

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 08 – General

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Editorial

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STATIC is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate. Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

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Static: *General* stemmed from a desire to investigate the possibilities of a potent but unplumbed category. We might think of the general – the general picture, a general claim, general studies, even the military general, whose command combines his soldiers into an incorporated force – as a form of meaning that in blurring the detail of its components generates a larger, more sweeping utterance. As something ‘opposed to *partial* or *particular*’ (*OED*), the general may not be that distinct from *the universal*. Indeed, the first definition of general in the *OED* reads closely to that of the latter. Both invoke notions of inclusion; but whilst the universal extends, comprehends or includes the whole of something specified or implied (*OED*), the general is less definite. Often accused of vagueness, the general is implicitly imprecise, but it is also, as such, open to suggestion. The general affects not all, but ‘nearly all’: an element of proximity as opposed to precise completion is registered. Might the general then sustain a meaningfully different kind of community to the comprehensive inclusion commanded by universality? In biological taxonomy, the genus – the Latin root of ‘general’ – fragments into an assortment of various species. The general in this sense is less a category than the lapsing of categorisation, the ground upon which specificities and differences are held – and are what holds us – in common. As one T. Wilson put it way back in 1551, ‘Genus is a general word, the which is spoken of many that differ in their kind’ (*OED*). Or, on the contrary, does that which is general slip all too easily into the generic, a phase that has the potential to condense generalisation into a bland, monotonous sameness? The contributors of Static8 address these questions in different ways and to different ends, but each invests in the notion that there is a critical and creative lining to the general – that there is a generative capacity to the general.

Matthew Taunton is the first to examine this potential. In *Realism, Modernism and the General: Beckett, Lukács, Adorno*, Taunton investigates the question of generalizable experience in light of theories of literary realism. Picking up on the problem of ‘general will’, a concept traceable to Marx as well as Hegel and Rousseau, his paper arrives at an understanding of Samuel Beckett’s *Trilogy* that highlights its foregrounding of the material. The general in this sense is accessed neither through the reflection or mediation of general realities – both political and social – but instead in a more immediate, shared experience of the given material universe. Likewise interested in the general’s bearing on modernism, Cécile Guédon turns to an analysis of strategies of depersonalisation and abstraction as generative modes of theatrical experimentation. Abstraction for Guédon amounts to an aesthetics of the general. ‘Veiled silhouettes, silent puppets and masked dancers transfigure the performing actor into an abstract shadow’ and, she suggests, gesture towards theatre’s preoccupation with ‘the disappearance of human presence altogether’.

It is with a steady dose of irony and characteristic ambivalence that the artist collective General Idea also arrive at this theme of anonymity. In his interview with General Idea member AA Bronson, Ger Zielinski strikes up conversation about the groups’ invocation of a ‘deliberate anonymity,’ hitting on

their innovative use of the multiple, corporate intimation, and gender performativity.



General Idea, *Marvel in Pageant*, 1971



General Idea, *Imagevirus New York Subway*, 1991

The ‘generic-ness’ implicit in General Idea’s incarnation of shops, pavilions and beauty pageants – all under the group’s own nom de guerre – each have resonance for the theoretical premise of Rem Koolhaas’ ‘generic city,’ the subject of Richard Prouty’s piece. In *Buying Generic*, Prouty examines plans to build the city ‘without qualities’ on the waterfront in Dubai. He challenges not only the mainstay critique of ‘sinister’ homogeneity in the city but also whether political realities permit the inversion of this structure into a desirable schema for democratic urban living.

With a similar concern for the consumerist implication of the general Mark A. Cheetham then turns our attention to the international language of the art world and asks the question, are we cosmopolitan in meaningful ways? Engaging the topic of categorization that carries throughout this edition, Cheetham begins with an insightful discussion of the ‘city *x* – based’ convention by which artists are described. The hyphenated ‘semaphore’ *New York-based* (for example) at once aligns cultural practitioners to a particular place or ‘scene’ and at the same time abjures the specificity of a single localization. Cheetham argues that with a revised specificity in the way they engage the cosmopolitan, artists, art-writers and curators can continue to effectively mediate the local and international.

The final two contributions of Static8 engage the general through visual culture. In her ongoing photographic project *General Assembly* the artist Jessica Westbrook collects images and digitally alters them to a state she calls ‘clinical neutrality’. Bearing on questions of semiotics, she categorizes these images – as we point out in the commentary that accompanies her work – according to the same roll of headings by which stock photography is governed. In this way, the usefulness of their labels and the photographs’ function as a generalized sign are at once affirmed and questioned. For Randall Anderson too, who ‘pinpoints’ the ubiquitous bulletin board as a laboratory for questioning the way we negotiate information, the structure of generalization is examined next to the complex relations of form and function. Bulletin boards are locations to which information floods but, as the video ‘Props’ suggests, this communication becomes the backdrop of our daily lives. In the public intervention piece, ‘Notices’, Anderson continues the project of alerting us to the theatricality of the everyday by turning paper notices into formal compositions, literally turning text over to reveal an aesthetic that might have been missed all together.

It seems the creative value of the general stands in its ability to define forms replete with potential. The general may never accept a single shape yet, with useful irony, it is this that makes it so applicable to how we metabolize meaning. It hints, that is, at signifying the vicissitudinous nature of the attempt to grasp perfect signification. It is perhaps precisely this openness that offers the greatest appeal for the editors of Static8.

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