

Shop Until You Stop

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‘Shop Until You Stop’, in Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt/ Tate Liverpool, *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg/ Max Hollein, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit 2002, pp. 222-30.

Art and fashion have always gone hand in hand. Sometimes radical and shocking, sometimes traditional and conservative, both are judged according to subjective standards of taste. Each represents in its own way the moods and spirit of the times. They stimulate the senses and create objects of desire as fetishes of an affluent society and legacies of culture.¹

If contemporary art tends to handle the issue of consumer culture with both fascination and nervousness, there is good reason for both reactions. Fascination because consumerism appears to become ever more cultural, less the realm of selling things than of selling or merely displaying images, sounds and words. Nervousness because the engines of this production are so vast and lavishly funded, their output so ubiquitous and strident. If commodities tend towards being cultural, what space is left for art?

It is an old concern, found in modernism as well as in postmodernism, though taking different forms in each. Fernand Léger stood before the machine exhibits of the Paris Fair in 1924, marvelling at how such immaculate productions outshone the poor, self-conscious efforts of artists.² The argument that art is no longer possible because the world of products is saturated with aesthetics is the postmodern variant of the same

¹ Sponsor’s statement by Hugo Boss in Renate Wichager, ed., *Sylvie Fleury*, Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit 1999, p. 8.

² ‘The Machine Aesthetic: The Manufactured Object, the Artisan, and the Artist’ (1924), in Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, ed. Edward F. Fry, Thames and Hudson, London 1973.

anxiety, and also on the surface of it a modernist dream realised, though in a false sublation, less in synthesis than surrender.³

While the issue of art's separation from or merger in commodity culture has a long history, during the 1990s, there was an intensification of the forces, many of them old features of capitalism, that contributed to the dominance of triumphant consumer culture over art, and indeed over all other cultural production. Commodities appeared to become even less like functional objects and more like evanescent cultural moves within a sophisticated, self-referential game played out over a wide range of identifications. The greatest profits continued to be made not in industry but in services, data processing and finance, and the success of those sectors was most associated with the neoliberal economies, particularly with the United States.⁴ In the West, this change was felt as early as the mid 1970s but the 1990s saw the collapse of alternative models, not only in Eastern Europe where formerly Communist nations adopted neoliberal policies, often with catastrophic results, but also in the great industrial economies, Germany and Japan, which both suffered stagnation and decline. Continental Europe as a whole moved to embrace the neoliberal model, sugar-coated though it was with nominally social-democratic governance. Like commodification itself, the neoliberal model—encompassing privatisation, high unemployment, low wages for workers, the weakening of the unions and neglect of public services—widened its ambit and deepened its hold.

In some of these territories (including Scandinavia) which recession had newly opened to unrestrained and corrosive market forces, art served as an unwitting agent of neoliberalism, trampling over the comforting if suffocating amenities of social democracy, while giving expression to the liberated concerns of identity politics, consumerism, vulgarity, and pleasure in the degraded.⁵ Such works opened up previously suppressed perspectives, yet at the same time served as useful, if minor, allies of privatisation and the colonising force of commodification. The parallels between the orthodoxies of postmodernism and the free market ethos have often been drawn out:

³ On that saturation, see Jean Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, Polity Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 146-7.

⁴ See Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Volume I. *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwells, Oxford 1996, ch. 2..

⁵ This was apparent in the survey show of Scandinavian art in the 1990s, *Organising Freedom: Nordic Art of the '90s*, Moderna Musset, Stockholm 2000.

The ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. Circulation, mobility, diversity and mixture are its very conditions of possibility. Trade brings differences together and the more the merrier! Differences (of commodities, populations, cultures, and so forth) seem to multiply infinitely in the world market, which attacks nothing more violently than fixed boundaries; it overwhelms any binary division with its infinite multiplicities.⁶

Corporate culture has thoroughly assimilated the discourse of a tamed postmodernism, which in the first place it had a strong hand in bringing to hegemony. As in mass culture, art's very lack of convention has become entirely conventional. Ubiquitous and insistent voices urge consumers to express themselves, be creative, be different, break the rules, stand out from the crowd, even rebel, but these are no longer the words of radical agitators but of business. The writers of the US magazine of cultural analysis, *The Baffler*, vividly describe the extent and standardisation of these injunctions. Their wonderfully condensed example of this imperative is William Burroughs' appearance in an advert for Nike.⁷ Much in the art world since 1990 has offered a tame exemplification of those virtues purloined by corporate culture.

Postmodern theory itself, as it moved from being an account of a potential utopia or dystopia to being a flat description of an existing reality, lost its critical and ethical force. In its reduced state, consumerism and the supposed empowerment of the shopper were central to postmodernism's disquisitions. While in the 1990s postmodern theory was buffeted by attacks on its internal absurdities, and its browbeating of readers with meaningless scientific jargon, in much of the art world, at least, it was less replaced than lost sight of by its acceptance.⁸

⁶ Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 150.

⁷ For a selection of articles, see Thomas Frank / Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1997.

⁸ On absurdities, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Oxford Publishers 1996 and Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead 1990; on jargon, see Alan Sokal / Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, Profile Books, London 1998. For the controversy caused by Sokal, see Editors of *Lingua Franca*, ed., *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham that Shook the Academy*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2000.

The spectral character of the contemporary commodity goes hand-in-hand with the rise of neoliberalism. This militant form of capitalism was aided by far-reaching technological changes that made the exchange of information cheap, quick and simple. Vast programmes of computer networking were driven by profiteering on the privatisation of publicly owned telecommunications industries.⁹ The digitisation of data could turn previously free information (for instance, in libraries) into commodities, in an enclosure of data commons.¹⁰

In another development that tended to make the commodity less material, branding achieved greater importance throughout the 1990s as corporations spent money saved on outsourcing production on their own images. As Naomi Klein has argued in her justly renowned book *No Logo*, as production was exported to low-wage economies, so the link between the consumers of a product and its makers was sundered.¹¹ The brand was elevated in compensation, floating free of mere products, to become an allegorical character, a reliable embodiment of particular combinations of virtues or admirable vices. Sometimes, as with Ronald McDonald, it solidified into an animated figure.

While commodification has generally expanded, so that, for example, sequences of genetic code are patented and companies advertise in schools, limits are still drawn. John Frow lists some areas, such as religion, aspects of personal life, politics and art that, while not free of the effects of commodification, are not subject to the strict demands of profit maximisation.¹² If, in reading the list, the words ‘politics’ and ‘art’ are stumbled over, perhaps it is because democracy has become more plainly plutocracy, while art and business have drawn nearer to each other.

Again, the 1990s saw an intensification of trends that had been initiated earlier. Business sponsorship of the visual arts and partnerships between large corporations and art

⁹ Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, ch. 2.

¹⁰ Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, ch. 4.

¹¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Flamingo, London 2000.

¹² See John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 131.

institutions increased and as a matter of course tended to suppress the display of dissenting art works, while importing business practice into galleries and museums.¹³ Art has increasingly tended to be used as an instrumental device to stimulate shopping (and perhaps this is part of the role of a show called 'Shopping').

Branding in the art world has also flourished. Galleries and museums burnish their new logos, striving to impress the character of their brand upon the public. The branding of 'Tate' (marketers conduct systematic warfare against definite and indefinite articles) has produced an entity that exceeds its various physical branches, and achieves cross-branding symbiosis through deals to endorse, for example, a range of household paints sold at D-I-Y giant B&Q. Many artists similarly strive to achieve brand recognition, and a few succeed: Tracey Emin has become a brand out of which her art is made.



Sam Taylor-Wood and Elton John in front of Taylor-Wood's mural for Selfridges, 2000

Such artists as brands are again allegorical figures that, like robots, deliver particular and predictable behaviour along with other outputs. At a meeting on arts sponsorship held at the Royal Society for the Arts, a representative of Selfridges put the matter with candour: the recent display of Sam Taylor-Wood pictures across the façade of the shop was a bringing together of two brands, to the benefit of both.¹⁴

On going to the links page of Claude Closky's website, the viewer is presented with an alphabetical list of .com sites composed of familiar names: it begins adams, akerman, alys,

¹³ For a striking account of the way sponsorship altered the art world, see Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London 2001.

¹⁴ Royal Society of Arts debate, May 2001.

amer, andre, araki. All the links are in fact to company sites, so clicking on www.billingham.com, for example, takes you to a site selling camera bags.¹⁵ Expectations are frustrated, and the range of products and services brought together that share artists' names is a curious little database, yet the work encourages the user to think about artists' names as brands, and about the .com character of their work.

As commodities have become more cultural, art has become more commodified. Even in the early days of postmodernism, Adorno recognised the parallel between art and consumer goods, especially in an age of over-production

...where the material use-value of commodities declines in importance, where consumption becomes vicarious enjoyment of prestige ... and where, finally, the commodity character of consumables seems to disappear altogether—a parody of aesthetic illusion.¹⁶

The result is an attitude to art that is similar to people's attitude before commodities. Yet this is no irreversible or inevitable historical development, borne out of the essence of art and commodity, but one that is tied to the rising and falling rhythm of the economic cycle, and enjoyed only by those wealthy enough to conspicuously consume.



Guillaume Bijl *Matratzenland*, 2003-4

¹⁵ www.sittes.net/links

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London 1973, pp. 24-5.

A number of artistic practices in the 1990s responded to the trajectory of these changes, feeding off them and pushing them further. Sylvie Fleury took the results of her shopping trips to high-class boutiques and laid them on the gallery floor; or she (literally) placed desirable, fashionable items on pedestals. Guillaume Bijl simply opened shops (amongst other institutions) within the museum. For Wolfgang Tillmans the same photographic material may serve in gallery installations or as publicity pictures in 'lifestyle' (that is, shopping) magazines, and his approach is sanctioned by the rise of increasingly arty fashion magazines and increasingly fashionable art magazines, along with some genuine hybrids.



Sylvie Fleury *Insolence*, 2007

For Marx, the commodity is a strange and complex thing, being at once a material object valued by its buyer in part because it has a use and, because of the action of the market, a bearer of monetary exchange value. While uses are diverse and incommensurable, exchange values are all set on a single scale. For Benjamin Buchloh, in his pessimistic accounts of contemporary art, use value is increasingly surrendered, and art (like money)

has become a commodity of nearly pure exchange value.¹⁷ (As long as they remain material objects, neither money nor art can shed all use value; books can be printed on money, and a Rembrandt used as an ironing board.)¹⁸ In a further stage, even the pretence to achieving use value is dropped, as artists simply reflect and examine the new scene in which there is no distinction between art and commodity culture, and they do so without critique, irony or the desire for change. This is, for instance, the view generally taken by critics about the work of Sylvie Fleury.¹⁹

Thus art approaches the condition of that most abstract of commodities, money, and it is actually used like that by the rich, as a quasi-liquid form of speculative capital, with the consequence that great numbers of the objects in which that value inheres are locked away unseen in secure, purpose-built depositories.

Yet there are disturbances to this simple scheme in which art and other commodities grow closer in character, as do galleries and shops: to begin with the materiality of the art object persists, even of media art which has been accepted as art only by paying the price of becoming partly material. The art market is still dependent upon the buying and selling of rare or unique objects which are far removed from the mass-produced commodities found in ordinary shops. In many markets, a few dominant companies control production, but there are few in which consumption is regulated. The commercial art world tries to hold both reins tight, for the buyers of these objects are very few and known to the sellers, production is artificially limited, and patronage often has a personal dimension. To look at the contemporary art world is to take a glimpse into an older, pre-industrial market system.²⁰ A suggestion of this difference is found in Andreas Gursky's various photographs of top-flight shops and famous galleries. The shops seem to

¹⁷ See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham' and 'Parody and Appropriation in Picabia, Pop, and Polke', in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, October, Cambridge Mass. 2000.

¹⁸ According to Vladimir Mayakovsky, following the revolution books were sometimes printed on money which had gone out of use. 'Broadening the Verbal Basis', *Lef*, no. 10, 1927; reprinted in Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988, p. 260. The use for the Rembrandt was Duchamp's provocation. Marcel Duchamp, 'Apropos of "Ready-mades"', talk delivered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 October 1961, in Michel Sanouillet/ Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London 1975, p. 142.

¹⁹ To take one example, see Renate Wichager's essay, 'Freddy Mercury Feels Good', in Renate Wichager, ed., *Sylvie Fleury*, Cantz, Osfildern-Ruit 1999.

²⁰ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Gardes*, Thames and Hudson, London 1998.

reproduce the forms of minimalist sculpture with such pristine perfection that matter becomes uncannily spectral, while in the galleries the muddy craft character of the objects displayed is evident, for instance, in the ragged shadows they cast on white walls.

Furthermore, and here one limit of profit maximisation is drawn, in many nations the state plays a large role in hoarding and displaying art objects, influencing the determination of taste and the course of art writing. If art works were truly commodities like any other, states should be happy to leave their purchase, conservation and disposal to market forces. While commodities are thought to divide as well as define identity, appealing to competing impulses within the individual, there is an ideological presumption that the art work within the museum forges social cohesion even as it celebrates difference, and collective memory even as it recycles and recombines a diversity of references.

Above all, while ordinary commodities live or die by millions of individual decisions to buy or not to buy, the feedback mechanisms which determine the track of contemporary art are regulated and exclusive, and the ordinary viewer of art is permitted no part in them. Komar and Melamid highlighted this issue by applying the standard methods of the consumer questionnaire to painting, producing results guided by catering to the average taste of different national populations.²¹

This separation from the full rigours of the market confers advantages and disadvantages. From the art enclave, flirtations can be engaged with the world of shopping, with an assurance that one will not be subsumed into the other. Indeed, those works that appear to threaten such subsumption (such as those of Bijl) serve to reinforce the boundary by making it visible. Isolation turns the gaze inwards, as within a mirrored box, so that reflections assume an unwarranted significance, and artists' moves tend to be seen in relation to those of other artists, rarely within the context of the outer world. Increasingly recursive games are played with predecessors' work, as well as with material drawn from mass culture. Thus Mike Bidlo appropriates Warhol's appropriation of Brillo pads,

²¹ See Joann Wypijewski, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1997.

transforming the appropriation of a consumer item into the appropriation of art, while suggesting that Warhol's images have themselves become reduced to consumer items.



Mike Bidlo *Not Wahol (85 Brillo Boxes, 1970), 1991*

This specialist internal discourse only provides the illusion of escape from the commodity form. Marx has the fetishised commodity speak of its own condition, and it says the following:

...our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange values.²²

²² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1976, pp. 176-7.

While art seeks to protect itself with specialist, internal discourse in works and words, it only emulates the play of free-floating exchange values in a time of glut.

From the moment that it was established, the safety of the enclave has, of course, been challenged by artists. Yet while those challenges were tied to time and context, the objects in which they were incarnated were not, and as they persisted through history, their tinge of radicalism added to their aesthetic lustre and market value as they became increasingly conventional art commodities.

From the mid 1990s, with rise of web browser, the dematerialisation of the art work, and especially its weightless distribution over digital networks, has threatened the protected system of the arts. What is the market to make of a work that is reproducible with perfect accuracy, that can simultaneously exist on thousands of servers and millions of computers, and that can be cannibalised or modified by users? How can one buy, sell or own such a portion of data? This is a situation, central to Marxist theory, in which modernisation of the means of production comes into conflict with the relations of production. In digital art, the use of the most up-to-date technological means to make and distribute work comes into conflict with the craft-based practice, patronage and elitism of the art world.

Artists have inhabited online space alongside corporations that made concerted efforts to force the change from forum to mall. That commercial colonisation has been a rich subject for net artists who have produced many sharp and sophisticated pieces designed to draw the shopper up short. One of the most notorious was staged by the art corporation, etoy, whose *Digital Hijack* which diverted surfers who had typed in keywords such as 'Madonna', 'Porsche' and 'Penthouse' into a search engine, and clicked on etoy's top-rated site, greeting them with the response: 'Don't fucking move. This is a digital hijack', followed by the loading of an audio file about the plight of imprisoned hacker Kevin Mitnick, and the hijacking of the Internet by Netscape.²³ Others, including Rachel Baker with her examination of customer surveys, data mining and loyalty cards,

²³ *Digital Hijack* no longer runs but a simulation can be seen at <http://146.228.204.72:8080/> Mitnick became a cause célèbre for the hacking community, and for those wishing to ensure freedom of expression on the Net generally. For a site devoted to his support, see www.kevinmitnick.com

have come into dispute with corporations using the copyright laws to suppress freedom of speech. Baker made a site promising Web users who registered for a Tesco's loyalty card points as they surf, provided they filled in a registration form that asked questions such as 'Do you often give your personal data to marketers?' and 'How much is your personal data worth to marketing agents?' She soon received a letter from Tesco threatening an injunction and damage claims.²⁴

This form of art is indicative of a wider, extraordinary development: that out of a renewed and virulent species of capitalism, at the point of its apparent triumph, there condensed from fragmented single-issue politics, a coherent movement of opposition.²⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that this is no accident, for cooperative values emerge from the very change of the primary economies towards data processing:

Today productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks. In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labour thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism.²⁶

The Open Source or free software movement provides an example of such collective and unremunerated work in action.²⁷

The combination of productive and reproductive technologies in the digital world handed astonished artists a route back to social and political engagement, sidestepping art institutions (which, as we have seen, were thoroughly imbued with the corporate ethos), and promptly raising once more the spectre of the avant-garde.

²⁴ For the letter, see <http://www.irational.org/tm/archived/tesco/>; for the work, see <http://www.irational.org/tm/archived/tesco/front2.html>

²⁵ For a guide to this new politics, see Emma Bircham/ John Charlton, eds., *Anti-Capitalism: A Guide to the Movement*, Bookmarks Publications, London 2001.

²⁶ Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 294.

²⁷ The interpretation of Open Source is controversial. For a business-friendly view, see Eric S. Raymond, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary*, O'Reilly, Sebastapol, CA 1999; for a more radical analysis, see Richard M. Stallman, 'Why Software Should Not Have Owners'; <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/why-free.html>

Marx argued that production and consumption were bound up with one another to the point of identity. Not only does one depend upon and complete the other, but in production is found consumption (for instance, of raw materials), and in consumption production (for instance, eating produces the body).²⁸ The exclusive focus on consumption in much of the art world is an ideological matter, one that flows from the prominence of advertising and other corporate propaganda, for which the less that is thought about production (who labours and for what pay, in what circumstances and at what risk, under what form of coercion, with what environmental consequences?), the better. This blindness is reinforced in the art world by its own archaic production practices. There are huge numbers of art works that have dealt, for instance, with the uncanny character of toys in the realm of consumption; few touch on the equal charge of the contrast between their intended use and the circumstances in which the majority of them are made—in China, say, by the harshly disciplined sweated labour of young women living between unsafe factory and crowded dormitory.

There are exceptions to this ideological blindness: Allan Sekula with *Fish Story*, his extraordinary series of photographs and texts about maritime trade, makes visible those who labour in distribution, and in a very different register Sebastião Salgado with his vast, elegiac book of photographs about workers attempted to revive the humanistic engagement of the documentary tradition.²⁹

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1973, pp. 90-4.

²⁹ Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf 1995; Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, Phaidon Press, London 1993.



Andreas Gursky *99 cent.*, 1999

Finally, there are artists who in diverse ways bring the fields of production and consumption into connection and contention. Gursky's photographs, of shops and galleries as well as factories, examine the cultural rather than the economic identification between consumption and production. His depictions of, say, a Grundig factory, the Pompidou Centre and a 99c thrift store all show muted human figures dominated by large-scale grids. These could be textbook illustrations to Adorno's arguments about the secret affinity and interdependence of work and leisure, in which leisure, only apparently partitioned from work, adopts work's structure and forms.³⁰

In his installation and performance piece *Breakdown*, set in a disused shop on London's Oxford Street, Michael Landy brought the two spheres into manifest contact by cataloguing and destroying every possession he owned.³¹ The labour of many people, working on a production line, was used to disassemble into component parts and finally pulverise commodities. Labour was used in destruction to bring attention to the labour expended in production, which the seamless, slick surface of many commodities renders invisible. The constitution of the self through the ownership of commodities was also

³⁰ See 'Free Time' in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bern

³¹ See Artangel, *Michael Landy / Breakdown*, London 2001.

brought to the fore, leading viewers to ask of themselves, Without all these things, what would be left of me?

For Buchloh, a key example of art that had a use value was Soviet Constructivism, made following revolution for particular, well-defined purposes.³² Particularly online, where the boundaries between production and reproduction are faint, artists have been rediscovering use value. With activist works, allied to the new political movements, such as Floodnet designed by Brett Stalbaum, they have even engaged in the direct disruption of shopping, notably with a campaign against the giant online corporation, eToys, which had used legal action to close down the art site etoy.³³ They did so with such effectiveness that their action (along with the recession) forced the company into receivership. Perhaps the most radical and productive works of the last years have not been those that dwelt within the power of consumerism but those that explored its limits, and what lies beyond.

³² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, October, Cambridge Mass. 2000, p. 198.

³³ For Stalbaum's account of Floodnet, see <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ZapTactFlood.html> For information about the eToys dispute, see <http://www.toywar.com/> See also <http://www.RTMark.com>