Fittedness of home. Sensorial and somatic dynamics in the era of IKEA homes

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Abstract: *This study consists of concentric layers that surround, like spheres, the central topic of home. The home is understood as a core reference point for late capitalist consumer lifestyles. The paper argues that its central status is symptomatically manifested and can, therefore, be analyzed through how IKEA engages with everyday life. Discourses drawn from art, consumer culture theories, somaesthetics, and sensory studies are factored in to revolve around this topic. Each discourse is examined individually and in combination to determine how it fits the task of rethinking the home.*

Keywords*: aesthetic capitalism, home, IKEA, John Cage*

1. Is this kitchen for dancing?

On February 5, 1959, a memorable phenomenon occurred in the Milan-based television quiz show, "Lascia o Radoppia" (Leave it or Double it). A foreign contestant in his late 40s, presented as a mushroom expert and composer of unconventional pieces, had already appeared on screen several times by that time and returned this evening for the 640.000 Lire question. Before the game, he was given the opportunity to premiere a new experimental piece of work he composed. At this moment, the situation turned more than unusual: instead of being equipped with conventional instruments, the studio stage was set with all kinds of homeware utensils like a (filled) bathtub, vibrating toy fish, pressure cooker, a bottle of spirits with small glass, a seltzer bottle, ice cubes (and an electric mixer to crush them), rubber duck, a bouquet in a vase, watering can, a water-friendly whistle, and the like. Those items were staged with a grand piano, five radios, a tape machine, and, most importantly, a stopwatch. Alongside the unique "instrumentation"—a seemingly haphazard assortment of belongings from a middle-class home of a late 50s American suburbia—the performance required its performer to walk in infinite zigzag tracks between the items and make them sound according to a presumably premeditated performance plan to be realized through the total control of timing aided by the only non-sounding instrument of the piece: the stopwatch.

The majority of the audience, both in the studio space and most probably at home as well, laughed aloud at this strange apparition, which, however, was intended to showcase more than an amusement attraction. It aimed to trigger a meditative reflection on what might happen if an autonomous aesthetic turn were infused into the everyday practice of humdrum domestic

activities. The piece's composer was none other than the then-already notorious John Cage. The performance was entitled *Water Walk* (1959)—an enigmatic biblical reference in the era of universal canalization, where every step on the pavement is a step above the underground water pipe and sewer network. The performance created an ambiguous and critical collage of the state-of-the-art home environment through its scenery, comparable to that of the famous contemporary collage work of Richard Hamilton (*Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* 1956). It merged all its paraphernalia into a funny and quirky witches' kitchen.[1]

Astutely chosen, all the objects involved were representative symbols of the postwar economic boom and the accompanying improvements in living conditions: the stage of *Water Walk* is a home environment stripped of its architectural backdrop, which brings to the fore typical household consumer goods that bear either cultural, technical, or utility valor. Piano, domestic flowers, and radios demonstrate home as the center of cultural life taken in the broadest sense. They refer to a place where cultural expressions are created and arrive from the outside world, and symbolic metabolisms can take place, primarily in the living and dining rooms. Other items in the collage, such as the bathtub, toy fish, and rubber duck, manifest the infantile comfort and playfulness of the modern, hot water-powered bathroom and its ultimate intimacy devoid of any superintending gaze. In contrast, the kitchenware utensils at play represent efficiency, sophisticated engineering, and a universal design solutionism so typical of the political-economic optimism that fueled the 50s in the West. They are also in line with the changing social role models of women—partly still being held captive by house chores, partly occupying ever more domains in the spectrum of professions. Amongst those paraphernalia, the protagonist—a male by no coincidence —is to perform a busy choreography. The whole phenomenon might leave the audience with an impression of utter disorderliness and scrambling, which might also prove to be an eerie or even graceful sequence. The ambiguity of this choreography stems mainly from its impersonal temporality—the performer, despite his bodily proximity, has only indirect contact with the environment, as all his gestures are subject to the prescribed agenda of actions controlled by the stopwatch, just like the archer's manual connection with his bow and arrow, which are not directly and rudimentarily grabbed in their physical reality, but through the mediation of the heightened attention fixed on the target. The symbolic embracing and situating quality that belongs to homeyness—a central tenet of the anthropologist Grant McCracken (2005)—prevails here in temporal planning, rather than the conventional spatial order.

Thus, on the one hand, the performer embodies a persona akin to Raoul Haussman's assemblage portrait of the *Mechanischer Kopf* (1919), which captures a human state invaded by technology. It is the everyman struggling under the constant pressure of time amid a plethora of civilizational achievements, euphemistically labelled today as *multitasking*. This has a depersonalizing and haunting effect on the performance. On the other hand, however, the performer's bodily presence and his whole material environment might prove to be a manifestation of poetic power, a charming realization of the Kleistian puppetry applied to consumerist ordinariness in which household chores transfigure into a mysterious dance that follows the playbook of a higher order, while at the same time ties > tying the subject back to its bodily realities, the inner order of its regularly pulsating soma. It is as if the material compound of the home and its subordinated inhabitant would be in need of salvation by an involvement in an orderly, designed procession that transfigures the ordinary and utilitarian

1 No audiovisual documentation of the premiere has survived, but its second performance in January 1960 in a similar American TV show has been conserved and is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXOIkT1-QWY

dimensions of their existence. This procession should go beyond mere beautifying procedure; rather, it should be a transformation, which engulfs into its vortex everything that is living, moving, or at least movable (every sound is a movement by resonance); thus, being at home may become a celebration, a carnival, and a rediscovery of the soma as the performer must pay heightened attention to the precision and timing of his movements similar to the ones of an athlete, while consciously activating his muscle groups and overcoming bodily inertia when handling the ordinary objects of the home.

From today's perspective, Cage's performance might also be seen as a send-up of the lifestyle trend that understands the kitchen as a place of fun and dancing. This trend has been appearing in many forms in consumer culture, for instance, on the book cover of the Canadian nutrition celebrity Karlene Karst, who entitled her latest cookbook, *This Kitchen is for Dancing* (2019). The choice to name the kitchen activity "dancing" refers to more than providing posh and healthy foods. Instead, it is about creating a nurturing and vibrant communal atmosphere to take kitchen presence as an opportunity for rich and broad family life or an occasion for other interpersonal interactions, thus rendering life at home an aesthetically and morally uplifting reality that follows individual choreography in a private proscenium.

Cage's performance, however, is less about a more satisfying everyday life than about a utopian alternative to it, one that achieves greater autonomy. Nonetheless, what his performance demonstrates is not absolute autonomy. It avoids the hubris of the subject's total agency; instead, it is content to claim a higher degree of freedom from the passivity of modern consumer life.[2] This demand is supported by the altered sensorial relation the performer establishes with the chaotically accumulated pool of objects. Not only are their functional purpose, economic value, meaning in life, interrelations, and hierarchies of their social status suspended, but their sensorial features are also redefined. The configuration of the audible, the visual, the tactile, and the palatable undergoes a substantial change, resulting in an altered human presence. For those who received the performance as a farce, this alteration must have been no more than a frisson, a fleeting shock. For those who took the performance as a miracle play, this sensorial change is a symptom of resistance, a redefinition of human presence, and a revision of what home might be. Cage's approach presents a home as a field of action, rooms for maneuver. His performance piece poses the question: What is it that controls and organizes domestic space? His answer unmistakably indicates a consumerist ideal of life that pairs with the ever-wilder and conflicting co-habitation that works between human inhabitants and their accumulated stuff, utensils, gadgets, and consumables that have been efficiently fobbed off on them and are believed to be indispensable in a decent home. The tactical aspect of Cage's performance is a demonstration that the all-too-familiar everyday settings and routines might be reorganized under the auspices of a more autonomous choreography.

In this sense, Cage's vision of the choreographically saved life is profoundly different from the contemporary slogan of "this kitchen is for dancing" that beams from home surfaces announcing playfully the ideals of the current design capitalism (Szentpéteri, 2019) that matches unpaid domestic work with entertainment. An example of those appearances is the poster inscription that was mounted on the wall in a kitchen interior of a Budapest IKEA store in 2024, inviting the visitor's imagination with the verbatim quotation of the above line: "this kitchen is for dancing". According to what I will explain in what follows, IKEA seems to be proposing by this wall inscription the spontaneous aestheticization of everyday domestic

2 McCracken (2005, 44) is right when he claims that goods purchased at the market, against all beliefs in passive consumerism, definitely acquire new and individual local value and frame of perception when they get involved in a home; still, prosumerism is taken to a much higher level by Cage in an era of blossoming conformism.

situations and their enhancement by play; hence, their intensification through complementing the fashioned furnishing and paraphernalia with aesthetically charged performances. Opposed, however, to what Cage's vision captures, where a home becomes a place of spiritual-sensory-somatic reorganization, according to what IKEA proposes, a home is a place of a more prosaic aestheticization and becoming aestheticized.

The fundamental difference between the ambitions of the Cage work and the contemporary lifestyle guidelines embodied in IKEA's proposal—although distant in time, both of which are variations on the same impulse to mitigate civilizational harms—lies in how they interpret playfulness and the aesthetic. After all, Cage labels his performance as a miracle, regardless of how ambivalent and ironic or carnivalistic it is. The idea of walking on water is a blatant biblical allusion. At the same time, it goes beyond a mere parody as it exemplifies how people may rise above the everyday flooded with consumerist objects. The presentation of this rise is like the celebration of a ritual in which a sensory transfiguration of the material world occurs: the many different things designed for rational purposes become artful acoustic sources, stimuli for a contemplative state. In this transfiguration, sensory shift plays a primary role. What was conceived for grabbing, holding, handling, operating, and switching on and off now is lending itself to being listened to; also, it invites our sense of rhythm. Even the nature of the human movement is becoming transfigured. What was subject to the needs of expediency and efficiency now acquires a certain autonomy, the proprioceptive qualities associated with movement execution are valorized, and the felt-bodily presence is brought closer to the experience of the athlete and the dancer.

To sum up, Cage's stage evokes a home. His performance piece can be read as a poetic, pseudo-ritual proposal for how being at home, and becoming someone through the home (see McCracken, 2005), might be realized in an alternative way within and against consumer society. In what follows, I offer a glimpse into the theories about how aesthetic capitalism operates, how our sensorium and somatic routines cooperate with it, how and to what extent one might resist or dismantle the reigning lifestyle protocols and ideals of home, and what chances there are to return to a more autonomous domestic existence.

2. Aesthetic capitalism at home

In his *Critique of Aesthetics Capitalism*, Gernot Böhme (2017) provides an explanation of the operational circumstances that govern the current state of affairs in the lives of developed societies. He calls that aesthetic capitalism, which has ensnared life at home as well, despite the latter having long been seen as a refuge from the pressures of social reality.[3] Against differing theories that stem from the perspective of labor conditions (the classical Marxist approach) or from the conflict of interest between capital and welfare state (as Piketty understands), Böhme understands capitalism as an endlessly growing system of consumption—surplus consumption, to be more precise. A substantial leap that Böhme detects, a development that should be seen in hindsight as a necessity within the inner dynamics of capitalism, is the economic shift from managing needs to feeding desires. This shift is in conjunction with an essential change in the status of commodities, on the one hand, and the restructuring of everyday life, on the other, aligned to consumables of every imaginable and unimaginable kind. Böhme even claims that by now, the commodity to which once *use value* and *exchange value* was attributed has acquired

3 Comparing skyscrapers and suburban free-standing residential houses, two of the most distinctive building types of the developed economies in the 20th century, David Howes underlines that the latter, which has been developed as the ideal typical site of the home, is "an antidote to the pressures and formalities of city life." (2014, 9)

a *staging value* as its primary feature. Contrary to what was still the evidence for Marx, namely that the economy serves the reproduction of life, by now, it serves the *intensification* of life by nurturing and growing consumerist desires. Böhme picks out four central desires: (1) "the desire to equip one's life;" (2) "the desire to be seen and heard;" (3) "the desire of *fame*;" and (4) "the desire for mobility." As opposed to needs that can be satisfied, desires have no natural limit; they are always open to "something more." (20)

The surplus implied in this "something more" has a qualitative, rather than a quantitative nature. It is undefined and open—because desire is operative in the aesthetic dimension. One is longing for better, newer, more advanced equipment and less for an additional piece of something already possessed. One strives to be seen and heard in better quality and by a better audience, gaining better and more superlative feedback, not the sheer quantity of those. One wants to travel to more interesting, privileged, and envied destinations, not a multiplication of any random trip. That is why Böhme concludes that "It is no longer the case that the economy is an instrument for satisfying human needs, but, conversely, human beings transform their system of needs [exchanging them for desires] in order to satisfy the requirement of capitalist development—the need for continuous growth." (Böhme, 2017, 12) While in everyday consumption need is replaced by desire, in the functioning of capital, it remains unchanged, and there is no possibility of reducing the need for growth and lessening the urge for the capitalization of all life spheres, which is enforced efficiently through the methods of *aesthetic intensification* for arousing desires.

"Enhancement of life" is the keyword used to name the aesthetic capitalization of life that is taking place in every sphere, including the residential one, which is crucial. Enhancement, in this context, also includes the simultaneous arousal and exploitation of desires. These latter, in turn, lead in no way to a felt enrichment of one's life but instead to a spiral of discontent. As Böhme puts it: "The possibilities on offer for enhancing one's life—one's reputation, equipment, status—give people in all situation the feeling of having fallen short or, conversely, of needing to make more of an effort to improve their position." (51) One wants to live the best life possible instead of a good enough life. As a result, consumption becomes compulsive, demonstrating the power of the *performance principle*, which prevails even in the "enjoyment" of life. The efforts to overcome discontent and pursue life intensification are carried out under the auspices of *aesthetic labor*, which is multifaceted and encompasses—as Böhme puts it— "all the human activities which impart to things, people and ensembles that something more which goes beyond their physical presence and availability, their thing-ness and utility." (20)

Contrary to the delusion that aestheticization brings about a better life, the grim reality, as Böhme points out, is that the intensifications resulting from aesthetic labor have not brought freedom to either society or the individual, but have become the primary means of manipulation and capital interest. However, Böhme's analysis of how the unobstructed invasion of the aesthetic happens in daily life is not complete. As will be shown, supplementing his views with the insights gained from sensory studies and somaesthetics, the shortcomings of his take can be resolved. His elucidations are convincing from the economic and psychological perspectives, but sensory studies and somaesthetics can add relevant physiological, experiential, and cultural insights.

In a substantial paper on the sensual logic of late capitalism, David Howes (2005) begins from the same vantage point as Böhme: classical Marxist theories overlook the central status of consumption in developed economies. This lack has to be compensated by means that go beyond standard social theories since consumption, even in those theories that acknowledge its central role, is taken as a means of social aspirations in the first place. Consumption is usually

considered a personal achievement, a reference point for self-esteem and identity production,[4] and an indicator of social status. Nevertheless, the indispensable precondition for consumption is the implication of the sensorium, which, as sensory studies have convincingly revealed, is far from being an anthropological constant but rather a regime that can change and is indeed recalibrated from time to time in a dynamic historical process highly influenced by the prevailing economic and power conditions. (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2005; Smith, 2007; Howes and Classen, 2014; Howes 2014) Howes recognizes and emphasizes that the consumables—be they physical goods, environments, services, activities, or relations—and the act of consumption are bonded and correspond to each other through their coordination in the sensorium. (2005) Captivating the subjective sensory preferences and implementing those into the market offers leads to complete success among the consumers.

However, those subjective sensory preferences are far less autonomous than one might think. They are harnessed into the logic of capital, which approaches every sensory realm as a new continent to be occupied and exploited through the production of excitement. As a result of this colonization of the senses, cars can be competitively marketed by their artfully composed interior fragrance system, real estate by their potential influx of cool breezes from the neighboring pine forest, pasta by its eye-catching colors, homeware machines by the leather-like feel of their surface, lighting fixtures by their ability to adjust to circadian rhythms—readers can easily add their own experiences to this constantly growing list.

Howes captures all this with the concept of *hyperesthesia.* In hyperesthetic consumption, "body-storming" (a play on brain-storming) has become a key tool for designers: "Marketers and designers now hold 'body-storming' focus groups […] in an effort to divine the most potent sensory channel, and within each channel the most potent sensory signal, through which to distinguish their products from those of their competitors and capture the attention of potential customers. 'Perceptual positioning' now means everything to moving merchandise." (288) Beyond this tool, producers and marketers introduced further deeply body-oriented methods to stimulate consumption; these include multisensory orchestration of the experience, synesthesia, targeting the sensorial subconscious, and immersive storytelling.

Prevalence of hyperesthesia also explains why designers today focus on aesthetically fueled interaction: because it is through aesthetic experience that the fit between subject and product, the living organism and the environment can be most seamlessly achieved—an insight put forward by John Dewey a century ago with different reasons and with highly different aims in mind: "Underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of the subconsciousness, the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment." (Dewey, 1980, 150) Zygmunt Bauman, in contrast, realized, already in the early 1980s, that this human aptitude of fittedness gets channeled into the workings of consumerism when aestheticization is directed towards the preparation of the bodies to be able to accommodate the increasing amount of experiences that the production and services market wants to sell them.[5]

Despite the constant expansion of offers bombarding our senses, a kind of standardization applies, to which Guy Julier found a proper term in "neoliberal sensorium." (2017) His associated idea of the "neoliberal bodyhood" addresses the room for maneuver the living, sentient, purposive and cognizant body-mind, the soma might command within the current economic constraints. (2023) Whereas adaptation of the material and social environment to human needs

4 This view is dominant in McCracken's (2005) reasoning as well.

5 "The imperative to consume demands, above all, that the body '*be made fit* to absorb an ever-growing number of sensations the commodities offer or promise'" states Howes, quoting Bauman (via Clarke, 2003, 146)

and the betterment of life would be in line with the benevolent pragmatist tradition inherited from Dewey and his fellows, in reality, our own developed capability to adapt is the one that let us being exploited by the capital interest and power. (see also Crippen, 2023)

Adapting to what is offered, instead of claiming what is personal, is not only a typical behavioral of the petty bourgeoisie but also a reflex deeply entrenched in the body. Richard Shusterman (2017) provides an obvious yet striking example of this when he presents and explains a relatively unknown yet crucial practice of fashion studios using fit models to finalize their tailoring processes. As is well known, garments are not manufactured in every imaginable measure in an economy where the market is mediated and cannot work on personal grounds; they are only produced in standardized sizes. This circumstance results, on the one hand, from the economic pressures of mass production, and on the other, from the primacy of staging value. The fit model is quite desperate and, as Shusterman demonstrates, a highly ambivalent attempt to save, at least partially, the consumer good's reference to use value—wearability. The fit model is a hypothetical everyman, the hyper-typical body whose task in the design process is to help the creator achieve body/cloth fittedness according to the predetermined look. The use of the fit model is, however, ambivalent by necessity. However ostensibly perfect the fit, the final result might not be satisfactory for many consumers, either in terms of self-representation (the cloth does not fit well enough on their differing bodies) or self-experience (misfit is felt as discomfort).[6] It happens because "Chosen for simply being an average body, the fit model is then transformed into the somatic ideal that determines the precise cut of clothes for the entire size range of the garments he models for." (2017, 94) Shusterman is not afraid to identify this process as an inverse Platonism, where a contingent and particular body provides the transcendental form to be followed for the production, while, in turn, the generalized confection goods are supposed to showcase the individualities of their wearers of highly different bodies. Furthermore, the clothes derived from the original fit model sample are not only an ambivalent means of self-expression but also a force that corrals human behavior: "

> Studies have shown that people behave differently when they are wearing their professional outfits (such as a physician's white coat or a police uniform) even if they are off-duty and engaged in non-professional activities. As clothes are made to fit the bodies and movements of men and women, so the bodily behavior of those men and women are conversely made (through training or implicit learning) to fit the meanings of those clothes." (99)

The particular weight of this formative capacity of clothing comes from the fact that the urge to wear emanates much less from the individual than from the producer. "We clients of clothing fashion think that we choose our designers, but they have already chosen us [according to our economic status, and also through the body ideals their fit models embody], which is why we prefer their clothes." (100).

Emanuele Coccia (2024) emphasizes that clothes and home cannot be thought of separately. Through dress, home—as an expression of its inhabitant—steps out into the public, and conversely, the home is a vastly enlarged dress. Home and clothes are homologous because both are not only expressions and indicators of our subjectivity, but also extensions of it. Clothes and home are manifestations of the dynamically changing notion of comfort and happiness we all have.[7] (see also Rybczynski 1986) Coccia's idea of twinning home and clothes is not without

6 Somaesthetics differentiates between *experiential* and *representational* dimensions of the somatic practice, adding, however, that "there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner." (Shusterman, 1999, 306)

7 Coccia writes, "Thanks to cloths, the home stretches beyond its walls; it continues into a sort of mobile extraterritoriality which follows every minimal movement of our body with infinite precision. Thanks to clothes, in effect, we never leave home; we carry it around with us,

precedent, of course, as Gottfried Semper has already compared and conjoined textiles and architectural spaces in the 19th century, stating, "the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles." (2004, 247)[8]

Here, we can return to the initial questions arising from John Cage's performance example: What is a home for? What is the existential latitude it might provide? What impact might be exerted on the rhythms, moves, vectors of attention, and habits in everyday life by those ensembles of objects constituting the space its resident inhabits? To what extent can one expect the home as a refuge from the performance pressures of consumerist everyday life? Is there any chance to equip a home with all the latest consumerist goods while avoiding subjugating it to impersonal capitalist forces and the reigning ideas of normativity? Is there a way to resist the pressures imposed upon domestic life enforced by our commanding desires to be equipped, seen, and listened to, garnering recognition, and possessing a recharger hinterland for our come and go in the outer world?

3. Live on the IKEA stage

These questions might be approached in many ways. In what follows, I address them by considering how IKEA, the largest company in furniture and home furnishing worldwide,[9] participates in people's domestic lives, more precisely, how it influences their ideas and visions of home.[10] One of the pioneers in studying IKEA ethnographically, Pauline Garvey (2018), provides an insightful account of how people of the consuming masses became used to tying their lives to IKEA in their homebuilding urges. Conversely, she also shows how IKEA managed to achieve a social perception, due to which this company is the first idea that pops into many people's minds when furnishing a home. Garvey concentrates above all on the exhibit sections of the IKEA stores. These have historical roots on the one side in trade fairs and home expos, while on the other in open-air ethnographic exhibitions (the paradigm of which is the Swedish Skansen), that is, in musealized forms of past everyday life. In harmony with those historical patterns, for IKEA exhibits, the stakes are to imbue the audience with an alternative of their lives through a mock-up home, into which they are directly invited to animate it not only through imagination but more so by physical engagement. This event, which is both contemplative and action-oriented, is in many ways similar to trying on a new outfit. Putting on the garment, one wants to check the effects on self-image and self-presentation and, at the same time, the fittedness, the lived bodily experience through the garment, which provides mediation between the self and the material outside world. Likewise, the IKEA store invites the public to take furniture and objects on display as they would do to clothes in a fitting room, except that homes are typically interpersonal environments, so it is more appropriate to try them within a dynamic presence of human multiplicity.

One might ask whether IKEA settings are based on the realities of the audience's living conditions and their evident needs. The answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, IKEA interiors are indeed inspired by real-life situations.[11] Thus, they intentionally "strive for the familiar"

we transform it into a kind of second skin. Thanks to clothes, homes are transformed from immense containers into sleek and supple vehicles through which we shelter from the world." (70)

8 This idea is maintained also by the architect and author, Witold Rybczynski (2001, 21).

9 https://www.statista.com/topics/1961/ikea/

10 The intention to influence is far from hidden, as one could read about it on a previous company website: "Inspiration is free: Visit an IKEA store and sit, lie down, test, touch and try things out. Look inside our closets and under our beds. (Who knows what good ideas you'll find there.) Even if you walk away empty-handed, you'll be taking home a whole lot of fresh ideas" (recorded and quoted in Garvey, 2018, 37)

11 Their annual *Life at Home Report* is but one evidence of it. https://lifeathome.ikea.com/about/

(Cirelli, 2012, 68) and are in line with what Dalibor Vesely claims as the final referent of the humanistic new design: "the typical situation." (2004) On the other hand, their suggestions are heading towards a hyper-real everyday life: where everything fits together nicely; where the apartment and its occupant are like a hand in a glove; where things work softly and are tamed to your hands; where orderliness is not a temporary result of cleaning but axiomatic; where lights and warmth are enjoyed on demand and are not confined by utility bills; where the audible is not the unclear mixture of your own household's noise and that of the neighbor; and finally, where the temporal pressure of everyday activities is forgotten or gets suspended. The IKEA showroom settings are hyper-real homes; hence they can affect the actual life of which they are copies. They do it in a hybrid way, merging a quasi-autonomous lifestyle exhibition with the marketing practice of a highly profitable commercial enterprise, precisely in line with how "staging value" (Böhme, 2017) should come into effect in aesthetic capitalism.

However, this hyper-reality should not be made conscious. What IKEA showrooms are supposed to display is nothing less than an elevated but feasible idea of home and domesticity. They accomplish this through their carefully selected product assemblages accompanied by fleeting traces of individual lives (notes, photographs, clothes). When IKEA showcases its convincing suggestions on how to achieve "a better everyday life"—to quote the founder, Ingvar Kamprad's verbiage (1976)—it comes as no surprise that the re-designed home interiors go hand in hand with social normalization (where state and corporate aspirations converge, see Kristoffersson, 2014). Of course, this normalization agenda is hidden from the customer's view because the immediate visitor experience is more about abundance and diversity.[12] The exhibited model apartments are supplied with furniture and homeware of different materials, colors, styles, and ambiances targeted to differing consumer groups, like families, singles, DINK couples, pensioners, downtowners, suburbanites, countrymen, working-class people, white-collar workers, yuppies, bobos, technophiles, eco-savvy people, travelers, hipsters, and creatives. A clear taxonomy cannot be extracted from such a social tableau, but systematicness is unnecessary for an impulse-based marketing strategy anyway. What is really needed is an inviting narrative and a multisensory experience that offers immersion.

IKEA showrooms deliver both impeccably. In 2024, during fieldwork with students from the Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, we detected twelve simultaneous offers for envisioning a better home.[13] In each case, upon entering the given showroom, the visitor can read a general introduction supposedly written by "the absent dwellers" of the exhibited home about their life routines and their primary values. This introduction addresses the visitor in a succinctly written first-person narrative prose printed on an A4 size paper, mounted on the wall, similar to an artist's statement in an exhibition space. These notes are, of course, pseudo in nature, as if the jest of a witty curator who invented the exhibited artist at once with her artworks and artist's statement, or the deception of an imposter anthropologist who showcases a fictional ethnic group as a recently discovered one. Regardless of their fictitiousness, the narratives attached to the home mock-ups add enhanced make-believe and provide the feel of credibility to the material presence that the interior design composition realizes. The cooperation between words and sensory effects results in a life scene, a *tableau vivant* that powerfully engages the imagination and calls for bodily immersion. (Garvey, 2018, 46) "Trying on" a home environment here emphatically means a simultaneous corporeal and interpretive insertion into a lifestyle

12 One might add, however, what Howes claims as "seeming diversity of options" is the precise description of the situation (Howes, 2014, 11).

13 Since the in-town Budapest store where this fieldwork took place is the smallest in the country, there is a high chance that one can encounter even more lifestyle offers in bigger ones. Not to mention, IKEA megastores like the one on Kungens Kurva in Stockholm, as well as IKEA's central website, feature many lifestyle variations under the umbrella of "ideas and inspiration."

proposal, practicing a somatic empathy, and foretasting a future possibility of the self.

In fact, through somatic empathy, the possibility of an alternative home choreography becomes tangible, one that arises from altered physical and symbolic relations, materials, scales, or new functions and combinations. These features exert definitive influence over the feel of orientation, supported movement directions, the rhythms of positive and negative space, potential spatial nodes of emotional gravity, dynamics of sensorium, premonition of what is shareable and what might be kept private, the pace and temporal features the given interior supports, the practical or symbolical affordances one might discover, and similar motives, which are constitutive of how domesticity is envisioned, even unconsciously. (see also Franco, 2019) However, the same risk threatens the visitor as that which is often the case with trying on a dress out of context, leading to dissatisfaction upon wearing it outside the fitting room. The act of somatic empathy that takes place in the showroom quickly makes one forget that one's living space never really ends at the perimeters of the residence. (McCracken 2005, 29–33) However, it includes, to an elementary extent, the immediate and broader neighborhood, the location within the environment, also the natural and climatic conditions—not to mention how the given home is located within a more abstract social landscape, how it is consistent with the social perceptions about the dweller and the neighborhood.

Beyond subjective interpretation and individual experience of the lifestyles offered in the showrooms, regardless of the diversity thereof, IKEA settings share some common features: their imagined inhabitants are youthful (regardless of their actual age), lively, resourceful, capable, and creative, and they do not lack humor. In the language of materials and functions, these are mirrored in the use of clear-cut shapes, smooth and clear surfaces, firm articulation, intense ambiance, blonde woods, raw timber, all-absorbent storage solutions, easy connectivity, flexible configurations, multi-usability, and radiant rationality.[14] Furthermore, the imagined inhabitants' general virtues and attitudes manifest in their living spaces' sensorial, proxemic, and proprioceptive parameters and the habits through which they occupy those spaces. All these trickle into the audience's perception and imagination so efficiently that Garvey feels it necessary to state that in certain societies, "it is the avoidance of Ikea goods that requires active effort rather than their acquisition." (2018, 95) She also points out that "Ikea showrooms actively orchestrate a holistic experience, encouraging shopper engagement with the items on display and providing a tightly choreographed experience based on sensorial engagement." (13) The resulting normative models are complex. They do not necessarily determine the exact appearance of the home but rather promote consumer behavior that is interested in coordinating details, composing the stylistic unity of the dwelling, and upgrading the always all-too-soon-obsolete existing conditions.

The symbolic rise, one might say skyrocketing, of the kitchen that has occurred in recent decades is a good example of how the domestic life choreographies promoted by IKEA showrooms and imagery have been ingrained in the social realm, boosting a lifestyle that exerts playful and aesthetically ambitious control over one's belongings. (Ledin and Machin, 2017 and 2018) As a result, the kitchen, often conjoined with a dining area or the whole living room, has transcended its historically more modest status and become a central, multifunctional, multilateral, interpersonal, hybrid place, a real centerstage of the domestic life where nutrition

14 In Garvey's account, perhaps the most important item in the IKEA universe is storage, which is the key to transforming a home inconspicuously into a depository full of equipment associated with the different activities the inhabitants want to practice. The storage serves to organize things properly, eliminate their randomness, and fit them into intentional compositional relationships, thus avoiding their presence as mere sediments of life. Just as the inhabitants of neoliberal capitalism must lead an efficient and performance-oriented life, their living spaces must also reflect these principles: everything is optimized or should be so. Garvey also points out that a clean surface can only be maintained through constant struggle; thus, the reality of invisible and unpaid work and emotional engagement is implicit in the aesthetic regime of "decluttering." (2018, 104)

and dialogue, care and labor, pleasure and study, need and desire, inhabitant and visitor, constant and unexpected occurrences meet in an open contingency.[15] The same kitchen counter serves as the place for immersing after a stressful day in individual kitchen to-dos, cooking together playfully with our partner, or having a good chat with a visitor while nibbling on something, filling out bills under good lights, enjoying the view of the kids from that vantage point as they play in the living area; discussing a work issue with a colleague who just popped in; or simply, pondering and daydreaming. (Fawzy, 2019)

This hybridization has brought new freedom and flexibility compared to previous kitchen paradigms, in which it was a segregated, more functional, and restricted space, akin to a self-contained organ within the body of the home. Its newer nodal role makes it more akin to the nervous system.[16] At the same time, beyond its new freedom and flexibility, the kitchen of aesthetic capitalism also favors the neoliberal principles to maximize performance: while you're talking, you can chop onions; while the eggs are boiling, you can pay the bills, etc. (Fawzy, 2019) Physical and spatial proportions, ergonomics, the density of objects, and proxemics are devised to fit perfectly to the options the repertory of commonly accepted kitchen behaviors consists of. The freedom of choice neatly hides the limitations of the finite number of scripts and choreographies. The inhabitant may feel that he or she fits nicely into the kitchen environment provided by IKEA, while this fit is more of a testimony to the fact that IKEA has successfully adapted the customer to the catalog of life choreographies it promotes. What Garvey claims about storage applies here, too: the subject of aesthetic capitalism wants, above all, to exercise control over objects and environments designed to enhance and intensify his or her life (a dialectic of controlling the control) while he/she plays from the playbook of efficiency (a second-degree dialectic of controlledness through exercising control). Efficiency is internalized; it prevails through the felt sense of control and coordination, and by today, both have become somaesthetic components, even a precondition, of the sense of "being at home."[17]

In case one thinks the stunningly aestheticized, intensified, hybridized IKEA kitchen transforms its owner too much into a dummy of a neoliberal homescape, then it is time to pose a travesty of the Hamiltonian question: *Just what is it that makes Cage's kitchen so different, so appealing?* The answer may seem complicated due to the many apparent similarities between the IKEA and the Cage kitchen. Like the IKEA kitchens, the kitchen that Cage's performance conjures is aesthetically highly organized (it turns the entire home into an instrumentarium), intensified (as for the alienation effect it exerts), enhanced (as new functions it invents), and utterly hybridized (as it blends the concept of a public stage and an interior, and unites the separate rooms of a home into a Frankenstein place). Cage's kitchen, too, places its resident in a highly occupied and multitasking state, so no distance between the player and the role can be maintained, just like in the case of the enlivened dummy.[18] However, the underlying difference between those stylized kitchens—that of Cage and IKEA—is their inverse relation to determinacy and choice. While the IKEA dummy is doomed to choose between the finite number of building blocks the company secures for creating the desired homescape and also

15 Rybczynski (1986, 73) warns, however, that already "In the [17th-century] Dutch home the kitchen was the most important room." The consequences of that, including the changing roles women played in the history of home, also the regularly occurring countervailing trends, are explained in detail in his informative book.

16 What Shusterman (2019) writes about the somatic foundations and references of urban space and architecture can be extended to the smaller-scale spatial aspects of the home. Emanuele Coccia (2024) has recently taken notable steps in this direction.

17 "Conforming to the ideology of home as a bastion for individuality and intimacy, for unique expression and singularisation, it is nevertheless striking that it is here that the detritus of intimate routines is most rigorously patrolled," Garvey notes (2018, 119).

18 This aspect is mirrored in the artist's commentary: "... I ... rehearsed very carefully, over and over and over again with people watching me and correcting me, because I had to do it in three minutes. It had many actions in it, and it demanded what you might call virtuosity. I was unwilling to perform it until I was certain that I could do it well." (Kirby and Schechner, 1965, 62)

from the finite repertory of activities and choreographies that fit well into that homescape, Cage's protagonist is strictly regulated by the script of the piece whose notation, however, leaves the musical aspects relatively indeterminate and through this gesture invites for a potentially infinite poetic re-framing or redefinition of the home and its associated spectrum of actions. While in the first case, the freedom of choice is encircled by the pressure of capital, in the second case, the imperative of an indeterminate creation opens up the space. Fittedness means conformity through lifestyle in the first case, while in the second case, it is an open symbiosis, an empowering entanglement with the material world.

In reality, the inhabitant's expected or hoped-for fit in the styled and equipped home often fails or remains deficient, just like the perfect fit of fashionable attire optimized for fit models rather than random consumers remains somewhat off. One tries to fit into the hyper-typical home promoted by IKEA showrooms and the associated visual imageries. However, the experience resembles, to a great extent, that of fashion consumption, where only the body of the fit model is hyper-typical.[19] The outfit optimized for that body will not fit anyone else perfectly. In these cases, aesthetic capitalism shows its invalidity for the disappointed consumer, similar to how the glass slippers disappointed Cinderella's stepsisters (i.e. they did not fit). The end result of consumption—not necessarily recognized and admitted—is a lack of satisfying aesthetic experience and life enhancement, the expectation of which initially triggered and fueled the desire for consumption. Both with fashion garments and stylish interiors, the fleeting fittedness is realized only as a correspondence between the products' display value and our desires, rather than a correspondence between the objects, on the one hand, and the sentient, intentful, and intelligent body-mind, including its kinaesthetic range, proprioceptive feel, and self-fashioning, on the other.

4. Visions of resistance and reinvention

At a certain point in Cage's performance piece, an unexpected development occurs: the performer creates a series of booming sound effects by pushing the transistor radios off the kitchen table. Although acoustically speaking, these sound events fit smoothly into the overall soundscape of the piece, nonetheless, they are unexpected, stirring, and have a symbolic meaning. They might express malaise in a media culture that threatens the intimate microcosm of the home, and they even perform a gesture of resistance. A similarly thunderous and much more intense gesture of resistance occurs in Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*. At some point in his life, the IKEA-obsessed protagonist—waist-deep in a consumption quagmire—gets fed up with his lifestyle. He takes drastic measures to tackle his malaise: he lets a gas leak blow up his fancy condo. The enumeration of the resulting loss is acute and precise on different levels:

> Something which was a bomb, a big bomb, had blasted my clever Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green yin and an orange yang that fit together to make a circle. Well, they were splinters, now.

19 In the housing context this problem is inherited from earlier positions of modernism that provided the idea of the home as "a machine for living in" (Le Corbusier) that should provide decent universal living conditions to everyone. Rybczynski draws attention to the fact that two decades before Le Corbusier's debut in the 1920s, Ellen Richards, founder of the home economics movement and pioneering ecofeminist, formulated analogous demands among markedly different conceptual frameworks when she claimed that "the house as a home is merely outer clothing, which should fit as an overcoat should, without wrinkles and creases that show their ready-made character," thus "anticipating—by twenty years—Le Corbusier's statement that 'one can be proud of having a house as serviceable as a typewriter.'" (1986, 190) The similarities between the overcoat and the typewriter, argues Rybczynski, are, however, far more modest than their differences are—Richards realized that domestic activities are way more complex and personal than factory procedures, and there is not one 'correct' way of doing things at home; "that was why Richards imagined the house as clothing, which should be fitted to the individual." (Rybczynski, 1986, 191)

> My Haparanda sofa group with the orange slip covers, design by Erika Pekkari, it was trash, now.
> And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.
> We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Mine fell fifteen stories, burning, into a fountain.
> We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Mine are confetti.
> All that sitting in the bathroom.
> The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe.
> The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that.
> The Klipsk shelving unit, oh, yeah.
> Hemlig hat boxes. Yes.
> The street outside my high-rise was sparkling and scattered with all this. The Mommala quilt-cover set. Design by Tomas Harila […]
> It took my whole life to buy this stuff.
> The easy-care textured lacquer of my Kalix occasional tables.
> My Steg nesting tables.
> You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.
> Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (Palahniuk, 1996, 43–44)

Cage's and Palahniuk's poetic visions address how "being at home" can be envisioned and enacted differently in a consumer society. Pauline Garvey and many more IKEA scholars are pondering the potential for resistance against the lifestyle protocols suggested by the hegemonic actors of the home furnishing industry. Guy Julier is seeking the possibilities of escaping the neoliberal bodyhood imposed upon the individual through urbanism, architecture, infrastructure, objects, and services. In a similar vein, David Howes considers ways to overcome the capitalization of the senses. Richard Shusterman initiates *pragmatic* somaesthetics that can critically assess hidden agendas and the undiscovered potentials in various self-fashioning practices, including housing practices. Finally, Gernot Böhme's proposal to return to *oikonomika* is evidence of the same search for alternatives. This final section provides a brief overview of the above.

Duplication, more precisely, transformational mimesis, as Michael Taussig (2018) conceptualizes it, is an essential feature of IKEA lifestyle exhibits. These settings act as vivid imitations of life. At the same time, conversely, they invite the consumer to mimic the gestures that come to life in and from them, to indulge in the metamorphosis the process of imitation implicates. This means duplication that engenders duplication. In contrast, Palahniuk's novel subverts and complicates the trope of duplication by conflating it with schism. In turn, John Cage's performance piece mimics and replicates life on various levels. One level is its carnivalistic dimension, a sonic parody of middle-class family life of the postwar new suburbia, and a pastiche of busy housewifery (executed by a male from a non-exposed gay background). However, the piece also incorporates another dimension of mimesis, through which it enters into a more-

than-human sound ecology and reenchants the everyday *Lebenswelt*.

In contrast to the poetic imitations artists deliver, Pauline Garvey (2018) finds that society has significantly less leeway to avoid the coercive influence of IKEA (and similar companies) on home furnishing and the choreographies of domestic life. For her, the realistic range of options includes only strategies for mitigating or counterbalancing those effects, such as mixing and matching consumerist items with items inherited from past generations or found at flea markets, garage sale events, and salvaged from bulky household waste collections. Garvey points out that IKEA is located on the axis of ordinary/extraordinary. This makes it possible for residents to blend their newly bought products into the background of their existing homescape, thereby allowing the home to regain, to some extent, its status as a primary hub in the network of interpersonal relations. This way, they maintain a better stance for themselves, leaving it to the objects to fit in rather than vice versa.

Compared to Garvey, Guy Julier pays attention to broader environments, such as neighborhoods and even whole cities, as the defining frameworks of human dwelling. He conducts "performances or interactions" (2023, 127), which he interprets as "embodied and experimental ethnographic exploration" (130). These are implemented as atypical bodily gestures to grasp intersections of the sensorium, embodied practices, design, and capital interest. In one of his performances, he tries to find "his" half-a-square centimeter of space in a modern shopping center in Helsinki based on the fact that the pension investment institution to which he is a regular contributor possesses 15% shares of the mall's leasable spaces. In another act, he covers a sixty-meter stretch of footpath in an hour, thus underscoring the capitalist imperative of individually managing and exploiting the units of time that contrasts with experiencing time as continuity. His slow motion leads to a re-rhythmization of body and movement, and an altered experience of locomotion and goal-orientedness, although in a substantially different sense than it happens in Cage's performance. In such actions, Julier makes accessible a peculiar and ironic version of "augmented reality" through embodied tracing of abstract relations. The latter are experienced in flesh-and-blood circumstances rather than distanced desk research.

Likewise, the project of somaesthetics suggests the rehabilitation of practice in order to better cope with the challenges related to our abilities, our degree of freedom, and our prospects for a better life. A central premise of somaesthetics is that self-knowledge, self-care, self-fashioning, right action, and practicing the art of living—requirements of the good life—are highly dependent on our conscious cultivation of the body and the unconscious customs and ingrained routines we live along. (Shusterman, 1999) Its Deweyan legacy also teaches us that the body of the living creature cannot be treated as a separate entity from its immediate environments, both natural and social. Although everyone indeed leads their life within abstract and mediated relations, such as culture, society, the state, city, municipality, and the like, in the strict sense of the word, one's home is where one lives and from where one's life emerges. That is true regardless of how much the history of philosophy has neglected, marginalized, or ignored the question of the home, always emphasizing the question of the *civitas* or *politeia* instead.[20] Home was seen, like the body, the feminine, and the animal, as a background against which human dignity would stand out through politics. In this regard, the kitchen—the center stage of both Cage's piece and the IKEA universe—is no other than the venue for feeding the political animal to maintain the capacity to participate in the affairs of the polis. Any re-consideration of the kitchen, and inseparable from it, the home in its totality, should be conjoined with a reinvention and restructuring of the ideals of life. In this regard, both somaesthetic analysis and

20 "Cities are, literally, uninhabitable," claims Emanuele Coccia (2024, 4), adding that "the only true and absolute citizens are the homeless, the clochards." (5) His book is an intriguing thought experiment on the dismantling and rebuilding of the concept of home.

practice can provide a critical orientation.

One inevitable and initial task in this effort is reassessing the sensory operations that characterize life in late capitalism. David Howes (2005) asks what can be done to combat sensory and physical fixations that reign in everyday consumption. His answer to the question points to one precondition and three important consequences. As he says, "Consumption is an *active* (not a passive) process, where all sorts of meanings and uses for products are generated that the designers and marketers of those products never imagined." (294) Initiatives and reconfigurations within the sensory sphere play an indispensable part in this. Although the sensorium is highly influenced by socially and politically engineered interrelations between the self and the environment, it is not fully controlled. The latent and unrealized potentials can be actuated. "The best antidote, I suggest, is sensitive-training," claims Howes,[21] referring to such practices as the highly somaesthetic Japanese behavioral regimen of *jikkan* or the German consumption climate of *Ostalgie,* which is charged with historical feelings. We can talk not only about sensitive-training or re-educating the senses but also about the rethinking and rediscovery of the sensory life as such. Parallel to hyperesthetic energies that have entirely eclipsed the former pragmatic use-value of commodities, on the consumption side, use might become more flexible to take an uncalculated, uncontrolled, 'poetic' turn in which *creative misuse* can powerfully counteract hegemonic forms of consumption. Creative misuse implies also that, while the gesture may seem affirmative towards the market—since the product is bought—this behavior undermines the latter precisely through the differing usage. In this case, valorization or value enhancement—which is an expectation of capital—is not done in the public sphere of the market but is taking place in the very sphere of the usage.

Finally, Gernot Böhme (2017) also writes about the possibilities of resisting the overwhelming power of aesthetic capitalism. His proposals are both general and more directly related to the problem of the home. His central insight—in full concert with Shusterman and Howes—is that the aesthetic character of present-day capitalism should be overcome precisely by aesthetic measures.[22] According to this approach, the primary action to be taken is not to condemn aesthetic labor and aesthetic effects as such, but rather to unleash the generic, anthropological potential of the aesthetic—a motive inherited from a tradition of thinking crystallized in Schiller's concept of the *Spieltrieb*. (Matherne and Riggle, 2020; 2021) It follows that the contents of the aesthetic experience are not necessarily false; they can transmit or generate real emotions and vital energies. Autonomy is not an option to be ruled out, even in the context of the aesthetic experience produced within the milieu of consumer capitalism. In this experience, regardless of whatever sphere of existence it occurs in, the integrity and wholeness of life are experienced, as well as the union of body and mind. Aesthetic awareness, which should include somaesthetic competence, is an eminent way of practicing what Michael Taussig (2020) calls mastery of non-mastery, an example of which can be seen in Cage's performance piece. It is because aesthetic awareness is not about control over perception or the perceptible, but rather embodied alertness that resists following predetermined routes concerning the content of the experience. It is an alertness that melts down fixed hierarchies.

Beyond increasing aesthetic awareness, Böhme also proposes moral and economic strategies for reclaiming a higher degree of freedom, which can lead to veering off the track from the consumerist trajectories of aesthetic capitalism and alleviating the damage of those trajectories.

21 Howes is here taking issue with Frederic Jameson's prescription – namely more "cognitive-mapping." Howes suggests that such an approach is unlikely to be able to cut through the sensory profusion of late capitalism. Fight fire with fire, fight over-stimulation with more discerning forms of sensation.

22 This demand, under the address of "aesthetic literacy", is shared also by scholars of Everyday Aesthetics, which was initiated by Yuriko Saito (2007), Katya Mandoki (2007), and others.

His moral proposals include the acquisition of virtues such as solidarity, moderation, self-restraint, autonomy, serenity—replacing dissatisfaction—and last but not least, a program of rediscovering authentic needs. From this latter, a further set of countermeasures follows: a needs management-driven recalibration of personal, individual, and communal life, in which the concept of home (*oikos*) is rethought, and the practice of domestic economy (*oikonomika*) becomes rediscovered. This would lead to a state of affairs in which genuine intimacy would be cherished through practicing mastery of non-mastery, whose poetic demonstration can be seen in Cage's performance. Its prosaic translation into daily life is a task that might be taken as an open call for today's IKEA-consuming masses striving to acquire and maintain a sense of homeyness as the eminent means to shape their identity and experience their individuality.

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