

Magic Vacuum

Disneyland Paris

It shows you the dirt you never knew you had
— Hoover slogan (1932).¹

In 1939, the Viennese economist and sociologist Otto Neurath published *Modern Man in the Making*. The book was illustrated with graphs, charts and pictographics designed by the German modernist artist Gerd Arntz which conveyed the history of technological advancement, social models of cooperation, and organisational strategies. This intense and aesthetically appealing visual efficiency was applauded by the public. Moreover, the streamlined means of communicating information—or “reductive genius”, as one critic put it—echoed the ideological proposal at the heart of *Modern Man in the Making*: the advancement of a distinctly managerial mode of being in the world.²

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was wrong to suggest that, when God is dead, everything is permitted.³ Despite flaunting the false promise of free desire and personal empowerment, capitalism produces its own punishing moral codes and ideological traps buttressed by commodified mediations of experience. Indeed, Robert Pfaller argues that the only kind of magic left in enlightened, secularised culture are the illusions produced by capitalism—anonymised “illusions without owners” so commonplace that they often go unnoticed.⁴ Despite living in an enlightened, *logical* world, suspension of disbelief is second nature when faced with such illusions. Canned laughter, face-recognition, pre-emptive algorithms, and powdered soup—these *little tricks* or *shortcuts* punctuate our lives, characterising everyday experience and, apparently, making contemporary life easier.

David Attwood centres a quintessential example of this phenomenon in *Magic Vacuum*. Wrestling them from their horizontal homelife, five Roomba vacuums are displayed on the gallery walls.⁵ The series could be read as a domestic-suburban take on Marcel Duchamp’s readymade *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919), a pharmacist’s vial empty aside from “Paris air”. Each was purchased by Attwood on Facebook marketplace and no doubt smuggles a trace of the anonymous debris of its previous home: dead skin, hair, crumbs, dirt, or plant matter. Today, waste has become a topic of interest inspiring the popularisation of new terms linking the body to the world around it like “digital shadow” and “eco-footprint”. More concrete, analysing one’s own leavings has become a practice of self-maintenance.⁶ These concerns all stem from an ideological goal of self-preservation and presentation—a means of sterilising the abject mess of life with protocols and rules aimed to streamline natural processes and assure the individual of their benevolent role in a broader narrative.

Text appears in numerous forms in *Magic Vacuum*. Most uniform is the “Hoover” logo on each Roomba’s face. Founded in 1908, the home appliance company monopolised the vacuum cleaner industry so completely that the brand name became synonymous with vacuum cleaners. (Indeed, “hoover” is commonly employed as a verb, have entered the vernacular seamlessly.) Compellingly, the Hoover vacuum has also become synonymous with contemporary art in the final decades of the twentieth century. Somewhat recouping the iconicity of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1916), the urinal signed R. Mutt, American artist Jeff Koons presented the updated (and less abject) technologies of managing waste as readymades in the 1980s. Illuminated with fluorescent lights, Koon’s *The New* (1980) featured the latest models of Hoover and Shelton vacuums in hermetically sealed plexiglass display boxes. Koons explained, “I chose the vacuum for its anthropomorphic qualities ... It is a

breathing machine. It displays both female and male sexuality. It has orifices and phallic attachments.”⁷ The snaky neck, the mouth-like nozzle, and the bag/stomach ready to bloat with household debris might resemble a surrealist *cadavre exquis*. This intricate anatomy is lost in the compact, disk-like twenty-first century vacuums Attwood displays.

Appliances like Roombas, water filters, air conditioners, or humidifiers—devices that aim to control or regulate the quality of air and other environmental factors within the home—take up space and make present the processes of home maintenance. The design limitations and attempt to make them subtle results in the impoverished aesthetic of efficiency. But these hard, plastic bodies with their own distinctive surfaces and contours recoup an aesthetic allure in this very streamlining.⁸ Though they take different forms, both Attwood and Koons investment in the Hoover brand points to the recouperation of the avant-garde promise of mystifying newness offered by design and technology. In a culture where the autonomy of art has been eroded—by deskilling, the emphasis on multi-disciplinary practices, and art’s attendant mobilisation under neoliberalism as a malleable and media-ready vehicle for ideology and identity—the enthusiasm for innovation, beauty and *goodness* in everyday life is usurped by fashion, design, and smart devices.

Accompanying *Magic Vacuum* is a complex venn diagram conceived by Attwood and designed by Celeste Njoo. Rather than neat overlapping circles, the compartments resemble the blades of a whirling pedestal fan warped by motion (echoing the rotating legs of the dachshund in Giacomo Balla’s *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* [1912]—an expression of the inextricable link between modernism and velocity). This kind of visual information can be utilised in business contexts to manipulate reality or obfuscate complexity through oversimplification. This is part of its inherent appeal. In his appraisal of Neurath’s *Modern Man in the Making*, Michael J. Golec emphasises the calming effect of visually ordered information and statistics in a managerial culture.⁹ In place of spiritual or religious systems of belief, “scientific” or “systems” thinking fills the gap, soothing the mind by making sense of the world through familiar, flat iconography.

The categories in Attwood’s venn diagram include “magic”, “automation”, “reproductive labour”, and “AI” to name a few. It could be read as a map of the conceptual concerns that define Attwood’s practice, representing the slippages between these concepts and their instrumentalisation in contemporary neoliberal culture. Importantly, the centre of the diagram—the point which all sets intersect—is a winky face. The wink typically suggests intimacy or solidarity with the subject it’s directed toward, a shared knowledge or message that is unknown to third parties. It also might act to alter the meaning of a message, undermining (or muddying) seriousness, suggesting there’s something beyond the text. As its prevalence in advertising suggests, it can be a highly manipulative gesture employed by bad faith actors.

What is smuggled into the home behind winking promises? In *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (1983) Ruth Schwartz Cowan emphasised the dubious promise of labour-saving devices. “Tools are not passive instruments” she asserts, “they have an influence on us”.¹⁰ In Cowan’s view, we become “victims of a form of cultural obfuscation” if we imagine the home as a respite from “the horrors of modernity.”¹¹ A similar sentiment is expressed by Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn regarding the acceptance of the institutionalised “cult of domesticity” by housewives in the past century.¹² Rather than “an assertion of their authority” this “receptiveness to the ministrations of so-called experts paved the way for the hegemony of professionals and the therapeutic mentality.”¹³ This erosion of the home and the private sphere by technology and market-driven ideologies is doubly relevant in the age of

surveillance capitalism where labour-saving devices (the Roomba among them) collect data while doing our bidding.¹⁴

Humorously, each Roomba is plastered with a bumper sticker, conflating the autonomous robot vacuum with the car. Many of the stickers reference magic or witchcraft, including the gaudy “Magic Happens”, “My Other Car is A Broom” and “Witches’ Parking Only: All Others Would be TOAD”. The witch has many associations in contemporaneity, both positive and negative. A New Age healer or derogatory term for a woman come to mind. (*Witch or bitch?* Another slippage.) Indeed, there is a longstanding association between woman and magic or trickery. Played for laughs, this manifests in advertising that seems to lampoon the gender wars. The deceived party is usually a male love interest who is beguiled by the beauty his female companion has achieved through dubious means (makeup, anti-aging treatments, cosmetic surgery, or shapewear) or impressed by her proficiency at domestic chores (the calculated result of labour-saving devices, cleaning products, microwavable meals, or meal-prep kits). But the distrust of women is deeply seated in psychology and psychoanalysis. In her celebrated publication *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982) Carol Gilligan countered this perception by centring women’s complex, caring maternal capacity as one that holds positive potential for public life outside of the home and personal relationships.¹⁵ However, parallel to the theorisation of care-ethics and women’s entry into productive labour, so-called “feminine traits” found a place in managerial practices. The admin-mindset and corporatisation of therapeutic methods in the neoliberal workplace centre feel-good rhetoric as a method of concealing or buffering hierarchies with fuzzy talk of teamwork and community—opaque, manipulative conduct that obfuscates dubious power dynamics and manages the deindividualisation of the worker. It is no coincidence that many devices (including Roombas, Siri, Google Home, and the default setting on many satellite navigation systems) have a generic female voice. Authority is cloaked: the gentle suggestion from the maternal mouth is more palatable. *Paternal authority is just too coarse.*

One of the most ubiquitous bumper stickers featured in *Magic Vacuum* reads “Magic Happens”, a glittery sticker that refers, in part, to its own simple holographic trick. The sticker’s website (which is advertised on the sticker itself) describes the sticker as follows: “ONLY in the original do the letter outlines have hidden magic vision woven into each letter.”¹⁶ Another striking juxtaposition emerges in the combination of the vacuum and the stickers. The utilitarian font of the Roomba’s buttons, bold and brief—an efficient use of space to convey the most information while occupying minimal surface area—contrasts with the eye-catching, curly or colourful font of the bumper stickers. Another ubiquitous inclusion is the “CoeXisT” sticker. Each letter forms a symbol. The “o” takes the shape of a prominent peace sign, the “t” a crucifix, and the “e” a hermaphroditic glyph, and so on. Though the incoherent mash of symbols was added in controversial and legally dubious reproductions, the original “CoeXisT” image by Polish artist Piotr Mlodozieniec directly confronted religious intolerance.¹⁷ Indeed, art lives on in poor imitations in its viral circulation, catching bugs along the highway.

The calculated ambiguity of the bumper sticker iteration of “CoeXisT” combines the spectre of feel good post-war countercultural rhetoric with turn of the century liberal multiculturalism.¹⁸ Taken literally, it’s the perfect symbol for neoliberal capitalism in which celebrating difference operates both as a generator of new identity-based markets and as a useful obfuscation of complex and ideologically challenging questions of economic inequality (which transcend or complicate divisions

based on religion, race, gender, and sexual preference). Like sharing infographics or political memes, the display of such a sign declares one's benevolent position in the culture war, asserting one's own purity while pointing to an external other who hates, who doesn't accept. It serves the narcissistic function of excusing oneself from a perceived culture of hate, violence or exploitation via a pre-approved rehearsed speech act, regardless of one's own personal conduct or political engagements beyond the text. *But we probably shouldn't take it literally.* It's just a sticker, after all ... ;)

by Tara Heffernan

¹ Hoover company (1932), quoted in Rosalind Sykes, "The Home in 50 Objects #1: the Hoover", *Financial Times*, 17 July 2020. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/66c8b7c4-3f64-4d51-adf9-9db3381589b6>.

² Kenneth Burke, "Quality and Quantity," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 395: For a detailed analysis of the managerial culture put forward by *Modern Man in the Making*, consult Michael J. Golec, "Otto Neurath's Modern Man in the Making (1939) and Scientific Management" *Nonsite.org*, 22 September 2022. URL: <https://nonsite.org/otto-neuraths-modern-man-in-the-making-1939-and-scientific-management/>: Indeed, the suggestion of a "modern man" forged by rules and good conduct as ordained by an elected overseer is established too by Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol nearly a century earlier in *Dead Souls*. In his schooldays, the young Chichikov flourishes by adhering to a schoolmaster who disregards "talents and gifts" as frivolous distractions, giving full marks instead to those who follow rules, even if they fail to learn one letter of the alphabet. Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol, *Dead Souls* (New York: Vintage, 1997). Text originally published in 1842.

³ This sentiment is expressed by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1979-1980), quoted in Slavoj Žižek, "If there is a God, then anything is permitted", 17 April 2012. URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/if-there-is-a-god-then-anything-is-permitted/10100616>.

⁴ Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (New York: Verso, 2014).

⁵ This horizontality—and relationship with the mess associated with the ground—also recalls the all-over, chaotic scatology of avant-garde painting, aligned with primal mark making and unconscious desires. Aggressive abstraction was prized as a transmutation of nature into culture via its containment in the parameters of the canvas and its vertical presentation. Case in point was Jackson Pollock's action painting, which he iconically created on the ground, splattering paint on the canvas, imbuing the artwork with, as Rosalind Krauss explains, 'a horizontality that was ... *below culture*'. Rosalind Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Painting", in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, edited by Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 170.

⁶ The British television series *You are What You Eat* (Channel 4, 2004-2006/Channel 5, 2022-) famously features analysis of faecal matter by a dietician.

⁷ Jeff Koons and Robert Rosenblum, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Anthony D'Offay Gallery, 1992), 44.

⁸ An iconic resemblance is recouped even in this simplicity. The Roombas, hanging vertically, resemble a comical smiley face: the "spot clean" and "turbo clean" buttons suffice as eyes, the "auto clean" button resembles a nose, while the brush release tab at the bottom recalls a smiling mouth.

⁹ Golec, 2022.

¹⁰ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, "Introduction" in *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage and Feminism* by Christopher Lasch (New York: Norton and Company, 2010), xviii.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Maggie Astor, "Your Roomba may be Mapping your Home, collecting Data that could be shared", *New York Times*, 25 July 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/technology/roomba-irobot-data-privacy.html>.

¹⁵ One of the main contentions of Gilligan's text is the obscuring of the moral complexity of women in prior studies. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ "Magic Happens Sticker", 2020. URL: <https://www.magichappenssticker.com.au>.

¹⁷ The image was first exhibited in an international art competition hosted by the Museum on the Seam, Israel in 2000. Phil Edwards, "The big fight over Coexist", *Vox*, 8 June 2016. URL: <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/8/11867438/coexist-logo-bumper-sticker>.

¹⁸ Advocating for free love (a liberation of the id), promoting anti-establishment values and pushing a vehement critique of the purportedly patriarchal and conformist structure of the nuclear family, utopic flower power thinking driven by the hippie culture of the 1970s inadvertently set the stage for our contemporary social and cultural malaise of toxic individualism and perpetual adolescence and—most relevant here—the unification of aesthetics and politics/art and life. A relevant example of a popularised hippie slogan is Dr. Tim Leary's "TUNE IN. TURN ON. DROP OUT". Of course, the association with the "drop out" was largely symbolic. Most members of the subcultural group were syphoned from the middle-class, they were not true rejects who were unable to meet the standards of institutional learning, or the markers of adult social and work life (those for whom the term "drop out" was coined). Leary establishes a harmony between the true reject and the middle-class "bohemian" subject, allowing the latter to revel in the poetic transgression the former's lowly status implies.