

*Ornament & Information* presents a group of artists who have lived and worked in either Chicago or Vienna. Across divergent and intersecting practices, the exhibition acts as the set for an ensemble posing the question of ornamentation's value and existence today, along with the architectural, economic, and social concerns that attend to it.

Traceable to the late nineteenth century and continuing to this day, there has been a largely unremarked upon reciprocating influence between Chicago and Vienna. This ideational pipeline has never been of a one-to-one nature; rather, it is a product of certain intellectual developments from one city being then synthesized and transcended by the other.

During his three-year stay in the United States, Viennese architect Adolf Loos absorbed many of the ideas that would later emerge in his 1913 treatise "Ornament and Crime," which called for architects to reject decorative motifs while focusing on a building's structure and spatial experience instead. While visiting Chicago, he studied Louis Sullivan's buildings and critical writings with lasting effect. In 1922, he would revisit Chicago with a finalist, but ultimately rejected, entry to the Chicago Tribune's Tower competition. His submission, a skyscraper shaped like a Doric column, was a cheeky nod to the columns of a paper but also a tongue-in-cheek critique of the tension between form, function, and aesthetics. Loos's brand of pared-back modernism would heavily influence Bauhaus architects who fled European fascism, particularly Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who would settle in Chicago, redefining the birthplace of the skyscraper.

Concurrently, during the mid-century, the economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman's hyper-individualist and free-market orthodoxies began to gain institutional support in Cold War Austria and America, laying the early groundwork for what would become known as neoliberalism. Where International-style architecture often limited ornament to muted but sumptuous material choices, the economic liberalism of the 20th century used austere means to yield decadent profits. At the heart of all these historical phenomena is a sublimation of excess and a curious absence—or reconfiguration—of the human body, rethought and repurposed within an ever-shifting modern world.

In the economic and architectural doctrines of the 20th century, the means justify the ends. Perhaps this explains why ornamentation, while still present, became an outdated conversation. In a society that prioritizes results, what good is something that is purely an end for its own sake? Across the exhibition, we see that "ornament" has beef with itself. Is it like Loos's or Mies's buildings: decadence packaged as austerity, or is it like Chicago's very own "Vienna Beef" hot dog: austerity made from excess? What roots both strategies firmly in the vocabulary of ornament is their indifference to productivity or usefulness; they are themselves for their own sake.

Modern architecture is often charged with subtractive thinking, but it might be more apt to claim that rather than abolishing ornamentation, modernity recharacterized it for new ends. Whether using luxury materials in functional ways or aestheticizing humbler components like cast concrete and steel, modern architects created spaces that prioritized showing a system of parts in relation to the whole. These efforts served to contextualize a building as something that fulfills a specific function, a function that should be evident based on plainly observable spatial and material considerations. Where in the past, ornament might have been used to highlight and narrate specific architectural intentions, the modern retreat of ornament into the fabric of space itself signals an impulse towards the immediate and informatic. The works presented in this gallery by Gaylen Gerber, Benjamin Hirte, B. Ingrid Olson, Walter Pichler, Diane Simpson, and Heimo Zobernig reflect and engage with this productive tension between material expression and informative content. Be they architecturally scaled interventions, fragmented quotations of social-realist ornaments, the enigmatic sincerity of found objects, surreal housing proposals, or puckish urban exploration.

Central to this room and the exhibition itself are questions of productivity, time, and the problem of the artist within a deeply conformist society. In contrast to the positivist assumptions of supply-side economic thinking and its subsequent systems of valuation, the work here asks what knowledge exists beyond quantitative or empiric value. Oswald Wiener, a writer, artist, and leading theorist of the Wiener Gruppe of poets in the late 1970s, who later made pioneering strides in the fields of cybernetics and cognitive psychology, proposed that in his theory of Dandyism, he was interested in the artist as a figure who is not solely invested in the production of artworks but in “evading ... determination by ‘communication.’” He was also known to recite philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s remark that “when calculating starts, understanding ends.”

The economization of daily life, which is perhaps no better illustrated than in the online betting markets infiltrating even the most banal instances of human interaction, seems to suggest that everything has a quantitative price and measure, that behavior is rote, and that the human is little different than a machine. As the novelist Robert Musil once wrote, “We do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little intellect in matters of the soul.” What connects the artists in this room is a continued engagement with the ineffable, beyond the formal constraints of things and the conceptual limits of language.

Beyond architecture, Adolf Loos wrote extensively on the fashions of his day, and one could easily trace such dandyish impulses along the pattern of a well-tailored anonymity echoed in many aspects of the practices gathered here. Dandyism, however, is less a question of style than it is an attitude of the mind towards sociability and humanity itself. Despite this, style and clothing in particular ought not to be disregarded. Fashion is often one of the best barometers to understand the relation of the individual to the prevailing social and historical headwinds of the day.

Garments function as a sort of elective ornament, something we choose to supplement ourselves with. They can either hide or call attention to their wearer; sometimes they do both simultaneously. A garment is in many ways a sort of mental prosthesis, a way to communicate a personal disposition in relation to the physical and political environment. A garment is always a fragment of a larger whole—an outfit. Garments code the body socially; much can be assumed based on clothes alone, for right or wrong. The artists assembled in this final section: B. Ingrid Olson, Anna-Sophie Berger, Isabelle Frances McGuire, Diane Simspon, Valentina Triet, and Walter Pichler each understand that the relationship of the figure to a garment is a historically contingent one, fraught with classed, gendered, and political data that compose the performance of a person.