

Kit C.O.T.I.S.

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[See table of contents](#)

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C.O.T.I.S.

WERNER HAMMERSTINGL

“Clearly more media-savvy than the average bear...” — I muse as I listen to a member of the Kit collective (*conspiring* since 1992) describe the group’s concerns with concealing its members’ personal voice and physical identity from the press,

ating component, any hidden properties are likely to create unease.

Kit, apparently very fond of acronyms, titled the Gertrude St. work *C.O.T.I.S.* (*Cult of the Inserter seat*), an acronym which Kit tellingly has to share with the U.K. organisation *Confederation of tape services*.

trix of concerns that connects to the contemporary condition of a society heavily augmented by technology.

I wanted to discover, before contemplating the specifics of *C.O.T.I.S.*, what else Kit had produced since 1992, so I decided to search the web. My search, which produced no hits

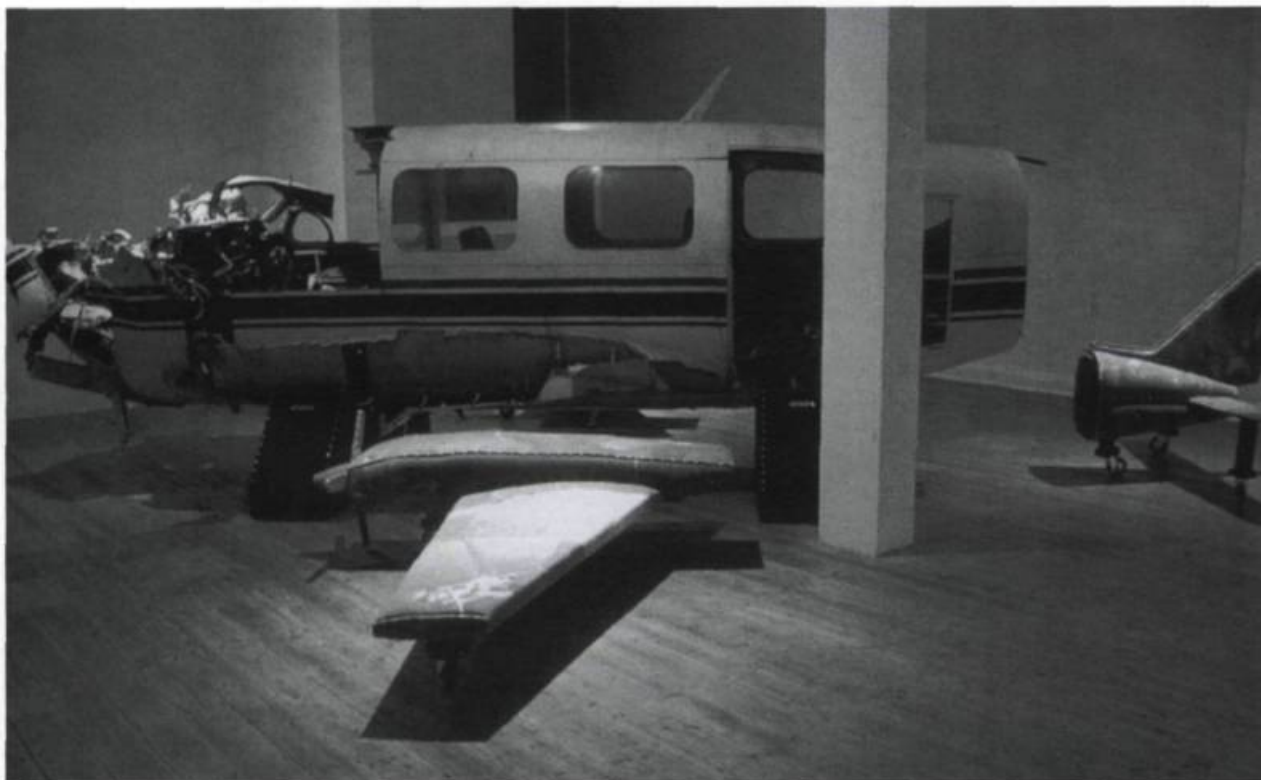
- The Resellers Source Kit;
- Life Kit, Disaster survival kits for the first 72 hours;
- The GHB Exothermic Experimental Kit;
- Virtual Frog Dissection Kit Version 2.0;
- Immigration, citizenship, visa, green card, legal, kits;
- Hallelujah West-Survival Kit;
- Ultimate Survival Kit. Perfect for taking along on hikes, camping trips, fishing and canoeing. (Keep one in your car and one in your house for emergency use).

So, nothing to direct to a site on this collaborative group of artists who dragged the fuselage of a crashed small passenger plane into 200 Gertrude Street. And yet a lot of context which informs *C.O.T.I.S.*—mortality, survival, legality, emergency, dollars—are all terms prompting a relationship with the issues raised by this peaceful, dead aeroplane in a gallery.

The perverse shrine constructed by *C.O.T.I.S.* (aka Kit) is a combination of the “ready-made” (or more correctly: Industrial junk) fuselage and some lovingly made “Phantom limbs”. Wing and tail sections, due to their obviously diminished scale, disconnected from the body and upholstery and unsuited to the utility expected of the body before its demise, might be pregnant with satire or desire. . . we will have to wait and see.

The upholstery recalls Hadrian Pigott’s *Instrument of Hygiene (case 1)*, from 1995, where the artist placed a porcelain washbasin, some copper plumbing fittings and two cakes of soap into a plushly fitted case upholstered in red velvet. The case might have held some unusual musical instrument until it displayed its contents of fetish.

At least two more British artists connect with *C.O.T.I.S.* in quite intimate ways. The first comparison is perhaps a little obvious: the carcass of a plane which, as much as any mechanical entity can, had died—and the lovingly made superbly



Kit, *C.O.T.I.S.* (*Cult of the Inserter seat*), 1999. 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Australia. walkerwade@hotmail.com

and the efforts by journalists to reveal that which is so playfully hidden. Who can resist such a game?

Members of the Ku-Klux Klan or the Fratelli della Misericordia kept their faces well hidden from the camera and the public by wearing masks to conceal their identity. But these individuals subscribed to rather extreme social and religious views. The Kit, on the other hand, appear to avoid parading their individual identities as an inherent strategic component of their art practice. In a society and a community where the measurable and otherwise quantifiable is a necessary oper-

There just isn’t enough code to go around, even acronyms are having to multitask. Acronyms are of course the language of officialdom and depersonalized, perhaps even dehumanized administrations. The Kit use of *C.O.T.I.S.* provides a small clue as to the possible strategy of the work—a politicized critique of structural domains perhaps? Artists have taken on at least some of the practices which had in earlier times been the combined tasks of the village elder and the village idiot: wisdom and irreverent, innocent satire. As a work, *C.O.T.I.S.* produces many conceptual nodes of entry to a ma-

for these rather elusive artists, nevertheless gives us a great view into the kind of society Kit is addressing with its work. Here is an extract of headings returned by my favourite search engine:

- kitcar.com has been the Internet’s premier and largest kit car information mall;
- Wholesale electronics components and educational kits;
- A legendary timepiece with its wagging tail pendulum and moving eyes, the Kit-Cat Clock has brightened many a wall/home for over 50 years;
- Fyrst USA First Aid Sports Medicine Kit for Athletic Injuries;

detailed *Dead Dad* (1996-97) sculpture of a nude adult male, by Ron Mueck.

The other example I wanted to mention is Jonathan Parson's *Carcass*, a dissected map (all the roads have been removed from the original map with what must have been surgical precision) of "Greater London", displayed in an acrylic case. Parson's "Carcass" is fragile beyond belief — an entire circulatory system of a great entity is a challenge between gravity and millimetre-wide strips of tenacious paper.

Ok, you get something of an idea how it all fits together, but I've not yet mentioned two features of the work: the first is a soundtrack, the second aerial photography of crash-site images printed on the upholstery used to cover the wing and tail-sections.

The sound is inconsistent, emerging from a concealed source inside the fuselage. We cannot place it exactly but it is familiar. The catalogue informs us that it constitutes fragments of "Black Box" recordings. Sometimes they appear to play backwards as if this could reverse the final moments of disasters that terminate in eerie silence after the sound of impact subsides.

The catalogue lists the 10 pre-impact recordings of plane crashes referenced by *C.O.T.I.S.* I will not repeat them all here except to say the last comments by flight crews share the normal human dimensions of expressions. We have the fatalist: "that's it . . . I'm dead," the inevitable: "oh fuck me," and the uncomprehending: "What's going on now?"

The irregular sounds emanating from this aeroplane body accompany the visible debris: the twisted seats and the wires slithering from the instrument section like spilled guts. Continuing my scrutiny of the interior I notice small personal items of the demised occupants: a cotton bud here, a toothbrush wedged between vinyl and aluminium there . . . nothing of great significance and yet informed by the fatal history of this relic.

With this history in mind it is easy to see a convergence between the private and the public elements of the crash. The upholstery on the wings and tail sections reinforces this with its printed imagery com-

prising aerial images of crash-sites. Debris locations are highlighted with white marks like the body outlines of victims in old detective films.

At this stage our attention is directed at the evidence. The evidence of a crash and how we encounter it involve a complex process of mediation between privilege (authority), convention (social mores), and the collective quest to establish causality. Crashes, and other disasters responsible for loss of life are endlessly picked over for evidence of causality. Modern investigators emulate the poor of Calcutta who scrutinise the terrain for scraps of food (means of survival). Evidence is collected so that the «body» can be reconstituted and analysed for the weakness that caused the disaster.

This essentially functionalist approach tends to define things in terms of cause and effect, but even at its most successful, it cannot reconcile the "inner" nature of the event. The obscenity of the random in an ordered society is enough to make anyone nervous. In a society where we have successfully sanitized our experience of death, where most of the dying is in controlled environments such as slaughterhouses and hospitals, or virtual on a screen or embedded in text, a plane/car crash occurs outside the specified locations for death and becomes a macabre but brief monument to the failure of a system which has wrapped itself in mechanical and electronic aids for survival.

The relationship between technological disaster and art has been examined across a variety of media, ranging from Andy Warhol's "Disaster" images (mid 60's) to J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1975) and Mark Pauline/SRL's techno-destructo-fetish events during the '80s and '90s.

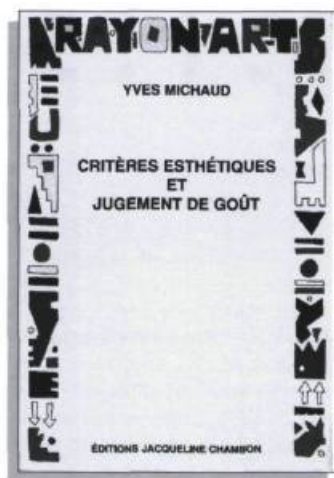
The *C.O.T.I.S.* work by Kit adds food for thought . . . will continuing technological innovation realize the extropian dream or will we simply become more vulnerable?

As we hurtle into the next millennium, we have to pass 2000. Good luck! ■

C.O.T.I.S.

by Kit @ 200 Gertrude Street,
Melbourne
February 1999

PARUTIONS



MICHAUD, YVES.
Critères esthétiques et jugement de goût.
Éd. Jacqueline Chambon,
Nîmes, 1999.
121 pages.

Depuis une dizaine d'années, en France tout particulièrement, des critiques et intellectuels de tous horizons se sont mis à questionner, voire à attaquer certaines démarches artistiques ainsi que l'accréditation de celles-ci par les institutions, alors que les œuvres produites à l'intérieur de ces réflexions n'ont rien à voir, disent-ils, avec ce qu'il faut entendre par le savoir-faire artistique. C'est dans ce contexte, que plusieurs considèrent comme celui du «n'importe quoi» et dans lequel tout jugement sur la validité d'une œuvre semble avoir perdu sa légitimité, que le philosophe et critique d'art Yves Michaud nous propose ce livre bref et concis sur la question des critères esthétiques. Conséquemment, on peut considérer ce court ouvrage comme un complément à son précédent livre consacré à la crise du sens de l'art contemporain.

Dans *La crise de l'art contemporain* (P.U.F., 1997), Michaud offrait une lecture claire et précise de cette polémique essentiellement franco-française. Après avoir présenté les différents points de vue des détracteurs et des défenseurs, l'auteur présente son diagnostic : la crise est de l'ordre de ce qu'il faut entendre par art contemporain. Plus précisément, elle en est une de représentation de

l'art et de nos croyances et attentes à son égard. Une de ces croyances remonte au XVIII^e siècle et concerne l'idée de citoyenneté démocratique, celle qui engagerait les individus dans une communicabilité universelle au sein d'un espace public. Or, croire à la démocratisation de l'art, notamment à l'idée qu'elle offrirait le «ciment social» de la communauté, est une utopie dont il faut se défaire. Désormais, la montée des goûts démocratiques au sein de la société postmoderne fait de l'espace public un espace de tension. «La communauté esthétique n'est qu'un mythe.» Ceci dit, tout ce qui se fait à l'intérieur de l'art contemporain n'est pas «n'importe quoi» et il est encore permis de juger des œuvres. Toutefois, cela nécessite un déplacement vers de nouvelles croyances. C'est alors seulement que l'on pourra de nouveau réfléchir aux critères esthétiques. Mais d'où viendront-ils? Quels seront-ils? C'est ce à quoi tente de répondre ce livre.

Avec la fin de l'histoire occidentale de l'art, de l'explosion de la consommation, de la décolonisation, la postmodernité a ébranlé le socle sur lequel s'établissaient les critères classiques de jugement de goût. En effet, à cause d'un pluralisme ambiant, il y a aujourd'hui au niveau esthétique «un désarroi critériologique» qui a fortement contribué au relativisme en matière de jugement critique amenant plusieurs d'entre nous à conclure que tout se vaut parce rien ne vaut. Malgré cela, il est indispensable, selon Michaud, «de redonner un sens aux notions d'expérience esthétique, de critères d'évaluation et même de jugement de goût». Sans opter pour un retour aux anciennes valeurs de l'art à partir de certaines œuvres canoniques, nous ne devons pas non plus croire que notre interrogation sur la situation des critères esthétiques est désormais vaine. Nous devons plutôt «penser la pluralité de façon organisée». En effet, les différentes expériences d'ordre esthétique sont liées au langage de telle sorte que la pluralité peut faire l'objet d'une approche raisonnée. C'est en s'appuyant sur les philosophes Hume et Wittgen-