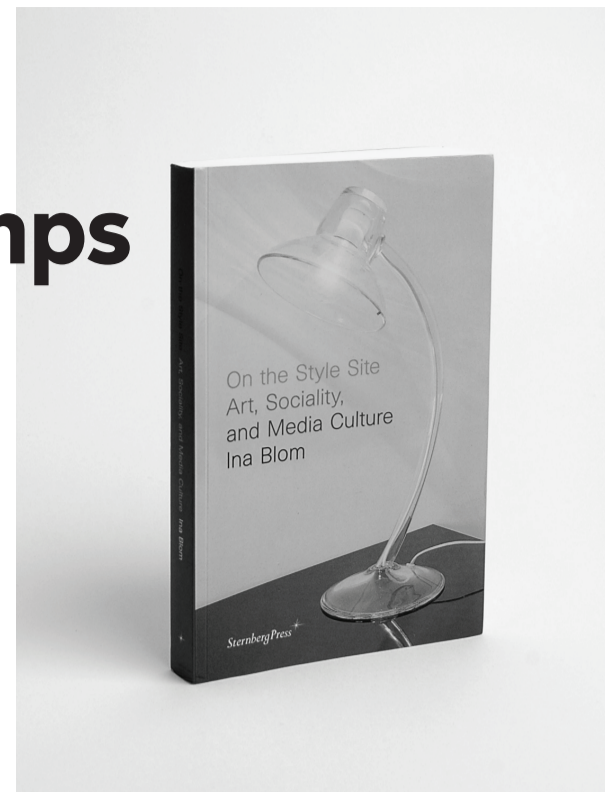


# Old Dogs, New Lamps

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**Jeff Kinkle**



Ina Blom's *On the Style Site*, as the book's subtitle suggests, is largely concerned with mapping the nexus where art, sociality and media culture meet. An art critic, curator, historian and theorist, Blom performs a re-reading of the artworks of many of the usual suspects of the past twenty years such as Olafur Eliasson, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Tobias Rehberger, armed with a theoretically dense conceptual schema that draws heavily on contemporary philosophy and media theory in general and theories of immaterial labour, cognitive capitalism, and biopower in particular. Looking at artists rarely considered under the rubric of institutional critique, and who are often seen to flirt with the aesthetics of design, fashion, and the mass media, Blom discovers a latent 'criticality' that is usually underplayed in discussions of their work or omitted altogether – a criticality she attempts to expose by thinking them in relation to what she calls "the style site".

Blom's starting point is the idea that over the past several decades, as notions of intervention in the politics of social space, institutions, and in the realm of sociality itself have come to the fore, the term "style" has by and large disappeared from critical and historical discourses on art. Simultaneously, however, style has become increasingly central to our culture and economy as a whole. The term style has been displaced from the art world into mainstream culture where it plays a key role in the development of subjectivity. The worlds we inhabit – not least galleries and exhibition spaces – are increasingly stylized worlds. Everyday life is now coated with style – subjectivity is constantly reproduced in and through style. The aim of Blom's book "is to operate in extension of this displacement, all the while testing the ground for a different way of relating to the style issues within art historical and art critical writing" (13). This is not done by merely returning to a vocabulary of style and form, as Blom states, "style, here, is not primarily evoked or referred to as an attribute of artworks but as a *social site*, and, furthermore, that the works to be discussed in this context should be seen as interventions in – or operations on – what we may now call *the style site*" (14).

The style site is conceived as a key "place" in which (post)modern subjectivity is created and continually reproduced by the environment in all of its cultural, economic, and technological complexity.<sup>1</sup> A consideration of the ways in which style – as a catchall term meant to include aesthetics, design, and fashion – structure our everyday lives is combined with the focus on the site-specificity of contemporary art. As Blom writes late in the book in a formulation influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, style site artists and artworks "invent artistic methodologies that make it possible to focus on the machinic production of sociality" (172). Referencing Craig Saper's concept of sociopoetics, Blom emphasizes that these works are more experiments on the style site than works that proclaim their existence within the style site. They not only reflect on the ways in which style produces subjectivity; they actively reconfigure this production. For example, Eliasson's work, to oversimplify Blom's argument, is seen to both reflexively consider how our perceptual reality is created through

lighting, lit spaces, and media machines while it re-orders our perception by making visible the techniques behind this creation.

Things get complicated as Blom then inscribes the style site within the media (once again, broadly defined). Following McLuhan and others, the ubiquity of the media produces a certain kind of mediatic subjectivity, not only on the level of content as an ideological state apparatus but in its form, in the way television for example structures the subject's perception of time and space. Blom's stance is influenced by the work and theory of Nam June Paik and she draws heavily on theories of biopower and immaterial labour, primarily those of Foucault and Maurizio Lazzarato, but also to a lesser extent Negri and Hardt on affective labour and Jonathan Beller on "the cinematic mode of production", and the idea that in post-Fordist societies life itself is put to work for the valorization of capital. Production is no longer limited to the workplace but seeps into all aspects of our everyday lives. Watching television can be seen as being productive for capital and this is demonstrated by the sophisticated ways in which advertisers, corporations, and networks vie for our attention. The value that attention produces may be difficult to quantify but the emphasis placed on television ratings and the high sums paid for advertising demonstrates its existence. The media's influence on the subjectification process is thus seen as being immense and so is the media's reliance on style. "The style site is, perhaps above all, treated as a mediatic site and is associated with the global information networks of contemporary capitalism, with all the difficulties this entails for concepts such as 'place' or 'context'" (14). Her claim as to the centrality of media to current style is not problematic in itself but one begins to become concerned that the concept of the style site has become a bit of a behemoth. As the term style by and large falls out of the middle sections of the book as the focus is placed on the media in general and television in particular, the extent to which the style site is even a useful concept for addressing the influence of the televisual on subjectivity becomes questionable.

The middle two chapters are centered on Blom's discussion of what she calls 'lamp works.' Used as a methodological convenience to ground her discussion of the style site and its relation to the media, contemporary works of art using lamps are specifically chosen because they direct us to a field of artistic articulation in which art, technologies, media, economic production, and personal lifestyles are treated as a continuum (59-60). Lamps are a creator of atmosphere and ambiance, themselves heavily stylized and plugged into an immense networked electrical grid, they also, Blom proposes, prompt discussion on the televisual. Blom's argument as to why lamps prompt this discussion is difficult to summarize as it builds on McLuhan, David Toop, Gernot Böhme, Walter Benjamin, and Heidegger, but the basic idea is that by building atmospheres around the emanation of electronic light, they mirror or reflect upon our mediatic environments and how media structures our perception of space and time. By framing atmospheric and environmental styles rather than distinct media contents, [the lamp

works] explore the production of subjectivity through the relation between moving image media and the 'perceptual' creation of space" (81). Many works are discussed in which television is treated essentially as a lamp: as a device for furnishing artificial light. For example, Rehberger's *81 Years* (2002) is seen to present television at its "most raw or reduced state: as a dispenser of light and time" (105). In the end, however, the use of lamps as an entry point seems a bit too random and forced. Blom continually makes claims like, "Living in the aura of lamps essentially means having one's entire perceptual apparatus connected to the global electronic and informational networks" (73), which is probably true, but the same could be said of say eating an avocado in Sweden (which also arguably engages more of the senses than lamps).

In *On the Style Site* "media" is almost synonymous with "television". Writing in 2007, one also wonders why the focus is on television? Do people still watch television? Socializing with primarily London and Stockholm's cultural classes may not make one representative of society at a whole, but I barely know anyone that owns a TV. There are also quite different senses of time and community generated or engaged by video games and the internet. We could perhaps even speculate that these medias are reconfiguring attention and sociability. I often find myself fast-forwarding through thirty-second viral videos to get to the so-called money shot: skip the build up and only see the funny fall. And when surfing online it seems to be inattention, the inability to focus on a web page for more than three seconds, that generates value and not really attention. We can perhaps think of the rise of things like Attention Deficiency Disorder as an inability of the state to keep up with the changes being instituted by our engagement with these new media technologies.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, there is a sense that the tumidity of Blom's core concepts makes the history and contemporary examples she chooses seem arbitrary. This is true of the book's second chapter that deals with the Constructivists and the historical development of the style site. In many respects this history is similar to the one sketched by Hal Forster, only with design standing in for style, which begins with Art Nouveau goes through Bauhaus and continues into the present in which everything from "jeans to genes" is subject to design imperatives.<sup>3</sup> It is understandable why Blom would choose the Constructivists as a key moment in the style site's growth, but it is also true that she could have chosen pretty much any of the groups of the historical avant garde. This is doubly true of the discussion of the lamp works, where Blom even acknowledges that the discussion of the style site in relation to artists who work with lamps is somewhat haphazard, but then even the artists chosen seem random. An artist working with lamps such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer seems to be more relevant to a discussion of aesthetics, biopower, and biopolitics than many of those discussed, yet is omitted.

This is the biggest problem with the final chapter as well, which seems to come out of nowhere. Blom used to work as a rock journalist and the final chapter of the book looks at the intersection of rock and art, building on many of

the concepts in previous chapters. It is coherent and thought provoking in itself and does relate to material elsewhere in the book but again feels a bit random. "Rock" too is defined as broadly as possible and appears to include all varieties of popular music, mainstream and underground. The immense variety of rock sites – from sitting at an arena rock concert, laying in bed watching a music video, dancing in a club with bass so heavy one feels nauseous to killing time with muzak in an elevator or listening to an iPod anywhere – makes the concept difficult to work with.

Unfortunately there is no proper conclusion to the book to bring together and as a result the book feels more like a collection of essays than a proper treatise. This is not a problem per se, but the chapters are linked to an extent that it would be unsatisfying to read each on its own and at the same time do not build on each other enough to make a coherent whole. The argument of the book meanders and it feels like many important discussions are never flushed out – politics being the most conspicuous by its absence. Key concepts are referenced but the debates surrounding them are not. Without entering into the discussions around concepts the attention theory of value, immaterial labour (and by and large only citing a single book by Lazzarato), the theoretical background feels less than rigorous despite the fact that Blom has obviously read both widely and carefully. At times the book feels a bit like a cocktail party where each guest doesn't want to upset the host by bickering amongst themselves, smiling and pretending to get along while the tension simmers beneath the surface. Lazzarato, Laclau and Mouffe, Latour, McLuhan, Foucault, Tarde, Benjamin, Bergson, Heidegger, etc, are all repeatedly referenced yet without any real conflicts erupting. This can work for a Nicolas Bourriaud, but not in a comparably dry academic text like this. The artist or curator as DJ fine, but not the theorist as DJ going from punk to polka to hard house without a cross-fader.

*On the Style Site* is just under two-hundred pages and one suspects that it might have worked better as a provocative, elongated essay or as a larger survey covering the development of the style site and its present importance more thoroughly: as it stands it feels both too long and too short. Still, Blom's text is very rich in both its theoretical and philosophical discussions and in its analyses of specific artists and works. It is a formidable attempt at revitalizing the discussion around a group of artists who one suspected not much new could be said about and should certainly be of interest to those concerned with the intricacies of art practice and aesthetics under the reign of so-called cognitive capitalism. ●

Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality, and Media Culture* (Sternberg Press, 2007).

#### Notes

- 1 In this respect Blom's concerns are similar to those of theorists such as Brian Holmes and Suelly Rolnik, although her interests are more philosophical and art historical, less economic and geopolitical and informed by Guattari than Holmes and Rolnik respectively.
- 2 I owe this point to discussions with Mark Fischer, Alberto Toscano, John Hutnyk, and Tom Bunyard on the "attention theory of value".
- 3 Hal Forster, *Design and Crime* (UK: Verso, 2002), p. 16.