

## Patterning Particularity: Adrienne Spier's Furniture Sculptures

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Adrienne Spier has had a long-standing fascination with flattening used furniture, taking away its ability to stand. She often begins her projects by scouring curbsides, classified ads, and waste facilities for desks, chairs and dressers—unwanted and outmoded, though often still perfectly functional. She dismantles, cuts, and reconfigures these items, translating their volumes into surface. In *Waiting Rooms and Offices* (Gallery Dare-Dare, Montréal, 2003) Spier elegantly evoked an office space using only two desks, levelled to the floor to form a single “H” shape—front, back, and sides splayed out as if the desks had been placed back to back before they were flattened. Once volumetric and functional, the flattened desks became pattern-like, as if to retroactively designate a template for their own construction. Deflated and stripped of their former use-value, they blended into the hardwood floor, taking on the weightiness of their architectural frame. Yet they also recalled the lightness of flattened cardboard boxes ready to be taped into temporary containers. Spier's office space suspended viewers between several economies of the flat: the utilitarian flatness of floors and workstations, the pragmatic flatness of shipping for at-home assembly, the discursive flatness of paperwork, patterning, and diagrams of social space.

In *Unwanted, Broken and Useless* (YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto, 2006) a desk lay gutted and splayed on the floor. Its joints had been refashioned into joints; its drawers sutured shut and cut off, transformed into mere surfaces; its legs fitted with casters; its four corners attached to a pulley system, counter-balanced by clunky weights made from chunks of an antique stereo. When two people pushed on the counterweights, they raised the flattened desk into its upright position. A surprising gestural vocabulary emerged; the desk heaved, wobbled, and undulated, passing through myriad animal-like motions—rippling manta ray, scuttling sea star, teetering fawn. When it returned to the floor it acted as a bellows, expelling a little puff of air. Playing at turning surface into volume, visitors mapped themselves into a comical, yet disturbing, animistic rite through which the desk came “alive,” re-inscribing its commodity fetishism with an uncanny creature-like quality. The piece re-imagined sculpture's potential for anthropomorphic “presence” as a visceral desire to breathe life into commonplace objects—a desire played out in an absurd marionette dance that showcased the puppet masters as much as the puppet.

In her recent show at Parisian Laundry, *Grade* (Montréal, October-November 2010), Spier exhibited flattened furniture at a remove—photographically. *Classroom* (2010) is a large, digitally composited photo which, from a distance, appears to be little more than a pleasing geometric pattern. Closer inspection reveals twenty-five flattened children's school desks distributed across a concrete floor as if seen, impossibly, from high above. Like Wim Delvoye's photographs of baroque marble floor designs made

from luncheon meats, Spier's desks interrupt the pattern's abstraction with their familiarity. They touch each other with the points of their legs, constructing a diagram of social connection and questioning the relation of patterning to social thought (as if in dialogue with William Morris). Yet the photograph also draws us into the desks' idiosyncrasies: their missing pieces, their visible scratches, their graffiti.

These idiosyncrasies are the subject of an accompanying series called *Inside Desks* (2010). Spier presents a set of twenty-four individually framed, life-sized scans of the one part of the school desks that does not appear in *Classroom*: the interior surface of their cubbies. Once used to store textbooks, tests, and notes, these surfaces also provided pupils with a private microcosm away from teachers' prying eyes. Kids could stick their hands in—scribbling their favourite band's name, declaring their country “#1,” proclaiming their love, or discarding a gum wad—with no one to witness these acts except maybe the next student to use the desk, or maybe the desk itself. Evading witnessing, the desks' interiors present the opposite of the omniscient perspective that *Classroom* invites us to contemplate. The multiple layers of graffiti – funny, often angst-ridden, and oddly familiar experiments in self-presentation – become found landscapes of text. Each inscription seems both aberrant and normative, reiterating the stereotypical tropes of graffiti while asserting itself as a rebellious and utterly singular mark—an inverse to the official inscriptions of teaching.

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, “When the schoolmistress instructs her students on a rule of grammar or arithmetic, she is not informing them. . . . She does not so much instruct as ‘insign,’ give orders or commands.” The “compulsory education machine” imposes “semiotic coordinates” on the child; the language children learn, far from neutrally conveying common sense information, consists of order-words, which are “made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience.”<sup>1</sup> Even graffiti on school desks—a quintessentially minor, quotidian form of disobedience—trades in order-words, reiterating established hierarchies of cultural capital even as its marks cancel each other out, chaotically layering over each other to the point of incoherence. Spier's quiet act of framing echoes the desks' act as silent witness to these inscriptions. It also speaks to the distribution of classroom activity in accordance with an arrangement of surfaces—a volumetric warp and woof around which graffiti, grading, and other graphic acts accrue.

Driving toward flatness, the spaces Spier presents open up again by means of a complex layering of characters and subjects, through which the desks acquire a spaciousness, a history. Yet just as *Classroom* interrupts pattern with particularity, the *Inside Desks* series challenges us to view heaps of particularity abstractly, as part of a pattern. Spier's works play with the points at which particularity folds into pattern, singular character meets overarching apparatus, and use-value turns into diagram. These perceptual points of tension hinge themselves to thought, subtly asking how pattern perception and concepts of social space might turn around—and even overturn—each other. Flattening themselves, Spier's desks bring these questions to the surface.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 75-6.

**Abstract:**

This essay showcases a few of Adrienne Spier's works from the past decade, culminating in her recent solo exhibition *Grade* at Parisian Laundry, October-November 2010. Spier's work has always been concerned with the dialogue between sculpture and flatness; in *Grade*, she presents flattened school desks photographically in a geometric classroom pattern. This act of patterning invites curiosity about the desks' particularity; the accompanying *Inside Desks* series offers a glimpse of the layered graffiti accrued over years of use on the interior surface of the desks. Presenting flattened furniture in myriad ways, Spier challenges us to mediate between particularity and pattern.