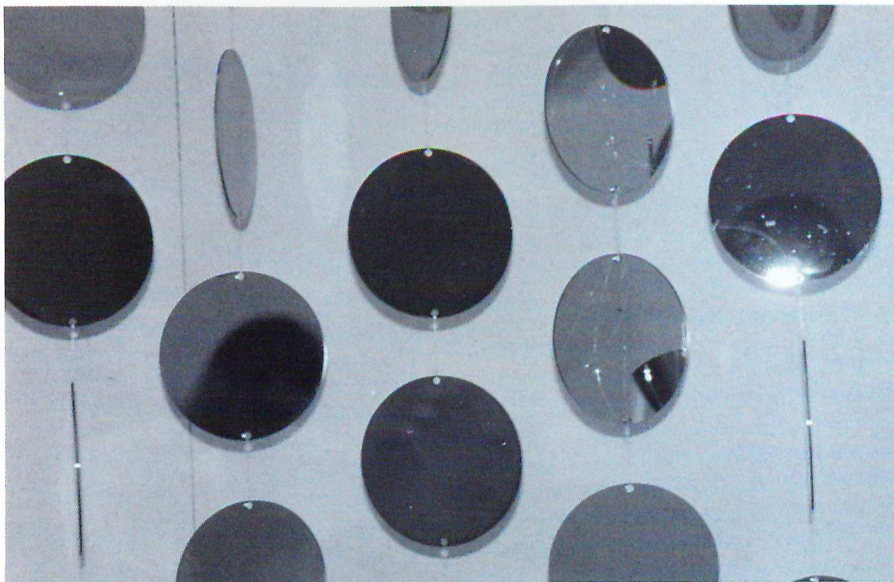


Nike Savvas
*psychic process of
 individuation detail*
 1997



The thing with nature is that it can only ever be metaphorical. When we attempt to grasp nature as unmediated, undesigned, unintentional, we only find our ideas on mediation, design, and intentionality. Nature's meaninglessness is simply, and profoundly, beyond us. Why do I say this? There seems to be a suggestion in Kessler's work that to recreate nature as decoration is somehow inauthentic. But what, in our experience of nature, is authentic? Nature is only ever what we perceive it to be. To turn nature into a decorative contrivance certainly makes us squirm because we conceive nature as somehow raw or pure, free from human influence – in a word, 'natural'. But we must never forget that this purity is itself a totally human construct.

Meanwhile, down in the basement, Kessler's nightmare awaits. For here Nike Savvas has produced works of almost total decoration, and very pretty they are too. Quite why the press release should suggest that they 'question not only modernist artistic conventions (who doesn't?) but also issues of race and gender' is beyond me. Perhaps they are talking about different work. Oh yes, they are: *Something Sparkly*, the only work discussed, is not on show here. By all accounts though, it is similar to *Cinema Screen*, a set of mirrored perspex discs hanging by nylon wire to form a wall-based screen. They spin slowly, revealing that one side of each disc is vacuum metalised in gold. It is very 70s and it is beautiful. And it is decorative. Another piece on show is *Nice Bubbles*, a work whose title is self-explanatory. Hundreds of blown glass baubles hang scattered on one wall, casting pearly shadows and looking almost exactly like soap bubbles. The Tate Christmas tree springs to mind. Hang on though, the Tate Christmas tree ... now that really should be a project for Kessler, shouldn't it? ■

David Barrett is a London-based artist.

■ Marie José Burki / Carsten Höller

Camden Arts Centre London March 26 to May 17

Inspired by the highly respected editorial feature of an esteemed American journal, *Glamour* magazine's 'Fashion Dos and Don'ts', one drunken evening a friend and I decided to compose a list of Contemporary Art Dos and Don'ts. Conceived as an act of charity, these were meant as helpful guidelines for the aspiring artist anxious to avoid a few recurring pitfalls of naff art. We didn't get very far, as we could only think of two definite Don'ts (1. Don't mix video monitors with pools of water; 2. Don't use bones, don't decorate bones, especially human bones, under any circumstances), but I always hoped we might one day continue our list and pursue the conversation for its comic potential.

It's a shame we compiled our chablis-driven list of Contemporary Art Don'ts before seeing Marie José Burki and Carsten Höller's densely clichéd, recent exhibitions at the Camden Arts Centre, our guidelines would have easily come out at least five times as long: 3. Don't involve cute dog pictures (Burki, *A Dog in My Mind*, 1997); 4. Don't make silent movies (Burki, *Trio*, 1996); 5. Don't pack your art in a suitcase, unless you're Marcel Duchamp (Höller, *Pilz koffer* [Mushroom Case], 1997); 6. Don't exploit the exploited, for example prostitutes, for 'artistic' purpose (Burki, *Exposure, Dawn I-III*, 1997); 7. Don't replay the hackneyed 'transformation of the viewer into a voyeur', unless you're Marcel Duchamp (*Exposure* again); 8. Don't film yourself endlessly 'acting crazy' in artfully dishevelled attire, as you should have gotten this out of your system during your first year of art school (Höller, *Musicmol* and *Musicmol 3*, 1998) (Note: Höller, who studied agricultural science, in fact never attended art school; maybe he should have asked somebody what he'd missed.); 9. Don't spin anything for

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Marie José Burki
Intérieur II-V 1995

that 'radial optical effect', unless you're Marcel Duchamp (Höller, *A-Rad* [A-Wheel], 1997); 10. Don't attempt to stage dull metaphors for the human condition literally, for example the old 'bird in a cage' schtick (Burki, *Intérieur II-V*, 1995).

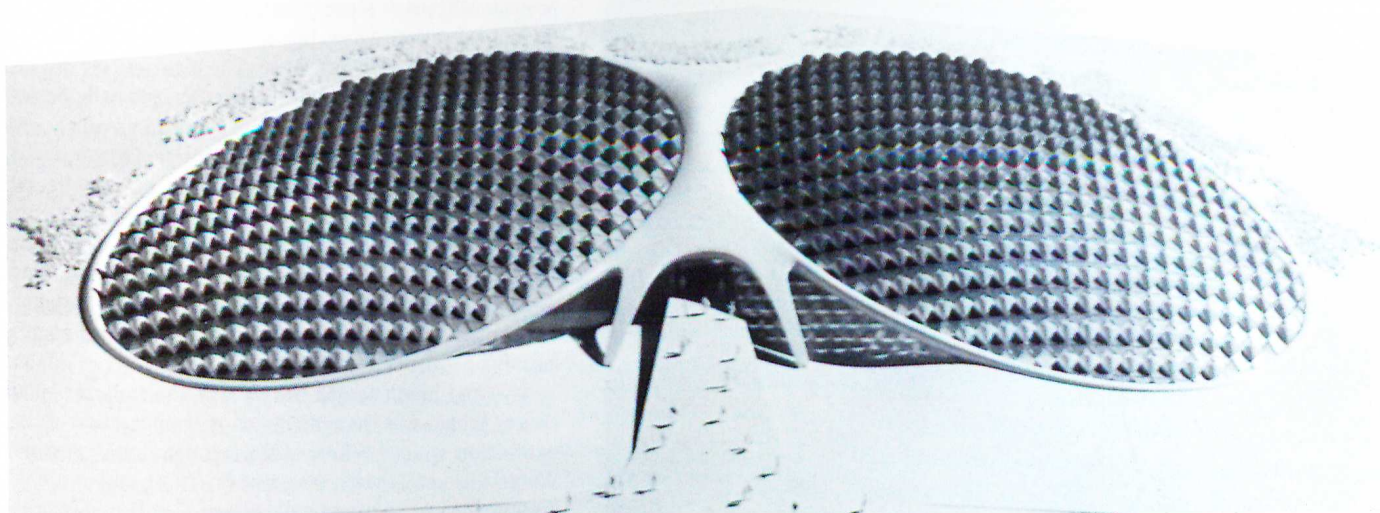
That pretty much covers the exhibition, save for a very nicely designed, 70s-looking, semi-transparent and undulating screen partition by Höller, which suggests that he might consider a shrewd career move into stylish furniture-making. Burki's work, sadly, did not point to an alternative career path she might be good at.

The Camden Arts Centre can usually be relied upon for some well-chosen, unusual exhibitions in the London scene, but this time, with Burki and Höller,

they really packed a dud. Marie José Burki's work, in particular, is nothing if not derivative. Her work actually makes you long for the far better examples of contemporary art that her work falls so far short of; *Trio*, a soundless video installation zooming in on the expressive faces of three musicians, conjured the distant, happy memories of viewing Stan Douglas's video sculpture *Hors-champs*, 1992, in which the talented Canadian artist re-staged a May 1968, Parisian jazz concert. The associations and observations in Douglas's thin, double-sided floating screen, splitting our attention from watching the musicians play to watching them wait their turn, and the layers of politico-cultural meaning in the symbolic significance of importing



Carsten Höller
Pilz koffer (Mushroom
Case) 1997



African-American free jazz to the newly radical French society of student revolts, have been replaced in Burki's work with ... nothing. *Trio* is deeply un insightful; we have all known since childhood that it is funny seeing musicians make silly faces while playing the notes, sort of like the embarrassed excitement of watching a new lover's bizarre sexual grimaces. And probably there is meant to be something here about the contingent, unacknowledged elements which make up a performance, but that is as visually and intellectually far as this tiresome work can stretch.

Or the 'alas, we are but birds trapped in cage' four-wall video installation, *Intérieur II-V*, which makes you pine for Mat Collishaw's *Antique*, 1994, in which a virtual canary was projected on a tiny screen inside a glass bowl. Collishaw's work is comparatively a masterpiece, about entrapment and illusion, even about the pleasures of confinement. Burki's work, with the bird shifting pointlessly, pathologically from one perch to the other – let me guess, symbolic of humankind, trapped in our routine thinking, our hopping senselessly from one thing to the other? – is literal to the point of offence. I actually found myself thinking like a taxpayer, wondering what these expensive-looking pneumatic projectors must cost, hoping that they would be put to good use sometime in the future.

This is artwork whose purpose seems to be the blandly convincing write-up in the press release, with all the buzzwords and empty sentences associated with this sub-genre of art writing ('Höller draws a parallel between the impact of the mushroom and the impact of art, both of which are heavily invested with ideals and fantasies.' Hello?). In defence of the Camden Arts Centre, the sign of a curatorial programme willing to stick its neck out, to take a few risks is that, well, sometimes it fails. ■

Gilda Williams is a writer and commissioning editor at Phaidon Press.

■ Future Systems

ICA London April 1 to May 24

Future Systems

The Ark model 1998

Architecture – in case you hadn't noticed – is back. Witness the government induced hoopla surrounding the Millennium Dome and Branson Coates's pavilion for the 'powerhouse::uk' exhibition at Horse Guards Parade. The glossies, the Sunday supplements and the second sections of the daily broadsheets can't get enough of it. The architectural doldrums that were the late 1980s are now officially over. Architecture is, ahem, the 'New Rock 'n' Roll' – almost literally so in the case of Branson Coates' soon to be completed National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield. The art world, too, sustains its ongoing fascination with urbanism, the catch-all term that has recently supplanted the 80s hangover of postmodernity and the ad-hoc aesthetics of the early 90s as the new curatorial and editorial line. The politics of space, be it social or physical, public or private, global or local, have become the endemic discourse.

Amidst these increasingly blurred boundaries we find 'Future Systems' at the ICA. Founded in 1979 by Jan Kaplicky and David Nixon, Future Systems is a (fairly) radical architectural and design practice now headed by Kaplicky and Amanda Levete that has long been better known for 'nearly winning competitions than for building buildings'. Future Systems, the architects' architects, took on board the visionary utopian thinking of Buckminster Fuller pretty much lock, stock and barrel as their original model. Fuller's once fantastical proposal for a dirigible architecture and his prophetic application of aviation technologies to both the built environment and urban public transportation (the doomed Dymaxion cars of the 1930s) start to find their apotheosis in Future Systems. Addressing the immediacy of everyday life – from the cradle (*Hallfield School*, 1996) to the grave (*Memorial Prague*, 1993) – Future Systems propose a new, fluid, sustainable urban landscape, a landscape populated by

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