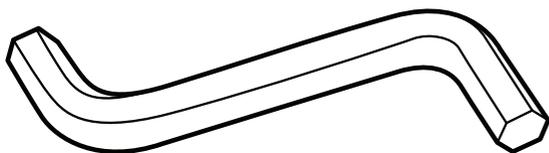


SWEDISH FOR ARGUMENT

23 Oct x 23 Nov



UTS
GALLERY

SWEDISH FOR ARGUMENT

Modern living, consumer culture &
IKEA; 8 artists unpack the flat pack.

Guy Ben-Ner
Emma White
Tony Schwensen
Helmut Smits
Gary Carsley
Jess Olivieri with
the Parachutes
for Ladies
Lorenzo Bravi
Michele Pred

Curated by
Holly Williams

At IKEA

Virginia Wright

IKEA's Design Manager hurried over with an almost audible sigh, told to spend five minutes with me no doubt and wanting to get it over with, but he looked down at my Australian boots when we shook hands and his face brightened as he said with a smile, "Always a pleasure to meet someone wearing R.M. Williams".

IKEA's international headquarters is still in Almhult, the Swedish village where it all started. The corporate complex houses the world's largest catalogue photography studio and the world's largest IKEA store, where no one actually shops. IKEA retail managers walk through the huge building, examining everything and deciding on the product mix for their own outlets, in Munich or Melbourne or Minneapolis. It's the only IKEA store that displays all the company's products.

Over morning coffee with a marketing manager in Almhult, I mention a joke I have with my sister in Tasmania. Whenever I visited her, on the drive from

the airport to her place, I always asked, "What's new?" and she always replied, "We still don't have an IKEA store."

"And they never will," my host replied with grim certainty. She explained that Tasmania will never meet the population formula used by IKEA to plan store locations. "Tell your sister not to feel bad about it," she added, "after all, the northern half of Sweden is never going to meet the formula either." But customers there get free delivery.

By midday I'd been off-loaded to a young designer grateful for the diversion. She walked and talked me through IKEA's in-house design process, unaware of my reaction as she showed me her design scrapbook of photographs of other company's current products. While I was mulling over this, she received a phone call about a table she had designed, the first batch of which had just arrived from a contract manufacturer in Thailand. One was already on display in the giant

model store, so we put on our coats and gloves and ran over there.

We found the theme area she'd been directed to, where her small garden table had been added to a patio setting that looked like a three-dimensional catalogue photo. She hurried toward the table, then suddenly stopped and said "*Fuck!*"

She waved me away, not wanting me to even see it.

As we walked miserably back to the main building, across a wind-swept open space of trodden snow, I asked "What will you do?"

"I can't do anything about the fabrication of the product," she replied. "That's decided by production managers. All I can do is sign a form requesting that my name not be associated with it."

As IKEA's 50th jubilee book *Democratic Design* explains, 'Quality means something slightly different to each and every one of us'.

From the unpublished book "If furniture could talk..."

Self Assembly

Holly Williams

Everyone has an IKEA story or two, some relish their visits to the store, some view them with anxiety or irritation. Most of us living in urbanised, economically prosperous cities have set foot inside the big, banal blue and yellow box.

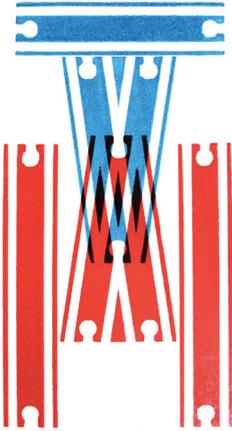
Swedish for Argument takes its name from a joke by American comedian Amy Poelher who once said that IKEA is Swedish for 'argument'.¹

It is, in reality, a made up word — an eponymous biography of the creator, Ingvar Kamprad (his initials I.K. and E.A. for Elmtaryd Agunnaryd, his hometown in Småland). While we may not all know what IKEA means, we are all familiar with what it offers. So familiar, in fact, that its products incidentally and incrementally pervade each of our lives: a silicone ice tray here, a clip on lamp there, a set of cheap wine glasses; the ubiquitous Billy bookcase—of which there are now over 41 million (one made every six seconds).

Statistics are staggering when

considering this global giant. The IKEA catalogue is thought to be more widely published now than The Bible—198 million were printed last year in 27 languages,² its subsidiary Swedwood estimated as the world's third largest user of timber, its 9,500 products are found in 41 countries across 300 plus stores³. There are also figures that are less widely publicised — its profit margins, complex financial structure, and intricate franchise and tax minimization arrangements which journalists are increasingly investigating.

Founded in 1943, IKEA reflects the forces of capitalism, modernism, democratisation and globalisation that are hallmarks of the 20th century. As the world's largest furniture manufacturer, its products shape, and are shaped, by how we live. IKEA is about the idea of our 'best selves'— free from depression, selfishness or clutter — a cohesive, organised self, making full and appropriate use



UFFICIALI letterpress prints on paper. 2011.

Artist: Lorenzo Bravi H35xW25cm

YOU ARE WHAT YOU BUY archival pigment prints, shop dropped by the artist on IKEA shelves. 2009. Artist: Michele Pred. Photo: Scott Morlan.

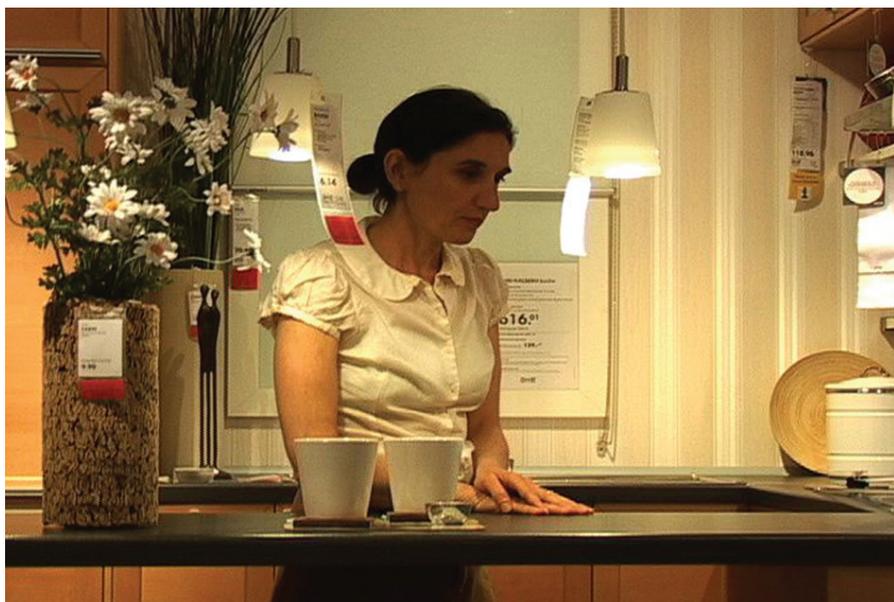
of the 'lifestyle solutions' to hand. In its showrooms there are no dark corners for unresolved family arguments or lingering grief — it offers an affordable, updatable way of 'keeping up appearances'.

Meanwhile, in Swedwoods' mega factory in Hultsfred, Sweden, massive sand dunes of fine sawdust are mixed with woodchips to form particleboard products to make our world a more organised, 'better' place.⁴ One of these

products, a wardrobe, Tony Schwensen struggles to put together in *TransScandinavia*. Whilst at first his sweaty efforts bring to mind masculine failure in the face of the flat pack, his work is also about the appearance and its shadow — the feelings about Sweden by its neighbours in contrast to how it is perceived beyond the region. His work reminds us that just as Sweden has been a colonising force in Northern Europe so IKEA brings its own kind of cultural colonialism across the world.

Working with the PAX wardrobe too, this time to create an installation, Gary Carsley's piece intersects the local — an image of Sydney bushland — with the generic in *D.98b (UTS dub)*. *Swedish for Argument* includes diverse, and at times contradictory works. Beyond the appealing and playful quality of his prints, Lorenzo Bravi's letterpress works can be read in the context of IKEA's aim for 'democratic design' given the huge





impact the invention of the printing press had on the spread of democracy, whilst Helmut Smits' *Flamma* poignantly highlights the almost baroque elaborations of design on our basic needs.

Several works in the exhibition have adopted interventionist strategies, with works that variously infiltrate or subvert the activities in the stores. Jess Olivieri with the Parachutes for Ladies, Guy Ben-Ner and Michele Pred in their own way conjure subtle critiques of the underlying economic imperatives in play.

In an act of subversion too, one of its most recognisable symbols, the iconic Allen Key has been elevated to a museum piece by Emma White who has painstaking modeled to scale an object of which there must be tens upon tens of

millions sitting in the bottoms of drawers and cupboards around the world.

Partly in response to the piles of discarded IKEA which litter Sydney's streets, and to the award winning 2002 advertisement *Lamp* directed by Spike Jonze (in which a perfectly good desk lamp is dumped on the street for the cause of branding IKEA as *Unböring*),⁴ the accompanying IKEA Recovery Workshop seeks to highlight the impact super low cost products. In making objects so affordable that their value becomes almost meaningless a kind of consumer relationship has arisen where it is cheaper to buy new stuff when one moves house than it is to pay someone to move it. In this way IKEA has colonized our relationship to our surroundings and our choices.

STEALING BEAUTY single channel video, colour with sound, duration: 17:40. 2007. Artist: Guy Ben-Ner.

TRANS SCANDINAVIA performance documentation, mini DV to DVD. 2006. Artist: Tony Schwensen. Photo: Brent Grayburn.



In their ubiquity, IKEA's showrooms are monuments to the pleasures of new stuff — functional, appealing, cheap stuff, and lots of it, everywhere.

NOTES:

1. Quoted in Lauren Collins, A Reporter At Large "House Perfect," The New Yorker, October 3, 2011.
2. http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_US/about_ikea/facts_and_figures/index.html
3. ibid
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamp_%28advertisement%29



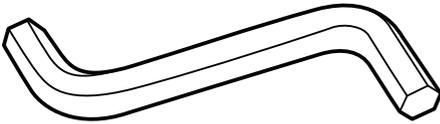
Guy Ben-Ner

Stealing Beauty

Guy Ben-Ner's *Stealing Beauty*, filmed without permission in various IKEA stores across Europe and using his family as actors, explores the meaning of economic exchange, private property and family love.

Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner is best known for his video works featuring his family. Widely exhibited internationally, his recent solo exhibitions include *Name Dropping* at Gimpel Fils, London and *Moby Dick* at Museum Kunst der Westküste, Germany. In 2005 he represented Israel in The Venice Biennale as well as participating in *Skulptur Projekte Munster* in 2007 and *Performa 09*.

DETAILS: Year: 2007. Single channel video, colour with sound (Duration: 17:40). Courtesy the artist and Gimpel Fils, London



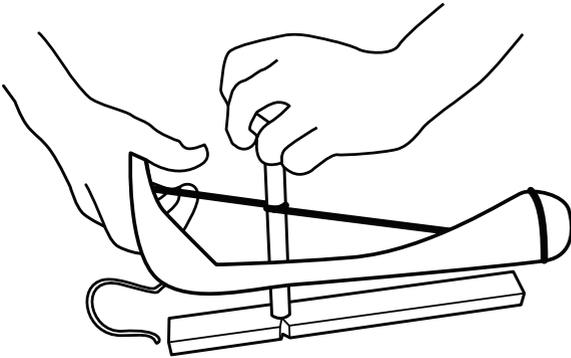
Emma White

Nice Try, DIY

Long preoccupied with painstakingly rendering mass-produced, everyday items from polymer clay, for *Swedish for Argument*, Emma White has created a stand-in for one of the most banal objects in the IKEA showroom — ironically one which is not available for separate sale — the allen key.

Sydney-based artist Emma White works mainly in sculpture, installation, photography and video. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Plastic Arts*, BREENSPACE in 2011, *While You Wait*, Locksmith Project Space in 2010; group exhibitions in 2012 include *Volume One: MCA Collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and *Mostly Agree*, Stills Gallery.

DETAILS: Year: 2012. Polymer clay/object modelled to scale. Courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney



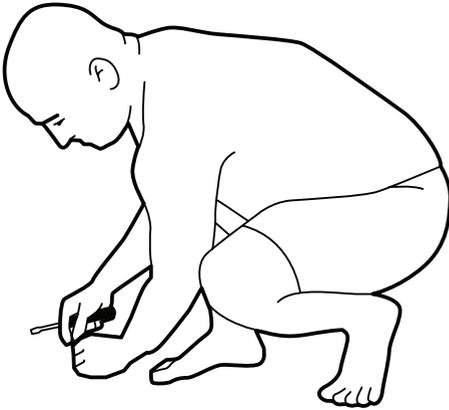
Helmut Smits

FLAMMA (A Basic Need)

The thought of people burning their furniture during the war so they could keep warm and cook formed the inspiration for *FLAMMA*. This work recalls one of humanity's basic needs: to make fire. Smits thought it would be interesting to go into IKEA as if he were a primitive human being and make fire using products found there. The project also plays off the back-to-basics image of IKEA and the Swedish lifestyle. IKEA does not, however, sell lighters or matches.

Helmut Smits is a multidisciplinary visual artist based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Exhibitions this year include *200 years Academy for Visual Arts*, 's-Hertogenbosch, and *The Sculpture House*, London Design Festival, UK. In 2011 he completed a permanent outdoor sculpture for the Wooldrikpark, City of Enschede.

DETAILS: Year: 2008. Single channel video.
Courtesy the artist.



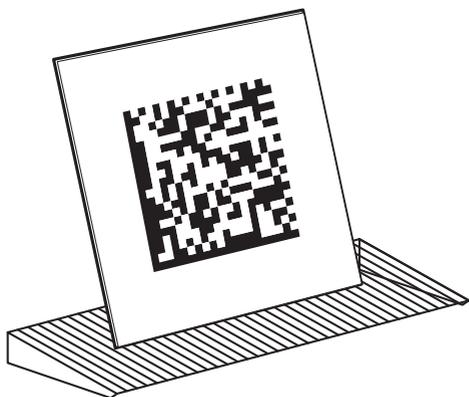
Tony Schwensen

TransScandinavia

Tony Schwensen's work considers the idealised perception of colonising forces — from Sweden's historical dominance in Scandinavia — to the ubiquitous retail influence of IKEA. In *TransScandinavia*, the history of IKEA is read simultaneously in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish as he tries to construct a flatpack wardrobe without the instructions.

DETAILS: Year: 2006. Performance documentation, mini DV to DVD. Courtesy the artist and KalimanRawlins, Melbourne and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney

In his own words, he is an Australian born human being, a non-resident alien in the cradle of the war of independence of the United States of America, a hominid professing to be an artist who works on the Performance and Graduate faculty at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Michele Pred

You Are What You Buy

On “Black Friday”, the largest shopping of the US calendar, Michele Pred ‘shop dropped’ ten original prints in her local IKEA store. The prints which simulated the look and feel of generic IKEA posters also included fabricated barcodes which made it possible for customers to purchase the pieces at the cash registers. In a form of reverse exchange, Pred’s interventionist works earned income for IKEA whilst at the same time generating a hidden critique through their function as QR codes — taking the purchaser to a site commenting ‘You are what you buy’.

Michele Pred is a Swedish-American conceptual artist. She works with found or confiscated objects and technology imbued with cultural and political meaning. She received her BFA from California College of the Arts, Oakland, where she is an adjunct professor. Recent solo exhibitions *Homeland Security* at Thompson Art Gallery, San Jose and *Confiscated*, Jack Fischer Gallery, San Francisco.

DETAILS: Year: 2009. Archival pigment prints, plastic wrap, photographs. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York.

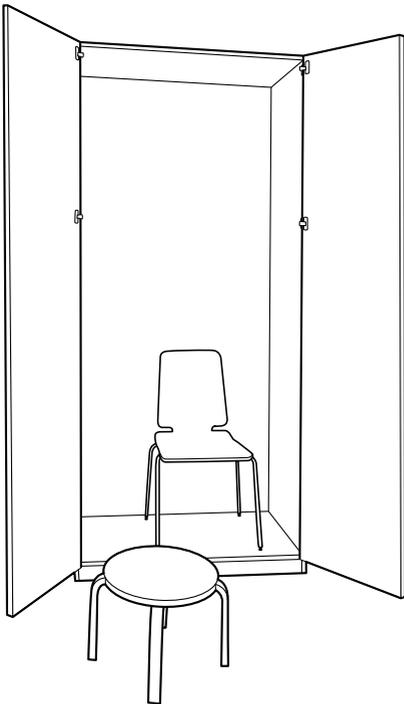
Gary Carlsey

D.98b (UTS dub)

Gary Carlsey's IKEA works purposefully conflate a mixture of reasoned and fanciful assumptions. He posits that the flat pack and the Fluxus Store proceed from the same set of historical, economic and cultural circumstances. Clearly, Fluxus artists and the management of the well-known Swedish brand view the collector/consumer as having agency within the expanded field of authorship. Less rational though more revealing are

Carlsey's convictions that IKEA is an acronym for the Institute of Contemporary Esthetic Arousal and that beauty is a form of genius, only more illusive.

Carlsey's practice considers complexities of post-colonialism through photographic, and site-specific installations, often drawing from images of constructed historic sites or moments. Recent exhibitions include *Gardenesque*, TORCH Gallery, Amsterdam in 2012, *Bark Art*, BREENSPACE, Sydney in 2009 and *Scenic Root*, AGNSW in 2007; his numerous group shows include *There was a world, once*, Märkisches Museum, Witten, Germany earlier this year.



DETAILS: Year: 2009/12. Lambda mono print applied to 2 door PAX Nexus Wardrobe, GILBERT Chair and FROSTA stool. H240xW160xD160cms. Courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE Sydney.



Jess Olivieri with The Parachutes For Ladies Like A Salmon

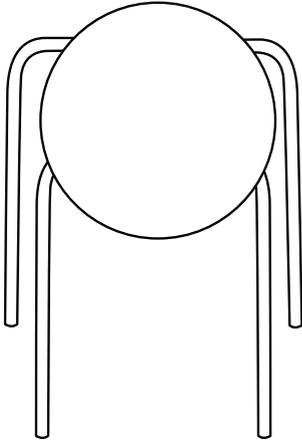
This video considers the movement of people through codified architectural space and asks what it is to move against this flow. The mass of people spin out of shot, peeling outwards in choreography reminiscent of Busby Berkley's famed sequence *By a waterfall* in the 1933 musical *Footlight Parade*. Cited as the precursor to synchronised swimming, Berkley's work sees women's bodies kaleidoscopic formations both swimming in and mimicking the movement of water.

The recurring metaphor of the salmon moving upstream has been recently used in marketing circles to describe moving closer to the source of distribution and 'cutting out the middle man'. As an aside,

one of Sweden's national dishes is cured Salmon or Gravlax.

Jess Olivieri's works span performance, sound, video, dance and installation. Her practice investigates the social and cultural factors that influence how we inhabit public space. With co-founder Hayley Forward, the Parachutes for Ladies recently showed at GOMA as part of *Contemporary: Women* and Campbelltown Art Centre's *Transmission* in a collaboration with the Sydney Chamber Choir.

DETAILS: Year: 2012. HD video projection. Courtesy the artists



Lorenzo Bravi

IKEA PRESS

These works are a collection of experiments with letterpress printing. Working under the project title IKEA PRESS by *uno-di-uno (1:1)*, the constructive elements of IKEA products are used instead of traditional wooden printing letters, becoming printing die for limited editions — a stool or a door be used to impress their outline and train tracks can become typographic, figurative or abstract compositions. These elements can then be assembled back in the objects they belonged to, returning to their intended function yet still bearing the signs of the printing process.

Italian artist & designer Lorenzo Bravi reimagines traditional techniques such as letterpress printing as well as working as a graphic designer with experimental publishing, signage systems and interactive installation. This year he has participated in *Festival International de l’Affiche et du Graphisme de Chaumont* and *The International Biennial of Graphic Design*, Brno.

DETAILS: Year: 2011/12 IKEA PRESS: Officers, Blu Frosta, Yellow Frosta, Orange Frosta, Blue Knuff, Still Life. Letterpress on paper, timber. Courtesy the artist

Contributors

HOLLY WILLIAMS is a Sydney-based curator who works at UTS Gallery. In 2011 she curated *Creative Accounting* which examined money and the economic system. Her forthcoming project with Adam Jasper considers the influential New York publication *Cabinet*.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT is a design historian and former curator of Canadian Decorative Arts and Post-1900 International Design at the Royal Ontario Museum. A lecturer at the University of Toronto, her book *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920 to 1970*, was published in 1997.

SCOTT MITCHELL is a visual artist and lecturer whose cross-disciplinary projects often focus on the consumer modification of mass-produced goods and the communities these practices form. He is also a member of the collaborative group OSW (Open Spatial Workshop).

JO LAW is an artist currently completing her doctoral thesis on Walter Benjamin's use of allegories and montage and is interested in exploring the images of IKEA as contemporary dioramas. She teaches media art at the University of Wollongong.

THE AUSTRALIA QUARTET, UTS Piano Quartet in Residence, was formed by four of Australia's best regarded young chamber musicians. Their mission is to ensure the future of classical music by illuminating forgotten masterpieces, championing contemporary composers and collaborating across media and artforms to challenge perceptions of classical music.

Acknowledgements

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Accompanying Events

GALLERY FLOOR TALKS

- ▶ Fluxus and the diorama:

Gary Carsley & Jo Law.

Tuesday 30 October 1–2pm

- ▶ Swimming upstream:

Jess Olivieri & Holly Williams.

Tuesday 6 November 1–2pm

IKEA RECOVERY WORKSHOP

Bringing new life to abandoned IKEA; a speculative fabrication workshop led by Scott Mitchell for UTS staff and students.

Tuesday 13 – Wednesday 14 November

(Registration required)

MUSIK FRÅN NORR

Musicians from the Australia Quartet,
UTS Piano Quartet in Residence.

Tuesday 20 November 6–7pm

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