From New York to the Congo via Marfa: Branded Occupation
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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to interrogate Prada’s occupation of space through the use of art installations and the appropriation of strategies employed in artistic practice by analysing three interventions as case studies. The first section considers the New York Prada Epicentre store (2001) designed by Rem Koolhaas and the strategies of ‘rough luxury’ employed by the architect to inject unpredictability into a commercial space. The second part and central focus of the paper is a critical analysis of Prada Marfa (2005), a public sculpture created by artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragsæt. Located in the Texas desert, the art work is a replica of a Prada store that appears to be open for trade but which is permanently sealed. Prada was not directly involved in the conception or funding of the project but donated merchandise and provided information about corporate design. The paper concludes with a consideration of Carsten Höller’s installation The Double Club (2008) as a project that merges patronage with publicity to create a branded art experience. An interdisciplinary approach is used to interrogate the branded occupation of space exploring its complexities, methods, networks and connections to wider social, cultural, economic and political issues.

Introduction
On November 21st 2008 the Prada Congo Club or The Double Club as it was renamed following an intensification of the political crisis in the Congo, opened in an old Victorian warehouse near Angel tube station in London. This Carsten Höller project by Fondazione Prada was an art installation that took the form of a bar, restaurant and nightclub and was an outcome of the extensive programme of arts patronage undertaken by Miuccia Prada and partner Patrizio Bertelli, owners of the luxury Italian fashion brand. The Double Club was an exemplar of the kind of large scale and site-specific work that gave Prada a presence, by association, in an ‘edgy’ area of a city that was not the conventional location for luxury retail. The aim of this paper is to explore Prada’s occupation of place through its use of art installations and by the appropriation of strategies employed in artistic practice. Three interventions will be analysed in order to explore the relationship between location and identity and the nature of artistic critique when associated with branding and consumption.

The paper will begin by discussing the Prada Epicentre store (2001) designed by Rem Koolhaas and his architectural practice OMA/AMO. Did the creation of a liminal space that was part store and part cultural centre make it possible for the architect to engage with commodification and remain critical? Prada Marfa (2005) by contrast is a public sculpture located on USA Highway 90, outside Valentine in the Texas desert that looks like a shop but which is permanently sealed. Created by artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragsæt, Prada Marfa is discussed in terms of its relationship to site-specific art practices such as ‘institutional critique’ and as a form of ‘critical spatial practice’ that engages with the dominant ideologies of capitalism and gentrification. The paper concludes by considering The Double Club as a project that exemplifies Prada’s claim to engage with ‘the world of ideas and innovation’ as a means of pushing the brand ‘beyond the physical limitations of boutiques and showrooms’.1

In No Logo (2000) Naomi Klein argued that global branding resulted in the colonisation of public space through marketing.2 Her polemic was part of a broader anti-globalisation sentiment that opposed the transfer of power from politicians to the market. Against this anti-brand backdrop the challenge for companies like Prada was to sustain growth and enter new
markets whilst maintaining exclusivity. This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach to an interrogation of the branded occupation of place exploring its complexities, methods, networks and connections to wider social, cultural, economic and political issues. I contend that art is deployed as a crucial weapon in the struggle between competing brands for domination in the ‘field’ of luxury fashion due to its economic and symbolic value. Running in parallel to the global expansion of physical sites through the opening of spectacular flagships and additional generic stores, Prada infiltrates space through its appropriation of artistic strategies that mediate the brand image to its target audience.

**Prada New York.**
In 2001 Elmgreen and Dragset papered over the windows of the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in Soho New York with the announcement ‘Opening Soon Prada’. This was a critique of the increasing privatisation and gentrification of the arts district; a neighbourhood where former factories had been converted into artists’ lofts and studios. Artists such as Martha Rosler with her ‘If you Lived here.’ project had previously linked the arrival of art galleries in SoHo to rising property prices and raised the issue of gentrified sites as places of contestation. Rosalind Deutsche commented that her work articulated two forms of spatial practice: ‘resistance to the uses of aesthetic space and opposition to the dominant construction of the city.’ Driven by the demands of the marketplace, SoHo had evolved from an industrial, to a cultural, then a commercial site, resulting in the displacement of artists forced out by the rising costs of real estate. Gentrification is the process defined by Zukin as ‘the conversion of socially marginal and working-class areas of the central city to middle class residential use’.

2001 also saw the opening of Prada’s New York epicentre store designed by Rem Koolhaas, in a location on the site of the former Guggenheim Museum Soho. Originally Prada had planned to collaborate with the Guggenheim so that the museum would host exhibitions and events in the Prada store in return for rent from the fashion brand. Even though the Guggenheim-Prada collaboration did not come to fruition due to the closure of the museum, it was axiomatic to the brand strategy underpinning Prada’s architectural expansion, which claimed to redefine shopping as cultural entertainment.

In *The Experience Economy*, business strategists Joseph Pine and James Gilmore claimed that experiences represented the foundation for future economic growth. They argued that experiences were central to ‘a new, emerging economy’ and represented ‘an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output.’ Their book, which served as a manual for businesses on ways to increase profitability by capitalising on consumer demand for experiences, also had relevance for other sectors. Tom O’Dell, an academic from Copenhagen Business School claimed that the selling, packaging, and ultimate consumption of experiences transcends business and has wider, social and cultural implications. ‘The commodification of and search for experiences has a material base that is itself anchored in space. They occur in an endless array of specific places, such as stores, museums, cities, sporting arenas, shopping centres, neighbourhood parks and well-known tourist attractions.’ He coined the term ‘experiencescapes’ to describe strategically planned and designed landscapes such as the Prada epicentre where experiences are staged and consumed.

To facilitate the staging of experiences, a huge void spanning two floors was gouged out of the centre of the Prada New York store in the form of a wooden ‘wave’. This space incorporated an electronic foldout stage and doubled as a display area and site for cultural performances. In *Projects for Prada Part 1*, Koolhaas claimed that luxury could be defined as ‘Attention,
'Rough', Intelligence, “Waste”, Stability’. At the Prada store, luxury was not communicated through the use of expensive materials but through the creation of additional space in terms of volume and square footage. With real estate prices in Soho at a premium, Koolhaas argued that ‘the ultimate luxury is wasted space’. By creating a hybrid space that was part arts centre, part shop, he would ‘re-inject public space into the commercialised desert of Soho’ where art galleries had been displaced by boutiques. Performances and cultural events involving music, art, fashion and film and the display of murals, installations and digital content were designed to introduce unpredictability into the homogenized spaces of commerce. This ‘rough luxury’ was promoted by Koolhaas as part of an avant-garde strategy aimed at pursuing a social agenda whilst operating within the boundaries of corporate patronage. Cultural critics such as Michael Sorkin however accused Koolhaas of cynicism, arguing that the architect adopted business as his highest moral imperative while retaining an avant-garde rhetoric, 'check out the tomes of market research, branding ideology via sheer weight of irony and statistics.'

**Prada Marfa**

If Prada New York is a store disguised as a cultural venue where the commercial function is concealed beneath the veneer of art, then *Prada Marfa*, a $100,000 permanent art installation is its antithesis. The simple white sealed cube designed according to corporate specifications, is a permanent sculpture masquerading as a shop, a store that will never open. At night the small replica with its illuminated display of Prada shoes and handbags recalls the monumental photographs of German artist Andreas Gursky. Local newspapers reported how spectators driving past the installation were confounded by the juxtaposition of high-end luxury boutique and desert wilderness. What appeared to be a Prada store in the desert, could for those who were familiar with nearby Marfa as a centre for minimalist and land art, be read as something very different. Marfa was transformed into an internationally recognised arts venue after Donald Judd created his permanent sculptural installations there in the 1970s. The Chinati Foundation and Judd Foundation continued Judd’s legacy hosting annual Open House events which attract thousands of art tourists every year. Bourdieu argued that ‘a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded’. For viewers to 'read' the secondary meanings of this installation and engage with its commentary on western affluence and gentrification, it was necessary to possess the requisite knowledge, or what Bourdieu has described as 'cultural capital'.

Connections can be made between *Prada Marfa* and the work of minimal, conceptual, land and performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s such as Judd. According to Kwon, the latter ‘challenged the idealist hermeticism of the autonomous art object by deflecting its meaning to the space of its presentation’. *Prada Marfa* relies almost entirely on context for its critical effect. The insertion of a luxury boutique into the desert wilderness is shocking because of the disjunction between the sculpture and its setting. The artistic strategy of inserting a new element into an existing space in order to interrupt dominant meanings also has links to Duchamp’s ‘readymades’. The location of a mass-produced and ‘vulgar’ object such as the *The Fountain* of 1917, sought to reveal the ideological constraints imposed by the museum and relied for its effect on the separation of art from everyday life. Fraser has argued that Duchamp’s negation of artistic competence with the readymade ‘transformed that negation into a supreme affirmation of the omnipotence of the artistic gaze and its limitless incorporative power. It opened up the way for the artistic conceptualization – and commodification – of
everything’.18 Today the strategies employed by the historical avant-garde are harder to replicate as contemporary culture according to cultural critics like Baudrillard is marked by this absence of material reality. He maintained that everything is mediated, and is an imitation of an imitation, a simulacrum that is a substitute for reality itself.19

Prada Marfa could be interpreted as a critique of consumer culture and luxury branding; a commentary on gentrification and art tourism; an exploration of public and private space; a response to minimalist art; or perhaps it was a subtle marketing ploy - advertising as art. Elmgreen and Dragset deny that it was the latter and state that when seeking sponsorship ‘we all believed the obvious potential sponsor, Prada was a conflict of interest’.20 Miucca Prada ‘generously’ donated the twenty pairs of shoes and six handbags, gave permission for the use of the logo and the Fondazione Prada offered guidance in terms of matching the sculpture to existing stores. However in every other respect the artists worked independently. It could be argued that the ambiguous message of Prada Marfa did not diminish the status of the Prada brand but rather conflated its image in the mind of the consumer with the innovative, critical and liberal values associated with the artists’ work. Miucca Prada explained her part in its creation as a recognition that it was ‘an intelligent work, and rather than shy away from it, we recognise the strength of its statement.’ For her, the work illustrated ‘a deep-seated anxiety as well as an extricable link, between art and fashion’.21

Miuccia Prada is joint owner with husband and company CEO Patrizio Bertelli, of the Prada Foundation (1993) in Milan which hosts two exhibitions annually, publishes books on contemporary art and architecture and reports annual attendance figures of thirty thousand. A further cultural centre is planned by Prada to open in Milan in 2012 designed by Rem Koolhaas. Through its exhibitions, publications and employment of professional and internationally recognised curators such as Germano Celant who also works for the Guggenhein, Prada’s private art gallery functions like a public museum endowing the brand with cultural gravitas. In Bourdieu’s analysis of the field of high fashion, he described how members of the field can occupy different positions in terms of power and status. In the dominant position are the designers ‘who possess in the highest degree the power to define objects as rare by means of their signature, their label’.22 In other words he argued that it was the unique position of the producer and the position he or she occupied within the field of fashion that by extrapolation, determined the value of the product, or in this case, the brand. For luxury companies the identity of the owner or creative director of the company was pivotal in the creation of brand image. Brand owners such as Miuccia Prada constructed an artistic identity for themselves by funding and collecting art and commissioning ‘cutting edge’ artists and architects who formed part of what Bourdieu described as ‘the consecrated avant-garde’.23

Contemporary corporate patronage which seeks to enhance status and to provide social and cultural credibility through the appropriation of the values associated with art can prove problematic for artists wishing to maintain critical distance.24 As Bourdieu and Haacke argue in Free Exchange, sponsorship is essentially an ‘exchange of capital: financial capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored’.25 The artist Hans Haacke has been closely associated with the conceptual art practice which Benjamin Buchloch referred to as ‘institutional critique’.26 Developed out of Duchamp’s critique of the aesthetic criteria used to categorise objects, it was an artistic strategy that questioned normative exhibition conventions in order to reveal their underlying ideological functions. Haacke’s
investigations into the social and economic relationship between art institutions and corporations sought to expose the connection between the museum, the studio, art market and art history and criticism and the network’s openness to social, political and economic forces. In an essay written in 1974 he argued that no artists are immune to the socio-political value system of the society in which they live and participate in the ‘maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within the frame, set the frame, and are being framed’.27

If Prada Marfa can be viewed as a form of ‘critical spatial practice’28 or ‘spatial-cultural discourse’,29 what are its terms of engagement? How does it work in relation to dominant ideologies, question them and draw attention to wider social and political problems? The location of Elmgreen and Dragset’s work five miles outside of the crumbling ‘ghost town’ of Valentine with its truck stops and dilapidated grocery stores is significant. Although it is closer to Valentine than Marfa the sculpture has Marfa in the title as if to underline its connections to a town that has been transformed and gentrified by art tourism. The aura of wealth and status associated with the Prada brand stands in stark contrast to the landscape it occupies which is redolent of decay and neglect. Prada Marfa itself is made out of biodegradable sun-dried, unburned bricks of clay and straw, which historically was the traditional building material of Mexican Americans. Once considered only suitable for the houses of the poor adobe has been transformed into a status symbol in the southwestern United States. As Rael has highlighted, ‘what was once a vernacular tradition has transformed into a capitalist driven process that often leaves the traditional descendants of earth dwellers unable to afford mud’.30

Prada Marfa was created in mud as an installation that would naturally decay into a ruinous state. As one of its producers from the Art Production Fund said, ‘We loved the idea of the piece being born on October 1st and that it will never again be maintained. If someone spray-paints graffiti or a cowboy decides to use it as target practice or maybe a mouse or a muskrat makes a home in it, fifty years from now it will be a ruin that is a reflection of the time it was made.’31 Site-specific works according to Foster, took sculpture off its pedestal and created a direct physical relationship with the viewer.32 In the case of Prada Marfa the interaction between viewers and sculpture was certainly physical: the replica store was shot at, spray-painted, the sealed door pulled-off with a truck and chain and the merchandise ‘shop-lifted’. A decision was made to repair the sculpture and Miuccia Prada donated more shoes and bags. The police began an investigation, security stickers were put in place, an alarm system installed, and sheriff’s deputies were brought in to protect the store at night. The incident achieved extensive local and international press coverage with the Houston Press reporting that the County Sheriff was on the lookout ‘for a one-legged woman with a taste for high fashion’.33 The artists themselves were even accused of vandalizing their own sculpture as a cynical publicity stunt designed to attract media attention.

Due to its physical isolation, the main means of encountering Prada Marfa for audiences other than local inhabitants, tourists and the art crowd was through the artists’ website and reviews in newspapers and journals. The official photographs taken of Prada Marfa and disseminated by the artists are revealing in their juxtaposition of the traditional rugged American ‘cowboy’ complete with Stetson and boots, a stereotypical image of masculinity, next to a replica of a European luxury store stocking women’s fashion merchandise. The cowboy symbolises ‘rugged individualism’, the romanticisation of the individual who takes risks to achieve rewards. The Texas desert signifies the Wild West, frontier country that is dangerous and challenging...
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but replete with opportunity. The location is the context for a critical insertion that highlights the dominant ideologies of the American West and the American Dream.

So was Prada Marfa ideologically conflicted? Kwon argues to be specific to a site was ‘to decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden operations’. 34 By locating a hyper-realistic sculpture of a luxury store on a deserted strip of motorway in the Nevada desert, the artists displaced common signifiers making them appear strange and unfamiliar. Prada Marfa was ostensibly a critique of capitalism and consumerism but unintentionally reinforced the capitalist values it criticised. The installation attracted more art tourists to the area, thereby intensifying the processes of gentrification and powerfully reinforcing the appeal of the commodity. Although Miucca Prada did not instigate this project and in an interview in 2004 carefully reiterated her desire to keep her involvement in the art world separate from her business interests nevertheless her association with Prada Marfa could only have increased her ‘cultural capital’. The designer claimed that ‘when I buy art, I want to keep it separate. You don’t want people to think you are doing what you are doing because you want to make your company better’. 35 Four years later in an interview with The New York Times she conceded that ‘it was a little ridiculous how I wanted to keep entirely separate the art and the fashion. In the end, I’m the same person’. 36

Prada Congo Club

The shift from claims about the disinterested and objective nature of Miuccia Prada’s patronage to the overt deployment of art to enhance her luxury fashion business is exemplified by The Double Club, a temporary art installation created by artist Carsten Höller and funded by the Fondazione Prada. As Höller commented in relation to Miuccia Prada and her patronage of the arts, ‘we’re not so naïve as to think that we don’t contribute to this business. But it’s beyond money. Above all, I think, it’s about the fact that she’s afraid of being vulgar’. 37 The location of the ‘intervention’ near Angel tube station in London gave the brand a presence by association in a fashionable area of a city and access to an elite group of opinion-formers. The club was designed half in Congolese style and half in Western style and was described as ‘creating a dialogue between Congolese and Western contemporary music, lifestyle, arts and design’. 38 Unlike Prada Marfa with its sealed door never to open for commerce and the New York Epicentre store which concealed its mercantile function beneath a programme of cultural events, The Double Club was a working bar, restaurant and nightclub that was also a work of art.

Access to The Double Club was through a dingy alley behind Angel Tube station. There was no external signage to indicate its location and only the security guards outside signalled its presence. A dark internal corridor led the visitor into three separate but interconnected spaces that were each divided by virtual lines into part Congolese and part Western areas. Kram/Weisschar, a design company who worked on the Prada Epicentre store in New York collaborated with Höller on the project and designed many of the western features. From one side the courtyard bar was made of wood and corrugated iron imported from Kinshasa and the other comprised a copper design illuminated by neon signage where customers could perch on specially designed ‘triton’ stools by Kram/Weisschar. Throughout the club the juxtaposition of two cultures was communicated through the use of contrasting materials in terms of flooring, walls, furniture and art. In the restaurant two menus were offered and the discotheque played different music styles that were connected by a circular dance floor that revolved at a different speed to the lighting rig above. Unlike Prada Marfa where the contrast between the
sculpture and its context was startling, the dual design of The Double Club appeared to be easily assimilated by the visitor and when the venue was full, was almost imperceptible.

Antecedents to The Double Club can be found in artistic practice in the 1960s such as the Pop Art installation The American Supermarket (1964) which took over gallery space in New York and blurred the distinctions between supermarket and art gallery, and also in the temporary shops such as Yasuhiro Hamano’s 200 Days store and Russ Miller’s Vacant. The Guerrilla stores started in 2004 by Rei Kawakubo, owner of Japanese brand Comme des Garçons have been particularly influential in the rise of pop-up shops, bars and clubs. These temporary shops occupied sites on the edge of the inner city in areas that had not been gentrified and adopted a low-cost industrial-looking décor where walls were left bare and fixtures and fittings assembled using recycled materials. The advantages of guerrilla stores were that they could be opened quickly at minimal cost; they allowed the brand to test out new markets without making a major financial investment. In addition the staging of artistic performances and the inclusion of work by local designers and artists created the idea of the store as an event which generated buzz. As Springer has argued, ‘as stores close before they reach the mainstream, they maintain their air of exclusivity’ and ‘convey qualities of a creative community on the move’.

Conclusion
The most significant aspect of The Double Club in terms of understanding Prada’s relationship with the arts is a public acknowledgement that patronage and publicity have merged. In a 2009 advertisement entitled Prada Classic #1, the copy stated that:

Prada also creates experiences: a singular mode of invention runs through Prada’s global projects that unite fashion, design, art and architecture in the production of new realities. THE DOUBLE CLUB, also known as The Congo Club in London is one such project. A daring collaboration with artist Carsten Höller. It tests the power of art in the realm of entertainment, engaging the public in a remarkable nightclub and restaurant experience. A Prada moment.

Central to Prada’s patronage of art projects such as Höller’s, is a strategic focus on the consumption of experiences. The Double Club and more recently the Prada Transformer, a mobile arts pavilion that changes shape to accommodate different events, are key sites for the staging of competitive ‘creativity’. Here art, architecture and cultural activities combine to produce the interior as ‘event’ or branded art experience. Space is used as a critical business tool where it functions as an integral part of corporate identity and brand communications for the luxury fashion company. Prada infiltrates space through its patronage of ‘avant-garde’ art and architecture and its appropriation of artistic strategies that mediate the brand image to appeal to an ‘art-savvy’ and fashionable target market.

Endnotes
7 The Guggenheim Museum Soho (1992-2001) closed due to poor attendance figures and a lack of state and private funding.
18 Fraser, (2006) ‘From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique’, p. 131.
24 See for example, Miles, (1997) *Art, space and the city*.
31 Quoted by Wilson, (2005) ‘Prada as desert sculpture’.
33 Harman, (2005) ‘Shattered Illusion: A Prada "store" comes to West Texas, only to be vandalized’.
40 See Mores (2006) *From Fiorucci to the guerrilla stores*, p. 149.
43 See *Prada Transformer Website*. 
References:


Fondazione Prada Website. Available at: [http://www.fondazioneprada.org/](http://www.fondazioneprada.org/)


