A Vinyl Platform for Dissent: Designer Toys and Character Merchandising

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Abstract

‘Designer toys’ or ‘urban vinyl’ offer themselves as a fascinating site of resistance to the contemporary circulation of images and things. This article provides an introduction to the field of designer toys and argues that the field may be understood to be a materially situated critique of the commercial practice of character merchandising. Beginning with a description of the logic of character merchandising, this article goes on to demonstrate how designer toys critically and creatively transform some of the fundamental tenets of this practice, advancing a critique of character merchandising via the material objects themselves. In this age of image circulation, the case of the designer toy demonstrates how material artefacts can themselves become significant sites of critique.

Keywords

character merchandising • designer toys • images and things • platform • urban vinyl

Contemporary global visual culture is characterized by the vertiginous proliferation of images and things, which has been accompanied by, and generated through, the emergence of agents of connectivity that tie images, media platforms, things and consumers together. The brand and the character are two increasingly powerful agents for developing and sustaining these networks. This article proposes to engage with one form of resistance to such networks developed by a particular material object: the designer toy. The designer toy is a kind of collectible art object in toy form. Produced in relatively small batches (tens, hundreds, sometimes thousands), the designer toy is at once a kind of
material, thing-ly wrench in the character-driven network of images and things, and a generative element of other, parallel networks. This article will examine the cultural and theoretical ramifications of the field of designer toys, a field about which very little of critical substance has been written, despite its importance as a site of artistic and commercial activity. The question this article proposes to ask is: how might the material object of the toy function as a site of reflection and critique of the practice of character merchandising?

Character merchandising is a form of cultural production and marketing that uses a character (or multiple characters) to generate the consumption of media forms such as television programs and video games, objects such as plush dolls and plastic toys, and products like car insurance and financial services. Most associated with Walt Disney’s empire of characters and Japanese anime’s global expansion, this practice has been taken up in various forms around the world, instituting character-driven networks of images and things. Not surprisingly, the very prominence of character merchandising as a technology of network creation and consumption has provoked a number of artistic and micropolitical responses. As Félix Guattari (1996) writes: ‘Revolution is not uniquely played out at the level of explicit political discourse, but also on a far more molecular plane, in mutations of desire, artistic and techno-scientific mutations, etc.’ (p. 222). The field of designer toys, we might say, stages a micropolitical revolution against the character and its industries.

It was within artistic practice that the character became an element of micropolitical subversion. The character has become a central figure in the practices of contemporary artists from Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo to the so-called ‘low-brow’ art of their American counterparts: Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, Jeff Soto and Dalek (aka James Marshall), to name but a few. As characters take center stage in the art scene and on the canvas, they seem to import their logic of consumption into the art world. At the same time, these characters also become a site of experimentation and transformation, so that the realm of character merchandising and the modulation of the affects, perceptions and desires on which the consumption of character merchandise depends are subverted. Moreover, it is not only on the medium of the canvas – a privileged site of artistic interrogation – that these artists’ experimentation into the production and deformation of characters has taken place. With the advent of designer toys, the very commercial medium of the toy has become a site central to these artists’ critical mutation of characters.

The designer toy is a three-dimensional figure based on the design and pattern of a particular artist or graphic designer collective, usually made from rotocast vinyl, but includes resin, plush and wood objects as well (Jeremyville, 2004: 5). Designer toys are ‘limited edition, relatively expensive figures aimed at niche collectors’ (Phoenix, 2006: 11). Unlike most toys that occupy a secondary status as they are translated from another medium, designer toys are singular pieces, which blend ‘art, graphic design, and toys to create original items that come from a personal sensibility, rather than the direct result of merchandising from television or film spin-offs, comics, or video games’ (p. 106). The phenomenon first emerged in East Asia in 1997–8 – in Hong Kong (with the work of Eric So and Michael Lau) and in Tokyo (with Hikaru Iwanaga’s Bounty Hunter) – and
quickly spread to the UK, North America, and Southeast Asia (Budnitz, 2006; Phoenix, 2006: 43–54). Designer toys began as, and continue to be, a field of experimentation into character production and design, a new medium for staging encounters between character merchandising and art. In some ways, this new artistic medium reproduces old modalities, encouraging the consumer to become collector. Nonetheless, the field also suggests an opening whereby the very terms ‘artist’, ‘commerce’ and ‘consumer’ are transformed. It is in this sense that designer toys have been rightly deemed ‘subversive’ (Vartanian, 2006: 6).

Subversive practices are of necessity informed by the normative field(s) from which they emerge and into which they intervene. Hence this article will begin with a brief presentation of several of the major principles of the field of character merchandising, since it is in relation to this field that the uniqueness of the designer toy becomes legible. Subsequently, I will analyze the ways the designer toy subverts the normal functioning of character merchandising. An analysis of the material form of the designer toy will be key here, since it is this form and its affect on character design that accounts for the ways these objects can impede the network-forming property of the character. The material form of the toy will be understood to be an active force, an agent in the development of experiments in the nature of the character within the field of designer toys. In the field of designer toys, the practices of the character industries are accelerated, slowed, disrupted and transformed – through an intervention at the level of the form and design of the material objects themselves. The material orientation and regularity of the designer toy form (the ‘platform’) force a critical encounter with character merchandising, allowing for the creative transformation of the normative character. The designer toy phenomenon will thus allow us to explore the ways material objects or things may function as nodes through which to transform the proliferating networks of images, things and the agents that bind them within late capitalist consumption.

**Character Merchandising: Principles of the Practice**

Connectivity is one of the first principles of character merchandising. The character is never a stand-alone image or thing, but always facilitates a proliferation of media forms and objects that constitute an extensive, inter-communicating network. This proliferation of character image/things and their intercommunication are two fundamental elements of character merchandising (Tsuchiya, 1995; Azuma, 2001; Lamarre, 2006, 2009; Steinberg, 2009). Thus the character is a doubled object: it is that which is incarnated in material form, as well as that immaterial form which facilitates the connection of these material instances. This doubled nature of the character allows it to function as a network-forming agent, continually generating new images and things.

A second element of character merchandising relates more specifically to the visual aspect of the character: its stability and resemblance. The character maintains a degree of self-sameness, consistency and ease of recognition across its incarnations. The character operates within the logic of resemblance. Whether on the page of a comic, on a television screen, as a desktop icon, on a t-shirt or
in the form of a plastic figurine, the character image or thing remains visually consistent and easily recognizable. The simplicity of most characters – being non-photorealistic, iconic entities such as Mickey Mouse or Pikachu – enables their ease of translation across media forms.

A third aspect of the character is its uniqueness of form. The most long-lived characters are often unique in shape and form. Such characters can be recognized in silhouette, and at a distance as much as up close. This uniqueness of character form contributes much to its memorability and longevity.

The fourth element of the character is its face; it goes without saying that all characters have faces. The recognition and intercommunication of character incarnations will ultimately rely as much on the distinctiveness of the character's face as on the uniqueness of its form. Moreover, facial traits lead not only to its recognition, but also insert the character within a particular social regime that sees the predominance of the face as an organizing form. The face, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) suggest, is a product of the intersection of the two 'regimes of signs' constitutive of what we might call 'modern' social formations: the 'signifying regime' (signifiance) and the 'subjective regime' (subjectification).

The signifying regime works through the proliferation of signs and signifying networks organized in rings around a relatively stable center. The subjective regime is a 'passional' regime, evoking consciousness and interiority. Within the signifying regime the face functions as the substance of expression, fueling the multiple interpretations upon which this regime depends; the 'white wall' of significiation (the expressive cheeks of the face) offers the visual cues needed for meaning to be transmitted (p. 115). The subjective regime establishes the eyes as the 'black holes' in which subjectivity is anchored. The regimes of significiation and subjectification operate together to construct what we know as the face, which Deleuze and Guattari call a 'white wall/black hole system' (p. 167).

In short, the face is not a given, but is rather a construct, a 'social production' (p. 181) located at the intersection of these two semiotic regimes, and within a particular social assemblage. While Deleuze and Guattari emphasize they are not doing history in developing their theory of faciality, the social assemblage to which the intersection and dominance of the signifying and subjective regimes correspond can arguably be called modern. The face is a construct generated by a technology of power specific to the modern, capitalist social assemblage – one to which the facialized character belongs. While the emergence of the character also suggests a transformation of this assemblage, characters are informed by the logic of faciality. Mouths and noses and other details may or may not be part of the character, but the surface–eye/white wall–black hole relation is a constant.

The character does not, however, operate in a vacuum. A fifth fundamental element of the character merchandising is the character's relation to the 'world' to which it belongs (Ôtsuka, 2001[1989], 2010). An overwhelming majority of character-based networks invoke this character–world relation, particularly those that grow out of Japan's fertile manga–anime nexus. Characters are positioned in relation to the worlds to which they belong, worlds that are
developed through narrative and non-narrative means. The distinction between the character and its world is maintained, however; the world is never inscribed on the character, but only implied. The character provides a means of accessing the world – this being one of the reasons for its consumption – but does not contain the world in itself.

**Designer Toys: Delinking the Network, Developing Singularity**

Having outlined some of the principal characteristics of the character merchandising system, I will now suggest several ways designer toys work to transform the character and its circulation as a material object. Many designer toys evoke an awareness of their position in relation to the character industries and develop particular, materially located challenges to the system of character merchandising. Building on the descriptions of the field of designer toys by those involved, on the analysis of particular artifacts, and on generalizations of trends within this heterogeneous field, this study will concentrate on two central rubrics: the network and the platform. Focusing on these two elements will highlight the distinctiveness of the designer toy, and the ways it intervenes in the normal operations of character merchandising.

Designer toys subvert one of the fundamental premises of the character culture industries: connectivity. These toys are often described as stand-alone objects, independent of narrative, setting or world. As such, designer toys would seem to sever the most basic thread of character merchandising: connectivity across multiple incarnations. While we will see that other forms of connectivity are developed, there is some truth to the assertion that designer toys are singular things, disconnected from other objects and from narrative worlds. They are not tie-ins to a larger franchise. Paul Budnitz, founder of one of the preeminent designer toy producers, Kidrobot, argues that designer toys aren’t “from” anything at all (Budnitz, 2006: 9). He writes:

> The impulse to label and package things, to box up ideas into previously understood packets of information is terrifying because it shuts out anything new. Take a trip to Toys-R-Us and try to find something that isn’t ‘from’ something else, or based on a license of trademarked characters that have been pounded into our culture through repetition and advertising. A Jurassic Park plastic Brontosaurus may be a cool toy in and of itself, or it may not be, but the fact is it is being sold not because it’s a really amazing plastic dinosaur … but rather because it is a character from a movie and it depends on our memory of the movie for appeal. (p. 9)

Budnitz’s point is that the appeal of licensed objects is based on the image networks to which they belong, rather than the material qualities of the toys themselves. The non-networked quality of the designer toy, Budnitz goes on to suggest, puts far greater pressure on the material specificity of this object:
So if you’re selling a memory of a movie, how great does the toy itself really have to be? On the other hand, if you’re going to create a ten-inch-tall walking piece of tofu wearing a spaceman outfit (To-Fu Oyako by Devilrobots), then you have to try to convince your customers to buy it for no other reason than that it’s really, really weird. (p. 9)

The specificity of the object – its uniqueness, its weirdness, and its isolation from image/thing networks – becomes the basis for its appeal. Outside of image/thing networks, artists find the freedom to develop new and singular character ‘toys’.

Framed in this manner, the non-communicative aspect of the designer toy comes to the fore. Indeed, designer toys would seem to operate along the lines of the ‘vacuoles of noncommunication’ that Deleuze (1995) proposed as an antidote to the surfeit of communication within ‘control societies’:

Maybe speed and communication have been corrupted. They’re thoroughly permeated by money – and not by accident but by their very nature. We’ve got to highjack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control. (p. 175)

As with speech and money, so with the networks developed around characters: permeated by money, these function as conduits for desire and consumption.

Might the designer toy function, then, as a kind of circuit breaker or ‘interrupter’ of the communicational relay found in the character merchandising system? This is indeed what Budnitz is suggesting, echoing Deleuze’s assertion that true creation must involve a kind of de-linking from image networks that otherwise block the production of the genuinely new. Poking holes in the communicational fabric, designer toys would seem to question the image/thing networks of characters, and function as conduits for the introduction of novelty into the world of material objects.

Not all forms of communication are broken, however; in rupturing certain ties between character images and objects, the designer toy in fact generates new networks in their place. Vinyl toys are distinctly ‘part’ of something, even if not a pre-determined, merchandised world. Not all of these new networks lead back to the system of character merchandising or impinge on creativity, however; some connections are key to the creative critique of characters these toys develop.

Here it is worth noting a general distinction within the field of designer toys between larger (often 6 inches or taller), more expensive, limited-run objects, usually produced by more established artists or designers, and the smaller (usually 2 to 3 inches in height), more numerous toys that are part of a series – a grouping of toys into a set family. Kidrobot, Play Imaginative, Toy2R, Medicom and other vinyl toy companies release many of these smaller toy series in ‘blind boxes’. Blind boxes conceal exactly which toy of the series one is purchasing. They are uniform in size and shape, indicate which series the toy comes from, what types of toys are available in the series, along with the ratio of their availability (for example, in Dunny series 3/25 for common characters, 1/25 for rarer characters,
1/50 or 1/100 for quite rare characters, and some ‘chase’ characters whose availability is unknown). There can be anywhere from 6 to 35 toys in each series, and these may be composed of completely different shapes or characters; distinct patterns using a single form; or different ‘colorways’ of a single pattern and form.

The serial grouping points to the ways networks are reconstituted around the designer toy, first and foremost through the logic of the series. The series subsumes the radical distinctiveness of each component object within the larger ensemble of the serial form, as Jean Baudrillard (1996) notes in the context of book series (p. 103). The blind box and the character series incite the impulse to collect, mark the rare characters with an affective and economic value above and beyond the rest, and organize distinct toys into a system of consumption not unlike character-based merchandise (which also operates in serial manner, albeit across media forms). The series and the impulse to collection it incites potentially overshadow the uniqueness of the individual toy. The serial form thus creates a first kind of regularity or communication between individual toys.

A second form of communication between toys arises from the consistency endowed by a particular designer or artist. Recognizable stylistic traits are as much in demand in the designer toy world as in the world of contemporary art. Stylistic distinctness becomes an important way of demarcating an artist’s work, and recognition gained either from putting out good pieces or from an artist’s work in another field – whether graffiti, fashion, posters or fine art – promotes the collection of a particular artist’s oeuvre. Designer toys large and small are informed by this second form of series, an informal group marked by a particular artist’s name, signature element, or style.

Thus, even as the designer toy erects blockages in the networks of character merchandising, this vinyl art form simultaneously develops other networks – series of toys, networks of art or collection, regularities of style, the circulation of capital and of prestige, etc. This is not to say that Budnitz is wrong to emphasize the material specificity of the designer toy, the attention to the craft of toy production, and its resistance to being sold based around film or animation franchises and merchandising networks that inform regular toy production. All of these are very much true. However, it does mean that, while on the level of character licensing, designer toys can be said to function as ‘vacuoles of noncommunication’, opening spaces of creativity and a return to the materiality of the toy, there is another level at which new networks emerge. Some of these networks would seem to recycle old habits (i.e. collection and accumulation). Other networks continue the promise of designer toys’ subversive generation of creative, thing-ly novelty. The most fascinating example of the designer toy’s potential creativity is to be found, interestingly enough, in the development of a serially produced form: the ‘platform’.

**A Platform for Experimentation**

The platform is a three-dimensional character-like shape and form to which particular artists or design firms are invited to contribute graphic designs. Different companies have developed and become known for their distinctive

At first glance, platforms seem to introduce a level of networked regularity to the toys, perhaps even a uniformity that would impinge on their creative rupture of the networks of character merchandising. Yet, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that it is the very regularity of the platform that makes it a key element of designer toys’ experimentation and critique. Clearly, some forms of connection (between platform pieces) interrupt others (between character incarnations). Not all forms of connection are inimical to creation; the platform introduces a disjunction between repetitive form and artistic contribution that is the basis for a new kind of creative critique.

The platform is ‘a blank artist’s canvas of sorts’, ‘a vinyl canvas’, as many describe it (‘Trexi Series 1’, 2004: 86; ‘Be@rbrick’, 2002: 15; Dennis, 2008: 57). Artists, graphic designers, and graffiti artists are invited to create their own visual designs for a particular platform, their own Dunny, Qee, or Trexi. Some artists even modify the shape of the platform, adding props or, in more rare cases, transforming the shape of the platform. And yet, for all its comparison to a painter’s canvas, the platform is itself a work of art: a distinctly designed, recognizable and indeed copyrighted material form. It is an anthropomorphic, character-like object that was itself created by an individual or group of designers. Unlike the flat, blank canvas of the painter, the artist who is invited to ‘collaborate’ on the design of a Qee or Dunny is given a distinctly shaped, three-dimensional material form to work with. Hence all work on a pre-existing platform becomes collaboration by definition.

Indeed, the conception of the form as a blank canvas is a misnomer; each platform comes with a set of material orientations and formal specificities so that it is ‘blank’ only in the most superficial sense. Most platform toys are humanoid in shape, having feet, arms, torso and head. Yet this does not mean that all artists adhere to the form and produce similarly humanoid characters. The most interesting work done on platforms is marked by the attempt to get out of the humanoid shape itself; to deform the character and defamiliarize the contours of this vinyl platform. The challenge of working on a platform like the Dunny, which is haunted by the ghosts of the prior work on the object, is that the artist must labor to create the platform anew, to make his or her contribution distinctive, innovative and memorable. Experiments in visual design are born. Thus the very regularity of the platform toy turns it into a ‘platform’ for experimentation, creation, critique and dissent.

The first point to make in this regard is that the regularity of the platform runs counter to one of the basic tenets of character merchandising: the presumed singularity and uniqueness of a given character’s shape, color and design. As we saw, the field of character merchandising revolves around a central character that crosses a number of media forms. Visual resemblance across incarnations
is one of the anchoring features of the character, and the principal guarantor of successful transmedia migration.

The platform art toy undermines this visual resemblance by introducing a gap between form and surface design. Instead of the ‘one character = one form’ principle, the platform toy substitutes the principle of ‘one (plat)form = infinite (non)characters’. While the platform itself is recognizable in all of its incarnations – even despite the occasionally significant modifications of its form, as in the Devilrobots Dunny, which sports the design group’s trademark square ‘tofu’ head – there is no single character one can associate with it. Rather, the platform is the basis for a multiplicity of designs, and a multiplicity of characters and non-characters. Here the term ‘design’ refers to the visual patterns, motifs and colors that sit on the vinyl surface of the platform, which function as its contoured material support (a support that, despite the passive implications of the term, actively shapes the level of design as well as its aesthetic appreciation). This design is the main contribution of the artists, the substance of their contribution to the platform. As such, the platform readily lends itself to the creation of non-characters or quasi-characters, acting as a surface for scribbling or doodling rather than the basis for a recognizable character (for instance Gary Baseman’s ‘Buckingham Forest’ Qee [Figure 1], or Jon Burgerman’s ‘Burgermenos’ Egg Qee series). The most basic effect of the vinyl platform is thus to throw the uniqueness of the character into question by its violation of the ‘one character = one form’ equation. Or rather, the site of uniqueness is displaced; the specificity of the platform designer toy is to be found in the design permutations of this platform. Creative graphical design becomes the basis of recognition and innovation as regards an artist’s contribution to this uniform form.

The gap the platform introduces between toy shape and character has a second major repercussion: the relation between the character and the world becomes a site of experimentation. Some artists take advantage of this gap between character and form to inscribe both character image and world on the very same surface, underscoring an understanding of the platform as dynamic surface rather than character. An excellent example of this is Jeremyville’s 2008 collaboration with Kidrobot’s Dunny platform, the 8-inch ‘The Nightmare in Jeremyville’ figurine (Figures 2 and 3). This figurine is accompanied by a one-page, 30-frame color comic strip written by Jeremyville, who started his career as a comic strip writer (Figure 4). What is most interesting about this toy-comic duo is that the toy’s surface design is a combination of the character as it appears in the comic strip with the dream world of the comic and the narrative events that occur within it. While the shape of the body and the face are much the same in the cartoon character and the figurine, the body design of the Dunny figurine, as well as its ears, are inscribed with the various events and creatures that appear in the comic. The narrative world appears condensed and compressed on the character’s very body. If Jeremyville’s style is guided, as he suggests, by ‘creatures I want to make real and worlds I wish I could visit’ (Jeremyville, 2007: 114), what we find are both creatures and worlds condensed onto this single vinyl figure. Other works also display this condensation of character and world onto the material surface of the toy, from Baseman and Burgerman’s doodles, to the design duo DGPH’s
Figure 1  Gary Baseman’s ‘Buckingham Forest’ Qee. Image courtesy of Toy2R.
transformation of the Trexi platform into a landscape in ‘Molestown’, to Amy Ruppel’s 2009 Dunny.

A third consequence of the platform-induced gap between form and character is the separation of the face from the head, and the proliferation of faces across the body of the figure. The face as expressive substance came into being through the ‘deterritorization of the head into a face’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 175), a process that also saw the removal of the head (as face) from the body. Yet
the ‘faciality machine’, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, produces not only a facialization of the head, but also a ‘facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings’ (p. 181). Any part of the body can take on the signifying or subjective functions ascribed to the face: the pointing finger, for example, can substitute for the scrutinizing eye; or the trembling hand expressing fear can function parallel to the expression of fear on the cheeks of the face.
In contrast to the proliferation of face-functions that Deleuze and Guattari describe, what we see with the literal proliferation of face-images across the bodies of the designer toys, is something of the reverse. Namely, the proliferation of faces in designer toys suggests a rendering ineffective of the signification and subjectification functions proper to the regime of faciality. While clearly gesturing towards and parodying the centrality of the face and faciality to the practice of character merchandising, the multiplication of faces we find with many platform figures does not reinforce the regime of faciality as much as undermine it. This

Figure 4 Jeremyville’s ‘Nightmare in Jeremyville’ comic strip. Image courtesy of Kidrobot.
proliferation of faces transforms the face into a decorative element and makes a mockery of the signifying/subjective powers of faciality. The platform allows designer toys to develop a critique of the predominance of the facial regime in character merchandising.

Within character merchandising, the facialized entity of the character has two requirements: the face must be singular and easily recognizable, and the character body can have only one face. With designer toys, we find a significant number of figures without face, such as Triclops’s ‘Rainy London’ Dunny, the wood-pattern Qee, and many Be@rbricks. Moreover, while the majority of designer toys do tend to have faces of some kind, a significant number depart markedly from the character norm by sporting several faces. This tendency is found particularly strongly in Play Imaginative’s ‘Trexi’ series, and across Dalek’s work. The ‘Square Head’ platform within the Trexi series shows itself particularly open to the proliferation of faces. While the body of this platform is in the same humanoid shape as the rest of the Trexi series, the two-tiered rotating and removable head of the 3-inch figure is square, giving rise to multiple different face designs for each side of the square. With Jacques Christophe’s ‘Crying Clown’, Deime’s ‘Franken Trexi’, or Satoshi Okano’s ‘Protect Ya Face’, the normally static face of the character toy becomes open to transformation. Christophe’s ‘Crying Clown’ permits the random mixing and matching of eye expression with mouth expression. Okano’s intervention is even more interesting for combining three faces that are stylistically completely different.

The modularity of the Trexi face not only multiplies faces, it also challenges the implicit frontality of the character toy. The character toy normally has a particular point of view built into it: a frontal viewing position defined by the orientation of the face. The Trexis challenge this frontality by developing faces on all sides of their heads, making their orientation less clear. Other designer toys similarly challenge this frontality by having designs and faces on all sides of the toy – such as Jeremyville’s Dunny – or by making the ‘side’ of the character into a ‘front’, as in Tim Biskup’s ‘Wrecker Panda’ Qee (Figures 5 and 6). The perspective or viewpoint built into the character toy is challenged by the proliferation of faces and points of view on the character.

Dalek’s work presents another route towards the critique of faciality, seen in his contribution to Kidrobot’s ‘Fatcap Series 2’ (Figure 7), his 2009 Dunny, or his contribution to the Teddy Troop platform. In all of these works, eyes and mouths proliferate so that every part of the body is in some way facialized, making the face itself a mere pattern or decorative element. Divided into top and bottom sections, many of these vinyl toys possess four distinct faces: a different face on the top and bottom of each side of the character. This quadruple facialization renders the face itself a decorative element, parodying the proliferation of faces within character culture. Instead of the regime of faciality, we find instead a complex play of surface and depth, foreground and background, face and figure both suggesting and undermining the ‘one-face per character’ principle.
Figure 5 Tim Biskup’s ‘Wrecker Panda’ Qee (front). Image courtesy of Toy2R.
Figure 6  Tim Biskup’s ‘Wrecker Panda’ Qee (back). Image courtesy of Toy2R.
The interruption of character merchandising’s networks of images and things and the gap between form and character introduced by the platform generate the space for the critique of character merchandising developed in the field of designer toys. The material, formal regularity of the designer toy platform allows it to become a site of critical practice, generating an aesthetico-political experience of the toy premised on the critical transformation of the normal operations of the character industries.

In concluding this preliminary sketch of designer toys, I would like to gesture towards a final consequence of the platform toy: its use as a literal platform for collaboration and participation within the vinyl toy community. Following logically from the development of the platform as a blank, vinyl form for creation, many designer toy companies also sell the platform as a blank, do-it-yourself (DIY) toy. Playing into the DIY spirit that ignited the designer toy movement

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**Conclusion: Collaboration, the New Creative Paradigm**

The interruption of character merchandising’s networks of images and things and the gap between form and character introduced by the platform generate the space for the critique of character merchandising developed in the field of designer toys. The material, formal regularity of the designer toy platform allows it to become a site of critical practice, generating an aesthetico-political experience of the toy premised on the critical transformation of the normal operations of the character industries.

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in the first place, companies like Play Imaginative, Toy2R and Kidrobot sell all-white, single-color or glow-in-the-dark versions of their platform toys, allowing fans, collectors and creators to make their own designer toys. The regularity of shape proper to the platform thus functions as both a creative constraint to contributing artists and as an invitation to generate one’s own ‘custom’ toys, often shown in exhibitions at the stores that sell the toys. It is here that the field of designer toys has the potential to transform that last trait that links them firmly to the character merchandising system: their mode of consumption. This article has noted the many challenges to the system of character merchandising launched by the designer toy: the interruption of image-based communication through the emphasis on the material specificity and singularity of the toy; the dissociation between form and character, and character and toy; the compression of the character-world distinction onto the toy itself; and the critique of the facialized form of the character. All these disrupt the work of the character and its network of images and things, whose consumption is integral to the cultural industries of contemporary capitalism. Indeed, the designer toy generates a new kind of experience of the material object known as a ‘toy’. The statement – ‘This is a work of art, not a toy’ – printed on every Kidrobot box is thus not merely a marketing strategy or a warning to unsuspecting parents of toddlers; this is also an indication that these are works that fit into an ecology of creative practices. At their best, these art-toys function as micropolitical subversions of existing capitalist relations through the very material object of the designer toy. In fact, the designer toy points to the way the material thing can function as a site of critique of the contemporary circulation of images and objects in character merchandising. The centrality of collaboration and the DIY ethic embedded in the field of designer toys would seem to transform the last element linking this field to that of character merchandising: the passive consumption of pre-existing objects.

As the meeting point between the formed matter of the vinyl canvas and the intervening artist-participant, the platform is a central point for the expansion of collaborative art practices. As Jeremyville (2007) writes: ‘Collaboration is the new art movement of our times’ (p. 6). As this article has shown, the platform introduces a gap that allows for the development of the critical and creative field of toy/character/art that we know by the name of ‘designer toys’. At the same time, the platform promises to close another kind of gap: the gap between producer and consumer, artist and collector so that everyone can become collaborators in a larger project.

To be sure, this regime of generalized collaboration draws on the creativity of the consumer, situating it within a trend in post-Fordist consumer culture that encourages an active form of consumption or ‘prosumption’, wherein the consumer becomes the active producer of the commodity (Lazzarato, 1996; Terranova, 2000; Küücklich, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Arvidsson, 2008). Moreover, the following these subversive art pieces have gained, and the long queues to purchase the newest, limited-edition toy, demand that they also be understood to fall within the expanding field of what Martin Roberts (2005) has dubbed the ‘subcultural industries’.
 Nonetheless, this article has endeavored to analyze and delineate the important ways the designer toy moves aesthetic experimentation from the canvas and the art gallery to the material object of the toy itself. The designer toy generates an expanded field of creative and critical practice that simultaneously invokes and works against the grain of character merchandising. It also points to the potential of the platform for collaborative artistic creation. Creative critique is born through the bottleneck of the platform’s material regularity. It is here that the novelty and the subversive quality of designer toys lie, making the thing-ly toy a platform of creative dissent that operates against the circulation of images, things and characters within late capitalist visual culture. The field of designer toys is and most likely will continue to be a vital realm of aesthetic experimentation. We should be on the lookout for things to come.

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Notes

2. The blind box was most likely introduced into the designer toy field by Japan’s Medicom, but presumably developed from the practice of including ‘premiums’ in children’s candies in Japan that began in the 1920s with the caramel-maker Glico. For a history of premiums in Japan, see Kitahara (2003).
3. Unlike other companies, Kidrobot does not sell a DIY version of its Dunny platform, but rather of a similarly shaped figure, Munny.

References

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