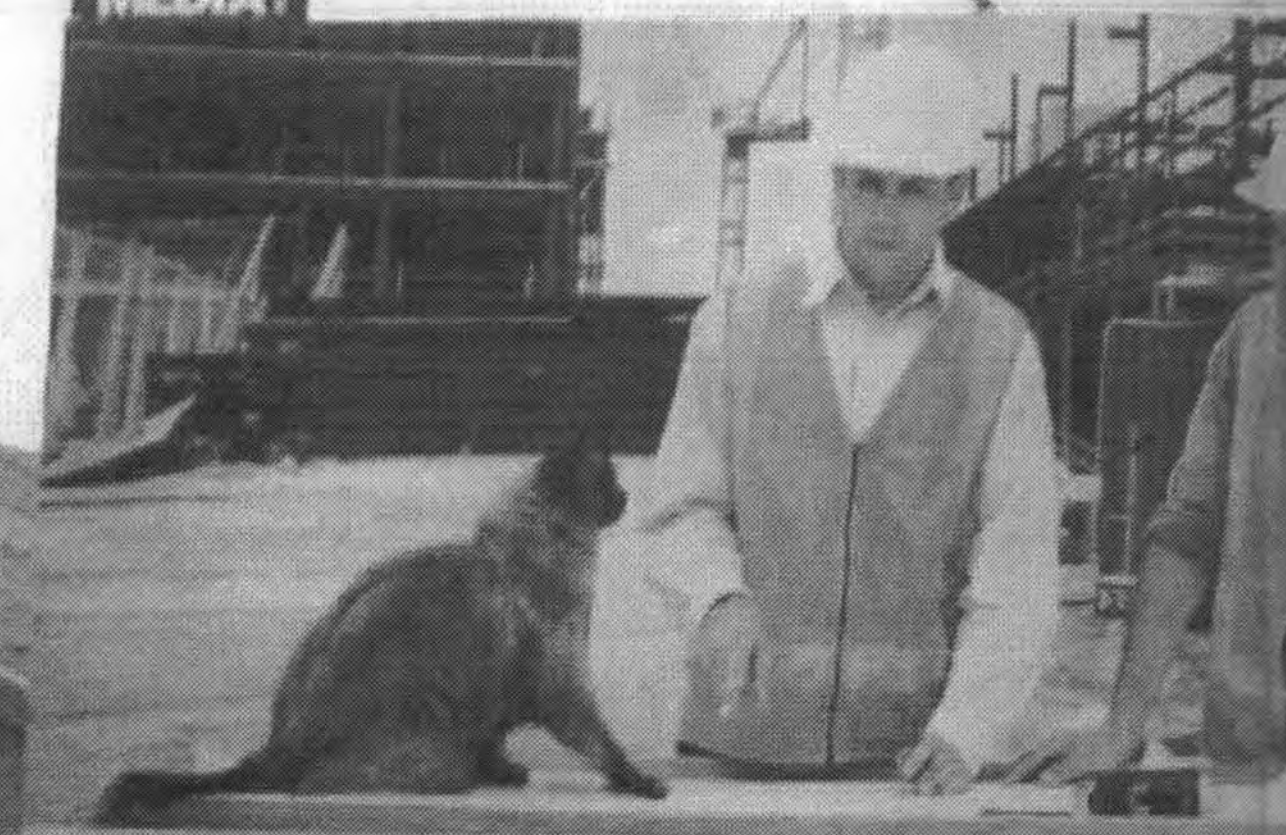




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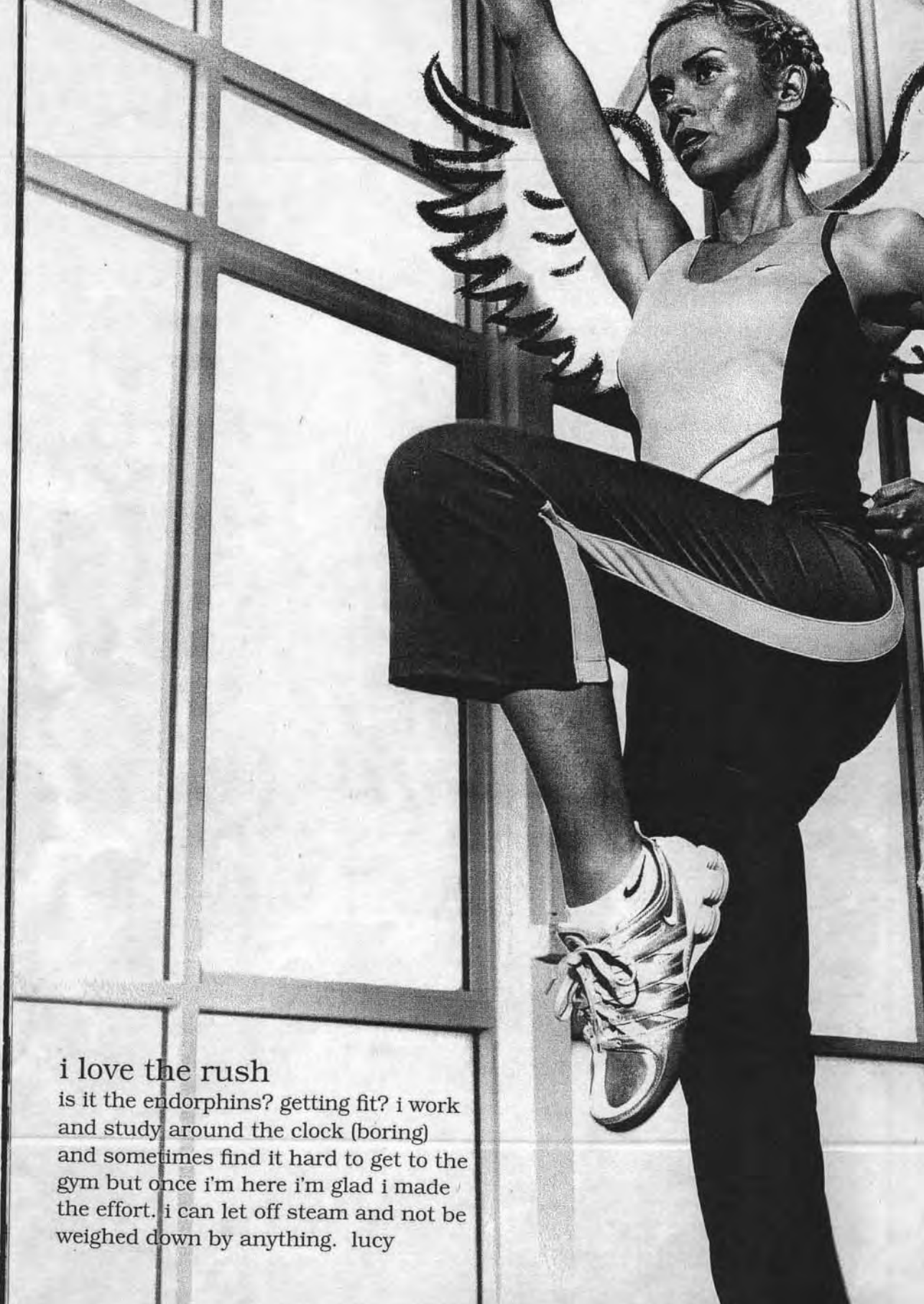
BLUEPRINT INHABITATIONS

Jared Wells & Harold Grievess.

At a time when domestic animals are being encouraged into the workplace as ritual comforters offering worker salvation and increased productivity this Optimum billboard appears preying on neurotic companion-animal bonds. "Help your cat reach her potential" follows the dependable sting of any self-help evangelist promising lifestyle empowerment with an accompanying suggestion of animal neglect. Ricocheting off the enervating pressure of failure, the billboard elicits domestic compulsion. With its pure-bred overtones and benign interruption of the work site, especially in the pet's walk on role as consultant, the domestic cat becomes a placard commodity stretched between the realms of corporate benevolence and inspired kinship fraternity. Couched as it is in the neurotic aspiration of potential, Optimum's manifesto embroils the domestic animal into a market excessively buoyed by its optimism as fanciful companion-animal indulgence. Such platitudes surely match aspirational moments of pet-food culinary pedigree but don't they also deal under-handedly to the given expectation that companion-animal ownership has always insinuated attentive care? Given over to Optimum's marketing moment which suggests some new, grand future is it enough to ask what this enlightened potential could be. Are these questions new augmentations to the pre-existing familial ode to produce productive offspring? Could neglect ever enter into this disposition – could indifference? Optimum's billboard never dreams we could answer back to this coercion but perhaps we should.

Optimum's billboard is facile and oblique. It offers the tantalizing glimpse of pseudo-sovereignty in designer product. Coalescing, perhaps even withdrawing from the pace of life, Optimum promises to accentuate the domestic bliss of a lifestyle's inhabitation. Played out by the cat's interruption of the two male worker's consultation of blueprint plans, the Optimum billboard regales the cat as a domestic counterpart worthy of the busy, pseudo-brusque, lives of the professional worker. Self sufficient and clean, smart and savvy, Optimum has deliberately ringed in the domestic pet within a hierarchy of merchandising, dispensing alienating gestures designed to exacerbate self worth through transferred commodity consumption. Inspiring you to allow your pet to eat, or if it hadn't been nabbed by another company, dine, on their product rather than the standardized fare of say, Chef or Chow, Optimum deploys its aspirational context as a premium gesture for self-enabling pride. Transferred as it is through the domestic animal this marketing structure mimes a rich eco-system of complimentary lifestyle practices perfectly played out in the startled moment of this interruption of the domestic sphere into the masculine domain of the construction site.

It is a mistake to think that both males are on equal footing as architects when there is such obvious work-ware disparity. Contrast the younger one to the left with the older worker to the right. With his grizzled attire, bent posture, and blue collar shirt (rolled at the sleeves, and with complimentary exposed t-shirt at neck), the older worker strikes out as the pragmatic site foreman. Likewise the younger worker's crisp shirt and odd discomfort in fluoro-vest binds his alienation from the site of production, embroiling him in the anomic state of bureaucratic worker, desk bound and enigmatically idealistic. Such displacement naturally works alongside the cat which has appeared, surprisingly in sphinx-like profile, formed as it is in a state of question with its paw stretched forth in benign sovereign expectation (this is hardly begging – even a dignified form of begging). Interrupting the young buck's enthusiasm the cat lets loose a strain of familial embarrassment, inheriting as it does the lineage of Salem's comedic interruptions in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.



i love the rush

is it the endorphins? getting fit? i work and study around the clock (boring) and sometimes find it hard to get to the gym but once i'm here i'm glad i made the effort. i can let off steam and not be weighed down by anything. lucy

Such locution, not so much reviled cat, but more 'damn cat', a neurotic frustration inheriting this comedies breakdown of the benign authority of the professionalized male wage, sends the younger architect reeling as the embarrassed discomfort of upper middle-class aspirations before his earnest counterpart, the pragmatic foreman.

Subsuming the cat within his pragmatic disgruntlement, expressed by his paternal scowl, the foreman's account of the cat's interruption is at odds to the startled discovery of the architect. Embedded as he is in the duration of taking orders (a wage serf for the personal aggrandizement of an architectural profession whose earnest idealism is deliberately played off), the foreman's grasp of the problem is more laconic deferral, a lateral process of adjustment rather than the vertical hysteria of the architect's embarrassment. This deliberation of demeanor is then a further accession of the foreman's cooption of good will, as though to suggest he is merely a dupe in a durable order that sees him play acting the part of good-will sergeant. Thus the two figures, old man in hat and pure bred cat to the right, bracket off the young buck's wild eyed enthusiasm as an abbreviation, a suspended pause in the technicality of the corporate architecture of pet food merchandising. To the right is the self-deprecating air of hard work whilst to the left the insouciant cat garners platitudes as show pony nostalgia all under the guise of reaching your full potential and where else better than on the set of a high rise construction taking a break for directorial airs. These complications, both in their familial embarrassment seem to pre-empt – even enact – self mockery before such middle-class aspirations of designer-rite encampment. The naivety to which the subsumption before quixotic commodities, like designer cat-food or bottled water would have once assumed, nowadays seem such commonplace fare that even this knowingly cynical advertisement would garner little of the comedic attention it should warrant. At its base level, its enactment of pride, its marketing of not only the pet's well-being but also more importantly, the owner's smug satisfaction that they are emblematically concerned owners, is little more than a constitutionally form of conspicuous display.

Designed to exacerbate the sense of self privilege Optimum's billboard co-opts purchasing power by projecting the authorship of self-enabling pride. Like Nike's recent appeal to woman, it deploys a facile becoming, a conjuncture of purchasing power with designer status entropy. In a recent brochure for woman's gym attire Nike twists Descartes infamous "I am" into a sentimental disfigurement which plays out the anguish of self-empowered rites. Deploying the strategic "I am" alongside a string of self deprecating airs: "I AM STRONG (except when there's chocolate), / I AM ADVENTUROUS (so I like to think)," the advertising mantra becomes encoded in this fabric of conditioning in which the gym workout, or jogging, even yoga becomes an empowering posture of self assertiveness. Thus "I am" becomes attire, a posture, an attitude which moves on from the masculine aggrandizement of the sensational, deterministic tag "just do it" to become an enactment of affect. Never "I am," but more purely "I'm happy / I'm sweating." It is always the "I" in action, the "I" in performance. The Nike woman thus emerges as pure affect, a mannerism embedded in performance rites. Herein lies the subtle dexterity of Nike's corporate ruse: self-enablement rites are seductively packaged and sold as a readymade ensemble of stylized gestures, the crucible of the self played out as a paradoxical act of scripted improvisation, the choreographed sovereignty of the Cartesian puppet.

Nike's products costume appearance and concoct a desired tone in order to make gesture an act of complicity. Of course this complicity is purely temporal, cached towards a gesture that is always restrained. For instance the Nike "I," "can come to class and let it all out" only so that "afterwards, I'm buzzing." These gestures deploy the personal pronoun through implicit performances which elicit nothing but doubt. It works against failure by maintaining its own affront, its own costume of appearance in performative rites of self-will. Writing about such outward expression, such cached assertions, Deleuze and Guattari have shown how expression is intimately related to possession, claiming that these "necessarily appropriative" iterations "constitute a having more profound than being".¹ In the act of operation, in the act of self will, "I am" becomes a co-operative rite of self-exertion which, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, no longer simply belongs to "the subject" but instead to the "territory" from which they are produced. What Nike's "I am" becomes then is a convenient mask behind which the consumer relinquishes their selfhood. Their appropriation is little more than an order enacted as a strung together co-option of the individual in their rite of adaptation before an anxious fear of failure.

Unfolding as a series of exclusive disjunctions that authorize an Abrahamic form of *ipseity* or "selfhood" ("I AM STRONG / except when there's chocolate" etc.), Nike's slogans inscribe the consumer's desiring body

in the rhythms and sonorities of language, in the stringent phrase propulsion of the fitness regime. This implicit performance functions as a territorial refrain, training and disciplining the body through an ensemble of programmatic gestures that amount to a *spatio-temporal corporeal mapping or organization of affect*. In this way, Nike promotes a vision of the body as holistic and unified, thus masking the profoundly heterogeneous functioning of the corporeal sensorium (in a state of anger, for instance, a sort of internal battle rages within the body, in the arousal and contraction of antagonistic muscle groups). Rigid and hypotrophied, Nike remakes the essential multiplicity of the body and its affects into something unified, abstract, calculable, and exchangeable, in other words, into a commodity. A slave to passive affections, the Nike sportswoman's enabling posture is, ironically, a catatonic freeze, in which the vital intensity of the body (viz. its body without organs) is suspended, its organs nailed down, hierarchized, its difference erased.

The well-tempered body of the Nike sportswoman finds its correlate in the demure domesticity of the Optimum cat whose clear, sharply delineated profile – so suggestive of the outline of an anatomy engraving – thus answers both to commodification pressures and the detached scientific gaze of the vivisectionist, a gaze that in the late nineteenth century helped produce and map the animal's body with organs. The Optimum cat is, in a sense, skinned, laid out on a billboard that doubles as dissection table. And yet, like Nike's near cadaver, this cat is also animated – as if by divine afflatus – from above by prescribed self-enablement rites that come replete with their own patronizing spiritual overtones. According to their website, Optimum's pet food maximizes your cat's full potential '[n]ot just in terms of health and nutrition', but also, so they claim, 'on a deeper level, finding the *perfect balance between body, mind and soul*'.² Like the Nike sportswoman's yoga, then, the conscripted cat's obligatory familial dance is all about restraint, balance, and perhaps most insidiously – *ascetic discipline*.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, any individual animal 'is or can be a pack, but to varying degrees of vocation that make it easier or harder to discover the multiplicity, or multiplicity-grade, the animal contains' (241). The concept of the animal pack is important for Deleuze and Guattari because it is the milieu most conducive to the circulation of impersonal affects, with affect defined here not as a 'personal feeling' or received mannerism, but rather 'an effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel' (240). There is something in the animal, then, a power or potentiality that threatens to catapult the self into a process of deterritorialization, a process that results in the dissolution of the borders of the self and the concomitant decomposition of (the idea of) the organic body. The self is a threshold, a door, a multiplicity that can link up and pass into any other multiplicity.

What then is the multiplicity-grade, virtual or actual, when we skin Optimum's cat? Is it possible – by means of Deleuzoguattarian sorcery – to treat this innocuous looking moggy in the mode of the pack or the swarm and thereby to engineer a becoming-animal, or is this cat already too individuated, too sentimentalized, an oedipalized animal replete with its own petty history, a taxidermied Garfield? Surely Optimum's marketed 'potential' is not the 'vocation' Deleuze and Guattari had in mind. Caught up in this bind of compensation, the Optimum cat is trapped by two opposing functions or movements. On the one hand, Optimum construes the cat's 'potential' as merely the degree to which it can be successfully integrated into the familial institution, a mere lifestyle commodity. On the other hand, the cat's demonic 'vocation' is to sweep the self away – through the power of affect – in a becoming-animal or enterprise of desubjectivation that is too strong for it, and to throw the familial assemblage into upheaval along with it. The 'potential' of the animal then, depending on the case, oscillates between two poles, between a schizo Eros and an Oedipal Thanatos.

This is of course the very question Optimum dangles so enticingly before the confused street-walker. What is it for a pet to appear on the scene like this? How does this cat get here and is it possible to transfer its apparition into sites beyond the billboard? Doesn't this placard cat work all too easily alongside the two male workers, surely there must be an unwitting alterity to such pronounced vocations. Is there not something already threatening in the cat's sphinx-like attitude, given the fact that the Greek Sphinx is a demon of destruction and misfortune and that its name in fact derives from the verb *sphiggo*, meaning to strangle? Surely then its unannounced appearance also prefigures not only its merchant expendability but also its availability for more surreptitious concerns. Sphinxes are after all chthonic figures, apt to disappear down the nearest rabbit hole. Optimum's tantalizing supposition of domestic entitlement as familial obligation is surely a heightened consumer ruse whose preliminary hearings are merely feeble attempts to

ape nostalgia for the domestic scene. So it shouldn't be surprising that we can suggest that there exists an instability to these placard forms and that we'd want to disappear amongst them.

In its delineation and constant manipulation of the cat as a consigned commodity, Optimum's billboard forgets that the pet can disappear as quickly as it has been thrust into the limelight of advertising. Fragmented and displaced from its intermediary grouping this cat can easily escape its remnant hold on the here and now. As de Certeau reminds us:

what is cited is fragmented, reemployed and patched together [*bricolé*] in a text; it is altered therein. Yet in this position where it keeps nothing of its own, it remains capable, as in a dream, of bringing back something uncanny ... it retains the surreptitious and altering power of the repressed.³

Compelled as it is by the constant maneuvering of capital's desire to occlude the pet's own marginal escapes it is possible to think of this placard form as a *housed alterity*. Grafted into the domestic realm as a lifestyle supplement, the arched back of the cat – skinned or not – will inscribe a threshold or limit that constantly evades the market pressures of commodification and homogenization. Recognized as a disquieting caesura in the pulsed time of the advertisement's stability is it possible to recognize a strain of Cheshire in Optimum's moggy? After all, Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat is adept at coming and going, fading in and out, presumably having abandoned its too individuated, too perceptible, too visible role as family pet, leaving behind it an uncanny, horrific smile without a face. This free floating smile is a pre-personal affect, an affect that no longer needs a body, person or thing as its support, not an affect that someone owns, viz. an individuating affect. Unlike Nike's sportswomen who is made up of territorialised affects this Cheshire grin is not an embodied brand but a Deleuzian "Image," a pure affect freed from its actualization in a particular person (or animal). Recognizing this may just let us loose from the bounds of conscripted lifestyle encampment, exaggerated pet-love or not. After all, surely the trick is not to escape the territorializing formations these exaggerated and highly transitory forms of consumption entail but instead to glide seamlessly over them constructing as we go our own pleasures.

Lodged at the work site, the pet's iterative moment coincides with the schematic order of the blueprint. Tempting us with its directorial paw, the cat for us is an over-coded form hindered by its placard deferral to the aspiration culture of the 'professionalised' worker (architects, doctors, lawyers). In its forgetfulness that their assimilation of the pet has the power to return the animal's alterity at a heightened level, Optimum's billboard shades all forms of lifestyle marketing with a crepuscular form of prosperity. Beckoning as a surreptitious temptation, this cat's provocation as a haunted and supplementary fragment, dramatically re-casts Optimum's invocation of maximized 'potential'. Embalmed by its corporate inscription, Optimum's domestication of the pet returns to us as a material, fleshly wound of the familial corpus. Sutured as a tear or abrasion this alteration of the pet-commodity seeks not so much to parody the cordial atmosphere of the domestic compound but instead to exaggerate its deathly hallmarks as a final resting place – the domestic sanctuary as humanity's last stand. No longer so oblivious to such dissimulation, the cat in its embalmed-scripted lifestyle (its true potential) is a technicality of human culture, performative and yet consigned to the surrogate forms of subjectivity which so characterized the Nike women. Attacking the brief caesura of this over-laden placard we can promote a capitulation before the sanitized lifestyle of our petty histories. Bearing out the projection and neurotic suppositions which hinge so deeply on modern capital's enlistment of the familial unit, this over coded ventriloquism becomes a blatant blueprint for the terminal future of the domestic oedipal fantasy. Closed off as the consigned apparatus, Optimum's pet becomes a ghostly reminder of the claustrophobic dwellings that the durations of a lifestyle's script will always entail. Optimum's blue-print will always put a positive spin on this but it is always at best a momentary deception, foreshadowed by its own moribund grin.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London/New York, Continuum, 2004 [original 1988]); 349.

² <http://www.optimumpet.com>

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988); 251.