Is the Renaissance joint-stool *zany, interesting, or cute*? These are the categories put forward by Sianne Ngai in order to capture our contemporary experience of all things cultural, from ninja bunnies to crowdsourced dreams:

The interesting, cute, and zany index—and are thus each in a historically concrete way about—capitalism’s most socially binding processes: production, in the case of the zany (an aesthetic about performance as not just artful play but also affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (a serial, recursive aesthetic of informational relays and communicative exchange); and
consumption, in the case of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor towards ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities).¹

Zany pertains to the aestheticization of labor in the experience economy; interesting describes information and media in the age of TMI; and cute captures our relationship to objects in a world overrun by phones that look like their owners and puggles spiked with microchips. In this essay, I would like to suggest that the homely, ubiquitous Renaissance joint-stool participated in a version of the “zany” as new-minted by Ngai (supplemented by occasional encounters with Cute). Ngai links the zany to the performance of “affective labor,” a phrase used by the Italian autonomists (including Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno) to characterize those forms of work that curate the emotional envelope of social life, including caregiving and informal economies based on gift exchange and collective effort.² “Affective labor” refers


to both the emotional work that often goes unmarked or uncompensated in domestic and social life as well as the sentimental expenditures carried by labor itself. In the information and experience economy, culture workers create and distribute affect as a product in its own right. Theater is a form of affective labor, and so is cooking; indeed, the traffic of stools between scenes of household management and stage management links these two zones of expressive performance. Gener-ically, Ngai associates the zany with comedy (the cute belongs to romance, and the interesting to realism), and she recovers the resume of the zany in Renaissance theater: “Deriving from the character of the zanni, an itinerant servant in commedia dell’arte who is modeled after peasants seeking temporary work in Venetian households, zaniness has a history that stretches back to the sixteenth-century division of labor and the theater and marketplace culture of what is now Italy.”\(^3\)

In Renaissance households, stools were highly mobile actors in the daily drama of artisanal work, domestic labor, and commensal pleasure in rooms that changed function over the course of the day as well as the week and the year. Closely linked to the butts they were designed to bear and imaginatively affiliated with beasts of burden, stools show up in the insult repertoire of Renaissance comedy as a handy extension of the lower body and its humor.

The stool belonged to what I call the Renaissance *res publica* of furniture. Bruno Latour poses the following challenge:

> Has the time not come to bring the *res* back to the *res publica*? . . . There has been an aesthetics of matters-of-fact, of objects, of

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For Latour things are areas of public interest whose histories of production and patterns of use help shape the dimensions and directions of our shared spaces of verbal and economic exchange. Furnishings constitute a res publica, a public matter, in several senses. First, the hierarchy that places chairs above stools in the inventories of the period replicates the social order of the Renaissance household and the household-state; one res publica (the furniture system) mirrors and supports the other (the body politic) in its biopolitical and political-theological handling of limbs, spines, and butts. The furniture system is biopolitical insofar as distinct forms of seating afford specific styles and postures of human behavior, with stools belonging more to labor and task work and chairs obtaining more to the dignity of its inhabitant in scenes of public deliberation, audition, and spectatorship. This furniture system is political-theological insofar as the upright architecture of the noble chair bodies forth the second, official body of the king, while the zany stool, both mobile and multiple, scoots around in more low-lying and scatological service economies. Finally, in an age before mass production, furnishings of all sorts solicited care on the part of human users, who became the curators of things as much as their owners; here, res publica names a relationship of codependence and obligation among things, persons, and the locales in

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which they dwell. My examples for this essay include several scenes from Shakespeare, plus an inventory of home furnishings left by Bess of Hardwick to her son in 1601 and a pattern book written by cabinetmaker Thomas Sheraton in 1793, at the dawn of a new ordering of furniture. The scenes of use (and occasional abuse) disclosed by these texts grant us some access to the Renaissance res publica of furniture, a commons constituted by postures of craft, labor, conversation, and enjoyment distributed among chairs and stools, the persons who made, moved, and used them, and the environments in which they sat.

Much new work on objects in medieval and Renaissance studies draws on Latour’s actor-network theater and on the adjoining but more speculative discourses of object-oriented ontology associated with Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Iain Hamilton Grant. Although I draw on Latour in particular, my own travels in the object world are guided by design and design discourse, including product design, graphic design, branding, and built environments, with special attention to the theory of affordances that runs through all of these practices of design. In design research, “affordances” designate those physical aspects of an object, including shape, color, layout, and position, that communicate to the human user how a particular thing, be it coffee cup or touch screen, is meant to be handled. ⁵ Affordances are thus directly related to interfaces: to the communicative points of contact between objects and users. ⁶ The term “affordance” was


⁶ See the classic study by Jef Raskin, The Humane Interface: New Directions for Designing Interactive Systems (Addison-Wesley, 2000), who uses “interface” as short-hand for
first coined by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson to describe the way in which animals perceive elements of their environment in relation to the possibilities for action born by specific features of their world. He begins with the flatness of the ground, which affords running and standing for quadrupeds, and he goes on to consider what he calls “the furniture of the earth,” which encompasses enclosures, convexities, concavities, and apertures, each with their own distinct affordances for animal dwelling. Gibson groups human perception under animal perception, and thus considers humanity within a wider ecological scene. Although affordances in design research today often promote a reductive view of human-machine interaction (the hand on the doorknob, the finger on the button), affordance theory shares deep connections with phenomenology and pragmatism as well as ecology, as demonstrated by the work of environmental ecologist Harry Heft. Many designers today are restoring an environmental perspective to usability studies, mining the history of affordances itself for new paradigms that might check the behaviorist and consumerist tendencies of their profession. “Environmental” carries here both its popu-

“human-machine interface,” “human-computer interface,” and “user interface.” Raskin defines interface as “the way that you accomplish tasks with a product—what you do and how it responds” (2).

lar sense ("The Environment," as if there were such a thing), while also referring to the place of an object (such as a joint stool) or a practice (such as theater) in a set of nested and overlapping systems that might include urban, agrarian, monetary, climactic, craft-based, and informational networks. These practical efforts echo Jane Bennett’s call for a “political ecology of things” that maps human and non-human interaction from the view of the worm and the sardine can. Also relevant here is the idea of the assemblage, associated with the work of Giles Deleuze as reread by Manuel De Landa. In new work on Renaissance melancholy, Andrew Daniel develops the assemblage as a way of tracking the life of resistant composites formed by things, ideas, persons, and environments. Melan-

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9 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).


choly is an assemblage, but so is Starbucks. The comparison tells us something not only about the ideational and thingly dimensions of disease, but also about the symptomatic morphology of marketing. The Cute, the Zany, and the Interesting are assemblages in this sense, since they are composed of objects, affects, and ideas distributed throughout environments that have been both wired and wall-papered by branding. Daniel’s sources include avant-garde art practices (including his own) that body forth assemblage as technique and worldview.

Assemblage is so closely linked to assembly that their meanings often merge, but I will also distinguish the two terms. “Assemblage” involves the physical construction of experiential spaces out of objects, fabrics, and the haptic ingredients of ambience, as well as names, brands, and other myths. “Assembly” concerns the gathering of persons in those spaces for the purposes of deliberation, debate, celebration, or the exchange of bodily fluids. In distinguishing assemblage from assembly, I remain an Arendtian, and hence a humanist: I am concerned, that is, to cultivate the differences as well as the ongoing dependencies between human forms of appearing and the appearing of things. I read Arendt, however, for the productive interfaces between the oikos and the polis that surface throughout her work, and not for the supposed purity of their separation. In this task, I am guided by Patchen Markell’s scanning of the landscapes of The Human Condition for scenes that reintegrate work, labor, and action in formations that can illuminate our contemporary cityscapes, retail zones, and housing arrangements.¹² Markell supplements what he calls the territorial strain in Arendt’s writing—her desire to

sequester engagement with things from human speech—by a “relational” reading of human action in built environments. In *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt writes that self-disclosure accompanies all of our intercourse, not just privileged instances of public speech; whenever we work at something in concert with other people, we also talk, consider, negotiate, evaluate, plan, and decide. The title of Markell’s essay, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*,” indicates his interests in world-building practices such as architecture and design that reconcile the utilitarian and aesthetic dimensions of human making in forms of dwelling and habitation that both require and support living together.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate calls Petruccio a joint-stool in an exchange that illuminates the networked character of Renaissance housing:

KATHERINA: “Moved.” In good time, let him that moved you hither Remove you hence. I knew you at the first You were a movable.
PETRUCCIO: Why, what’s a movable?
KATHERINA: A joint-stool.
PETRUCCIO: Thou hast hit it: come, sit on me.
KATHERINA: Asses are made to bear, and so are you.
PETRUCCIO: Women are made to bear, and so are you.

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13 “Even the most ‘objective intercourse,’ the physical, worldly, in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly to one another”: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 182–83.
“Movable” means fickle, variable (as in the famous phrase, “La donna è mobile”), but Katharina swiftly fixes the adjective as the noun meaning furniture. As the Romance words meubles, mobilia, and muebles indicate, furniture is defined by its status as movable property, and such movables were all the more in motion in a period when households frequently rezoned domestic spaces for purposes of work, eating, or rest. Petruchio swiftly rejoins that he will happily bear her weight (disclosing a covert image of the woman on top); she in turn is quick to figure him as a mere beast of burden, whose language of “bearing” yields further bawdy potential for Petruchio.

The joint-stool [Figure 1] appears as an object in motion, an envoy from a reprogrammable space whose furnishings lend themselves to frequent rezoning. The stool is inanimate in the sense that it does not move of its own accord, yet its design invites not only scooting under the table or filing against the wall, but also, under

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circumstances of rage or shame, hurling across the room.

Figure 1. Ellen Lupton, A Joint Stool for Bottom. Acrylic. 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

The stool is an actant in Latour’s sense, which captures the way in which things “might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, block, render possible, forbid, and so on.”\textsuperscript{17} The height of the joint-stool, the flatness of its upper surface, the stability and lift promised by its foot rail, and the elegance of the joint itself, in which mortise and tenon accomplish their own union without nails or glue, all invite sitting and in some cases standing by promising a measure of both convenience and security. Meanwhile, the stool’s legs are also handles, easy to carry about for multiple uses.

We might say, following Sianne Ngai, that there is something “zany” about this scene and the imagined

movement of objects through it. Ngai links zaniness to the performance of labor: “Pointing to the intensely embodied affects and desires of an agent compelled to move, hustle, and perform in the presence of others,” the zany bears “a special relation to affective or physical effort.” Stools are the workhorses of the household; like nags and jades, they are eminently assworthy, designed to support manual as well as skilled labor, tasks that help meet the biological and emotional needs of the household while sometimes generating their own affective surpluses (as gossip, reverie, or the pleasures of dexterity). Michael Hardt writes that,

Caring labor is certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower.

In this short exchange, Shakespeare allows us to glimpse the emergence of such immaterial networks out of the flow of objects among domestic, animal, and linguistic landscapes. Although objectification rules the speech—each speaker derides the other as thing and animal—the delirious mobility of these mobilia casts them into a metamorphic environment that houses humans alongside other forms of existence, including the inanimate life of objects, the laboring life of domestic animals, and the metaphoric life of language itself, as the busy, buzzing, prolix, punning medium through which these zany transformations are captured, transferred, and communicated.

The zany stool stands in some opposition here with the more stolid chair. Chairs were costly to make and uncomfortable to sit in; there might be one or two

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in a household, reserved for the patriarch, perhaps his wife, and honored guests. The chair may, like the stool, support the rump, but it also stretches upward to outline the higher elements of trunk, head, and arms. A political theology as well as a biopolitics shapes the life of chairs. The throne hosts the king’s second, immortal body within an elaborate exoskeleton of carved wood and cloth of gold, since the ghostly dignitas of father, king, or bishop requires biotechnical support to maintain its fragile charisma. In the film The King’s Speech, recall the scene with the coronation chair in Westminster Abbey: George finally finds his voice when he confronts his lowborn Aussie speech therapist brazenly lounging in the seat of kings. The throne, chair par excellence, is both the privilege of sovereignty and the response to a certain impotence, an inveterate stutter. The Renaissance “chair of ease,” for example, was designed to cushion the buttocks of people suffering from anal fistulas (such a chair notoriously appeared on stage in Middleton’s Game of Chess).

Sometimes stools seem to move all by themselves. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Puck claims responsibility for the minor terror of tipped stools:

The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;  
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,  
And ‘tailor’ cries, and falls into a cough;  
And then the whole quire holds their hips and loffe  
And waxen in their mirth, and néeze, and sweat  
A merrier hour was never wasted there.20

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Here Puck accounts for our sense that things conspire against us in the mishaps of everyday life, while also indicating the role of stools in the verbal life of women engaged in affective labor. We can take Puck’s uncanny causality either as phenomenological, a stab at describing the way that we experience objects as animated (Merleau-Ponty), or as real, a means of asserting that objects actually do operate as causal agents or actants (Latour and Harman). In either scenario, Puck bids us to attend to the life of objects in an ecology composed of mixed goods and multiple systems in a scene that also records acts of human assembly and verbal display. Animating the zone of human accident and error, Puck is an emissary of assemblage who gives a name to interfaces that fail. He is moreover himself a fabrication of the folk intelligence shared by the women he mocks, authors of the premodern world of uncanny causality now revisited by Latour and others in search of richer paradigms for the life of things. Puck’s antics allow us to address chairs and stools as what James Gibson called “value-rich ecological objects,” dense composites of natural materials, artisanal skill, household labor, fantasy and folk tale, and the somatic music of the laugh, the cough, and the sneeze. The stool rests its case in a play concerned with Bottoms of all kinds.

In *Macbeth*, the Renaissance *res publica* of furniture frames the famous banquet scene. Bidding his guests to sit down according their own degrees, Macbeth declares,

> Ourself will mingle with society,  
> And play the humble host.

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Our hostess keeps her state; but, in best time,
We will require her welcome.²²

Her “state” is the chair of state that likely stood on a raised dais at one end of the great hall, upholstered and canopied with fine fabrics in order to set off the status of its occupant within the sovereign softscape. Visualizing the dignity of its occupant, this open pavilion also identified its sitters with their physical vulnerability, their need to be safeguarded from too much noxious air or unseemly mingling. Rather than sitting next to her on his own chair of state, Macbeth decides to “play the humble host” and “mingle with society”; engaging in the hospitable practice of “commoning,” Macbeth taps the fiction of equality between guest and host by sitting at a long table south of the dais, likely furnished with stools or benches, not chairs.²³ Yet before he takes his seat, he must greet the murderers at the side doors, and their bloody message will, of course, prevent him from finding his place at the table after all: “The Ghost of Banquo enters, and sits in Macbeth’s place” (stage directions at III.iv.40).

Simon Forman’s 1611 account witnesses Banquo in a chair behind Macbeth²⁴; putting Banquo on the chair of state next to Lady Macbeth would emphasize

²⁴ “The next night, being at supper with his noble men whom he had bid to a feaste to which Banquo should have com, he began to speake of Noble Banco, and to wish he wer there. And as he thus did, standing up to drincke a Carouse to him, the ghoste of Banco came and sate down in his cheir behind him”: Simon Forman, cited in Kennth Muir, ed., Macbeth, xiv.
the hollowness of the new prince’s claim to kingship. Yet, as Dyson notes, Macbeth’s existential complaint focuses on stools, not chairs:

The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murthers on their crowns,
And push us from our stools. (III.vi.77–81)

So, too, Lady Macbeth mocks her husband’s folly: “When all’s done, / You look but on a stool” (III.iv.66–67). Given Forman’s report and most staging practices, it seems most likely that Banquo’s ghost occupies Macbeth’s chair, and not the seat reserved for Banquo at the feast. If Banquo’s ghost occupies Macbeth’s chair, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth nonetheless associate this haunted seat with the lowly stool. Perhaps the appearance of the ghost in the place of the king has symbolically demoted the royal dignity of the chair to the “commonness” of the stool. In any case, Macbeth’s violations of hospitality have permanently cost him his place at life’s great feast, and a haunted stool, not a haunted chair, may be the most appropriate seat to bear this void. It is interesting that Duncan, the parricide of the play, produces no ghost; it is Banquo’s status as friendly stool-mate that makes his murder the one that haunts Macbeth the most. In Macbeth, the political theology of the king’s two bodies, visualized by the throne as a kind of second skeleton and ideal form of the mortal monarch, makes room for the political theology of the stool, whose interchangeable intervals and butt-bearing affordances establish lower, more

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lateral, and more mobile forms of relationship and communion.

The voluminous inventory of Hardwick House, conducted for Bess of Hardwick in 1601, lists forms of seating in ordered clusters.²⁶

A Chare of clothe of golde fringed with golde and black silk, a Table, a Carpet of darnix, a Joyned stoole, a Close stool, a stoole pan, a Chamberpot. (34)

A Chare of Cloth of golde with golde and silke freeze, a stoole of Cloth of golde and grene and black velvet, a joined stoole inlayed . . . (34–35)

A Chare, a forme [bench], a square quition of needlework, a fier shovel, a payre of tonges, a Close stoole, a stoole pan . . . (36)

A Chare of red cloth fretted with grene & stitch with white & grene silk frenge, a lowe stoole of grene cloth fretted with red & stitch & fringed with white, a plane joyned stoole . . . (37)

Too wood Chares, tenn frames for Chares, three wood stoolees, a Close stoole covered with leather, another close stole . . . (42)

a Chare of grene cloth stitch with yellowe silke, a stoole of grene cloth sticht with yellow silk, too Joyned stooles, a close stoole covered with Lether, a stool pan, a Chamber pot . . . (42)

A Chare of cloth of tissue with golde fringe the frame guilt, a stoole of wrought cloth of golde and silver with yellowe and red silk fringe, a Joyned stoole . . . (44)

A Chare of cloth of gold and cloth of tissue, the back needlework and wrought with golde, a little Chare of cloth of golde, a stoole of cloth of tissue and black wrought velvet, a Joyned stoole . . . (43)

An implicit status landscape as well as a set of relationships organizes these lists. Chairs come first, then forms or benches, then upholstered stools, then joint stools, and finally close stools and their accoutrements (stool pans and chamber pots). This ordering draws on the deep relationship between chairs and buttocks as the list descends from chair to stool to close stool. These lists record orders of status across the lived and social bodies most certainly, but also relations of conservation and stewardship. In an era when furniture was made by hand and made to last, chairs and stools not only supported acts of labor and conviviality, but also solicited care. Bess of Hardwick instructed her son to keep her collection intact and in good health:

the sayed plate Beddinge hanginges and other furniture so bequeathed or appoynted . . . shall have speciall care and regard to preserve the same from all manner of wett mothe and other hurte or spoyle thereofe . . .

These objects live in a domestic ecology of moisture, mold, and moths, of hurt and spoil: they inhabit Puck’s world, a world of accident and happenstance at the

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27 Of Household Stuff, 10.
tempestuous fronts between clashing microclimates. The inheritor of Bess’s collection is not their owner so much as their curator: in Roman law, the curator is the guardian of the estate and physical well being of his charge. Curation, unlike ownership, attributes something like rights to objects: the right to be cleaned and repaired, the right not to be thrown away. There is a burdensome side here as well: like God at Sinai with those weighty tablets of stone, Old Bess is entrusting her son with pages and pages of furniture, but she is also saddling him with it. In any case, curatorial exertions are more cute than zany, insofar as they concern “the tenderness. . . . we harbor. . . . towards . . . commodities.”

It is not the wood so much as the fabric that requires conservation (and whose fringes and curves make furniture potentially cute in Ngai’s sense). Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have dubbed Renaissance England “a cloth culture,” and indeed much wealth and design inventiveness as well as skilled labor went into tapestries, bed hangings, and upholstered furniture. Bess’s most valuable holdings were in fabric, not wood, and her inventory is stuffed with soft goods, from “a quition [cushion] of tapestry” and “tapestry Coverletts” to major cycles on themes like the planets, hunting, and the story of Abraham; her collection is especially famous for its holdings in appliqué and embroidery, including portraits of famous women pieced together from bits of ecclesiastical vestments. Upholstery participated in the media architecture of the Renaissance not only through the

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images displayed on the woven and painted finishings of furniture, but also through the forms of framing, veiling, padding, enclosure, and partition that fabric afforded. I call the world shaped by moveable fabrics and furnishings the Renaissance softscape, a term borrowed from landscape architecture, where the hardscape encompasses permanent features such as paving, retaining walls, landforms, and gazebos, while the softscape gathers up the many plantings that arrange color, texture, smells, and shade according to diurnal, seasonal and life cycle habits of growth and decay.\footnote{On the Renaissance softscape, see my essay, “Soft Res Publica: On the Assembly and Disassembly of Courtly Space,” Republics of Letters 2.2 (June 2011): http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/96.} A chair assembles hard and soft elements (frame and cushion) within its double body, but the chair’s mobile architecture also contributes more broadly to the softscape of the Renaissance rooms that might house it, insofar as the chair is designed for repositioning, transport, storage, and care in spaces shared by holiday and quotidian scripts.

The upholsterer, whose office emerges in the seventeenth century, is the artisan who made cushions for those chairs but also draped walls, bedsteads, and tables with “golde lace,” “sarcenet Curtins,” carpets of “tawnie cloth garded with velvet,” “white fustian,” and all the other woven goods that lent their ornamental, reflective, sound-absorbing, and light-blocking affordances to Renaissance chambers.\footnote{Cloth words from Of Household Stuff, 24. On the profession of the upholsterer (from “upholder”) as it emerged in the seventeenth century out of the earlier offices of fourriers and ushers, see Peter Thornton, “The Upholsterer’s Task,” in Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France, and Holland (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 97–129. See also Joan DeJean, The Age of Comfort (New York:}
1793 manual, *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer’s Drawing-Book*, which educates the artisans of the softscape in the science of perspective drawing, indicates the deep alliance between furniture makers and upholsterers as well as their desire to gain credibility from the more established design profession of architecture [Figure 2].

Sheraton draws a visual analogy between the structure of the chair and the framing of the house in order to merge the softer work of the upholsterer and the cabinetmaker with the harder arts of formal building. Sheraton’s assertion of professionalization reflects the increasing immobility of furniture in a world in which floor plans and room functions had become firmly fixed. At the same time, by releasing upholsterers and cabinetmakers into forms of space organized by perspective drawing and thus attached to the technology of the image and the society of spectacle, Sheraton’s book anticipates the rise of the interior decorator and later the interior designer. These masters and mistresses of the modern softscape were the first fabricators of the experience economy, whose tools in our new century include not only mass-produced wall coverings, Pantone colors, and a maze of carpeting options, but also computer-generated building forms, sound gardens, smart walls, and ambient projections.

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Figure 2. from Thomas Sheraton, *The CabinetMaker and Upholsterer’s Drawing-Book, in Three Parts*, 1793. Figure 36: “How to Represent a Chair Having its Front Perpendicular to the Picture.”

“Liquid architecture,” incorporating flexible floor plans and multiple traffic patterns into spaces whose functions fluctuate with the market, is the new softscape.\(^\text{35}\)

\(^{35}\) Klingman, *Brandscapes*, 130.
In each of these scenes of assembly, chairs and stools in various states of dress constitute a *res publica* of furniture. Latour reminds us that Heidegger used the word “gathering” to “account for the ‘thingness of the thing,’” and he goes on to write that “A gathering, that is, a thing, an issue, inside a Thing, an arena, can be very sturdy, too, on the condition that the number of its participants, its ingredients, nonhumans as well as humans, not be limited in advance.”\(^{36}\) Chairs and stools are “public things,” furnishings moved about in order to zone and rezone the environments of entertainment; themselves gatherings of distinct materials and skills as well as whole zoologies and anthropologies, they invite acts of human gathering through the affordances of their shapes and their organizational contributions to the shifting softscape of work, conversation, and conviviality. (We all know the difference between chairs in a circle and chairs in rows.) If chairs are composites of materials and systems—assemblages in a physical sense—they are also tools that support assembly in the sense of public gathering and convening, whether for a state dinner, a gossip fest, or a flyte of insults.

Establishing the importance of affective labor for the Italian autonomists, Michael Hardt writes that

Affective labor is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities. The productive circuit of affect and value has thus seemed in many respects as an autonomous circuit for the constitutions of subjectivity, alternative to the processes of capitalist valorization.

Whereas affective labor dominated the productive practices of pre- and early modern cottage industries, it dwindled into mere women’s work during the great age

\(^{36}\) Latour, “Matters of Fact, Matters of Concern,” 246.
of manufacturing. In our moment, Hardt notes, the experience and knowledge economies have “incorporated and exalted” service work, making affective labor into “one of the highest value-producing forms of labor” in today’s software sweatshops and retail theaters. Yet affective labor, through D.I.Y., localvore, and slow food movements as well as through daily exchanges of social capital at the verges of consumerism, has the capacity to resist total cooption by creating forms of “biopower from below” that cable-stitch corporeal expenditures and somatic satisfactions into new ideational and social networks, as Jack Bratich has argued forcefully.

The zany Renaissance stool is a cipher of the creative capacities of affective labor, its compact architecture plugged into artisanal practice, household work, commensal pleasure, and the informal arts of conversation and performance that accompany all of these. Stool-anchored labor is seated but not secured, poised for changes in task, posture, and spatial rearrangement as the occasion calls for; as such, stools afford though by no means insure styles of sociability that are themselves responsive, fluid, and egalitarian. In the heyday of manufacture, the assembly line replaced sitting work with standing labor, while the mass-produced chairs pumped out by modern industry and design incorporated the proletarian pragmatism of stools into their stacked, portable, factory-built frames. Today, sitting—not on stools but on desk chairs, couches and the tyrannous buckets and benches of the minivan—has become an emblem of the forms of physical and ethical inertia built into a world in which

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38 On biopower from below and its link to gendered labor, see Hardt, “Affective Labor,” 98–100. On D.I.Y., affective labor, and the Italian autonomists (including Hardt), see Bratich, “The Digital Touch.”
both work and play seem designed to keep us on our asses. The standing desk and WiiGolf promise to restore the mobility once afforded by *mobilia*, but without questioning the conditions of our new situation. Rearranging your furniture into knitting circles, rezoning the kitchen table for the business of crafting, or claiming the tools of marketing and design for community yard sales or underground music may lead to some of that short-circuiting of capital that Hardt and Bratich associate with the gift-giving virtues of affective labor, even if the surplus such efforts deliver is more sugar rush than velvet revolution. Still, if some fresh wrinkles can be furrowed into the botoxed brandscape by acts of design, ethical and economic channels just might open up for several kinds of actors, whether it’s craftivist mothers, do-their-share dads, free range children, AIDS quilters, urban gardeners, food pornographers, three-legged rescue dogs, tofu turkeys, analogue toasters, object-oriented cookery,\(^\text{39}\) Steam Punk office furniture,\(^\text{40}\) Helvetica hoodies,\(^\text{41}\) or pillows shaped like Zoloft.\(^\text{42}\) When you rezone the experience economy, don’t forget to make room for a few stools. The stool below [Figure 3], hewn from hazel branches,
is just right for a prosumer Goldilocks seeking a new perch in the forest of affordances.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Figure 3.} “Fall/winter stool,” oak slab and hazel branches, designed by Valentin Loellmann for Galerie Gosserez. The construction is similar to the mortise-and-tenon joints used in the making of Renaissance joint stools. Courtesy of the artist.