

*The below is an excerpt from **The Detroit Project**, a novel-in-progress by Zoë Mendelson.*

Nell is a lecturer in an unnamed London art school. Her students on the Public Art programme were recently set a project to design a future for Detroit. Nell's interests in public space mask the disarray of her private space, as her home tips ever closer to a hoard. In this excerpt we meet Nell taking a student group to a branch of IKEA.

It was a Tuesday and she was event teaching. More and more of Nell's classes were taking place outside faculty, in association with museums and cultural institutions. It was a kind of a Diaspora which allowed collaboration between bodies - on the surface - but was, Nell felt, from the inside, an overwrought administrative masturbatory exercise. With museums being open study spaces anyway, this display of 'openness' to academic dialogue was emphatic in an almost patronising sense. Nell was working to add other kinds of idiosyncratic, closed spaces of study to the consortium. She had, after much prodding and budgetary shoe-horning, brokered an odd partnership between her first year students, the National Archives and IKEA. Ten students were now standing in a family-style kitchen mock-up waiting for her introduction to the unit to be delivered in conjunction with Philip from the National Archives. Nell was shouting into her mobile phone over repeated announcements from Customer Services.

'No, not that one. You're where? The Marketplace. Oh shit. We're in a kitchen. A KITCHEN. It's greyish. Granite. It's called Lidingö. No, it's okay. I've got an espresso. You'll see us. Ten out of ten of them have hoods. None of us are pregnant. We stand out.'

They waited a little longer, fingering surfaces and opening drawers, letting them glide back into place along silent castors. One student wandered off for cheap gravadlax. Time was ebbing away, unmarked by a superficial wall clock reflected back at the group in tempered glass cabinet doors. Nell was going to have to carry this one.

'Why are we here?' She asked the remaining nine students. 'Museology. We are here because it's a museum. Yes, you've probably been here before when it was a shop. It is sometimes a shop, sometimes called a *shop*. Today we are going to be in the IKEA *Museum*. In responding to it as an archive or collection we may or may not be using different mechanisms of

recognition or interpretation. Here, in this kitchen, for example, I can see that people-of-today use their kitchens as social space. Cooking is no longer an activity marginalised or made invisible. I can see that objects are sold by cultural or intellectual association. The fake book covers are in Swedish but I can pick out that they are travel guides and philosophy. Would these be read in the kitchen or are they designed to tell us something about ownership? Why are they archived here? Why are they all white? Why are there no recipe books?’

Nell slipped off her shoe and placed her foot back onto it, leaning into the other foot for support. Her phone rang.

‘You can’t see us? How come? We are pretty visible. Oh God, well... I’m five foot six with straightish brown hair - some grey in it -shoulder-length and I’m wearing a navy blue shift dress. A fabric brooch. Too much detail? Maybe there’s another Lidingö kitchen. Okay, call me back when you’ve asked someone.’

She turned back to the group, most of whom were leaning into their palms on the work surfaces. They had gathered a thirty-something couple in matching Juicy Couture tracksuits who were not yet sure what they’d joined in on but thought it may help them be more decisive.

‘What I’m asking you to consider is whether, in transforming the commercial into the museological - as these display mechanisms could be said to encourage - anything changes. Does each object acquire status or history? Does our behaviour change? For example, if I tell you that this is actually a museum, what happens to the tactility of the store? Would you still *touch* anything? I’m already making choices about what kinds of behaviour each object allows of me. I will open this cabinet but I won’t take out a glass. I will test the seating but I won’t eat at the table. I will sit on a sofa but am very unlikely to lie on a bed. I will run my hand along the shower curtain but I won’t step into the shower. There’s a vulnerability in being ‘at home’ in public. This overt, sit-com domesticity with its fourth wall removed - even its second or third in some instances - generates a kind of theatricised toolkit of movements. Look at how that couple are stepping *around* the rug over there. This is not home, it is elsewhere.’

‘Excuse me, do you deliver to E9?’

Nell ignored the question. She went on,

'In 2007, Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner made a video work, *Stealing Beauty*. He and his family filmed themselves performing routine family activities and conversations in various branches of IKEA as customers shopped and browsed around them. They had showers, climbed into bed together and argued. Look it up. Some of it's on youtube. Not now! You can do it later. I love the idea of this piece as a kind of performative clandestine cell - allowing domestic life to seem risky or underworld. Have a think about what you could do here that would subtly alter the store. The museum. What kinds of... oh shit, hang on. Excuse me.'

Nell left her shoes in Kitchens and took the call behind a Springkorn shower curtain. Her head was hardly visible above a flamingo's crudely printed body.

You did a poo, WHERE? A horrified father was dragging his daughter away from Bathrooms. She was pulling her knickers up on the run.

Philip was, by now, sounding increasingly exasperated. Air-conditioned places should not be making him sweat this much. He had put a lot of work into this project behind the scenes and was now absent without leave. For a man for whom organisation was a source of comfort, and even displaced machismo, this absenteeism was unsettling. His bag was unnecessarily heavy. Full of print-outs and risk assessment forms. Outward-facing projects were like this, he remembered. He had spent several uneventful years at his desk in the Archives but now academia had started calling. He breathed in the smell of clean to alleviate this awkward displacement and confusion. Philip and Nell had been leaning on the same granite, fluffing the same leafy seat cushions and craving the same empty chrome dustbins. Across town, in Kilburn, he was standing behind a Springkorn shower curtain, his tidy hair just visible above the flamingo's crudely printed body. They both described what they could see. They had the same viewpoint.

As they talked there was an announcement in the background. There was an offer on sofa covers for the Karlstad. Philip heard it in the store, punctuating Aretha Franklin mid-vowel, but Nell only caught it through her phone. Ah, said Nell, slowly, but can you see the pasty bloke in the daft jumper looking in the wavy mirror? No? I think we're in different IKEAs. I'm in Edmonton.

Philip retreated to the restaurant where he indulged his truancy with *New Swedish Tapas*. Seafood in various guises rested at intervals on a china rectangle. The archivist was knowingly attracted to the little helpings of smoked salmon and salmon mousse, staged like taxonomical

versions of prior fish-ness on his plate. By the overflowing mustard pump, which he wiped down with a tissue, Philip encountered a father reprimanding his daughter for using an unplumbed toilet in a bathroom display. Through their disappointment and frustration, both Nell and Philip could see the irony in their misfired meeting. In Edmonton Nell's student group had begun creating subtle alterations of the displays. A pile of recipe books was placed precariously on a cistern. Four very low foot stools were moved around a breakfast bar. The Sniglar baby changing table was placed in a cold, grey office and piled high with soft, under-stuffed guinea pigs. A kitchen table was made up with linen as though it was a bed. Six-year old twins playing a clapping game were each handed empty book covers imaging wintry Swedish landscapes. One student took apart office furniture with an allen key.

Before lunch they re-grouped and Nell filled them in on Philip's north London whereabouts, contextualising it as pre-ordained and just another duplication of the store's content. She promised to email them his handouts. 'In the film *Fight Club*, Edward Norton's unnamed protagonist walks through a virtual catalogue for a store which he *calls* IKEA but is actually titled FÜRNI for the film. It replicates the IKEA brand with graphic exactitude but the products, names and descriptions are fictions. A Norwegian fan of the cult film, with the online name of Transgressor, has published translations of the product names, testing both their meanings and authentic Swedish-ness. Thus we are sold an Avstikker or *Detour* CD rack and an Utdrag - *Excerpt* - chest of drawers, as if in reference to their own placement in pastiche. Objects are personified such as the Skogvokter or *Forest Ranger* table lamp and a slip cover named for Erika Pekkari, who is, herself, a Swedish furniture designer who designed for IKEA. Norton's line, 'Uh, yes... I'd like to order the Erika Pekkari dust ruffles' is now used in actuality as marketing for the designer on her website. What goes around, comes around.'

Nell needed a coffee. Her own deadlines were looming and the teaching day hadn't exactly gone to plan. She arranged to leave her students to their own devices - possibly literally, ensconced as they now were in their phones - and slipped away thinking of her ongoing book project and the distraction of her current employment. Over *New Swedish Tapas*, which Nell moulded speedily into one flesh-fishy pink mountain, she wrote her chapter headings in capital letters into a little checked Moleskin book. This wasn't really doing anything but reminded her gently of the need to remain focussed and organised. After an hour she left. On the way out she

was sure she saw someone who fitted Philip's exact description, sitting on a child bed, flicking through FÜRNI. He looked up and caught her eye, held her gaze briefly and then began, hurriedly, to pack his bag.