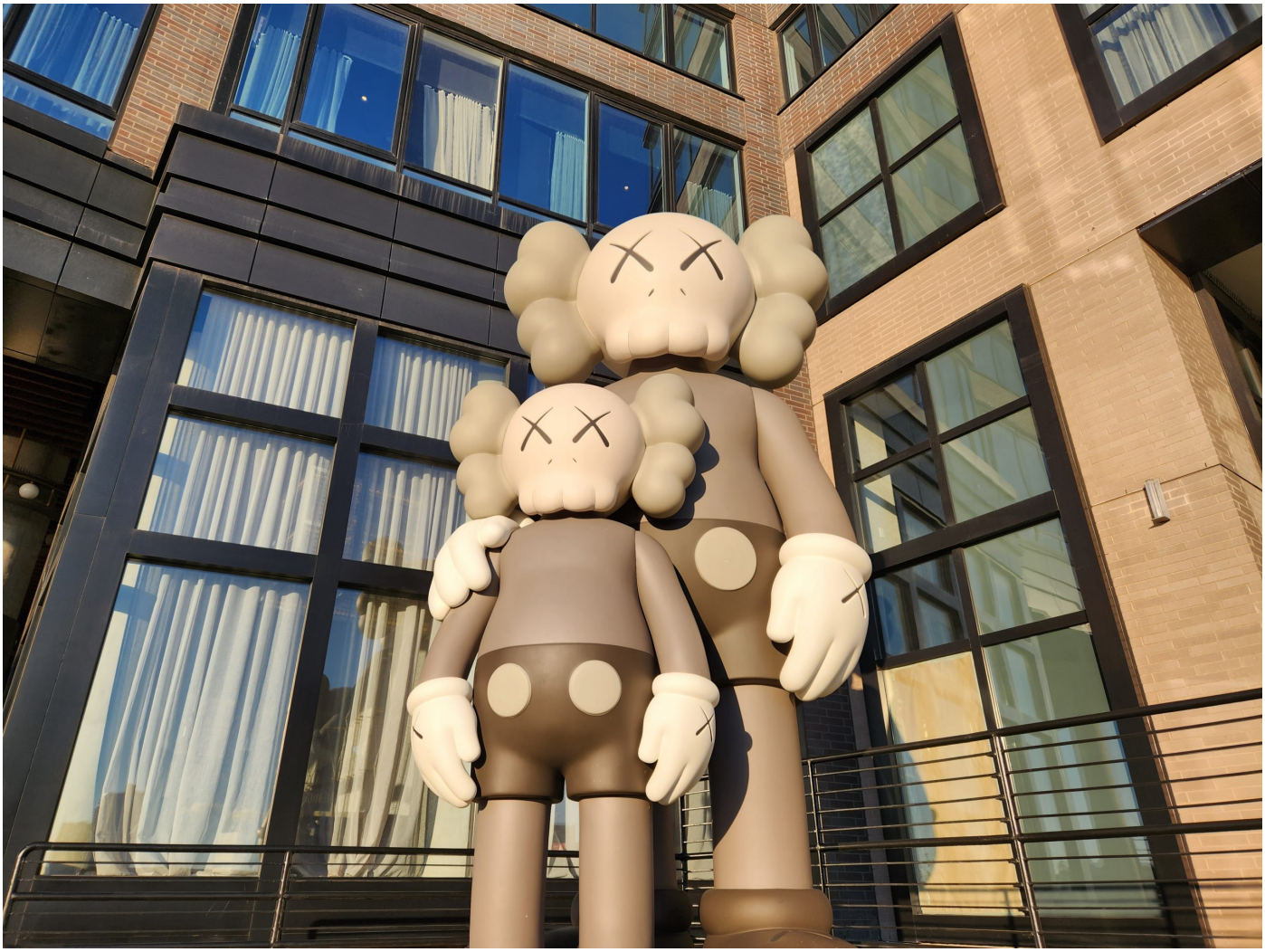
Why Is Everything So Ugly?

The mid in fake midcentury modern



New ugliness around the corner from the n+1 office. Photograph by Mark Krotov.

We live in undeniably ugly times. Architecture, industrial design, cinematography, probiotic soda branding—many of the defining features of the visual field aren't sending their best. Despite more advanced manufacturing and design technologies than have existed in human history, our built environment tends overwhelmingly toward the insubstantial, the flat, and the gray, punctuated here and there by the occasional childish squiggle. This drab sublime unites flat-pack furniture and home electronics, municipal infrastructure and commercial graphic design: an ocean of stuff so homogenous and underthought that the world it has inundated can feel like a

digital rendering—of a slightly duller, worse world.

If the Situationists drifted through Paris looking to get defamiliarized, today a scholar of the new ugliness can conduct their research in any contemporary American city—or upzoned American Main Street, or exurban American parking lot, or, if they're really desperate, on the empty avenues of Meta's Horizon Worlds. Our own walk begins across the street from our apartment, where, following the recent demolition of a perfectly serviceable hundred-year-old building, a monument to ugliness has recently besieged the block. Our new neighbor is a classic 5-over-1: retail on the ground floor, topped with several stories of apartments one wouldn't want to be able to afford. The words THE JOSH have been appended to the canopy above the main entrance in a passionless font.

We spent the summer certain that the caution tape–yellow panels on The Josh's south side were insulation, to be eventually supplanted by an actual facade. Alas, in its finished form The Josh really is yellow, and also burgundy, gray, and brown. Each of these colors corresponds to a different material—plastic, concrete, rolled-on brick, an obscure wood-like substance—and the overall effect is of an overactive spreadsheet. Trims, surfaces, and patterns compete for attention with shifty black windows, but there's nothing bedazzling or flamboyant about all this chaos. Somehow the building's plane feels flatter than it is, despite the profusion of arbitrary outcroppings and angular balconies. The lineage isn't Bauhaus so much as a sketch of the Bauhaus that's been xeroxed half a dozen times.

The Josh is aging rapidly for a 5-month-old. There are gaps between the panels, which have a taped-on look to them, and cracks in the concrete. Rust has bloomed on surfaces one would typically imagine to be rustproof. Every time it rains, The Josh gets conspicuously . . . wet. Attempts have been made to classify structures like this one and the ethos behind their appearance: SimCityist, McCentury Modern, fast-casual architecture. We prefer cardboard modernism, in part because The Josh looks like it might

turn to pulp at the first sign of a hundred-year flood.

Writing a century ago, H. L. Mencken bemoaned America's "libido for the ugly." There exists, he wrote, a "love of ugliness for its own sake, the lust to make the world intolerable. Its habitat is the United States." However mystical and psychosexual his era's intolerability might have felt in its origins, by the 1940s the explanations were more prosaic. With the wartime rationing of steel and sudden dearth of skilled labor, concrete structural systems quickly gained appeal—as did buildings that could be made piecemeal in a factory, put on a trailer, and nailed together anywhere in the country. And as the postwar baby boom took hold, such buildings were soon in high demand, fulfilling modernism's wildest dreams of standardization with little of the glamour. A few Levittowns later, the promise of salvation-by-mass-production would come to seem elusive: new manufacturing techniques were transforming both the buildings and the builders building them. In *Prisoners of the American Dream*, Mike Davis describes how, in the 1970s, "the adoption of new building technologies involving extensive use of prefabricated structures, like precast concrete, eroded the boundaries of traditional skills and introduced a larger semi-skilled component into the labor force." If it's cheaper to assemble concrete panels than to hire bricklayers, cityscapes will eventually contain fewer bricks.

A construction industry with newly decadent profit margins was ready to spring into action in the 1990s, when—after a violent, decades-long process of urban renewal and white flight—real estate developers, brokers, and local politicians started luring predominantly white homeowners and renters back to the cities they'd abandoned. By the 2000s, infill housing began to crop up in American cities that had for decades been defined by their plentiful surface parking. These residential developments were ugly, but not yet inescapable. Like the fresh-faced presidential candidate with whom it's hard not to associate them (did every wood-and-concrete complex feature a knockoff Shepard Fairey mural, or have we been blinded by the mists of memory?), the buildings spoke to an upwardly mobile, progressive, even

post-racial demographic that didn't share its parents' all-consuming fear of city life. Then came the ultimate stop-work order: the 2008 financial crisis.

> *The ruling class seized cities and chose to turn them into . . . this? To our right is a place that sells wiggly candles.*
>
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The urban building boom that picked up in the wake of the Great Recession wasn't a boom at all, at least not by previous booming standards: in the early 2010s, multifamily housing construction was at its lowest in decades. But low interest rates worked in developers' favor, and what had begun as an archipelago of scattered development had coalesced, by the end of the Obama years, into a visual monoculture. At the global scale, supply chains narrowed the range of building materials to a generic minimum (hence The Josh's pileup of imitation teak accents and synthetic stucco antiflourishes). At the local level, increasingly stringent design standards imposed by ever-more-cumbersome community approval processes compelled developers to copy designs that had already been rubber-stamped elsewhere (hence that same fake teak and stucco in identical boxy buildings across the country). The environment this concatenation of forces has produced is at once totalizing and meek—an architecture embarrassed by its barely architected-ness, a building style that cuts corners and then covers them with rainscreen cladding. For all the air these buildings have sucked up in the overstated conflict between YIMBYs (who recognize that new housing is ultimately better than no housing) and NIMBYs (who don't), the unmistakable fact of cardboard modernism is that its buildings are less ambitious, less humane, and uglier than anyone deserves.

They're also really gray. The Josh's steel railings are gray, and its plastic

window sashes are a slightly clashing shade of gray. Inside, the floors are made of gray TimberCore, and the walls are painted an abject post-beige that interior designers call greige but is in fact just gray. Gray suffuses life beyond architecture: television, corporate logos, product packaging, clothes for babies, direct-to-consumer toothbrushes. What incentives—material, libidinal, or otherwise—could possibly account for all this gray? In 2020, a study by London's Science Museum Group's Digital Lab used image processing to analyze photographs of consumer objects manufactured between 1800 and the present. They found that things have become less colorful over time, converging on a spectrum between steel and charcoal, as though consumers want their gadgets to resemble the raw materials of the industries that produce them. If *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* once offered a warning about conformity, he is now an inspiration, although the outfit has gotten an upgrade. Today he is *The Man in the Gray Bonobos*, or *The Man in the Gray Buck Mason Crew Neck*, or *The Man in the Gray Mack Weldon Sweatpants*—all delivered via gray Amazon van. The imagined color of life under communism, gray has revealed itself to be the actual hue of globalized capital. "The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow," wrote Hardt and Negri. What color does a blended rainbow produce? Greige, evidently.

A lot of ugliness accretes privately, in the form of household goods, which can make it hard to see—except on the first of the month. Today's perma-class of renters moves more frequently than ever before (inevitably to smaller apartments), and on moving day the sidewalks are transformed into a rich bazaar of objects significant for ugliness studies. We stroll past discarded pottery from wild sip 'n' spin nights; heaps of shrunken fast fashion from Shein; dead Strategist-approved houseplants; broken Wirecutter-approved humidifiers; an ergonomic gaming chair; endless Ikea BILLYs, MALMs, LACKs, SKUBBs, BARENs, SLOGGs, JUNQQs, and FGHSKISs. Perhaps this shelf is salvageable—? No, just another mass of peeling veneer and squishy particleboard. On one stoop sits a package from

a direct-to-consumer eyewear company, and we briefly fantasize about a pair of glasses that would illuminate, *They Live*–style, the precise number of children involved in manufacturing each of these trashed items, or maybe the acreage of Eastern European old-growth trees.

It occurs to us, strolling past a pair of broken BuzzFeed Shopping–approved AirPods, that the new ugliness has beset us from both above and below. Many of the aesthetic qualities pioneered by low-interest-rate-era construction—genericism, non-ornamentation, shoddy reproducibility—have trickled down into other realms, even as other principles, unleashed concurrently by Apple's slick industrial-design hegemon, have trickled up. In the middle, all that is solid melts into sameness, such that smart home devices resemble the buildings they surveil, which in turn look like the computers on which they were algorithmically engineered, which resemble the desks on which they sit, which, like the sofas at the coworking space around the corner, put the *mid* in *fake midcentury modern*. And all of it is bound by the commandment of planned obsolescence, which decays buildings even as it turns phones into bricks.

Beyond the sidewalk, the street—which is mostly for cars, key technology of the 20th-century assault on the city. Barthes wrote that the 1955 Citroën DS marked a welcome shift in the appearance in cars toward the "homely," meaning that they'd begun to carry the comfortable livability of kitchens and household equipment. Today's automobiles, far from being "the supreme creation of an era," are homely in the other sense of the word. A contemporary mythologist could sort them into either hamsters or monoliths. Hamster cars (the Honda Fit, the Toyota Prius) are undoubtedly ugly, but in a virtuous way. The monolith cars (the Cadillac Escalade, the Infiniti QX80) possess a militaristic cast, as if to get to Costco one must first stop off at the local black site.[1] No brand has embraced the ethos more than Tesla, with its tanklike Cybertruck. Even Musk's more domesticated offerings feel like they're in the surveillance business: sitting inside a Tesla is not unlike sitting inside a smartphone, while also staring at a giant smartphone.

Shittiness is a big tent—and the tent is falling apart.

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Dodging huge grilles we walk on, pulled by ugliness toward a gentrified retail strip. Here the violence of the new ugliness comes more fully into focus. The ruling class seized cities and chose to turn them into… this? To our right is a place that sells wiggly candles. Past that is a boutique liquor store whose chalkboard sign proclaims, in cheerleader handwriting, that the time is Wine O'Clock, and past that is a Bank of America. Across the street, a row of fast-casual chains, whose names and visual identities insist on modesty and anonymity: Just Salad, Just Food For Dogs, Blank Street Coffee. (This raft of normcore brands finds its opposite in the ghost kitchens down the block, which all for some reason are called things like Fuck Your Little Bitch Burrito.) Up ahead is an axe throwing "experience," and another Bank of America.

Who asked for all of this? Numerous critics—self-hating and otherwise—have argued that the mallification of the American city is the fault of the same millennials for whom all the new construction was built, who couldn't quite bear to abandon the creature comforts of home even as they reurbanized. The story goes that millennials lived, laughed, and loved their way into an unprecedentedly insipid environment, turning once-gritty cities into Instagram-friendly dispensaries of baroque ice cream cones that call back, madeleine-style, to the enfolding warmth of their suburban childhoods. But the contemporary built environment is not the millennials' legacy; it is their inheritance. They didn't ask for cardboard modernism—they simply capitulate to its infantilizing aesthetic paradigm because there is no alternative. Or if there is an alternative, it's between an $8 ice cream cone or an $11 ice cream cone (or a $49 ticket to the Museum of Ice Cream).

Our ugliness tour is leading us toward the $11 ice cream cone zone. On the

waterfront, the spatial logic of The Josh persists, only at four times the cost per square foot. There is less random yellow, the concrete is glossier, and the view through the precarious glass is a little more ennobling. Too bad about the build quality. One paradox of the new ugliness is that it flattens the distinction between the rich, the very rich, the superrich, and the merely fortunate by ripping them all off in turn. These days housing at the most elite strata sucks nearly as much as the simply bourgeois kind. According to a parade of entertaining *New York Times* stories, residents of the toothpick-like towers on Manhattan's Billionaires' Row complain of elevator breakdowns, "catastrophic" flooding from poor plumbing, and "metal partitions [that] groan as buildings sway" in the wind. Shittiness is a big tent—and the tent is falling apart.

Our dérive has deposited us near a subway stop. We swipe in with a trusty MetroCard, soon to be replaced by the privately owned data-tracking behemoth OMNY, whose neon-on-black logo recalls the chilly visual identity of another threat to transit, Uber.[2] But at least as far as branding goes, OMNY is no uglier than other offenders. Our train car is covered in ads, all curiously alike despite marketing a staggering variety of superfluous stuff. How did workplace management systems, body-positive nutritional supplements, bean-forward meal kits, woman-owned sex toys, and woman-owned day-trading services all converge on the same three fonts? Everywhere we look there are little pool noodle–shaped squiggles, and where the squiggles end, there is muted flash photography that makes even otherworldly models look matter-of-fact. With the exception of the food delivery apps, which flaunt their violent takeover of the city in a meaningless word salad designed for shouting about salad—WHEN YOU'RE SO HANGRY, YOU'D TRASH TALK ANY SLOW WALKER BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR BEC, goes one GrubHub ad—the advertising all seems sheepish about being caught in the act of selling something.

But no single ad is as emblematically ugly as the digital screens that have

appeared across the city's train cars since 2017. Public transit has pivoted to video, and the function of its new giant iPads mystifies: their purpose is neither civic nor fully commercial. Instead, they're given over to a bewildering set of images for the TikTokified city, the worst of which belong to a marketing campaign called "Moments in Food." We watch, a little nauseated, as the Moments loop by: video tutorials for Homemade Pesto Hack, Homemade Chipotle Chicken Cutlet Hack, Homemade Three-Ingredient Oven-Free Blondie Hack. Why are there no measurements? Would this even seem edible, in the distinctly non-subwaylike atmosphere of an actual kitchen? Like The Josh's synthetic not-quite-surfaces, it all seems gesturally foodlike, a step removed from the real thing. Above us, pesto glistens.

Speaking of moments in food, it's lunchtime. Exiting the train, we pass a food hall, where, again, the theoretical possibility of endless variety manifests as lackluster sameness. Dozens of restaurants' satellite stalls all feature the same signage, the same subway tile backdrop, the same impression of having been shrunk to diorama size and turned into IP. We turn instead to the outdoor dining sheds. After sprouting with uncharacteristic speed in the first chaotic spring of the pandemic, the sheds have performed a sort of guerilla Haussmannization of the city—in a good way, clawing back public space from cars. The ugliness they've introduced to the built environment diverges, happily, from the usual kind. Unruly and old-school, the sheds have pissed off deranged community boards and their mouthpieces in the media. "The shanty outside Dumpling Man on St. Marks is unspeakably hideous," declared a recent *New York* article, "its colorless wood fragments hammered together so arbitrarily that you would rather eat in a pile of Lincoln Logs." Yeah—just the way we like it!

Around the corner is a movie theater, one of those places where they bring snacks or cocktails right to your seat. Filmmaking today is supposed to be more powerful than it's ever been, capable of representing everything everywhere all at once. As the world offscreen recedes into sameness,

movies can and should look great—but onscreen there is more ugly sameness. The thing we wander into is at first indistinguishable from any other blockbuster of the late green-screen era: only after Ryan Reynolds cocks his signature "terror gun" do we recognize this as *Army Soldier II*, a digitally shot Netflix-financed production based on a TV show based on a comic book. Can a movie be a remake of itself? This is the depleted vibe *Army Soldier II* and its ilk are giving off. The easy recourse to postproduction—"we'll fix it in post"—has resulted in a mise-en-scène so underlit as to be literally invisible. Despite its $275 million budget, the movie looks like it was filmed underwater in a polluted lake. The action scenes are nearly monochromatic, the color palette ranging from Tentative Black to what looks like Apple's proprietary Space Gray. Lighting isn't a lost art, but subsumed in all that murk, we're having trouble finding it.

> *Our neighbor to the right tells us she was hit by a Tesla while e-biking to Roosevelt Island to deliver a single unicorn latte.*
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Two and a half hours in, *Army Soldier II* suddenly becomes a comedy, with Reynolds vamping his way through long, flat takes designed to accommodate his "riffs." Now everything is *over*lit, as if the gaffers were only available for the second half of the shoot.

Such bad lighting—and such large portions! We exit the movie theater to a bright realization: our films are exactly as overlit as our reality. As our environment has become blander, it has also become more legible—too legible. That's a shame, because many products of the new ugliness could benefit from a little chiaroscuroed ambiguity: if the world has to fill itself up with smart teapots, app-operated vacuum cleaners, and creepily huge

menswear, we'd prefer it all to be shrouded in darkness. For thousands of years, this was the principle of illumination that triumphed over all others. Louis XIV's Versailles and Louis the Tavern Owner's tavern had this in common: the recognition that some details are worth keeping hidden. But now blinding illumination is the default condition of every apartment, office, pharmacy, laundromat, print shop, sandwich shop, train station, airport, grocery store, UPS Store, tattoo parlor, bank, and this vape shop we've just walked into.

Surveying a suite of candy-colored bongs, we reflect on the primacy of LEDs. (One of the bongs is bedecked with LEDs.) The shift to cold lighting in recent years was borne of urgent environmental necessity, and we accept that climate change requires concessions. We're prepared to make those: we will eat crickets and endorse, if necessary, the blockage of the waterfront park around the corner by a giant seawall. We will even help build the seawall! Change is inevitable. But LEDs can appear in many colors, as demonstrated by our new light-up bong. So why this atomic, lobotomizing white?

Outdoors, the situation is depressingly similar. After New York replaced the sodium-vapor lights in the city's 250,000 streetlamps with shiny new LEDs in 2017, the experience of walking through the city at night transformed, almost… overnight. Forgiving, romantic, shadowy orange gave way to cold, all-seeing bluish white. Again environmental concerns necessitate this scale of change, and again we wonder why, when it comes to its light bulbs, New York has chosen to back the blue. Inertia, disinterest, thoughtlessness, yes, but also the promise of increased police vigilance. Still, what is most striking about New York's ominous glow-up is the sense that the city has been estranged from itself: the hyperprecise shadows of every leaf and every branch set against every brick wall deliver a Hollywood unreality. New York after hours now looks less like it did in Scorsese's *After Hours* and more like an excessive set-bound '60s production. The new ugliness is defined in part by an abandonment of function *and* form: buildings afraid to look like

buildings, cars that look like renderings, restaurants that look like the apps that control them. New York City is a city increasingly in quotation marks, a detailed facsimile of a place.

Gah! Blinded by the intense glare of an LED streetlamp, we bump right into said streetlamp. Fortunately there's an urgent care across the street, still open in the dwindling dusk. We're no doctor—at least not until they start giving out PhDs in walking around—but we can tell that our knee is bleeding. If anything is broken, the CityMD's MD will take care of it. We stumble inside, into the intersection of exploitative private insurance and inadequate public options. Here, like everywhere else, a clash of patterns and surfaces—gray tile, gray bricks, greige wood paneling—enfolds us in a numbing palliative aura. We try to check in at the front, but the iPad doesn't react to the tap of our index finger. Are we a ghost? Is this the afterlife? The lighting is giving gates of heaven, but as with the supertall buildings and their elevators that never work, our problem is technical: the iPad is frozen. Another one is wheeled out and we make our way through a questionnaire. Allergic reactions? None. History of medical litigation? Huh, weird.

Our estimated wait time is three and a half hours, which gives us ample opportunity to reflect on our surroundings. Is there a more contemporary urban form than the urgent care facility? How did the entire world come to look like this nonplace, flimsy and artificial and built unsuccessfully to stave off emergency? Above our heads, the original *Army Soldier* plays on a flatscreen, Ryan Reynolds's leaden features motion-smoothed into alarming definition. Our phone buzzes with a push notification from Zillow: a 0.5-bedroom studio is now available for $4,775 a month in the sub-basement of The Josh. We examine our fellow patients, because nobody else is. The bleeding young man to our left looks to have been the victim of an axe throw gone very wrong. Our neighbor to the right tells us she was hit by a Tesla while e-biking to Roosevelt Island to deliver a single unicorn latte. We overhear someone behind us describe a harrowing food poisoning incident involving a Homemade Chipotle Chicken Cutlet Hack.

In the end we pay $75 for a Band-Aid, two Advils, a Blank Street Coffee gift card, and a branded pen we have no plans to return. After a long day of digital encounters we're asked to sign a paper receipt, and we click the pen. It looks like a pen and works the way a pen ought to work. Our eyes fill with tears at this satisfying tactile experience. Maybe it's just the bruising.

1. See also the increasing dominance of cars with opaque and foreboding matte paint jobs, described by the newsletter Blackbird Spyplane as "putty-lookin' ass whips." ↩

2. Along with Molly Fischer's 2020 study of the "millennial aesthetic" in *New York*, Jesse Barron's 2016 essay in Real Life remains an authoritative critique of neoliberal startup semiotics, from Uber to Seamless. "In 2012, Uber stood alone. Black, sinister, efficient. The logo like devil's horns. The invisible umlaut. In the place of cuteness, Uber offered a fantasy of minimalist sadism, with the user holding the whip." ↩