The Automats of the early 20th century have disappeared from Gotham’s cityscape. Now, New York Design Architects has brought the retro concept roaring back, 24-7, at Bamn! Fronting the kitchen of the 350-square-foot storefront is a curving wall of plasterboard with rows of coin-operated stainless-steel doors with glass windows. Each compartment houses an individual portion of comfort food with an international twist. Eight quarters get you a warm pork bun or a PB and J empanada. Change machine on-site.” Craig Kellogg, “Horn & Who?,” *Interior Design* (September 1, 2006).

Among the many divine consumer spaces in Manhattan’s Lower East Side the Bamn! Automat is a particularly fascinating emplacement. It realizes, most spectacularly, the absurd truth that any palpable separation between Capital’s material and aesthetic dimensions has been eliminated. The commodity no longer obscures the social labor invested in it; this productive process is in fact transparent and moreover, forms the basis of the Automat’s discreet appeal—“the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them” emerges in the act of exchange between consumer and automata.

Marx lets us know in *The Grundrisse*, that the process of automation is necessarily extended into the visual; “the full development of capital” occurs when the entire production process appears as not subsumed under the direct skillfulness of the worker, but rather, as the technological application of science.” Theaestheticization of automation is thus the expression of Capital fetishizing itself. Automated production gives rise to automated consumption; modes of presentation allow for the automation of desire. Bamn! confidently proclaims that inside “satisfaction is automatic!” reassuring us of their efficient use of the machine to subordinate desire to Capital’s regulatory flow.

St. Marx Place
Ryan Howe & R.J. Skypala

“People want the convenience of choice without having to interact with another human being, which may cause a delay or confusion.” Robert Kwak, co-founder of Bamn!

This “taste of history” is riddled with theological niceties, its fetish-face grinning at every turn. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), [G12a,3].

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BAMN! The consumer stands in front of the goods as if in a dream: self-produced commodities sequestered among themselves behind glass; communicating in the language of exchange value; disorienting the consumer as he is sucked into an atemporal maelstrom of past, present and future. Operating in this "ghostly objectivity" BAMN! serves to aestheticize the banal within the framework of a retro scenario, feeding off a nostalgia for antiquated culinary administration by offering just that in updated form. In this way, the automat revival has literally reinvented the mediocrite. Unlike the exhibitions, the techno-aesthetic display of BAMN! is already integrated into everyday life; fulfillment lies in the immediate gratification of experiencing the future of food service with the "warmth" of the past. At BAMN!, the quotidian holds a mirror up to itself and loves what it sees.

Ginsberg, the quotable auto-poet tells us: “There is nothing to be learned from history anymore. We’re in science fiction now.”

New York, Capital of the twenty-first century. Today’s neo-Bohemie post-Punk can navigate the experiences of Allen Ginsberg and Yoko Ono in the same space, but now adapted to suit the demands of late-spectacular society. The same strip of sidewalk that is home to BAMN! narrates the transformation of New York City’s urbane intellectual yet transgressive counter-cultural elite. Everything is now profanely illuminated, obscene, stainless.


The exhibition's organizing of commodities from around the world engages a narrative that solidifies the position of the Western Metropol as locus in the global circulation of cultural capital. Benjamin notes of the 1867 Paris exhibition “the ‘oriental quarter’ was the center of attraction.”6 However, today when we find this same thematization of commodity objects at work—Japanese, Chinese, Thai, ‘Asian Fusion,’ and Middle-Eastern cuisine; cultural goods from Japan, Tibet, and Others—it is inevitably re-inscribed with an appeal to the tradition of the dropout generation; specters of celebrities whose rebellious appropriation of non-Western spirituality and modes of existence was always doomed to the irony presented by Enlightened Capitalism. The global triumph of general equivalence: foods of the world present themselves within the same frame of speculation. BAMN! is Epcot Center’s dining panorama consolidated, with representative “dishes” just inches apart.

“The dreaming collective knows no history. Events pass before it as always identical and always new.” Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, [S2,1].

“They say everything old is new again.” The Today Show’s Natalie Morales on the opening of BAMN!

Walking down St. Mark’s Place, one is continually struck by the products, some of which have made their way out onto the sidewalk. This unrelenting stimulus provides no relief for reflection, the consumer is merely driven forward on the plane of linear, homogenous time.

From the Indymedia.org NYC discussion forum:
Jan 23, 2006 04:54PM EST
EH: Speaking of Anarchy... I remember a cafe between St. Marks & 9th St. across from Cooper Union that was called Anarchy Cafe. Any relation to Anarchism or was this place just using the name? This was around 1995 or so. Unfortunately it was replaced by McDonalds.

Jan 23, 2006 10:26PM EST
Tommy NYC: Anarchy Cafe was a bad faux french fin-de-siecle cabaret themed yuppie bar. You didn't miss anything!

“Naturally,” writes Benjamin, “one can say that the bourgeois comfort of the dining room has survived longest in small cafes.”7 Looking east out the window of Starbucks on Astor Pl. one sees how this continuity of comfort manifests in the urban

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6 Benjamin, Arcades Project, [G8a,3].
7 Ibid., [G1,2].
landscape; whether queuing for a Macchiato or sitting at the counter multitasking, the floor to ceiling windows permit clear visual access to the nearest Starbucks, located a mere 482 ft. from where you are currently. Arriving at the second location, the storefront previously home to the Anarchy Café comes into view. At any rate, you are no more than .3 miles west from the ‘comfort food’ to be procured at BAMN! for eight quarters.⁵

“Luxury turns into comfort and finally into a senseless gadget.” Theodore Adorno, Minima Moralia (Frankfurt am Main 1951), pp. 120

⁵ Distance calculations provided by Google Maps.