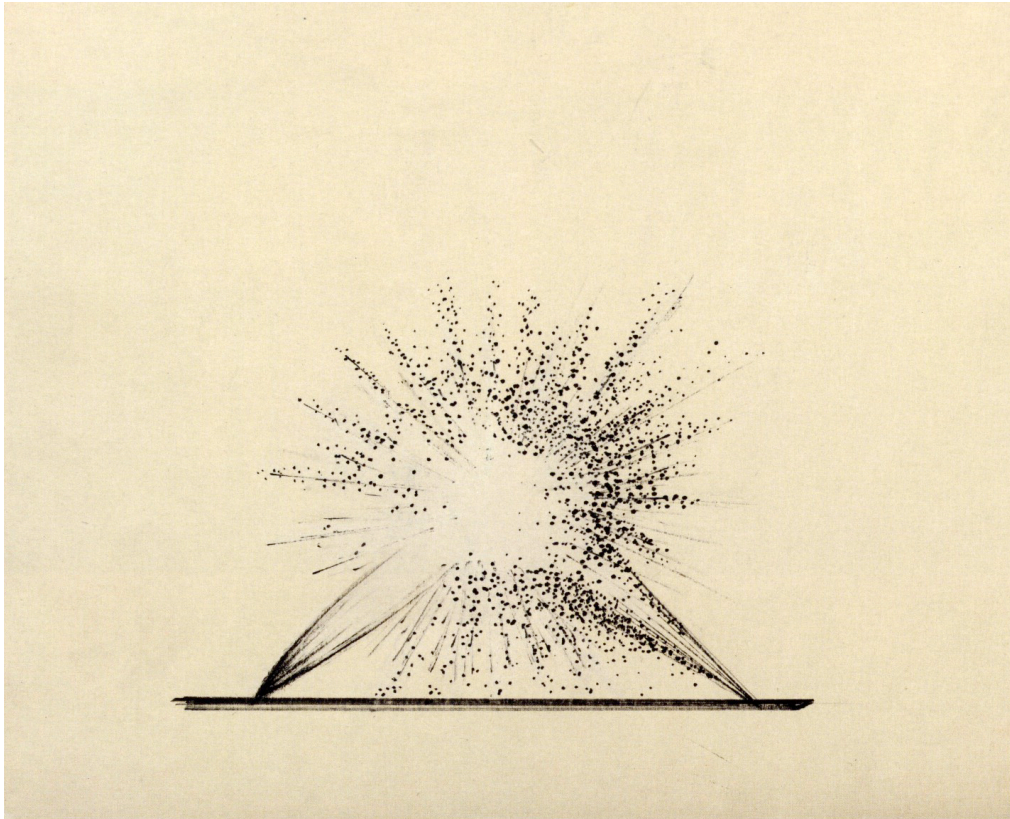




## Contents

5	The Invisible Hides Nothing
8	A Key Resource
10	Creative Destruction
13	Finance
15	Virtuality
21	Inexistence
25	Empty Boxes in Boxes
28	Each Something is a Celebration of the Nothing that Supports It
31	Clouds
37	Architecture / Design
40	Ruins
42	Zones of Possibility
43	A Wealth of Needs
46	Countervisuality
48	Xanadu
50	Appendix
55	Bibliography



Yves Klein. *Fontaines d'eau et de feu* "Le choc permanent"  
[Fountains of Water and Fire "The Permanent Shock"] (1958)

## The Invisible Hides Nothing

“For a time a curious priority has been accorded “the invisible,” owing to a confused literature, whose interest vanishes if we remember that the visible can be hidden, but the invisible hides nothing; it can be known or not known, no more.”

-René Magritte (in correspondence with Michel Foucault, May 23, 1966)<sup>1</sup>

There are innumerable debates over nothingness in the history of Western philosophy and science; the treatments of emptiness vary in implication from a mode of being, an environment, a mathematical tool, to a metaphysical space. It ranges from Parmenides’ initial conundrum of the impossibility of nothingness, to Aristotle’s dismissal of nothingness for its irrelevance in comparison to the seemingly more useful concept of space. Descartes’ denial of nothingness is important because he only saw room for matter and the extension of matter. For Sartre (allegedly due to a misreading of Heidegger), nothingness provided a platform for being, which was to set the scene for a rational atheism.<sup>2</sup> In these examples from the long and complicated history of the void, there is continuously a struggle over and within the romanticism of nothingness, the debate over a possible absolute emptiness as a reflection on existence.

This ongoing tradition has parallels and counterparts in the realms of representation and participation, be in the form of artistic practice or the culture industry at large. However, there is a divergence between the above philosophical debates over a broad existential emptiness and the socio-political analysis which would be required to understand present and absent representations of emptiness today. Theorists such as Guy Debord<sup>3</sup>, Jean Baudrillard<sup>4</sup> (or even Vilém Flusser<sup>5</sup>) have traced the collapse of the visual into the mechanics of late capitalist society as it takes the form of spectacle, simulation or other seemingly impenetrable, cyclical forms of ‘seeing’ (or not-seeing). Here visual substance could be understood to take the form of nothingness, albeit one concurrent with over-saturation, over-stimulation or simulation. This spectacularized communication landscape could be described as possessing a current of nothingness - not in the absence of the visual - but in the absence of certain possibilities of historical representation and political participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 56.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am less interested in the denial of the spiritual as I am in belief itself, insofar as I see the eclipse of belief systems by liberal capitalism as a threat to the possibilities of change within a largely unjust, exploitative but seemingly inclusive society. For a brief description of this inclusivity, see *Xanadu* (p.48)

<sup>3</sup> For example, see: *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see: *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), or *America* (1986).

<sup>5</sup> I am referring in particular to Flusser’s notion of “post-history” as discussed in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), *Post-History* (1983), and *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985).



At a social level, these conditions roughly mirror those as described as the “post-political”<sup>6</sup>: the *foreclosure* of the symbolic and participatory realms that are necessary for politics to occur. In general, a foreclosure is a systemically generated emptiness: a product of possession by dispossession. And it is precisely the emptiness within a foreclosure that is often inaccessible, unreachable unless through resistant strategies such as squatting or foreclosure defense. Thinking through this metaphorically, a post-political foreclosure of the political dimension<sup>7</sup> also enacts and produces diverse forms of emptinesses through processes of eviction.

In some respects, contemporary representations of emptiness appear alive and well. Great transcendent expanses like postcards decorate the mind (be it the romance of a falsely empty landscape or promoting a cloud-computing platform). In the realm of art, images arise of Yves Klein signing the sky; the white cube (or black-box) provides an arrogantly ‘neutral’ void-space. One might think of the emptiness of space, fog, sensory deprivation or holes in the fabric of material, knowledge and perception alike. But in a political-economic sense, does the void exist? Or is it a merely a trap, a barrier masquerading as its opposite?

Today, a wealthy urban dweller might inhabit what appears to be a pure transcendent zone within an empty space designed as a luxurious environment. This stylistic, aesthetic advantage of void-space<sup>8</sup> is the padding<sup>8</sup> for contemporary opulence, often paired psychologically with sanitation, a clean mobility. Be it urban minimalist living, the high-end yoga industry, or even Ryan Gander’s “gentle breeze pulling the spectator through the gallery space”<sup>9</sup>, the appearance of emptiness can be a visual marker for extreme privilege.

The purpose of the short texts that follow is to elucidate examples and representations of a few political-economic void-forms. In doing so, it will momentarily break from existing references to philosophical voids - if only for brevity and the purpose of problematizing nothingness within a neoliberal global economy, which is increasingly dependant on forms of immateriality and ‘elsewhereness’.

In the following texts, several distinct terms will be (and some have already been) carefully deployed, for example: immaterial, silence, empty-space, vacuum, vacancy, spaciousness, nothingness, inexistence, un-being, void.

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<sup>6</sup> The post-political condition has been discussed (for example) in the work of Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek.

<sup>7</sup> For Mouffe and Rancière, the post-political takes the form a liberal assumption of rational consensus that exists without antagonism, whereas Žižek focuses on the foreclosure of the symbolic realm necessary for what could be termed the ‘political’ (Dean, *Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 13).

<sup>8</sup> I use the terms “advantage” and “padding” in reference to the history of cleanliness and space as possessed by the few. “Padding” refers in general to the aesthetic assumptions which follow cultural life alongside the phenomenon of employing empty (domestic) space as a form of luxury itself. For more on the padding of minimal lifestyles (particularly in relation to sanitation and color), see *Chromophobia*, by David Batchelor (2000).

<sup>9</sup> From the wall label of Ryan Gander’s work in Documenta 13, titled *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)* (2012, Kassel, Germany).

These terms traverse the senses and speak to ‘the invisible’ in distinct ways according to each context in which they may appear (or not). Generally, they are terminologies of more-or-less strong forms of emptiness, ranging from referencing the vaguely underrepresented and hard to acknowledge, to inexistent<sup>10</sup>, to the unimaginable, to un-being (death), to a complete void.

What if these words are conflated? For example, what if the *invisible* is considered *empty*? The risk is a dissolve of what has already been made incomprehensible, invisible, irrationally elsewhere, or excluded. As in the case of 1970’s feminism (discussed in *Zones of Possibility* and *A Wealth of Needs*), the demand of making the invisible visible has ramifications throughout societal structure and life. To engage in an active discourse around the invisible can be to amplify what is already present and to find existence that was previously viewed as void-space. Conversely, when voids appear explicitly, they can be interrogated for what they might contain; by seeing voids through a lens of their own construction, the instrumentalizing and destructive qualities of emptiness can be seen without the propagandistic, marketable flourishes from which they stem. In other words, the implications of the terms in question can be fundamental tools that protect and demand possible ways of life and thought<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> For a brief explanation of this term in relation to the work of Alain Badiou, see *Inexistence* (p.21).

<sup>11</sup> The general phrase “ways of life and thought” is written with David Harvey’s list of items “under destruction by neoliberalism” in mind. This includes “divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life, attachments to the land, habits of the heart, ways of thought, and so on” (Harvey, *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction*, 146).

## A Key Resource

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan, in a 1974 interview in Ottawa<sup>12</sup>, was asked to clarify his then recent statements regarding the phrase “The Medium is the Message”; here he insisted it is not the car (and its effects) that is the technology which is altering the society as we know it, but its “invisible dependencies and resources” or “hidden environment of services” (such as oil) which constitute societal fabrics. Taking this example as a starting point, we might then consider, what are the central invisible resources that underpin western society today? Certainly there are uncountable exploited material resources that are caught up in current global economic systems, but in light of the dematerialization of the economy under financialization, invisible dependencies present themselves with new fundamental meaning. In this scenario, where money is made out of money itself in probabilities of derivatives, hedges and other virtual products, could it not be that this ‘productive’ anti-human<sup>13</sup> void, this hiddenness itself, has become the central medium of the current epoch?

Of course it is the case that material resources and structures form a basis and medium through which life continues, but now they appear for many as eclipsed, exploited and antiquated forms. It is in this scenario, where a virtual form of nothingness operates not only as the enabler of almost everything under global capitalism, but as a key resource, which, like all technologies and resources of the past, influences society at both the macro and minute, structural and interpersonal levels.

If hidden assumptions of efficiency and pragmatism<sup>14</sup> govern neoliberal world-views today, these writings here are a brief attempt to examine the contradictions of emptiness within the fallacies of accumulation<sup>15</sup>. If false nothingness bursts through our cultural fabric from its place in the backbone of contemporary society, what forms might it take now (lending itself towards a critique of the present) and how might it be reframed, re-envisioned, even utilized?

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<sup>12</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (1974 Interview from “Marshall McLuhan Speaks: Centennial 2011”)

<sup>13</sup> I use the term ‘anti-human’ not in the sense financialization (and other anti-human voids) does not stem from humans (indeed financialization stems from humans and humans alone), but to refer to the way that current invisible processes begin to work *against* the human. This notion of the void, while originating from humans, presents an automated technological progression that has progressed far from serving human needs at large. Moreover, although financialization stems from the enclosure of the commons and the origins of primitive accumulation (which was already exclusionary by definition), networking technology has bolstered this phenomenon into an expanded field. Regarding automation in general, Vilém Flusser has written: “the danger that lurks in automation, namely, that the apparatus will continue, even when the intended result has been achieved, to unintended results (as, say, the apparatus of thermonuclear armaments)” (Flusser, *Into The Universe of Technical Images*. 19).

<sup>14</sup> I refer to the pragmatics of both survival and capital accumulation. Here pragmatism becomes an unquestioned means of limiting the human experience to tangible goals, products, even commodities constituted only by affect. For an economic analysis of the attachment of pragmatism to goal-oriented, efficient modes of capital accumulation, see: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, or for an example of pragmatism (or resilience) in the realm of interpersonal life, see Mark Neocleous’s essay *Resisting Resilience* in *Radical Philosophy* 178 (Mar/Apr 2013).

<sup>15</sup> As global wealth distribution becomes increasingly unequal, it is only the few who can properly accumulate surplus value, yet the romance of pragmatic accumulation still appears as a reality principle and a zone of false potentiality.



René Magritte, *La bataille de l'argonne* (1959)



An abandoned art gallery at the former US Naval Base, Mare Island, California. (2013)



## Creative Destruction

Under the ubiquitous processes of creative destruction (whereby the new replaces the old within the logics of progress and accumulation), the making-voids of today require particular attention. Entities of all sorts, peoples, environments, and patterns, under the force of capitalism's rampant ruination and appropriation drives, are pressed to be find visibility or to be lost. Creative destruction, or "Schumpeter's gale" (famously defined by economist Joseph Schumpeter<sup>16</sup>), takes the logic of colonial expansion, the destruction of what is deemed to be obsolete, and posits it as one of central mechanisms of entrepreneurship and innovation. Today, a new brand unquestionably replaces an old one. But this logic is not merely one of object-based marketed innovation: a new people also unquestionably replace an 'old' one.<sup>17</sup> As previous (or marginalized) residents are rendered invisible, obsolete to or exploited by the forces of profit, there is a risk not just of destruction, but perhaps more as Karl Marx initially termed it, of *vernichtung*, or 'creative annihilation'.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to a total creative destruction of ways of life, there must be a process whereby those who exist are rendered inexistent. This is eviction in the broadest sense, and it pertains today to everything from housing, labor, class, ecologies, data, imagination and belief. Here the void is not a form of luxurious padding, nor romantic transcendence. Rather, the seductive visions of pure emptiness are instrumentalized; in a great and surprisingly cohesive irony, these ethereal qualities dress up the processes of eviction and change which produce the lack of that-which-existed-before. Moreover, in a time of disembodied virtuality and algorithmic processes, what if the political-economic void just means *void of humans*?

The 21<sup>st</sup> century already seems to possess an amplification of past conditions towards financial and ecological collapse, increasingly exploitative and integrated labor norms, and greater divides between what some have and what others do not. These qualities all imply an empty after-image or negation: collapse implies a tendency towards less of what we have (be it mess, structure, resources, 'nature', fellow humans etc); profiteering demands a greater divide between visibility and invisibility of others as complete beings. And as the divide between the rich and the poor grows, the emptiness of having less, nothing, or negative worth is becoming increasingly common in times of austerity and the neoliberalization (i.e., privatization) of former state services. Moreover, in a global economy which treats poverty as a resource<sup>19</sup>, lack itself, as a raw material, can only be overcome by those who possess and enact the contemporary political-economic void, even if they invisibly reside within it.

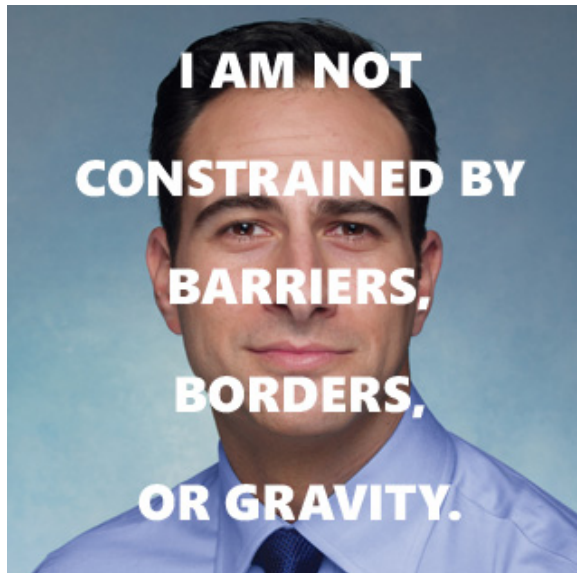
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<sup>16</sup> Discussed in Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942).

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction*, 145-158.

<sup>18</sup> As written in Marx's *Grundrisse* (1857).

<sup>19</sup> See: Christien van den Anker, *The Political Economy of New Slavery* (2004), or even Renzo Martins, *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty* (2009).



*Microsoft "Cloud Power" Advertisement, 2012.*



Heidi Nagtegaal, *Gods-Eye Fax Mural* (2010)

“An international network, God's Eye Fax Murals are being installed in cities worldwide, such as Johannesburg, Boston, Pittsburgh, a small town in Jamaica, Halifax, Seattle, Palouse, and Vancouver.

God's Eye Fax Murals started as a drawing, which was then dismantled, photocopied, scanned, and can be downloaded as a ZIP file, printed as a matrix of 56 tiled 8.5" x 11" sheets of standard printer paper, and posted on a wall in your neighbourhood.

If you would like to open a portal in your neighborhood, please contact [hello@heidi-nagtegaal.com](mailto:hello@heidi-nagtegaal.com) or [portableutopia@gmail.com](mailto:portableutopia@gmail.com).”

[[www.heidi-nagtegaal.com](http://www.heidi-nagtegaal.com)]

## Finance

A reliance on technologically-enhanced accumulation shows the splicing of time, the search for an ultimate removal of the void between markers in time – take, for example, the stock market operating at a post-human<sup>20</sup> level of microsecond probability calculations. Ironically, these ‘hyper-productive’ non-decisions create magnitudes of empty spaces (voids) elsewhere and can no longer treat these bubbles as controllable economic externalities.

Creative destruction, although described as a “gale”, is hardly reminiscent of Gander’s poetic “gentle breeze”. In metaphor, it might closer resemble Klein’s “Air Architecture” (1959)<sup>21</sup>, a utopian proposal whereby physical structures no longer exist above ground. In Klein’s drawings, which were sent in earnest to political leaders such as Fidel Castro, buildings themselves are replaced by forceful streams of compressed air which protect the internal citizens from all external elements. As a means of reconciling material byproducts, garbage and human waste is stored beneath the earth in large bunkers, hidden from view, sealed off from the pure Dionysian leisure society from which it comes. The flows of gases and fluids within ‘air architecture’ are cleansing, protective, and as such, necessarily violent. In Klein’s *Fontaines d'eau et de feu "Le choc permanent"* (1958), a stream of water collides mid-air with a stream of fire – a spectacle with no apparent purpose other than entertainment, or a monument in an otherwise empty plaza. As a monument, it might be a spatial infographic which memorializes the destruction within the science-fictional present from which it arrives.

What do financial-capitalism and air-architecture have in common? For one, both are unable to reconcile material byproducts – for Klein, it was because of the purity of his visions, and for neoliberalism, it is lack of recognition of waste (be it objects or subjects) when it no longer fits into the jet-streams of capital accumulation. What might become of the empty-boxes previously destined for downcycling<sup>22</sup> industries? Perhaps Klein’s bunker plans should be (or have already been) instated as a pragmatic solution for stockpiling waste, be it garbage, paper-products, or the e-waste from the cyclical flows of planned obsolescence.

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<sup>20</sup> I use the term “post-human” not unlike Marx’s usage of “reification” to refer to understandings of object-based systems of organizing human relationships. Additionally, post-human implies the increased speed and self-sufficiency of financial algorithmic networks. For example, “one new computer chip built specifically for high-frequency trading can prepare trades in .000000074 seconds; a proposed \$300 million transatlantic cable is being built just to shave 0.006 seconds off transaction times between New York City and London.” (Keim, *Nanosecond Trading Could Make Markets Go Haywire*, WIRED, February 2012).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the economics and philosophy of Klein’s work in relation to exchange and immateriality, see Thierry de Duve’s *Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer* in October, Vol. 49 (Summer, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> See *Empty Boxes in Boxes* (p. 25)

Although their descriptions of creative destructive processes differed significantly, both Schumpeter and Marx agreed on the fact that capital accumulation may require a consumption and destruction of the very internal organs of capitalism itself. This would be an internal contradiction: an accumulation from accumulation itself, something seen today in the mechanisms of financialization. One might observe here that the bubbles of recent market fluctuations are also a form of strange emptiness, a virtualized-virtuality. Creative destruction has its history in a wide range of aggressive tendencies from profit-bolstered colonial exploits to excessive resource extraction and environmental degradation, to political interventions into discourses and ideologies resistant to appropriation and dereliction. But when it is more convenient, or it runs out of room to creatively destruct exterior entities, financialization turns to algorithms and probabilities to produce and accumulate value from capital, an already virtual resource. The bubbles grow, hedge-funds and derivatives amass an inconceivably fast virtual post-human space, filled with calculations, but devoid of the products or human needs from which they originate.



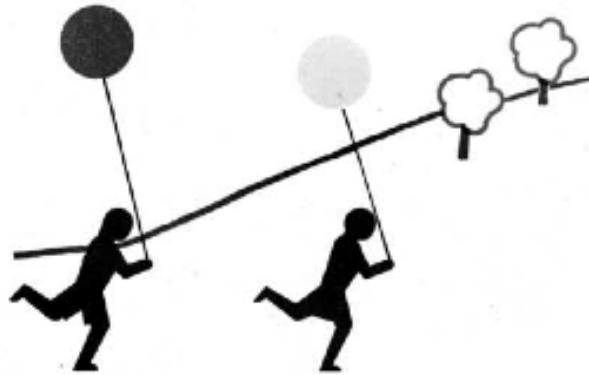
“Once an infinite and eternal three-dimensional structure, in which bodies flowed along in linear time from the past into the future, which was likewise endless and eternal, this universe [of physics] has shrunk to a kind of ephemeral balloon that is wrinkled in the fourth dimension, with wrinkles dense with possibilities. These possibilities can be grasped as an expanding, empty body.”

-Vilem Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985)<sup>23</sup>

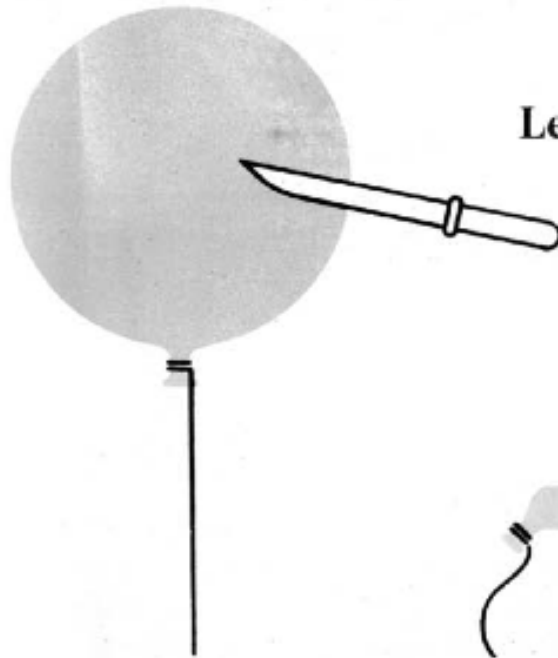
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<sup>23</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 135.

Can we  
see inside  
a balloon?



Let's take a knife  
and try.



Oh!



32

“Marie Neurath’s book for children *If you could see inside* (1949) employs the visual metaphor of a “magic knife” to rationalize a series of diagrammatic representations of objects of various scale and complexity: a volcano, a transport station, a house, an egg. In the book’s final example both the subject—a yellow balloon—and the magic knife metaphor are playfully, yet meaningfully, burst.”

[Republished image and caption from James Langdon’s *A Eulogy for the Cutaway* in *Fillip* 17 (Fall 2012)]

## Virtuality

“Only the underdeveloped still want to grow, presumably to shrink later. Devices, in particular, a central issue now, are becoming smaller, cheaper, and tend to shrink into invisibility and be delivered for free. [...] For the moment, this shrinking of volumes is rationalized by way of the past, as a “crisis in growth,” with arguments such as, say, the “exhaustion of oxygen and energy resources” or “protection of the environment.” But it goes deeper. It is about a shift in existential interest that is already under way. Bodies are becoming steadily less interesting, and bodiless, insubstantial, immaterial information is becoming more and more interesting. The smaller the body is, the better. It doesn’t get in the way so much; it can be overlooked.”

-Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985)<sup>24</sup>

In the changing economies of the ‘developed’ world, physical space is increasingly becoming cognitive space. As embodied space is pressed to become increasingly precarious, new forms of eviction arise; this is the eclipsing of the human body and basic human needs. Here Flusser’s dystopian optimism about a telematic virtual world still stands to be defended against, almost three decades since he wrote the above statement. Although networked technology is undoubtedly producing new relationships to physicality and bodies in general, there has yet to be a moment within global technology industries which offers bodilessness with equal (virtual) opportunities for both workers and consumers, or producers and receivers.

In the foundational models of capitalism (which still largely persist today), an ownership or managerial class extracts labor from workers within certain work conditions, be they of specific labor time, wages, productivity quotas. Under the pervasiveness of networking technology this model of humans-exploited-by-humans is rapidly changing into new forms with new absences of regard for fair work conditions. Take, for example, the phenomenon of “same-day-shipping”, a service instated by Amazon<sup>25</sup> and more recently, Walmart. The same-day idea is premised on the creative destruction of physical retail models, a process that seeks to virtualize the previously physical process of shopping.<sup>26</sup> If the concept of shopping has reached an expanded field, i.e. shopping for life experiences (travel, careerism, romance, etc.), and if this process can increasingly leave the embodiment of experience as an after-image encapsulated within a mere goal or pragmatic

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<sup>24</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of brevity, this example pertains primarily to labor systems of North America, and does not attempt to address global contingent labor systems such as the relationship between consumers, design sources and offshore manufacture sites. Additionally, more research and analysis is required on Amazon’s ‘Mechanical Turk’ taskwork platform, whereby non-U.S. workers complete tasks and receive compensation in Amazon credit. For a collection of critical writings on digital outsourcing and crowdwork platforms (including MTurk), see Limn, Issue II: Clouds and Crowd (2013).

<sup>26</sup> di Stefano, *Amazon’s Same-Day Delivery Will Shake Up Retail* (2013).

result, the risk of dissolution implies a repressive desublimation<sup>27</sup> bolstered by the digital age.

Furthermore, what happens to work conditions when the boss is replaced by algorithmic demand? It could be argued that even the most exploitative humans possess a sense of time that relates to their subjective experience of the world, but what of the time-scales of post-human systems which seek instantaneity as an absolute goal?<sup>28</sup> Already dismal work conditions<sup>29</sup> and anti-union policies within the distribution plants of Amazon and Walmart are exponentialized by this new algorithmic feudalism and the differential between the consumer and the worker grows within a void, the demanding virtual space between them.

As the challenge becomes not only same-day shipping, but free same-day shipping, workers' wages are inadvertently effected for the worse,<sup>30</sup> with the only void-like salvation of being potentially virtualized *themselves*, i.e. being made obsolete, replaced by automated systems. Amazon's distribution plants are already termed "fulfillment centers", and the gap between the consumers' instantaneous fulfillment and fulfillment of orders will necessarily close. But in this void-style eviction of humans (and human-needs), the fulfillment of the class-stratified and newly unemployed workers might be nowhere to be found.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>This term, an amalgamation of psychoanalytical notions of repression (via a commodity-oriented life) with particular declines in sublimation, is discussed at length in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964).

<sup>28</sup>Nick Dyer-Witherford, in *Cyber Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism* (1999) traces the role of technology within and against workers struggles. He states, "Marx analyzed the introduction of 'machinofacture' as a means by which the bourgeoisie strove to subjugate a recalcitrant proletariat. He alludes to [Charles] Babbage's writings in the great chapter of *Capital*, 'Machinery and Large Scale Industry', where he describes how the factory owners' relentless transfer of workers' skills into technological systems gives class conflict the form of a 'struggle between worker and machine.' He cites, as evidence of the political economist's technological strategy, the work of Babbage's colleague, Ure, who in the conclusion to his 1835 *The Philosophy of Manufactures* declared 'when capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility.' 'It would be possible' Marx observes, 'to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt.'" (3).

<sup>29</sup>For more information, see: Ryan Chittum, *The Morning Call Revisits Amazon's Work Conditions*, Columbia Business Review (2011), and Mac McClelland, *The Real Price of Amazon's Free Shipping*, Mother Jones (September 20, 2011).

<sup>30</sup>See also: Mac McClelland, *I Was a Warehouse Wage Slave*, Mother Jones (March/April 2012).

<sup>31</sup>Another (perhaps more foundational source) for considering the advancement of technology in relation to human workforces, perception, and automation is Harun Farocki's film essay *Wie man sieht (As You See)*, 1986). For example, Farocki makes a comparison between the advancement of automated loom technology which parallels that of the newly invented machine gun; the former evicts the worker, the latter produces an increased need for bodies in the line of fire.



RC Drone enthusiasts meet regularly on Mare Island, near Vallejo, CA. Mare Island was the site of a US Navy base (in operation until 1996). The base, which once housed over 50,000 soldiers, built and prepared nuclear submarines, is now largely abandoned. Lennar, the third largest development corporation in America, currently possesses a development contract for the conversion to market housing. The changing of material forms in society in general is mirrored by recent US Navy base physically downsizing (with an increased budget) to accommodate new automated technologies and tactics.





Luo Baogen's so-called "nail house". Zhejiang Province, China. (2012)

## Inexistence

*Inexistence* is sometimes conflated with *not-being*, but the differences between these two terms have significant implications. Let us state that all humans are beings. As an axiom, we can then posit that there is no un-being of a living human, but there are, as Alain Badiou states in “The Rebirth of History” (2012), various intensities of *existence*<sup>32</sup>. This difference presents us with a tool for unpacking the terrain of politics: there are those entities which are *beings* and are therefore equal as such, but there are beings who are more or less existent in the eyes<sup>33</sup> of capital, or even *inexistent*.<sup>34</sup> For Badiou, politics begins when the *inexistent* become existent.

For the purposes of this text, this definition of existence raises a central point: within a void, *what* and *who* might be absent? If we were to use the strong and absolutist term ‘void’ or ‘not-being’ in relation to human beings, then those who are lost to visibility and definition would be non-recoverable. In an increasingly privatized world, the risk is that the lens of capital accumulation can’t see human beings as pure means (without an end). Those who are ‘useless’ to the forces of both material and immaterial productivity (because, for example, of geographic location, poverty, discrimination) become largely absent and excluded from any benefits of productivity itself.

But if we all, despite particular geographies and struggles, live in a spectrum of existence, even the destructive forces of global capital cannot take away the beingness of even those who are the most exploited. If the *inexistent* can rise up (for Badiou, in ‘intensity’), despite the fact that economic forces have removed their voices and overly-extracted their labor, then the constant ‘elsewhereness’ of neoliberal capitalism can no longer be seen as a realist truth. Here, physical and metaphorical offshorennesses present themselves as exploitative processes of deferral that could potentially be countered via a raising of subjectivizing intensities of those who have been left behind by capital.

This might seem like mere semantics; why all this work to redefine the void? In times of rapidly changing economies and technologies in the context of networked communication, the acceleration of non-human speed, and artificially intelligent objects, new ideas around what is human and what is non-human are blossoming as justifications for continued technological innovation on the backs of unseen workers. If we continue to ‘innovate’ without first questioning the non-human (economic and thus globally social) status of living humans, we risk romanticizing the object (be it an iPod or financial algorithm). Worse, we risk accidentally assuming that technological progress (or the commonly used term ‘*innovation*’) that hinges on invisible contingent labor is progress at all. In other words, the

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<sup>32</sup> Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 67-68.

<sup>33</sup> For a brief outline of the political economic void in relation to the primacy of seeing, see *Countervisuality* (p. 46)

liberal-‘humanist’ displays of a ‘better future’ in the likes of TED Talks or interactive design conferences may propose new visualizations of the present, or new possibilities of technological interconnection, yet this genre of (often classist) technological inspiration risks taking a technological determinist outlook as a fundamental axiom. The issue of inexistence is never one of design (a discipline deeply indebted to both logics of profit and current modes of void-based (elsewhere) production), rather it requires a changing of intensities, whereby participants who work against inexistence are committed to the destabilizing of unequal extraction of global labor power as a basic premise.

This brings up a crucial point: a human-centric<sup>35</sup> outlook is required to allow multiculturalisms of participation (in the broadest sense), to fully imagine the social forms that do not hinge on a neoliberal openness where all subjects must participate in the void-making processes of capitalism. Objects can be voids, humans can not. To take an object-centric approach to societal change, or to adopt (explicitly or implicitly) technological-determinist standpoint is to cast humanity into void-space.

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<sup>35</sup> Take, for example, the blossoming fields of “thing power”, and particularly, “neo-animism”. In *Object-Relics and their Effects: For a Neo-Animist Paradigm*, Betty Marenko summarizes a history of objects while considering their possible internal intelligence, memories, and even agency.<sup>35</sup> She finishes, though, with the question: “can this neo-animist paradigm change the way we look at design? Can it change the way we design things?”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, technology - from our portable devices to global algorithmic networks - are reaching points of new influence, hybridization and perhaps even an internal ‘will’. But is this an impetus merely for the discipline of design, as much of an expanded field as it may be? Marenko’s examples of so-called ‘intelligent design’ originate from the likes of Apple, Foxconn, etc. Even armed with the philosophical tools of neo-animism, or even with a more rigorous study such as “object-oriented ontology”, would these corporations ever be able to overcome the basic illogic of creative destruction itself (a logic which they depend on for cheap labor)? Here, the design world self-privileges elegance (and intelligence) of form over a transparency regarding their already oppressive models of production and distribution. While Marenko’s theoretical platform (alongside many other philosophical object-based studies<sup>35</sup>) might be useful, even crucial, for understanding an increasingly post-human technological world, in the hands of the design world it may encourage capitalist innovation at the expense of those evacuated from political-economic voids.

This is not to dismiss completely the changing forms of objecthood within advanced technological society, nor is it to discount the critical work of those who describe the instability of object-subject relations at large, such as sociologist Bruno Latour. Rather, it is to posit the idea that the ‘magic’ of objects, be it within a fetishism, phantasmagoria, or even the broader category of neo-animism, is not a replacement or critique of an economic structure. These qualities work largely towards design practices in the extremely privileged worldview of technological innovation.

Here, ‘the chicken or the egg’ rendition of ‘technological change or societal change’ is set up with unspoken technological determinism whereby those who produce technological innovations can feel benevolent, or even radical, when dependant on the bodies of unseen exploited workers. Furthermore, the binary of ‘what comes first, societal change or technological change’ is reinforced by the straight answer ‘technological innovation’, but, in effect, both processes depend infinitely upon each other. In other words, those who blur the boundaries between objects and subjects may risk producing theory that inadvertently privileges a binary between objects and production by human labor.



San Francisco riot police gather in front of a quote by Helen Keller (inscribed on the Parkview Terraces Seniors Community building which SFPD occupied for their operations) during a break on May Day, 2012. The quote reads: "The best and most beautiful things in this world cannot be seen or even heard, but must be felt with the heart."



Temporary structures at Occupy Oakland following camp eviction, November 15, 2012



## Empty Boxes in Boxes

Apple's proud proclamation, "Designed in California" reflects the role of a celebrated new economy, constituted by the exporting of ideas, the intangible parts of production rather than the manipulation of raw material. This is mirrored by the profitability of ports shipping empty containers over material goods. Despite recent attempts to restart major industrial centers such as Flint and Detroit, Michigan, citizens on the American side of the global economy are increasingly told that material production is elsewhere.

In *Made in the U.S.A.*<sup>36</sup>, Marcus Wohlsen follows the life path of his empty iPod box as a means of tracing empty boxes and other waste paper through their long and extended travels. In a process termed *downcycling* rather than recycling, he discovers not only that the recycling industry of Berkeley covers the local expenses of garbage collection and processing, but that these empty boxes and waste paper repeatedly make itinerant appearances in different forms on opposite sides of the globe<sup>37</sup>. Here, the re-use and general utility of the empty box shows itself as part of a pervasive economic logic prior to that of an ethical or moral act.

First, Wohlsen's empty box joins millions of counterparts in the port of Oakland, whereby the waste to be downcycled is shipped and sold to industries in Asia. After a 13 day journey across the Pacific, the 'waste' is to be transported and processed into the next level of paper-products. It will likely become a new package, and shipped back across the Pacific, once again housing an interior commodity. Within this process, there is, however, a degradation of quality, a descent into new, 'lower forms'. An iPod box might become the cardboard packaging for apples (the fruit), for example. And after several trips back and forth (full and empty), the once pristinely designed packaging eventually becomes paper to be used locally in Asian markets.

But it does not end here, for after another round of downcycling, this last resort of packaging might find itself somewhere in the world in its final form of utility, that of toilet paper. Here, after a long and fragmented career, the once empty boxes become reminiscent of an English meaning of 'to void', i.e. 'to shit'.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, this end form of recycling finally ceases to wastefully encourage and package over-consumption.

If taken quickly, this story of an empty box in a container - a Russian *matryoshka* of empty boxes - might lend itself to a sort of capitalistic green

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<sup>36</sup> His Masters in journalism thesis at UC Berkeley, 2006

<sup>37</sup> Wohlsen also describes the recycling bin as "a *vacuum*, one that sucks paper all the way across the Pacific" (4).

moralism: recycling is profitable for the west. But it does not take long to recognize that the wider environmental destruction caused by shipping paper across the Pacific Ocean vastly overwhelms the benefit of commodity-packing re-use. This is not only because of the fuel and other demands of the shipping industry but because of the sheer global overpopulation of new commodities in general.<sup>39</sup>

The lips of the industries are often as airtight as the containers themselves; secrecy provides yet another absence to the layers of voids. Security demands the sanitation of sensorial knowledge and data transparency, reminiscent of Allan Sekula's description of the global port as resembling stacks of clean, scentless international bills, devoid of specificity and the possible reception by human senses.<sup>40</sup> But now, the secrecy protects a single, empty fact; in this competitive west-to-east traffic, as Wohlsen states, "no company wants its rivals to know that it doesn't have anything to ship."<sup>41</sup>

The economy demands greater speed. As it translates time into profit, economists speculate that it is becoming more profitable to leave the wastepaper in stockpiles in America, to merely send back stacks of empty boxes<sup>42</sup>. Without the messy practices of unloading and transporting downcyclables to processing plants in Asia, the lighter, cleaner empty containers are already primed for their primary purposes in a one-directional material supply chain.

These one-directionalities, elsewherenesses, and compounded paradoxical nothingnesses stand in contradiction to the logics of hyperproductivity, unless of course productivity is solely a void-form: financial capital. In the west, things appear from nowhere, yet there is always more illusory room for more stuff – both material and immaterial - unlimited growth, more credit, more debt.

The void should not be a compression of empty forms traveling the world, rather it should be a place where the economy stops still, where progress itself is recalled for a moment of absolute political and social auditing. But in many scenarios, political-economic 'empty spaces' fill the gaps to maintain the status quo.

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<sup>40</sup> Sekula, *Fish Story*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Wohlsen, *Made in the U.S.A.*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> See also: David Armstrong, "Discount cargo rates ripe for the taking: Influx of Asian goods to U.S. leaves containers empty on return journey from West Coast." *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 28, 2005.



*Microsoft "Cloud Power" Advertisement, 2012.*

Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it.<sup>43</sup>

John Cage's Zen koan-like "celebration" has an afterimage – that of the structural support of both nothing at all and of everything that could possibly occur. If we look to the conditions under neoliberalism, we see that this "nothing/everything" could be coldly interpreted as a price: a numerical surface and its extensions that have been pushed onto all objects, people and ways of life.<sup>44</sup>

The support, or nothing that pads each "something" is increasingly built into our treatment of substance in general. This seemingly magical property has risen from Marx's "fetishization" (the differential between use and exchange value), Walter Benjamin's "phantasmagoria" (the ghostly nothing which dances everywhere and nowhere around objects, hiding their origin), to the new paradigms of thing-power<sup>45</sup>, or even neo-animism.

For sociologist Paul Treanor, under the "complete philosophy" of neoliberalism, the answer to questions such as "why are we here?" and "what should I do?", is "we are here for the market, and you should compete."<sup>46</sup> And moreover, he explains, "...[all] social actions are not necessarily monetized, but they represent an extension of the market principle into non-economic areas of life".<sup>47</sup>

Keeping this definition in mind, if the ghostly property of "each something" celebrates its relations within a neoliberal system and mode of being, what if Cage's "silence" or "void" might today be best described by affect economies, cognitive capital and networks of animated objects under the logics of capital?

As Badiou writes, there is a basic paradox between an object (or subject) and a limited exterior label (a name, a number, etc.). For Marx, the application of a monetary or numerical surface to an object presents an irreconcilable differential that arises in the form of desire, or even magic. But under affect-economies or cognitive capital, it is not merely objects being labeled with a numerical surface, it is subjectivity itself. For Badiou, this is the most basic form of corruption: the application (or for the purpose here, the supportive "nothing") of a number to a subject. Once this process is assumed under the logic of neoliberal capital (and, for example, the monetization of affect within social media), we begin to see a celebration to end all celebrations, a de-humanizing disaster masquerading as celebration. It could be said that each something *becomes only* a celebration of the nothing that supports it.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted directly from Cage's *Lecture on Something* (Cage, *Silence*, 139).

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that Cage preceded (or attempted to transcend/sidestep) the era of financial spiritualism that has increasingly overcome contemporary late-capitalist societies. The purposes of this re-interpretation of his idea of "nothing" is not to discredit the complexity within his philosophies / artistic production, or of course of that of Chán/Zen Buddhism (alongside other uncountable other traditions employing a spiritual void), but rather to demonstrate the risks within the changing contexts of increasingly networked and post-human capitalisms. On the contrary, the struggle today should be to look to nothingness as both a substitutable entity of substance (such as in virtual products and storage), and, as Cage would likely have demanded, an infinitely rich space of silence.

<sup>45</sup> For more on thing power, neo-animism and their implications, see footnote 35.

<sup>46</sup> Treanor, *Neoliberalism: origins, theory, definition*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



*Voids*, French National Museum of Modern Art, 2009.





A backup diesel generator at a large computer data center, one of six in the room. Combined, they could provide enough power for a community of 7,000 homes. (NY Times)



## Clouds

“All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

-Marx / Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)<sup>48</sup>

“All that is solid melts into P.R.”

-Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (2009)<sup>49</sup>

What is the cloud today? The ethereal Cirrus, the harmless Cumulus, or the threatening Cumulonimbus? For some time, the clouds have signified a Turner-esque, romantic void, yet it has always been full, pregnant, ready to precipitate. The clouds of our time are hardly the soft, wispy ornaments of a peaceful sky; on the contrary, they are saturated in substance to the point where one begins to consider the inevitable precipitations, or even storms. This fullness, or rather an illusory elsewhere (or even nowhere), enters the scene as pure public relations: a marketing device to refer to the freeing up of physical space.

But where did the physical space go? It's still there. As a data center designer who has held hundreds on contracts, Peter Gross states “a single data center can take more power than a medium-size town.”<sup>50</sup> This is the territory of diesel generators, massive complexes with drastic environmental footprints. Even the seemingly insignificant clicks have a consequence; statistically, ten Google searches is the equivalent energy of toasting a piece of bread.<sup>51</sup>

On the human side of things, those integrated with the cloud, and particularly social media, have undoubtedly experienced a revolutionizing of interactivity, sociality, from desire to expectations, to new plateaus of new approaches to security and openness. But the landlords of these tiered cloud-like structures are entities premised on accumulation both of social and numerical capital. Rather than a clean exclusion such as of that of the housing complex, it is a matter of encapsulating being (systems of value,

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<sup>48</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Chapter 6.

<sup>50</sup> Glanz, *The Cloud Factories: Power, Pollution and the Internet*

<sup>51</sup> “In reference to the power demands of the cloud factories, in an interview with the New York Times, a senior industry executive (who asked not to be identified to protect his company's reputation) admitted ‘This is an industry dirty secret, and no one wants to be the first to say mea culpa [...] If we were a manufacturing industry, we'd be out of business straightaway.’ Some analysts warn that as the amount of data and energy use continue to rise, companies that do not alter their practices could eventually face a shake-up in an industry that has been prone to major upheavals, including the bursting of the first Internet bubble in the late 1990s. ‘It's just not sustainable,’ said Mark Bramfitt, a former utility executive who now consults for the power and information technology industries. ‘They're going to hit a brick wall.’” (Ibid.)

desire, and intention) while evicting the body in physical space within this new platform for reality.

In this scenario, where value is extracted from the tenants<sup>52</sup> of virtual space, we all become workers, constantly at work, always creative, always on call for the ‘public’ exposure of a next whim. Like the tourist industry, which has long hinged on the collapse of the consumer into the producer<sup>53</sup>, the productivity of digital-era life is ever on-demand, with only the rewards of mediated snippets of virtual social connection in exchange for an ever present marketing campaign which masquerades as life itself. And while platforms such as Youtube offer the possibility of a post-hierarchical, decentralized information and production network, this possible utopic system is still up for debate: in 2011 the top ten Youtube videos were all constructed by major players in the entertainment industry.<sup>54</sup> Although the social networking phenomenon undeniably offers new pervasive forms of visibility and definite ramifications for political organizing and social grouping, the underlying problem remains: the central decisions and origin points of the largest social media technologies are still in the hands of few.

Art critic and media theorist Diedrich Diedrichsen describes this new social landscape as the gradual progression towards “a world of traveling minstrels and itinerant theater troupes from pre-bourgeois, pre-capitalist culture, albeit now operating under the conditions of the digital age.”<sup>55</sup> In this scenario, the immaterialized tribes and troupes constitute entire societies managed by optimized, sponsored algorithmic link systems. But all of this is only occurring for the ‘tenants’ who risk being fully evicted in a paradox: this is only made possible by their absolute immersion. What I mean by this eviction-immersion relationship is that as social networking closes the immaterial gaps between people, it brings them closer to becoming pure resources within affective and cognitive capitalisms. As Diedrichsen might agree, it allows participants to be further indebted (via a demand for artistic surplus) to the feudal lords of the digital age.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the benefits of new modes of communication and production should be dealt with close attention to what is being extracted as value and *for whom*. The stakes are high: without explicitly confronting the landlords of digital space, the ways of life in tension with neoliberal capitalism risk becoming political-economic voids under the logic of creative destruction.

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<sup>52</sup> I use the term ‘tenants’ rather than merely ‘workers’ as a means to include the systems of rent which are constituting primitive accumulation in the digital age. (For more general information on ‘rent’, see Michael Hardt, *The Commons in Communism*.

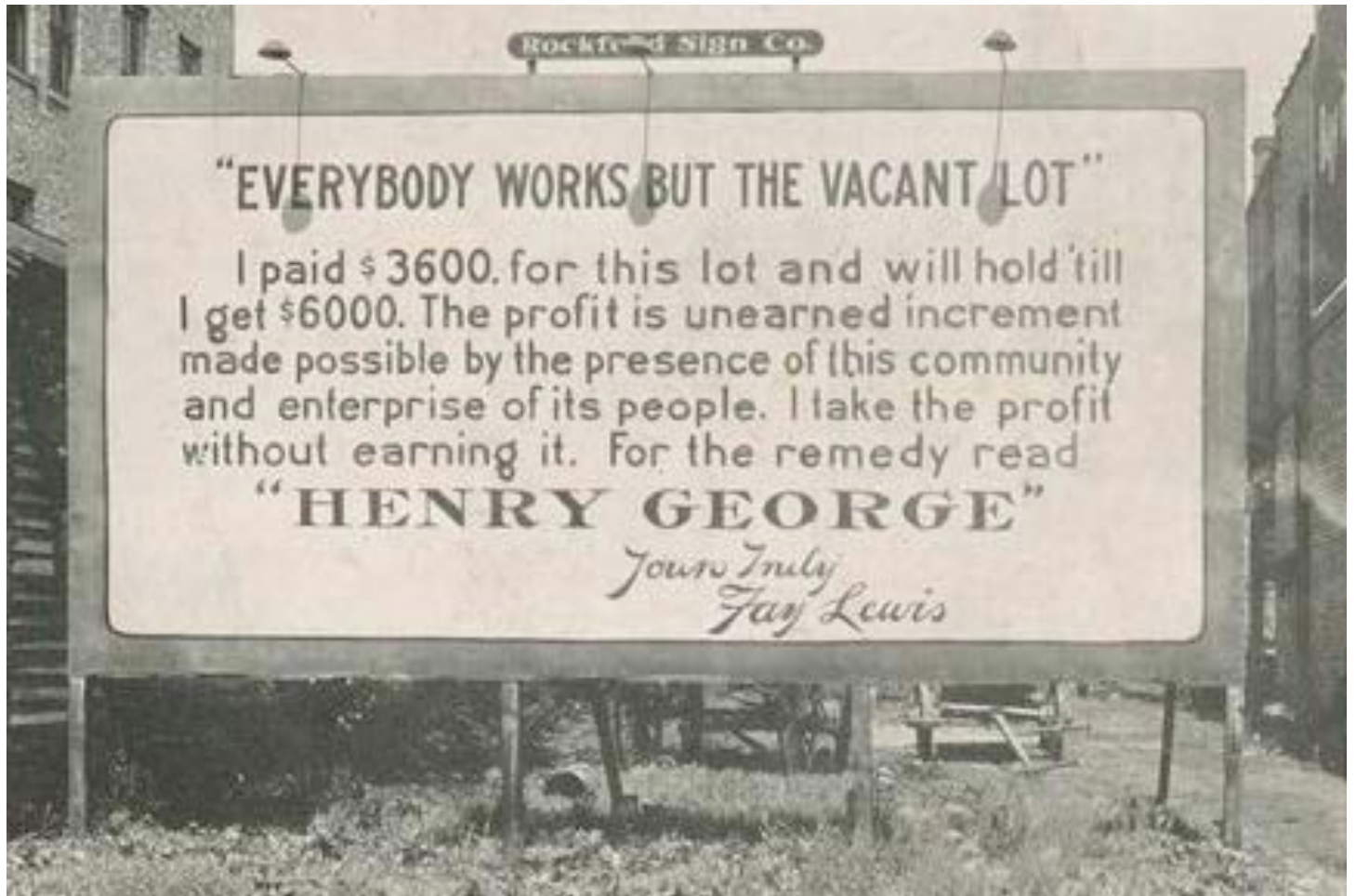
([http://seminaire.samizdat.net/IMG/pdf/Microsoft\\_Word\\_-\\_Michael\\_Hardt.pdf](http://seminaire.samizdat.net/IMG/pdf/Microsoft_Word_-_Michael_Hardt.pdf))

<sup>53</sup> This is discussed in Dean Maccannell’s 1973 book *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*.

<sup>54</sup> For more statistical information on Youtube, and other social media phenomenon, see the following: <http://www.wikinomics.com/blog/index.php/2009/03/04/putting-the-youtube-long-tail-in-perspective/>, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2254181/YouTube-wipes-billions-video-views-finding-faked-music-industry.html>, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20130113232352AAOpkQJ>, <http://vidstatsx.com/most-viewed>, [http://www.youtube.com/charts/videos\\_views?t=a](http://www.youtube.com/charts/videos_views?t=a)

<sup>55</sup> Diedrichsen. *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> For an interesting, but slightly updated depiction of power struggles and hegemonic structures in the digital age, see (for example): *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (2000) by Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu.



Billboard erected by Fay Lewis. Rockford, Illinois. 1919.

- Approximately 11% of all homes in the United States are empty.
- Between January 2007 and August 2010, mortgage lenders repossessed a total of 3 million homes.
- Eight million Americans are at least one month behind on their mortgage payments, and 5 million homeowners in the United States are at least two months behind.
- So far 5 million homes have been foreclosed. Last year in California, 1.2 million were foreclosed, and another million are expected to be foreclosed in California in 2012.
- Wall Street analysts predict as many as 7.4 to 9.3 million borrowers will face foreclosure.
- A quarter of African American and Latino/a borrowers have lost their homes or are currently at risk of foreclosure, compared to 12% of whites.
- Between 2005 and 2009, the typical Latino/a borrower saw their home equity decline by 51%.
- Industrial cities are turning into ghost towns. For example, in Dayton, Ohio, 18.9% of all houses are now standing empty, and 21.5% of houses in New Orleans are vacant.
- U.S. home prices have already fallen further during this economic downturn (26%) than they did during the Great Depression (25.9%).

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<sup>57</sup> Strike Debt / Occupy Wall Street, *Debt Resisters Operations Manual*, 41.



Diller & Scofidio: The Blur Building (under construction), yverdon-les-bains, Switzerland. 2002.





Diller & Scofidio: The Blur Building, yverdon-les-bains, Switzerland. 2002.



## Architecture / Design

In the field of design, empty space presents itself as a form of *use*, be it a doorway, a window, a balcony etc. More generally, buildings are for things to be *inside*. A space without a somewhat empty interiority is not a building at all. Drawing from several examples of certain architectural theories<sup>58</sup> and thing-oriented philosophy alike<sup>59</sup>, we see that the word void refers to the substance of absence; here the void functions as constitutive formal element that allows material itself to function.

While this might seem obvious, for some theorists such as Hal Foster, contemporary trends in architecture are employing emptiness in other ways, ones closer to the void of this text's focus. The architectural void was traditionally a phenomenological space, but I would like to point toward the shifting of paradigms in recent urban architecture in which the building becomes an *image* in an image-based landscape. In other words, the void is quickly becoming the opposite of its former connotations; it becomes the denial of spatiality.

In his 2011 book *The Art-Architecture Complex*, Foster outlines major architecture firms and their focus on stylized ornamentation and bodily alienation and disorientation. For example, dizzying, instantly recognizable new buildings, such as Shanghai's Bird's Nest Coliseum exist primarily for the photograph and the imagistic experience from a virtual distance, rather than the relationship between the body and the physical structure. Here, Foster advocates for architecture to "reassert the rights of the body against the abstract objectivity (even the panoptical mastery) of architectural representation"<sup>60</sup>. Within this refusal of the purely scenographic is a process of increasing complexity<sup>61</sup> (through disorientation, and bodily and even spiritual confrontation) that does not, for Foster, sacrifice material legibility. In general, here sculpture meets architecture in order to resist "a stunned subjectivity and arrested sociality supported by spectacle".<sup>62</sup> Here, trends in contemporary urban architecture confronts the *viewer* with a legible material lightness, an imagistic function, a void of spatiality oriented towards the human body. This void is paradoxically devoid of use (or unarrested inhabitation); it often avoids the very purpose of architectural emptiness itself.

If a building exists primarily as a picturesque rendition of its physical self, we might consider the structure itself as a void (void of spatiality and thus void of a complex humanity<sup>63</sup>). We might begin to argue for an architecture in which its spatial presence is oriented towards the human body without the goal of disorientation and spectacle. In other words, the architectural-void should be reconsidered not as a spectacularized design-element but rather a socio-political foundation that facilitates rather than evicts phenomenological experience.

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<sup>58</sup> For more on architectural voids, see (for example): Marc Kristal's *Immaterial World: Transparency in Architecture* (New York, 2011), Francesco Sebregondi's *The Event of Void: Architecture and Politics in the Evacuated Heygate Estate* (2010), *The Utility of Emptiness* (Museum of Modern Art, 2012), or Miraj Ahmed and Martin Jameson's *The Void* (Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> In addition to ideas outlined in footnote 35, I am referring to discourses around Martin Heidegger's notion of *The Thing* (1971).

<sup>60</sup> Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, 148.

<sup>61</sup> Using the term "lightness", Foster also ties current imagistic trends in architecture to financialization and other phenomenon which I refer to as void-forms. For example, he states, "An essential ideologeme of modernity today, lightness has supported an abstraction beyond any seen in modernism – one said to be in tune with the abstraction of cybernetic spaces and financial systems" (Preface, ix).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, xii.

<sup>63</sup> This is constitutes a doubling, a voiding of the aforementioned human-centric architectural spatial void, thus constituting a "void-void".



Luo Baogen's nail-house was demolished on December 1, 2012, after a prolonged resistance to local redevelopment (Zhejiang Province, China).

“Amnesia stifles the present moment. There is no recollection of that so-called moment of primitive accumulation – the mythic origins of a present condition. This serves as the present’s own historical conundrum. The absence of memory produces a state of amnesia: history is permitted to transpire without a trace, devoid of redemption. Wealth is accumulated by destroying use value, what remains is mere trash. Money’s architecture, the ruin, still decays.”

– Coupe (2013)<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> [www.coupeletat.org](http://www.coupeletat.org)

## Ruins

In the wake of historical events, be they distant or recent, invisible or at a grandiose scale, vacancies are produced within cultural memory, individual agency, and material environments. Sometimes the emptiness left behind an event is a crucial component in the continuation of an ideological or socio-economic logic. In other scenarios the void acts as a bubble of waste, a lack that at best is rendered obsolete, and at worst, contradicts the well-being of those in and around it. In both of these (not mutually-exclusive) conditions, the void can operate simultaneously as a site of trauma and fascination, action or passivity, or as a zone of future inaction or great potential.

What is a ruin? From ruin pornography to historical monuments, social art-projects dedicated to re-enactment, examples from the international archive style of contemporary art, apocalypse films, antique furniture, we see history through ruin and objecthood with reverence (and with often marketable appeal). The spectacularizing rush of emotion following a slideshow of Detroit's derelict opera houses<sup>65</sup> and other glamorized rotting spaces, or the reconstruction of shabby buildings in new, sanitized contemporary art settings<sup>66</sup> contains a complex pleasure, a naivety and benevolence. In North America, this fixation increasingly requires critical attention as material industries are replaced by new forms. There is no simple representation of abandonment, but at the very least, we should defend the ruin from being eclipsed by romanticism and deferral.

The ruin shows the physical architecture of changing economic activity as decay. This is not an 'upgrade', the simple replacement of one type of economy with another (be it through post-fordism, post-industrialism, etc.), but rather (as we learn from Harvey's analysis), creative destruction is a continuous process whereby capital accumulation (even within any 'new' economy) will continually make derelict processes both interior and exterior to itself. In this scenario, the ruin is not an experience of a spectacular, romantic past, but rather a continuous, open-ended delivery of the destructive present. In other words, the ruin can make real what is already around us (and caused by us) but also that which extends beyond the sensible realm of our reality principles; this 'making-real' could be produced in the form of complex, critical subjectivities with new antagonistic understandings of creative destruction. In North America, the decay of the ruin does not exemplify history, rather it demonstrates capital's disregard for time within an illusory, infinite present.

Within advanced capitalism, disaster facilitates both the paralysis and destruction of the under-privileged and bolsters the opportunism of privateers. The ruin has a tendency to represent distinct promises and possibilities. Outside of the ruin, in the increasingly privatized public spheres of the illusory 'non-ruin' (where common spaces are securitized and unreachable), the elsewhere-ness of the ruin can be a motivator, an inspiring and falsely-clean slate.

To return to Badiou: those who are fully existent under advanced capitalism should not treat the ruin as empty. This risks the dismissal of the 'beingness' of the inexistent. Yet on the other hand, the ruin can be a setting for resistance (of creative destruction itself, i.e. capital-based logics) and self-determination (or 'raising of intensity') without falling into the benevolent traps of neo-colonial expansion in the wake of continued creative destruction.

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<sup>65</sup> For example, see "The Ruins of Detroit" (<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/>)

<sup>66</sup> For example, see Ken Lum's project *From Shangri La to Shangri La*, whereby the artist recreated (adjacent to an internationally renowned luxury hotel) one-third scale models of destroyed homes in the intertidal region known as the Mudflats, in Vancouver, Canada. Or, for a different (and perhaps less cynical, but more naïve approach) see *555 Arts*, a Detroit-based DIY arts center located in a former jail, whereby artists have their studios in jail-cells ([www.555arts.org](http://www.555arts.org)).



Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas, *Wildflowers*, projected video loop, Henie Onstad Art Center, Oslo, 2009.

## Zones of Possibility

Certain practices and social movements offer an understanding of the political-economic void as a zone of social, political and post-profit possibility. In a society where capital defines, regulates, and channels visible substance towards accumulation-without-limits, it is the invisible forces and activities of a subjugated and compromised life that may offer the counter-argument. This is not merely the assumed-from-a-far “rise of the proletariat” (or precariat<sup>67</sup>), but rather a widespread process of altering of social visibility, or to use Badiou’s term, *intensity*. When invisible (to capitalism) modes of being are made visible with consequence, they provide a means of showing and exploding a seamless present.<sup>68</sup> This might be called a countervisuality, or as mentioned previously, a moment where the inexistent become existent.

For example, from 1970’s feminism, we can learn some important lessons about rendering the invisible visible. Activists, artists and organizations began employing, re-representing the assumed voids of domestic labor through demanding wage-compensation and socio-economic visibility for this previously unacknowledged field of work which supports and reproduces labor-at-large. By demanding visibility and compensation for a massive but largely misrepresented socio-economic infrastructure, the demands of 1970’s feminism can be seen as pointing to the illogics of a capital-wage-rent-oriented patriarchal society. These demands present the broader unresolved contradiction: if the logic of work applies to productivity in an increasingly social-economy, then it is the responsibility of such a society to acknowledge forms of contingent labor and domestic work rather than depending on them for support and reproduction while leaving them uncompensated as exceptions to the rules of work/inclusion.

In some respects, this strategy parallels the current demand for visibility of offshore labor, whereby western society drives forward with structural logics dependant on invisible, exploitative working/living conditions. To ask for fair conditions (and irreducible human roles in production / reproduction) from the position of invisible work, void-work, is to not only reveal the zones of void-work as overly-scripted and exploitative, but to point toward the necessity for a thorough reorganization of society itself.

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<sup>67</sup> See Isabell Lorey’s essay *Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting* (eflux #17, 2010)

<sup>68</sup> Note: neoliberalism (in its tendencies towards social liberalism) acknowledges and even encourages (in a creative destructive sense) pre-scripted incremental intervention into its own structure. This sanctioned critique, reminiscent of the history of institutional critique, can act as a vehicle for strengthening the flexibility and hegemony of already dominant structures. Here also flourishes the regulations and instrumentalization of (for example) many urban parks, carnivals, or even casually proclaimed ‘temporary-autonomous-zones’ (TAZ).



## A Wealth of Needs

Feminist economist Kathi Weeks (in her talk at *Historical Materialism*<sup>69</sup>) discusses some of the lessons of 1970's feminism through re-stating Marx in his 1884 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. I will here quote the original text at length:

"Political economy—despite its worldly and wanton appearance—is a true moral science, the most moral of all the sciences. Self-denial, the denial of life and of all human needs is cardinal doctrine. The less you eat, drink, and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life—the greater is the store of your estranged being. Everything which the political economist takes from you in life and in humanity, he replaces for you in money and wealth; and all things which you cannot do, your money can do. It can eat and drink, go to the dance hall and theatre; it can travel and it can appropriate art, learning, the treasures of the past, political power—all this it can appropriate for you—it can buy all this for you. It is the true endowment. Yet being all this, it is inclined to do nothing but create itself, buy itself; for everything else is after all its servant. All passions and all activity must therefore be submerged in avarice. The worker may only have enough for him to want to live, and may only want to live in order to have enough."<sup>70</sup>

Weeks acknowledges that this offers an alternative viewpoint to that of consumerism, and fulfillment through consumerist drives. But the ascetic position that Marx raises is one which posits capital accumulation as the goal of ascetic practice where 'god' or a spiritual goal formerly occupied this position. Here the voidness of the abstraction of value – capital – produces a voidness in the subject, a desire to possess increasingly large amounts of nothingness at the expense of their material and psychological needs.

For Weeks, this troubling logic, when paired with 1970's feminist thought on domesticity and previously 'invisible' forms of labor, opens a possibility for intervention and moreover the possible production of new subjectivities through *cultivating a wealth of needs* which exceed the offerings of both an exploitative labor system, consumerist options, spectacle and acquisition in general. In other words, one means of circumnavigating void-based exploitation is to develop through exploring un-reachable goals, the pure-means of post-goal-oriented activity that also cultivates, and collects needs and desires outside of the capabilities of the capitalist system.

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<sup>69</sup> The Ninth Annual Historical Materialism Conference 'Weights Like a Nightmare' (SOAS, 8-11 November), in a session titled 'Gender, Work and Reproduction in Crisis' with Silvia Federici and David McNally

<sup>70</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 84.



*Urgent Debt Tours of The Richard Serra Drawing Show. Cassie Thornton, performance at SFMoMA (2012)*

“The lead is not lead, nor is the art, art. Based on the high potential future value that it has, I recommend that we directly refer to the art as the debt that it is—its value coming from a future promise of trade or reappraisal, more collateral to take loans out against. The source of more debt, more value. And yes, this debt takes work to understand.

‘The absolute unpayability of debt may be its most transformative property.’

The source of debt is not physical, but it is a structure that we live within. It controls our movement and psychic states. Materials give us a reason to move, to act. Serra has filtered the debt from the air, like a real shaman accountant, making it physical for us to deal with. We should be careful. It is toxic.”

[<http://debt-material.tumblr.com/>]



Heidi Nagtegaal, *Masks for Disappearing: Colonial Artifacts Portrait Studio* (2011).  
Members of the museum public were invited to wear hand-made masks as they engaged with the Burnaby Museum's "touchable collection".

## Countervisuality

Each time we see, this act is constituted by not only what we see, but also by the entities we do not. There is no seeing without selection, no seeing without constraints over what can be seen, heard, read, known, felt etc. This is the not-seeing amidst seeing. As Judith Butler posits in *Frames of War*<sup>71</sup>, to counter the not-seeing within seeing, we must learn to see the frame which blinds us.

This condition of seeing renders invisible processes, peoples, ideas, and possibilities while it enables the mode of obsessively productive participation in late capitalist society. We ‘see’ in goals, we see in products, we see in the utility of value. But in a society saturated with an overall deficiency of democracy and common stages, it is not what we can produce, but rather what is perceived as not-present or not-possible that makes up the crucial points around which we must think today.

Many empty-forms are presented and delivered via visual perception, be it through advertisements, images of dereliction, etc. This deliverance relies on the limited notion of ‘seeing’, and its dependence on a long hegemonic mode of visual primacy in western society. This should not be conflated with that of the imagination, the ability within the fullest forms of subjectivity, which is by definition an abstraction which draws from all forms of sensory perception.

The basic crux of perception of void-forms today is that it is not just what we don’t see. It is what we don’t imagine. If we cannot imagine the end of capitalism, it is only because it is built into capitalism’s self-constitution. The long history of colonizing land through the colonization of the imagination presents itself again now as an impasse, but our current rendition of this complex might not be as unique as some theorists<sup>72</sup> might suggest. For example, Jacques Ranciere’s “distribution of the sensible”<sup>73</sup>, although sweepingly broad in its implications, is correct to suggest that the policed realm of the sensible is best treated as subjectivity rather than a particular ability or moment.

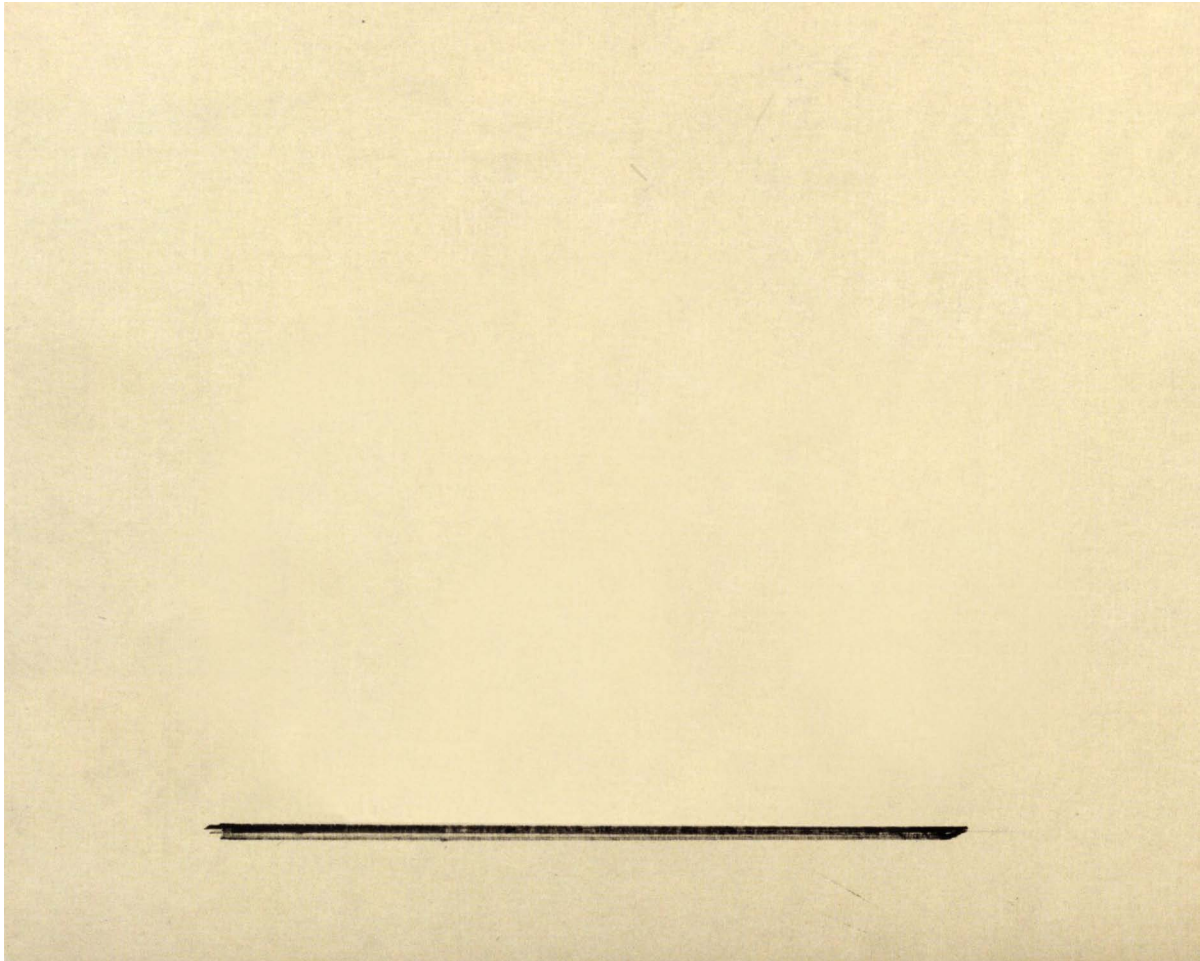
The voids of today, from invisible labour to hidden infrastructure and power relations, should be ‘seen’ not through a simple ‘rendering’ of visuality, but rather through almost the opposite: a (re) imagining of current emptinesses away from the visual. To see the non-visual is in this case, to see the void as full and thus not a void at all. Only then can we imagine its contents as rearranged, reconstituted, or even (re-)vacated.

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<sup>71</sup> Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

<sup>72</sup> In the aforementioned texts: Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), and Diedrich Diedrichsen in *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (2009)

<sup>73</sup> This concept is outlined in Ranciere’s *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004).



Yves Klein, *Fontaines d'eau et de feu "Le choc permanent"* [Fountains of Water and Fire "The Permanent Shock"] (1958)

## Xanadu

Silence is never silent. The void is always full, financial bubbles full of gambles and false promises. Today, emptiness is increasingly deployed as an excuse, or a justification for growth, for progress, for accumulation.

So-called ‘primitive accumulation’ has its history tied with enclosure. The privatization of the commons, and the eviction of the workers, inhabitants and beneficiaries of such a demarcation, has been a long and complicated history of forced evacuation of the many for the logic of the few. And while many of the above examples demonstrate this broad eviction process from within the material to the immaterial, it is imperative to note that the contemporary bubble form does not hinge merely on enclosure, but often employs its opposite.

In the case of housing evictions, there is an obvious removal of the former residents as they are foreclosed out, fenced out, to make way for an increasingly exclusive landscape of private ownership. In the above examples, this metaphor works to make explicit eviction in general, whereby something pushed out. In the global labor system, this is also the case. Work is pushed to the outside of an enclosure while the benefits of such contingent activity are inaccessible to those who provide it. But these vacated spaces left behind after enclosure are only the beginning.

As described, these vacated spaces are not vacant, they are imbued with the spectral narratives of exclusion, oppression, the byproducts of an economic system premised on capital accumulation. And in many cases, they are filled with something else too – their replacements. For labor, this is the transition from a material industrial society to one premised on innovation and the exportation of design. For housing, this is the transition to socially-designed, sanitized living environments for the wealthy. For the body, under an increasingly virtual society, affect becomes tied with capital to the point of the eviction of material presence, embodied life and thought, the replacements are new physical relationships closer tied to their destined virtual space. But in all these cases, the false emptiness left in the wake of these transitions is more commonly one self-described as inclusion, rather exclusion.

These instruments of inclusion are the processes of democratization or the liberalization of the public sphere<sup>74</sup> within the privileged spaces inhabited by replacements. The resources of the many and the everyday are brought into a logic of ‘use’ that often seemingly possesses no perimeter or enclosure. An increasingly networked society, under affective and cognitive capitalisms, or even the post-human feudal practices of algorithmic demand, require their fodder and resources from the clients, producers, managers, consumers, witnesses, etc. Primitive accumulation today is one of the

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<sup>74</sup> See Mitchell, Don. “The Liberalization of Free Speech: Or, How Protest in Public Space is Silenced.” *Agora*, Vol. 4. Stanford, 2007.



dissolving of the enclosure's fence and thereby inverting the logic from inside/outside to a single inclusive *inside* whereby surplus is extracted recklessly and without limits. Everything from thoughts to spirituality is employed in this omnipresent piecemeal accumulation. This is the vacancy of our times.

The Xanadu effect is an urban phenomenon that traces societal collapse in relation to the construction of the tallest buildings.<sup>75</sup> Such was the case with Easter Island, or the Empire State Building (erected only to be colloquially termed the 'empty' state building during the subsequent Great Depression). Today, as all becomes monetized, numericized within this inclusive void, the bubble gets fatter, the evictions increasingly assumed as already occurred. Under the logic of capitalism, this virtualization of the 'developed' world can only depend more and more on the products of those it has excluded. We keep building bigger and bigger voids. Larger clouds, faster algorithms, new renditions of financial probability gambles. Though materially the opposite, these palaces of nothingness perform similarly to that of the phenomenological experience of the big building; they both tend towards an imposed psychology of a subject being overwhelmingly dominated, be it towards a romantic, or feeble, ineffective belittlement.

Even if the Xanadu merely corresponds with the deceptive logics of growth, its next example may not be that of a newly dominant physical structure, but rather its lack: a greatest dissolution into imagistic emptiness. Here the triumph of substance in a society of elsewhere would an enveloping accomplishment, a breaking point whereby nothing is excluded from being elsewhere.

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<sup>75</sup> The name "Xanadu" is a reference to the palace in Orson Welles' 1941 film *Citizen Kane*. For more on this concept, see Edward Tenner's text titled *The Xandu Effect* ([http://www.edwardtenner.com/the\\_xanadu\\_effect\\_21105.htm](http://www.edwardtenner.com/the_xanadu_effect_21105.htm))

## Appendix

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING  
BETWEEN SOUTHERN EXPOSURE & "THE POINT OF NO RETURN"

This Agreement is entered into by and between the undersigned staff members of Southern Exposure ("Southern Exposure"), located at 3030 20th Street, San Francisco, California, 94110 ("3030 20<sup>th</sup> Street"), and Byron Peters ("Consultant") which includes the artist(s), collaborators, assistants, or any affiliated entities of the project "The Point of No Return".

The Parties to this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agree to the following:

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

1. We the undersigned, acknowledge that "The Point of No Return" involves a short consultation period followed by the implementation of an unanticipated (see Conditions and Arrangements) "service" to take place during the course of the exhibition "Point of No Return", after hours of operation, while Southern Exposure is closed.
2. Southern Exposure hereby retains the services of the Consultant for a period of eighteen days (the "Term"), without remuneration or exchange of monies altogether, commencing December 3, 2012, and expiring December 20, 2012, unless extended beyond or earlier terminated, pursuant to the terms hereinafter set out.
3. Both the Consultant and Southern Exposure understand and agree that any and all work product created hereunder operates as a free-trial which could be, at a future date, proposed (in a related fashion, but without specific reference to Southern Exposure), to for-profit and government organizations. Furthermore, the undersigned acknowledge that the service, in its relationship to surprise and negation, correlates thematically with "Creative Destruction" as a contemporary entrepreneurial strategy.

The Consultant and Southern Exposure recognize that there are certain inherent risks associated with Creative Destruction within its contemporary usage towards both innovation and the neoliberal dismantling not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (for example, challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart.

CONDITIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS

1. The terms of this Agreement create an independent contractor status and the Consultant has no authority to bind Southern Exposure in any matters of any nature or kind whatsoever. Southern Exposure and the Consultant understand that the resulting service and implementation thereof will occur only after a series of meetings, conversations of an informational or collaborative nature, and the mutual knowledge and approval of the nature and effects of the service. Additionally, the undersigned acknowledges that Southern Exposure may place restrictions as to the time and work place of the Consultant. Regarding the experimentation towards, and implementation of the service, Southern Exposure may grant the Consultant access to various areas within 3030 20<sup>th</sup> Street, but only after the services of the Consultant are approved by all parties. The Consultant will respect all notions of private information and security issues understood through dialogue with Southern Exposure, and will only implement a service after the idea/proposal is approved by the Executive Director of Southern Exposure ("ED"). Unsupervised servicing within "The Point of No Return" may occur in non-public areas (including the office and storage facilities) of 3030 20<sup>th</sup> Street only following approval, conversation, and a collaborative relationship with the ED.
2. Southern Exposure acknowledges the confidential and proprietary nature of the "The Point of No Return", and recognizes that there are certain inherent risks associated with the above described activities in association with Creative Destruction as either a visible or invisible strategy.

Read, agreed and accepted this 5th day of December, 2012.

Consultant:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Byron Peters

Southern Exposure:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Courtney Fink  
Executive Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Valerie Imus  
Exhibitions and Projects  
Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Morgan Peirce  
Communications and  
Outreach Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dave Sandoval  
Artists in Education  
Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Rocket Caleshu  
Associate Director



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November 18, 2011

**The International Time Capsule Society (Registry)**  
Oglethorpe University  
4484 Peachtree Road NE  
Atlanta, GA  
30319  
404-261-1441

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to address recent concerns over the long-term safety and security of infrastructure within the jurisdiction of the City and County of San Francisco. In concept, The San Francisco Planning Department supports the role of ITCS as an indispensable service within the preservation of American history and culture.

However, it has come to our attention that the long-term registration services of the ITCS may have been employed to potentially manipulate or cause damage to several landmarks and monuments of San Francisco. We are concerned about the database and long-term notification systems as conceivably operating outside of our records and management. In response to several recent reports of allegedly false or non-existent (yet registered) memorial capsules within and beneath the structures of permanent landmarks and monuments, we request that the ITCS no longer register capsules claiming to be officially sanctioned by the City and County of San Francisco.

We recognize that these circumstances were in no way instigated by the ITCS and we regret to decline your services as we work towards resolving these issues.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact the San Francisco Planning Information Center at (415) 558-6377 or [pic@sfgov.org](mailto:pic@sfgov.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Elster".

Scott Elster  
Interim Zoning Administrator

Enclosed:  
A: Referral SFDPW October 2011

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