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Editorial – “Structural Violence”

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e-flux journal #38 — october 2012 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle
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To get rid of violence, you have to get rid of people, Tariq Ramadan once said in an interview. Of course, Ramadan meant this as an impossibility and a warning against overzealous idealism. But what an idea! By getting rid of people completely, we could have totally frictionless surfaces for exchange. Removing the human factor would effectively erase the difference between ethical and unethical behavior, visible and invisible infrastructure, finally relieving the increasingly tedious obligation to explain how political orders function, how economic transactions are guided. Those still living would only need to deal with the end products of systems whose functions are too complex, too tedious or technical, to merit attention. The entire world would assume the appearance of an iPhone interface.

The term “structural violence” is used often in sociology, anthropology, and human rights circles to explain how endemic cruelty between individuals or groups becomes institutionalized. It is a way of understanding how the violence of entrenched social differences or unresolvable civil strife ossifies and becomes sealed into cultural pastimes. And while systemic political and economic violence is often assumed to be a problem to eradicate, it is often in its very nature impossible to distinguish from that of its host society. Furthermore, it is a kind of violence without clearly identifiable actors – humans who can be expected to appear as part of a legal process. In many cases, structural violence assumes precisely the form of the legal process itself.

After all, legal systems are state and municipal bodies, and are subject to crimes and transgressions that take place within the borders of their jurisdiction. No wonder, then, that judicial systems have become increasingly inadequate for providing oversight on activities that take place across and between borders. The recent slew of extradition hearings only become more surreal in their rationales – just look at the case of UK citizens Babar Ahmad and Syed Talha Ahsan, who were arrested in 2006 for posting to a UK website years before US prosecutors construed it as having supported the Taliban; unfortunately for Ahmad and Ahsan, the justification for extradition was that the service provider for the website was physically located in the US state of Connecticut. Meanwhile, the bizarre case of Julian Assange’s political asylum in a small room in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, the arrest of Megaupload’s Kim Dotcom, the FBI’s seizure the of riseup.net server, and of course Obama’s continuation of the US extraordinary rendition program, to various degrees all speak to the futility of pulling supranational activities back into the scope of

domestic institutions.

The information, finance, and even art systems find comfortable nests in this globalized in-between terrain, and their infrastructural advances now compete with and often surpass those of sovereign states. What defines this realm is transit, velocity, logistics, and abstraction – fluid dynamics that smooth surfaces for the business of anything from warfare to humanitarian work, from financial arbitrage to everyday trade in products like toothpaste. And though we are deeply familiar with the paradigm of globalization and its effects, we continue to struggle to understand whether, and how, all of this traffic can be seen as a structure because it fundamentally assumes such fluid forms. And yet they are forms nonetheless, which is why this issue attempts to identify the indices where an infrastructure that evades representation nevertheless leaves its imprint by displacing violence into forms of culture and exchange, into emotional relations and into language.

In this issue, Jon Rich responds to an article by Bilal Khbeiz on the shared contract between readers and writers, in which an impoverished and imprisoned writer addresses nameless readers who will in turn be the authors of future revolutions. Rich's response adds that the temporal compression of online exchange now produces a linguistic cocktail of authoritative address and rumor in place of analysis, and that this in turn shapes the ideological form of social movements led by ignorant readers.

Hito Steyerl looks at the state of indeterminacy between life and death illustrated by Schrödinger's cat, whose fate is decided by the observer who finally opens the box. Seen as a grave, the cat's box becomes a marker for both a juridical and metaphysical state of limbo functioning as a narrow pathway of communication between the dead and the living, the animate and the inanimate, the material that speaks and that which lies mute.

In an essay composed of excerpted passages from Eyal Weizman's latest book, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, Weizman looks specifically at the structure of the "lesser evil" argument and its redeployment as a means to justify evil acts by identifying even more heinous hypothetical alternatives. It is a preemptive logic that produces a cold calculus of differentials in the absence of ethical absolutes, forming the very shape of a weak negativity that characterizes the withdrawal of any viable or coherent leftist, humanist mission.

"Contemporary capitalism pervades daily life in much more complex ways than it did under classic industrial (Fordist) capitalism, when the conveyor belt and punch-clock still seemed like a

violent imposition of abstraction on life," asserts Sven Lütticken in his expansive essay on the relationship between economic and artistic abstraction, from Marx to Beuys, to recent arguments by Andrea Fraser and exhibitions such as Maria Lind's *Abstract Possible*.

Pelin Tan sits down with Simon Critchley to discuss the philosopher's thoughts on the social contract as civil religion, Obama and liberal political theology, anarchism and responsibility, the Arab Spring, and football.

In the second part of their series of essays on the cloud as an online meta-architecture and myth, Metahaven find the concept drawing deeply from ideological strains of techno-libertarianism, Ayn Randian anarcho-capitalism, and hippie cyber-utopianism. If the innovative new forms of control that circumvent and exceed those available to most governments are exercised under the heading of the cloud, then it becomes clear that the terms for understanding its new forms of power are still to come.

Finally, Cuauhtémoc Medina ponders Raqs Media Collective's drifting video work *The Capital of Accumulation*, which takes Rosa Luxemburg's work, legacy, and absent body as its guide through a landscape of organic relations between capital and the human body. If Luxemburg understood that human relations could not be fully subsumed in a calculus of numerical relations, it is perhaps her work as an amateur botanist that now speaks to the ghosts that escape the clutches of systemic enclosure.

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