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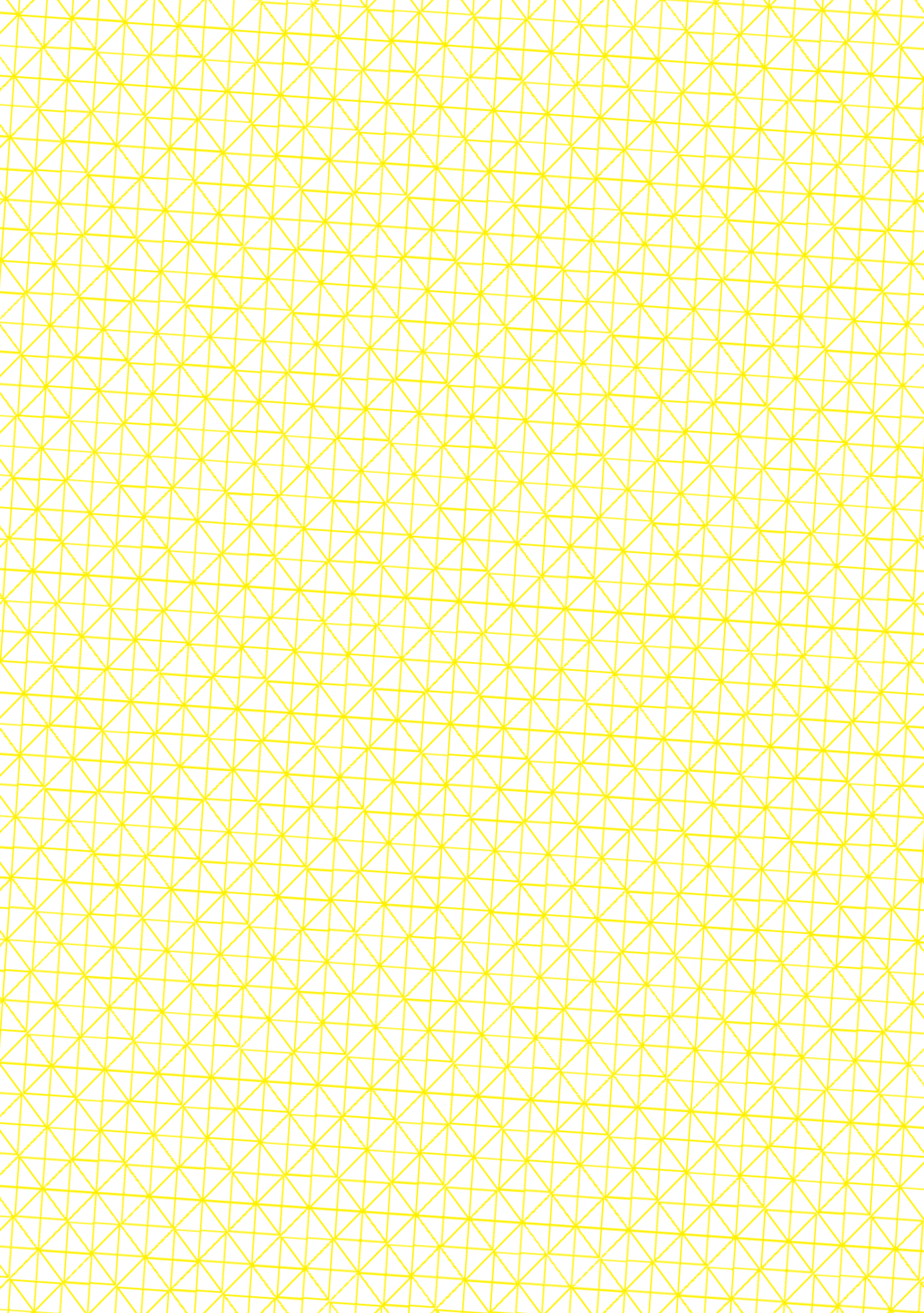
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回路、区域、边界

CIRCUITS, REGIONS, BORDERS

#2

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# FROM FLOWS OF CULTURE TO THE CIRCUITS OF LOGISTICS: BORDERS, REGIONS, LABOUR IN TRANSIT

**Brett Neilson, Ned Rossiter and Soenke Zehle**

When jurisdiction can no longer be aligned with territory and governance does not necessarily assume liberalism, there is a need to rethink the relations between labour, mobility and space. Bringing together researchers from different parts of the world to discuss and pursue various paths of investigation and collaboration, the Shanghai Transit Labour Research Platform moved between online and offline worlds. Sometimes sequestered in seminar spaces and at other times negotiating the city and the regulatory environment, the participants drifted toward a collective enunciation. We could say this was about the production of new kinds of labouring subjectivities that build connections between domains which are at once becoming more irreconcilable and more indistinct: life and work, public and private, political and economic, natural and cultural.

## CONJUNCTURAL CARTOGRAPHIES

The craze for China in academic publishing is as suspicious as the contradictory narratives it rattles out: the shift from world factory to global target market to hub of the Asian creative economy, the centre of a new and possibly quite attractive eco-authoritarianism, the

whipping boy of an exhausted human rights discourse, the silent interlocutor in the dialogue on the role of natural law, the cultural engine of the global counterfeit trade. Transit Labour's initiation of research in China is not part of a search for alternative modernities that articulate post-war geocultural visions. Such an effort ultimately expresses a modernity fatigue that seeks refuge in anachronistic regionalisms and a retrieval of the idea of culture as civilization.

Modernity is a global phenomenon and not merely the result of the upheavals, industrialisation, revolutions and enlightenments that began to occur in Europe over five centuries ago. At the very least there is acceptance that modernity must reckon with the history of European colonialism and that the two-way traffic between metropolis and colony was central to its emergence. Yet what needs to be asked is why a commitment to alternative modernities so often accompanies a retreat to the local and a rejection of theory's imperialism through recourse to positivist methodologies.

The alternative modernities perspective recognizes different paths to and outcomes of modernity. But its interest in flows, hybridities, overlappings and

contestations is not enough to displace a geographical vision that rests in civilizational narratives and divides the globe into continental, national or cultural regions that tend to replicate the established categories of area studies. Alternative modernities were conceptualized in the immediate post-cold war era, acknowledging the inadequacy of tricontinentalist cartographies as much as the need to attend to the coloniality of modernity's multiple constitutions. Today we no longer speak from within the same conjuncture.

We don't believe that the current global conjuncture is characterized by disjunctive flows any more than we accept the narrative of resurgent nation-states. There is a need to investigate how contemporary movements of people and things intersect in governed ways. This is the work of logistics. The Transit Labour Research Platform discerns and engages the labouring subjectivities required and produced by this work, as well as the technical apparatuses that contribute to this labour of extending circuits and building connections.

## CULTURES OF CODE

Logistics is about the management of the movement of people and things in the interests of communication, transport and economic efficiencies. Its operations incorporate but extend beyond the biopolitical management of populations. Logistics calibrates and coordinates movements across different populations and borders, taking into account the varying conditions that shape their formation. The aim is not to eliminate differences but to work across them, to build passages and connections in an ever more fragmented world. Gaps, discrepancies, conflicts and encounters are not understood as obstacles but as parameters from which efficiencies are produced.

The concept of circuits has electronic connotations that resonate beyond processes of manufacturing. Logistics is a programmer's game. Code is king. From the automated high-frequency algorithmic trading that already ushers in a new phase of capitalism to the global movement of smart objects monitored by virtualized business processes, logistics modulates relations through the architecture of code. Once designed as an end-to-end system to empower the margins, the fantasies of control built into client-server relations that have come to organize the world's online communications infrastructures are now threatening to circumscribe the horizon of our political imagination. But rather than reflecting on how to live well in the cloud designed and maintained in the netherworld of corporate network cultures, we prefer not to ... and

rather refuse the logic of a becoming-client to declare logistics itself a new terrain of the political.

In such a perspective, China becomes something other than an economic juggernaut, reconfiguring civilizational regions and world-systems. Instead, we want to attend to the multiple processes of bordering that internally divide and connect the continent to wider and differentially scaled circuits of labour, capital, technology, culture and life. We understand these connectivities in terms of the production of subjectivities that occurs across the event processing field. Commonly understood as a form of situation awareness meant to serve flexibilization and hence further spread corporate actors across complex networks, we contend that such awareness also signals recognition of the centrality of the management of subjectivity in transcultural production processes.

On logistics's cutting edge everything happens in real-time. Multiple streams of rapidly changing information are fed into the system and monitored by event pattern-matching applications that can recognize scenarios and execute rules in parallel. Integrating both time- and location-based data sources, this provides an unmatched scalability that surpasses the data and logic constrained capabilities of point-to-point systems. Not only can labour be matched to demand as defined by post-Fordist just-in-time production, but labour inputs can be modulated across multiple supply chains. The production of circuit boards, for instance, can be correlated with the disposal of waste, the loading of containers or the creation of designs. Here we detect the future-present of labour and economy beyond a post-Fordist paradigm of capitalist organization.

In the pursuit of a maximization of efficiencies and maintenance of control, new circuits are routed, new interfaces are created and new protocols are established. But crucially, labour cannot be exhausted as mere input to logistical systems. Unlike the organic union of technoutopianisms, the real subsumption of the work of the soul necessarily introduces restlessness along the supply chain. As these architectures multiply their points of entry, transfer and translation, possibilities for a de- or re-coupling become equally numerous. This is why political imagination must once again enter the technological field rather than retreat into political ontologies that are blind to the dynamic renegotiation of culture/nature dichotomies.

As the territory of logistics expands and capital accumulation adapts to new contingencies, the rise of circuits linking the financialization of capital with networks of extraction, production, use and disposal

turns the circuit itself into a meme of political thought. New vectors of relation necessitate adaptation within systems of governance. It is this work of adaptation in the interests of modular interoperability and value extraction that prompts us to see logistics as a dominant architecture of control in the age of information economies, network societies and increasingly algorithmic cultures. Just as the science of police gave rise to biopolitical governance, the military practice of managing flows has expanded across the techno-social field of biopolitical production in ways that cut across mere distinctions between public and private, between labour and life, or between state and market.

## LOGISTICS AS GOVERNANCE

Practices of self-organization undergird the logistical remapping of life and labour across circuits. Without engaging these practices it is impossible to discern the emergence of protocols whose functionality is rooted in the simultaneity of the formal and the informal. Nor is it possible to grasp why new points of transfer and translation must not only be mapped but be identified as sites of constitution.

We can glean lessons in the laboratory of China from patterns of self-organization in the informal economies of waste recycling industries. Like many without metropolitan *hukou* (residential permits), workers in waste recycling across China's major cities comprise part of the vast floating populations whose movement and forms of work are often shaped by social connections from the home town or village in the provinces. Aside from high profile occasions such as the Beijing Olympics or Shanghai Expo, when the city becomes a public relations event space, the informal economy of migrant workers in the recycling industries is tolerated by the authorities. Indeed, the self-organization of migrant workers provides a crucial point of connection between the formalized system of waste recycling and the informal economy whose capillaries form a network of collection and distribution that feed into the value chain of waste recycling.

These informal economies underpin the possibility of urban life across China. More notable in first and second tier cities, the integration of informal and formal waste economies connects with urban development, real estate prices, creative hypes and class transformation. To subtract the work of these migrants is to render the city dysfunctional and would amount to a form of economic sabotage. Here lies the potential power, barely visible and only translated with difficulty into established registers

of political expression, of the itinerant migrant worker whose mode of informality must necessarily be integrated within logistical systems of population control and economic management.

Consider the work of Chen Hangfeng. His short film *Santa's Little Helper* (2007) documents the Christmas decoration industry of a small village in Zhejiang Province. Based on agriculture and the manufacture of traditional crafts only two decades ago, the village is now the primary site for the production of the world's Christmas decorations, connecting the work of the villagers to the logistical systems adopted by global companies such as Wal-Mart. While the villagers organize their work through the relatively informal structure of the family unit, as distinct from the factory assembly line, it is precisely this informality that makes possible the fluctuation in worker numbers based on global demands for the decorations. Chen describes how the population of the village has grown from 1000 inhabitants 20 years ago to 10,000, based on the movement of migrants within China due to growth in the decoration industry.

That logistics is always adapting to contingencies tells us much about its pervasive power. No longer understood simply as a management framework but a political horizon, its forms of governance are intermodal and therefore relational. Logistics does not function exclusively within a system of representation. Linking formal and informal logics, forms of production that occur within this organizational paradigm include constituent as much as representational practices.

Logistical governance cuts across existing forms of territorialization, opening the borders of regions, culture and subjectivity to continuous modulation. It is crucial that we not simply dismiss logistics as the mere corollary of corporate fantasies of decentralized power, but begin to map the ways in which new circuits of biopolitical production require us to explore and engage their constituent elements. This includes the ways in which culture, nations and regions persist, not because of an essential status ascribed in political ontologies, but because of the way they frame the organization of (cultural) production. It is because of this materiality that culture can play its role as the condition of possibility of political reality.

## CONSTITUTION AS PRACTICE

Social mobilities reshape the borders of regions and cross with logistical systems of culture and commerce. By extension, value creation is generated through

environmental protocols by multinational firms in China whose autopoietic 'norm hungry' regimes (Teubner) intersect with global supply chains. By way of example, we refer to the Transit Labour visit to an IT factory that makes printed circuit boards in Songjiang industrial zone on the outskirts of Shanghai. During the introduction by the company's customer relations officer, we were informed that the branding and packaging of circuit boards occurs only in the final step of the chain with so-called Original Equipment Manufacturers. In the case of the factory we visited, these included Pioneer, Ericsson, NEC, Fujitsu, Apple, Alcatel, Sanjo, Canon, Sharp, Foxconn and Sony. The Original Equipment Manufacturers issue the factory with certificates attesting their adherence to industry and client determined environmental protocols. These include standards such as ISO14001 for the promotion of 'effective and efficient environmental management' as well as RoHS (Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive) and WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive).

Adherence to these standards directly affects the creation of value at other points in the supply chain. Beyond their function in supply chain management, the certificates confirming compliance have become important branding devices that offer reassuring and desirable messages to environmentally conscious consumers. This creation of value occurs through a multiplicity of industry and individual regulation mechanisms, increasingly monitored by private agencies rather than sovereign entities more directly subject to political control. It also links in multiple and ambivalent ways – compliance may reflect actual improvements in workplace health and safety – bringing producers and consumers in a web of relations shaped according to a new logic of circuits. And because logistics offers a framework to start mapping the agency of objects and subjects, we accord it a special significance in reflections on the political.

Because of their scope and centrality to the organization of life and labour, we contend that such practices of relation amount – in their aggregated effects rather than in a substantialist sense – to a new form of constitutionalism. We have obviously not entered a post-sovereign age where nations have ceased to exercise power over their territories, but we have entered an era in which economic and state sovereignty has been disaggregated to an extent even neoliberal theorists did not anticipate, giving non-governmental actors unprecedented influence. Not only does this inaugurate a new structural transformation of social and economic life, it also ushers in a new valency whose potential for political power combines distributed communication networks with focal points of intervention.

Logistics may or may not be able to contain and capitalize on such energies.

The constitutionalism enacted by and across such mixed governance regimes is not only partially disconnected from the state but also from international organizations created by states. Far from closing the gap between national or international rule making and the transnational operations of private actors, we see the disconnection of constitutionalism from its traditional link with representative politics and its adaptation to the social and cultural spheres. Arguably a new body of law and para-legal norms is emerging alongside and even against national and international law. The normative world is fragmenting as private governmental actors devise rules with global validity but sectoral limitation. The rules and standards that generate a particular kind of ecological branding device, for instance, are neither publicly comprehensive nor territorially differentiated.

Constitution, in this sense, requires neither legal texts nor mere situation awareness. Rather, it attests the growing indistinction between the rules of a system (or community) and the empirical facts or situations to which such rules should apply. This is precisely what we see in logistical systems of adaptation and innovation, which are constantly generating new rules. Constitution, to put it simply, is practice. As such, it is necessarily accompanied by a constituent excess that at once generates the system and refuses to be absorbed by it. Be it the self-organization of informal waste workers or the collective enunciations of platform researchers, there is always the impulse to connect by disconnecting. This is why the production of subjectivity continues to move through practices like logistics and spaces like China. Such movement defines the contours of a new politics.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
CULTURAL-FLOWS-LOGISTICAL-CIRCUITS](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/cultural-flows-logistical-circuits)

# FROM STATISTICAL TO LOGISTICAL POPULATIONS

STEFANO HARNEY



As the private sector has come to discover the potential wealth in commodities that produce and extend attention, mood, communication, social relations and opinion, the one commodity key to this production, commodity-labour, has increasingly yielded its secrets to that sector. Not only has this commodity-labour been trained in the university to do so, to be research active, in the most degraded sense of research as the mining of oneself and others for instrumental purposes, as in the research assessment exercise in the UK, but the university has experimented not just with the production but also the management of such subjectivities. Those experiments form the basis of the structure of today's private knowledge management firms. Marketing firms, software firms, media firms and creative industries firms resemble nothing so much in the way they operate today as university departments, full of peer review, mentoring, collaboration, experiment and crucially the bringing of all life into work, so familiar to the academic like no else except perhaps the artist, as Andrew Ross has well noted in his revealing book *No Collar*.

But this is not the end of the story, because if this real knowledge transfer was indeed so successful, why the change to social and economic impact? Of course there is no direct answer to this, but I would suggest it is symptomatic of a change in the universities, indeed a

change in research itself under capitalism. The research park is dying, its armed response teams, its manicured lawns and its protection of intellectual property rights behind reflective glass will not save it. Capital is not going to pay for all this any more, even indirectly through the state, nor does it need to. Capital is following research out into its new dispersed forms, its forms before and after intellectual property rights, and particularly and most importantly into its human form, where the investment is not in glass buildings and spraying ponds, but only in the upkeep of body and mind. And that upkeep, as Christian Marazzi puts it, is now the responsibility of the labour-power housed within it. So much cheaper, and so much more effective, as even popular concepts like 'wikinomics' hint, this new form of research and development occurs in 'communities' of people who work together out of a shared passion. Sound familiar? It ought to, and by the way it is very post-disciplinary, in both senses of the word. The self-motivated, self-organized teams of researchers populating this landscape starting everything from slow food movements to free software movements to new music scenes are today the generators of innovation 'harvested' by business. Pick up any business magazine and this 'open innovation' will be featured. And although this style of working together to invent new knowledge might have been pioneered, incubated we might say, in university departments, it may

be bad news for them, and not just because this way of working cannot be rented out. The massive disinvestment undertaken by governments in Europe and North America occurs not just at the behest of bond markets, but with the acquiescence of capital as a whole. Everyone in business and government is betting they can get their research for free in these communities of practice, the very communities whose spirit owes so much not just to the university at its best, but to the history of the Left, a history of mutual aid, shared property and egalitarianism.

But here's the final thing. The university is not passive in this process. It is still 'innovating'. No longer a place producing experts suitable to what Foucault would understand as a set of statistically organized populations, today the university produces what I would call experts for a logistical population, experts in logistics not statistics. And here the important new work of Ned Rossiter, Brett Neilson and their Transit Labour research group is itself pioneering. Business and government are no longer a matter of productivity through statistical variation, or at least not this alone, but about making different things fit together, things that look like they would not fit, making them fit faster, and in more directions. If statistics produced a population engaged in explorations of more and more relative surplus value, finer and finer ways to achieve productivity or public policy, depending on its application, logistics explores absolute surplus value. Logistical populations extend themselves absolutely by breaking through statistical categories and making connections, between life and work, public and private, political and economic, and organic and inorganic. Logistics is the work of extending circuits through new adaptations, translations, governances, scales and approximations.

And a new logistical subjectivity is being produced in the university in keeping with this dispersed and in some sense humanized form of R&D. This is a logistical subjectivity that mines information for compatibility, one that can plug itself in anywhere, without an adapter, as the labouring conduit between disparate forms of information, goods, cultures, languages, finances and affinities. This logistic subjectivity is the one we talk about when we talk about our teaching, when we say it is not the content of the play or poem or ethnography we are teaching that transfers skills to the student, but some general capacity to move between such contents, connecting them in a process of lifelong learning. What is the distance between what we say and what we mean here? Is our work not something like this connecting? Have we become only logistical experts ourselves?

I don't think so. Just try to study in the university today. Study – as what Fred Moten and I understand as that

permanently immature premature activity of collective thought without (an) end – is almost impossible in the university. The university wants us to come to a decision, an answer, a model, a theory, a policy. It wants to measure results. It wants deliverables. It wants us plugged in to the circuits. It wants to do logistics. But study unplugs, unplugs and yet remains in touch. Connects by disconnecting, in a dialectical irony CLR James, who exhorted us to only connect, would surely relish. We can still do this in the university through study, by disconnecting, drawing attention to the difficulty, care and undecidability of connection, by dragging connection down with us into the undercommons of the university. In the undercommons where many of us cannot not study, we find something incommensurate, untranslatable, something that sticks, causes friction, does not easily give itself up, something that stays common, that cannot be operationalized. In the face of logistical *dispositifs*, study does not work, does not connect. This kind of connection that does not connect in study may seem a fragile alternative, a local one in the face of the global, but measured by the statistical and now logistical resistances of state and capital deployed against it, it hardly seems fragile at all. Indeed its real impact may be precisely what the knowledge transfer and social and economic impact measurements are designed to regulate.

Excerpt from 'The Real Knowledge Transfer',  
*Social Text Periscope*, 26 August, 2010,  
<http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/impact/>

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
STATISTICAL-LOGISTICAL-POPULATIONS](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/statistical-logistical-populations)



# BAOSHAN ELECTRONICS MARKET

SHVETA SARDA

## 11:00AM – BEST CHOICE

The Baoshan Electronics market is right next to the subway station. The view is blocked by an outlet of a global food chain. Twenty year-old Pierre, a student of English Literature who has helpfully agreed to be my interpreter for the day, remembers the market from when he went to school, which is nearby. It was much smaller then. However, not too interested in electronics, he hasn't paid the market much attention.

We cross the road, which is busy with many people carrying their computers towards the market, and many crossing back with trolleys with printers, computers and bags with things electronic. The market begins quickly with shops selling printers, and looking at the different parts on display, I miss noticing how I entered it. Soon the row of shops to my right is selling audio equipment. I walk past many, till I walk into one. There are many kinds of audio equipment – loudspeakers, speakers, amplifiers, mixers. I am confused. The young man, with a large, muscular build and stained teeth looks calmly at us, I think fairly certain we are not going to buy anything. Of course, people come into his shop when they are looking for something specific. All the equipment in his shop looks professional and carries the label JBN. We are handed a brochure and allowed to stumble out of the shop. He does tell us, though, since we ask, that everything is made in Guangdong. We walk through the shop to the other side, where after a gap can be seen a big hall with many rows and columns of stalls.

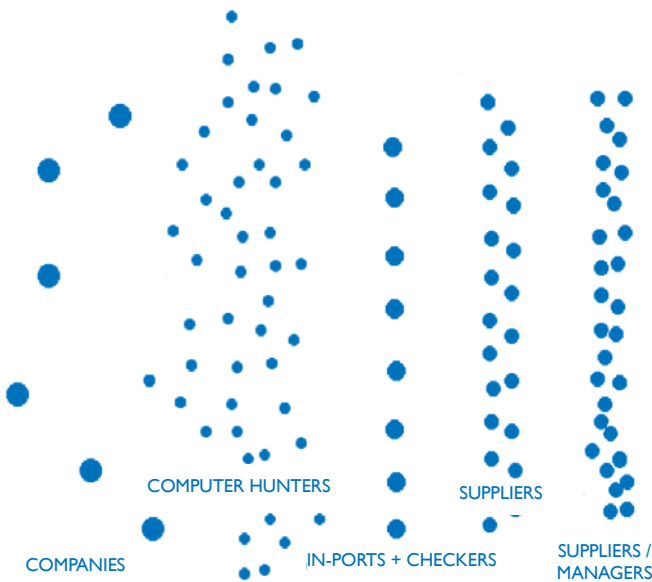
I turn the brochure about. At the back it says in fine print – *We would run the legal duty for republication. On the cover the text says – JBN (Jaibailun), Professional audio systems, the images and sound technology of USA, the best choice.*

## 11:35AM – COMPUTER HUNTERS

Inside the hall, which is quiet, past many stalls selling laptops, is this laptop stall. It is not very big in terms of size: a long table with two rows of laptops, each one with an A4 handwritten sheet of specs (in Chinese), and a shelf on the wall with more laptops. The manager – the only person manning the stall – knows we are not here to buy, because we tell him so, but switches on the laptop we have been looking at while contemplating how to begin the conversation.

This season the stall sells Sony; next season it may be a different brand. Companies update their tech infrastructure. Whenever old computers are replaced with new in the US or in Japan, computer hunters from China track them down and collect them. Individuals bringing their laptops to his shop are very rare. Computer hunters transport the laptops to China, where they are tested and checked and passed on to suppliers. This shop has a dedicated group of suppliers, and they supply according to the order he places. This year the demand for Sony has been high, and so he has asked suppliers to get him Sony. He is a seller, but is a distributor too, supplying to managers in different cities, to shops similar to his in different provinces. The region doesn't matter, when there is a demand, he supplies. He has been here two years and has two stalls. The other stall is in the same market, and sells a different brand of laptops. 'The market hasn't changed much in this time', he says. 'Sometimes, more people come, sometimes fewer. It is life that keeps changing'.

He was in manufacturing (computers) till two years ago. With the recession, he lost his job, and shifted here. The move would not have been without its share of uncertainty, and there is a tremor in his body, his words are rapid, though his voice is calm as he tells Pierre of this shift and then waits for Pierre to translate. Things will only get better, he says now. He started with one, but now has two stalls. He will grow further. He replaces the A4 sheet with the tech specs on the laptop, a tiny but effective gesture that conveys it is now time for business as usual,



time for our conversation to end. Both Pierre and I are, we figure from the speed with which we walk out of the hall, a bit overwhelmed. Neither of us expected, I think, to be let into life and its entanglements so soon. We haven't even stepped into the river and it's time already to step back, sit down and have some coffee.

### FLASHBACK AT NOON

We are sitting with a cardboard cup of coffee inside the fast food joint. Pierre remembers coming to this market, when he was younger, with his father and being furtively approached by someone offering to sell them a stolen bicycle, somewhere right behind the electronics market.

### 12:20PM – NOT TOO FAR AWAY

It's lunch time in the market. Everyone is eating out of thermocol tiffins, all supplied, it would seem, from one or perhaps more shops nearby. We have entered from a different side and shops here are selling CCTV cameras, webcams, GPS equipment. There is a continuous sound of conversations. We stop in front of a shop which is empty, save for a small table at its front end. There are two men – one young, the other older – behind the table, which has one A4 sheet with text and visiting cards on it, which many people are taking away. The board they have hung from the roof behind the table says Huaxi Securities, and we assume, considering the part of the market it is in, that the company sells security equipment. So we are a bit puzzled by the text on the table, which Pierre translates – If you buy for 10,000, you will get a phone, a beeper, etcetera for free. We inquire and are told it's a stock exchange firm.

We follow an old man carrying a large bag, gathering up garbage from the floor as he walks. He turns at a bend and we are distracted by what looks like a far end of the market. There is a lady here with a push cart, which could mean slow speed movement through narrow, perhaps uneven lanes. The cart, filled with neat, compact rows of movie CDs in paper jackets and plastic covers, Chinese and English with Chinese subtitles, has been redesigned so that when it's stationary, it stands on legs and the wheels rise up from the ground a couple of inches. She lives not too far from here, she tells us when we ask her. I'm yet to start looking through the CDs when the lady pulls out many, showing them to me one by one to figure out my taste, and takes a posture of great amusement that I won't get interested. Both Pierre and I are a bit uncomfortable I think – to look through her things only to extend our stay and make notes when I'm not buying and she's trying to sell is a transaction neither of us want to be part of. I'm unsure now; I'm in a market after all. Pierre and I walk away and reach the end of the lane when I'm more comfortable and remember I saw on her cart a copy of Avatar with Chinese subtitles. We head back to buy it. 5 RMB, she tells me and compliments me on my 'Indian' looks. I try to haggle and say 4. She's more amused than ever – once she indicated with her fingers, 'five', to a foreigner, that is a price of 5 RMB and was given 50.

We are further inside the market, amidst stalls/shops selling mobile phones now. This still seems to be a spillover from the main building, but less transitory looking than the stalls we have been to till now. There seems to have been growth too. The flooring on the lane we are walking on is different from the front part of the stalls/shops, which in turn is different from the inner part of the stalls/shops. The roof above us, as we walk in the lane, is made of a series of projections from the stalls/shops. Pierre says from what he can hear of conversations, most people working in the market are not from Shanghai. We stop at one shop and look at the Nokia N-series phones on display inside a glass case that can be opened from the other side. They are all twin sim card enabled. The two young boys sitting behind the table have come to Shanghai recently – a couple or more months ago. The shop belongs to their uncle, they are both from Guangzhou, and the phones are from Spain, they say.

### 1:30PM – A QUIET LUNCH

Pierre points out as we go for lunch that there are many more markets we can go to – several two to three storied buildings in the area, all of which are electronics markets.



### 2:15PM – COLLECTORS

We are walking along the road, skirting the market. Things being sold from shops are lower resource base here. Lights, lighters, small speakers, toys, thermoses, animated images, etc. Across the road a woman is selling, from her bicycle, squeezable plastic dolls with big breasts. I'm drawn by persistent loud noise – of people speaking, but it is clear it is something being played. Three two-wheelers (scooters) are parked next to each other, their bums towards the road, each with a TV set fixed on it, playing what look like theatre or TV serials.

Mr Ren has a blue scooter. There is a TV showing a play in which a man and a woman in very bright costumes are talking loudly to each other. And also on the scooter is a cardboard box filled with DVDs, which have been burnt, labelled by hand and put into plastic covers. Mr Ren is selling comedy from North East China, which is very famous, but has grown popular in Shanghai only over the last year. Before that there would be performances here, yes, but only on New Year, etc. Mrs Ren is at home burning DVDs while her husband is here, selling them. Mr and Mrs Ren have a collection of about 2000 comedies from North China. There are many local groups there, which perform for entertaining in clubs, on stage, etc. A camera person records these performances and also does post-production. Then they are distributed in Shanghai. The distributor brings Mr and Mrs Ren demo tapes, and they watch each and every one of them, then select

what they like and what they select they make copies of themselves, at their house. Mr Ren chose for me three sets of three DVDs. He specially selected them, ones which abound with invectives and abuse words, which he is confident Delhi will find worthy. He also gave me his phone number and promised to take me home, which he said, 'is not far away', to meet his wife, see how they work and browse at leisure through their collection next time I'm in Shanghai.

### 3:00PM – GOING DANCING

We're still walking along the outskirts of the market when I hear familiar music – the remix version of the Hindi song Noori, sung by Asha Bhonsle. The seller is wearing a sleeveless black shirt and when he sees me walking towards him he smiles, says namaste and indicating further recognition of where I come from, says, 'Gandhi, yes?' His stall runs from a small wooden box, which is waist high, and standing amidst a clutch of other such stalls, behind a row of bicycles and scooters, each of which seems to be held together with reams of scotch tape. He sells dance numbers in Hindi and Chinese; he has downloaded individual songs from an online site by paying a fee for each. These he makes collections of and burns onto CDs. His CDs have a black paper cover with the song names in Chinese, in white print. Beside the song names is printed his phone number. Pierre has gone in the direction of the fast food place and I follow him and

wait near the building. The woman selling an assortment of computer parts – keyboards, mother boards, etc. – and mobile phones which are gathered up inside a green plastic box, wires which are kept inside a cardboard box and a printer from a cycle operated mobile cart, is smiling at my interest in her child's squiggle on the side of her white cart. There are two children, and they are just an earshot away. We all pose for photos in front of the cart.

### 3:30PM – SCREENSAVERS

We walk back into the market, see a computer shop and ask the man managing it whether this would be a shop we could come to if we had, say, a Compaq Presario 2200, which is not a new model, to have a part replaced, or the RAM increased. He directs us to the first floor of the building.

The first floor is more laptops and we walk to one end of it. All along the wall at an unbroken, though not entirely unpartitioned, row of tables are many young boys – they all look like they are in their late teens, and they are all bent over open laptops, hard at work dismantling and putting things back together. We apologise to one young man and ask if he is learning here. He has nice, stylishly done hair. He is eighteen years old, and has been here a few months, he says. He didn't know anything about computers before he came here, several months ago, but is now adept at hardware. The others too are learning as they work repairing laptops, and each one will be around for one to two years, after which most will leave. Back downstairs, Pierre and I walk through tables/stalls with laptops, mouse pads, webcams and so on. I lose Pierre because I spend too much time looking at and photographing the incredible wall papers and screensavers on the laptops. One of my favourite displays takes its feed from a webcam and I can see the market in it, framed by vines and flowers.

### 4:15PM – COLLECTORS 2

Pierre is a little unwell and has to leave. I walk around, and am in front of one of the side faces of the building. There are many sellers here, and they have set up their wares on mats or sheets or directly on the ground. It starts to drizzle and suddenly the place empties out. But a couple of minutes later, the rain has stopped and the sellers are all back. I stop in front of one spread for several minutes, watching a woman wearing a hat set her things up. Potential buyers have gathered, and are picking up and looking closely, carefully at each object they think they might buy. Later I make a note, from memory, of the things she was selling:

- Two sunglasses (one yellow, one blue)
- One internet cable
- Three calculators
- Many ICs
- Plastic pipe joiners
- Tennis balls (many, in a bag) and badminton racquets
- One phone charger
- Tools – assorted (screw drivers, etc.)
- A screw driver case (some missing)
- Spoons and forks (few)
- Small bulbs

### 4:45PM – CONGREGATION

I walk along the building, towards the main road, making my way back towards the subway station. Just ahead of the shops selling printers, everyone is standing still, looking in the same direction. There is absolute silence, save the commanding voice of a man giving someone instructions. It's a police van; there are three policemen outside the vehicle. Someone has been arrested; he is inside the van. Onlookers have gathered – people have come out of the shops and are standing a short distance from the van. Tiny lights like blue stars from one of the light equipment shops are dancing over the scene. The van starts and I begin to walk on. A few steps ahead, in a small space made by a high railing that protrudes onto the street, two women and one man have sat down in the corner with their large white bags half-filled with scrap electronic materials they have been gathering from the market.

### ENDS

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/BAOSHAN-ELECTRONICS-MARKET](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/baoshan-electronics-market)

# FUTURE FUNCTIONS: ASPIRATION, DESIRE AND FUTURES

ANJA KANNGIESER AND MANUELA ZECHNER  
WWW.FUTUREARCHIVE.ORG



## SOME FUTURE FUNCTIONS

The future doesn't exist (yet), that much we know. Speaking of the future can never be matter-of-fact, since it always means to posit something that is to come, thus to make claims on the present. People speak of the future when they want to call something into being: it's not by coincidence that these are mostly politicians, advertisements, NGOs or activists.

Doing the work of the future archive – getting people to speak to their futures – reveals different tendencies of speaking to and of the future. Three of those could be: progressivist, speculative and desiring. While the future archive method focuses primarily on the function of desire, it constantly works through the former two, since they are an important part of most people's understanding of the future. What does it mean to speak of the future as a function?

We take the concept of a function from Foucault's idea of an 'author-function'. Foucault understands this primarily as a function of the subject, saying we should ask 'under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?' If the future is a function of discourse, it can configure the speaking subject in different ways. To speak of the future is to position oneself in different ways, depending on how one speaks of it: in determinist, speculative or desiring terms (this list may not be exhaustive).

The progressivist mode of speaking of the future has been commonplace across what we may call modernity – centring around ideas of technological advancement and linear historical developments. An example would be the

Futurama at the New York World fair in 1939, showing the future in collective-determinist, techno-scientific images and architecture. The subtext of the futurama – as an architectural as much as filmic, textual and relational entity – is that the future is coming, like an unstoppable wave, carried by 'progress', restricted to the capitalist 'west' yet sooner or later to hit the rest of the world. This type of future function is based on representations, predictions and promises, asserting that populations as much as individuals have to tune up to it. Whether it's a device for governing populations via their expectations and hopes, a literary device that helps produce grand scale science fiction, or a futurism that resonates murkily with fascism, this mode of future is particularly visible in 19th and 20th century industrializing nations.

The second function here is that of speculation, which corresponds to contemporary cultures of speculation and finance, variously called post-modern, post-fordist, liquid, etc. It is a mode of thinking futurity based on a multiplication of scenarios, calculations of profit and risk, both on a macroeconomic scale – the stock exchange being the paradigmatic space where this function is exercised – and on an everyday scale, via the projection of individual opportunities and risks. This future resides in micro-movements rather than large images. Where the picture of the modern future outlines a collective scenery, the speculative mode is an individualizing one based in small calculations, functional to neoliberal governmentality. In this mode, the future is something every individual struggles to gain privileged access to, having to invent and plan for every minute – to tune up individually, competing with everyone. This is a more fragmented version (on an ideological level) and vision (on a subjective level) of futurity, based in cultures of projects, credit and debt. There's no big promise here but rather an incentive to speculate and compete.

Thirdly, the desiring function of the future. This is much more slippery. It lies in the bodily and psychic modes of being fascinated by or attracted to possibilities. When we relate to the future in a desiring way, we don't end up with images but with sensations, feelings, maybe ideas. While large scale images and manufactured hopes are often used to activate, and in the same instance capture and channel desire, this does not make desire less of a function since all of the three functions outlined here have propensities to blur – for instance desires can also activate large scale images or speculations. What is of interest is the question of how to stay with this desiring modality. It's a way of relating to the future through our present bodies and souls, letting ourselves drift to imagine what things may open onto. It's a matter of tuning into rather than tuning up to. Desire carries the vague sensation that often brings forth moments of invention, and as such is the level that the future archive method tries to access, even if it never entirely 'succeeds'. Unlike success in speech acts, the force of articulations of desire is never just a matter of external conditions being right, but of resonances within the self as much as those between self, others and world.

Living in neoliberal societies, we are used to a predominance of the speculative function, to advertisements and policies inciting us to invest, risk, project. This shapes our subjectivity and life in many ways, making us anxious, precarious, hyper-flexible. How may this translate to China – or to ask based on our future conversations in Shanghai during the Transit Labour project, how may it translate to young Chinese workers of an industry that epitomizes neoliberalism – the Creative Industries? The work-life experiences we were told about didn't seem too far off from the self-exploiting, nervous tone of what some call post-fordist labour. While places like the Expo still seem to be very determined by the second mode of futurity, the realities of young people that have migrated to the city to work as creatives seem to be filled with speculation, projects, insecurity, unpaid labour and investment into CVs. The creatives (workers and students) we spoke to were not too preoccupied with China's future at large nor with the ideological project that the communist party sets out. Their struggle appeared to be an individualized one.

### THE FUTURE IS NEON?

Shanghai has large stakes invested in her projections of the future – the city she has already become for the millions living and working within her territories, and the futures she encourages as the 'next great world city'. Since May 2010, millions of people have travelled across

China to participate in her grandest scenario, the Expo, to consume the imaginaries laid out in pavilions by hundreds of nation-states and corporations. Here tourist-citizens fill their Expo passports with the paraphernalia marking their collective constitution of the coming worlds envisioned for and by them; worlds dazzling with new technologies for 'sustainable urban ecologies'. This is Shanghai's vision of becoming. Over the past several years, millions have migrated to Shanghai for the chances they believe she holds for them. One young migrant working at Baoshan Electronics Market told us that he moved from the Anhui province not for better pay, housing or work opportunities, but for more fun and excitement. The social imaginaries and the experience economies that circulate around and through the city are magnetic, and the speculations and desires of the young people coming to Shanghai call into being her many possible trajectories.

The Expo has a lingering technodeterminism that takes the form of LEDs and UFO shapes, spectacles of size and color, placing China in a macro image of the future. Yet the Expo also shows an activation of speculative subjectivity – spectacle molded into civil modes of experience economy, discourses of sustainability, investment and globality. As such, the Expo seems to be preparing something not for the world to admire so much as for Chinese people to experience and take on – a pedagogical project of instilling logics of civil society, competitiveness and investment. Everyone gets to take away the desirable Expo packet, a box mixing older with newer futures.

### THE DREAM OF SOMETHING MORE

Throughout China, young people are flocking to the metropolises in search of work in creative and communications based industries. Internal migration is most prevalent, with youths moving from rural or smaller townships to cities such as Shanghai – 'the city of other people's dreams'. This movement is configured through desires and aspirations, for escape perhaps, for capital gain and commodities, for a perceived elevation in social and personal value, for love, excitement and pleasure. Shanghai has done much to encourage these aspirations and the futures that can be found here. It is projected that creative sectors will generate 10% of Shanghai's GDP by the end of 2010. Whether this figure is accurate or not is less interesting than the particular confidence in continually expanding service economies it articulates, and the expectations it gives rise to.

The future Shanghai is reaching towards is one filled with workers of technology and invention. The innovations industry is underpinned by vast networks of often seemingly

unrelated occupations and sites of labour. This spans from the unregulated electronic waste collectors to the technicians in circuit board factories, the legions of factory workers assembling machine components to the interns at the photocopier and the marketing executive releasing viral propaganda. The creative supply chain is one productive of, and producing, invisible relations of commodities and services. The public face of this is often epitomised by, and stereotyped as, the in-demand successful creative designer or the corporate head negotiating a vertiginously paced lifestyle. Less fantasised about are the hordes of young assistants and graduates, migrants and casual workers that may struggle to coalesce their hopes in the present. The future is one of deferral. The promises inspired by these images of success drive an incessant searching out for a forward momentum, giving rise to a belief in a material concatenation of cause and effect: if I do this... then this... then this, then I will achieve what I aspire to.

During conversations with a few of the creatives that had migrated to Shanghai we found that none were satisfied with their current conditions, but all felt they were on the path for the eventual fulfilment of their potential. There was a common perspective that (self) exploitation, low or unwaged labour, competition and intermittent projects were a rite of passage that would culminate in capital security, socio-cultural and familial prestige. We found conflicting longings for freedom, time for individual creative praxis and enjoyment, which were quite active and positive in some people, as possibilities rather than sacrifices. One young woman who had been working for an advertising agency saw her future as a painter, an arts student wanted to make comics: these desires jostle together to create narratives of what may come, which overlap and grate against one another, complicated by external and internal pressures. For the young people we spoke with, their coming of age in Chinese capitalist systems and ideologies is steeped in contradictory forces that both elevate individualist achievement and commodity accumulation on the one hand, and a communitarian ethos of social reproduction on the other.

The method we used to open dialogue about desirable futures was a series of mappings: work/life balances, time budgets, social and work relations, zones of passage through Shanghai and bodily sites affected by labour. These mappings, while recalling social science techniques, are oriented towards the facilitation of exchange rather than the collation of quantitative information. The stimulus provided by the various maps affords a point of reference that helps to invigorate conversation through seeking clarification. This allows for a mode of interaction that is not founded on assumption, but on a dialogic and naive relation, which may shift depending on

the particular conversational constituencies. The maps themselves concentrated on intertwined psychosomatic, labour and social conditions. For some they served a quasi-therapeutic function, giving space for reflection on their own past and future processes of subjectivation as students, interns, workers, creatives and as civil and socio-cultural subjects.

## THE ASPIRING CLASS

There have been critiques that the demographic of workers and interns classified under the rubric of the young creative class are a-political and wholly imbued with egocentric concerns of economic wealth, fame and social prestige. A number of the young creatives we spoke with described their background as working or middle class, often migrating from rural territories either with their families or alone for higher education. At the same time, the broad sweep of the cultural revolution and the attempted rehabilitation of the bourgeoisie means that class composition was fundamentally altered, thus making the tracing out of class history one that needs to refer back to serial generations rather than only to the most recent. Thus these industries contain diversities that cannot be homogenised. The effects that this seems to have had on the younger generations may contribute to the searching out for a different kind of relationship to social reproduction and capitalist accumulation.

The composition of this labour force must be seen from within this history, but without negating present labour conditions that challenge conventional Marxist conceptions of class constitution. The determined aspiration and idealism – along with cultural narratives around knowledge, experience and work – that underpins young workers' acceptance of unsatisfactory labour situations must not be necessarily dismissed as a-political.

This is not to deny the recognition of a rising elite in creative and innovative sectors, or the commercial potential in these industries, but rather to acknowledge the wide disparities of material conditions and wages within the sector that problematise meta-readings of class formation. In this context, the challenge seems to be about finding different narratives around knowledge, experience and work. Indeed, the negotiation of a sustainable desiring access to futurity is a huge one no matter where and when, and needs to be worked out on a collective level – in sync with the singular instances it is made of.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
FUTURE](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/future)





# MY TRIP TO SANTA'S WORKSHOP

CHEN HANGFENG

Throughout Chinese history, peasants have always been oppressed by landlords. If they wanted to have a better life, they needed to find a way to earn more income by selling handcrafts or agricultural products. On the other hand, the peasants were always very creative about what they could do, always looking for new ideas. This produced a level of grass-roots creativity and pushed society forward, moving at a tremendous speed.

The trip to 'Chinese Santa's workshop' happened in 2007 in a village in southern Zhejiang province, near Wenzhou – a city known as the capital of fake goods. The village is known for producing a very large percentage of China's Christmas exports (China is reportedly the source for 80% of the world's Christmas ornaments and accessories), and this village alone produces 50% of the world's Christmas ornaments.

The countryside looked quite green on the way there on the bus, even in late October. As I got closer, I started to notice a difference: outside of one of the houses, the grain was spread on the ground for drying, alongside it was a collection of shiny colored balls also spread on the ground for drying. Piles of garbage were dotted with green and red colored stuff, and small white Styrofoam balls mushroomed along the side of the roadway. What surprised me about the first 'Chinese Santa's workshop' I visited was that it was an ordinary two-storey peasant home filled with an array of colorful things. A friend of mine, who used to come here and visit his grandparents, told me: 'it was just the best place for spending the summer holidays when I was a kid, lots of bamboo forests, and the creek was crystal clear. If you jumped in for a swim, you could easily catch some fish and shrimp'.

According to one of the workers from the workshop, 'This kind of manufacturing has had a history of over 20 years. The villagers used to produce crafts such as painted paper-fans and bamboo blinds during the low-season for agriculture. Then some foreigners visited the village and came back the year after with a proposal to make Christmas ornaments'. He laughed: 'Some of us still have

no idea what Christmas is about, but everyday here has felt like Christmas for almost 20 years'.

When I walked through the village, it almost felt like a survey of how Christmas ornaments are made: disco balls, red balls, golden stars ... Even the working conditions were pretty 'family-style', and everyone seemed quite happy about what they were doing: chatting, joking and laughing. I couldn't imagine how boring this would be if done on an assembly line. Later on, I found out that some of them have two sources of income: part-time farming and part-time work as 'Santa's little helpers'. They even hired workers from some poorer regions of China – the number of migrants has swelled the population from 1,000 inhabitants 20 years ago to more than 10,000 today. For the migrant workers, there is no base salary as it is all calculated by piece-work – more productivity equals a higher wage. I heard that a hard worker who works 8-10 hours a day, 6 days a week, makes a good 3,000 RMB a month. Though this may seem like a low figure, it is still much better than the average farming income.

I also found out that I missed the peak season, which is usually the summer time. By the time I arrived, most of the products were already on their way across the world, getting ready to adorn the homes of the West. But the villagers were still not taking a break – they were already working on the samples for the next Christmas.

## NOTE:

I made a video piece after the trip. Originally, the video was screened inside a small wooden box wrapped like a Christmas present, so people could only see the video through a small peep hole in the box.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
MY-TRIP-SANTAS-WORKSHOP](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/my-trip-santas-workshop)







# LOCATING DISPLACEMENT: ENVISIONING THE COMPLEX 'DIASPORIZATION' OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

PAUL GLADSTON

The term contemporary Chinese art is now widely used in an Anglophone context to denote various forms of Western-influenced avant-garde, experimental and museum-based visual art produced as part of the liberalization of culture that has taken place within the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the confirmation of Deng Xiaoping's program of economic and social reforms at the third plenary session of the XI Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in December 1978. The use of this term extends not only to scholarly texts and exhibition catalogues, but also to an ever-growing body of magazine and newspaper articles, tourist guides and market surveys aimed at popular audiences eager to learn more about the development of a newly revitalized post-revolutionary China. For writers in Mandarin Chinese (putonghua), the corresponding term is *Zhongguo dangdai yishu*, which is often translated literally into English within a Mandarin-speaking context as 'Chinese contemporary art'.

Due to continuing state restrictions on free market enterprise and the mobility of labour within and across the borders of the PRC, throughout most of the 1980s contemporary Chinese art was produced and exhibited almost exclusively within what is conventionally referred to as mainland China (that is to say, those spaces claimed by Beijing as part of the PRC other than Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan). Since the late 1980s, however, the production and exhibiting of contemporary Chinese art has become increasingly internationalized, not only through the inclusion of works of contemporary Chinese art in dedicated exhibitions and survey shows outside mainland China (key examples of which include the now notorious *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition held at the Pompidou Centre in 1989 and the widely toured exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*) and the en bloc emigration of large numbers of contemporary Chinese artists, curators and critics in response to the political crackdown which took place within mainland China in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen killings of 1989, but

also through the assimilation of contemporary Chinese art as a highly saleable commodity by the international art market. In light of which, there has been a tendency among more critically informed commentators – including Chinese artists, curators and critics such as Hou Hanru, Gao Minglu, Fei Dawei, Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi and Huang Yongping – to view contemporary Chinese art as a suitably transnational focus for internationalized post-structuralist discourse and in particular the critique of Western Orientalism/cultural imperialism associated with the terms post-colonialism and Third Space.

At the same time, however, there has been a durable assumption running throughout much of the published literature on the subject of contemporary Chinese art (whether Chinese or non-Chinese in origin) that the term 'contemporary Chinese art' refers more or less exclusively to work produced by artists of ethnic Chinese descent who were born in mainland China and whose careers were initially established there. As a result, there has been a widespread tendency to define contemporary Chinese art as an object of art-historical and critical knowledge in strongly 'core' nationalistic terms by marginalizing or excluding from consideration as contemporary Chinese art the work of Chinese artists whose ethnic/cultural identities as Chinese cannot be linked directly to the geographical space of mainland China – namely, those identified with the extended Chinese diaspora and those living and working in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Moreover, such thinking has also tended to overlook or downplay marked differences in approach toward the production of contemporary Chinese art within mainland China in favour of a more art-historically manageable and, to mainstream Chinese sensibilities, politically acceptable sense of overarching cultural 'Chineseness'. While mainland China retains a notional identity as a unified geopolitical space under the centralized governance of Beijing (distinct from those of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan), and while that identity is strongly allied to the supposed socio-

cultural homogeneity of a Han Chinese ethnic majority as well as the imposition since the 1950s of putonghua as a national lingua franca, it is in actuality the site of numerous historically contrasting regional cultural and social identities, a number of which, particularly in northern and south-eastern parts of China, have strongly informed the development of contemporary Chinese art. Despite the importance of these contrasting regional cultural and social identities to the development of contemporary Chinese art, most commentators have persisted in framing contemporary Chinese art as a more or less culturally homogenous, geographically bounded phenomenon. It is therefore possible to discern a powerful contradiction in relation to the discursive framing of contemporary Chinese art; one which, on the one hand, embraces notions of cultural diversity and interaction and which, on the other, seeks to anchor contemporary Chinese art culturally and historically within the fixed contexts of a particular time – 1978 to the present – and a particular place – mainland China.

Arguably, there is, then, a pressing need to develop alternative interpretative frameworks that give a rather less partisan/managerialist account of the highly complex and uncertain conditions in relation to which the production and reception of contemporary Chinese art now takes place both within and beyond the present-day borders of mainland China. One possible avenue of exploration here can be found in relation to arguments recently put forward by Alexandra Chang with regard to the envisioning of a distinctly 'diasporic' Asian-American visual art. According to Chang, Asian-American art, which includes work produced by the Chinese-American cultural diaspora, can be understood to have developed in relation to the shifting of the term diaspora from its conventional function as a noun to that of a verb; a shift in usage that, as Chang would have it, can be understood to signify 'that which is performed through art, writing, dialogue – performing the untranslatable linkage-unifying of difference through the act of participation'. For Chang the key issue at stake in relation to the interpretation of a diasporic Asian-American art is that it can be understood to go 'beyond a single aesthetic ... into a performative aesthetics of connectivity and linkage as found in art collective formations and other actively practicing communities of affinity'. Moreover, as Chang avers, by viewing Asian-American art 'as performative connectivity within a global perspective rather than as artificially cut and isolated from a global Asian diasporic framework', not only do the stereotypes of Asian-American art posed by contentions of a single Asian-American aesthetic disappear due to its diverse nature, but there emerges instead 'an aesthetics incorporating constantly shifting identities and social-political and historical issues'. In

other words, Chang's view of Asian-American art is one that sees the performance of dispersal and displacement associated with the term diaspora as a means not simply toward the rejection of cultural homogeneity, but also the imagining of a global network of persistently unfolding cultural decontextualizations and remotivations that is nevertheless able to cohere around a certain, commonly held (though, in this context, undeniably provisional/non-essential) sense of cultural identity. Here, Chang can be understood to have gone beyond a somewhat static view of cultural difference by drawing on diaspora as a metaphor for a persistent state of synchronic-diachronic (spatio-temporal) displacement, one that is arguably commensurate with a Derridean conception of the sign as something that is always-already in a state of deconstructive dislocation (connectedness-disconnectedness), persistently differing-deferring not only from/to other signs, but also from/to itself as it is continually recontextualized and remotivated (translated) along serially incomplete chains of signification (both within and between differing language systems).

To return to the question of the interpretation of contemporary Chinese art, such thinking would appear to be apposite in that it suggests the possibility of an interpretative approach with immediate sensitivity to the distinctly uncertain and constantly shifting boundaries of the field of contemporary Chinese artistic practice both within and beyond the present geographical borders of mainland China – but one that does not lose sight of a necessary practical sense of interconnective 'Chineseness' (the locating of displacement, if you will). Crucial here is the notion that diaspora is not an addition to, but a pervasive condition of, Chinese cultural identity both within and beyond the present day borders of the People's Republic of China. Instead of upholding the somewhat abstract and, it must be said, static internal-external cultural duality that currently informs the discursive structuring of contemporary Chinese as an object of knowledge, it is therefore possible to envisage an alternative conceptual positioning that allows for a rather more far-reaching and dynamic understanding of the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and Chinese cultural identity.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
LOCATING-DISPLACEMENT](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/locating-displacement)



# SHANGHAI: CITY OF OTHER PEOPLE'S DREAMS

JUSTIN O'CONNOR  
AND GU XIN

The title of this text comes from Jon Solomon's reworking of Patti Smith's opening lines in *Gloria*. The resonance with 'somebody else's sins' and the almost satanic rejection of a dominant discourse were just perfect at a time when the whole world seems enamored of Shanghai's glamorous modernity. Patti Smith also takes us back to an *ur-scene* of contemporary urban regeneration – the transformation of 1970s Lower Manhattan from economic basket case and anarchic playground to the neo-bohemian property boom charted by Sharon Zukin in *Loft Living*.

Unlike national government, city governments have more direct or 'hands-on' connections to those driving and corralling the global flows of labour and capital; they have a stake in such direct involvements in a way the more abstract interventions of national governments do not. In China the city government directly controls much of the real estate and have high levels of influence over the state owned enterprises and related satellites that so mark the Chinese economy – especially in Shanghai. Flows of diaspora capital, FDI and state generated capital give the city much more control than many in the West. It makes the city government a central actor in those networks of gatekeepers, brokers, intermediaries and connected entrepreneurs which characterize the urban governance of Shanghai.

But what of the generation of symbolic value? How is this learned, understood, generated and assembled? By what processes did the city begin to mobilise this dimension, so much more amorphous and immaterial than the hard flows of capital and labour?

Zukin's account of lower Manhattan headlines the role of artists; but the other key actors were those urban conservationists whose learned and documenting gaze transformed the detritus of an industrial district into an object of historical value. Similar conditions were also present in Shanghai and there have been a few major successes in getting the city to recognize the heritage value of an older Shanghai. The colonial buildings of the Bund and the mansions of the former French

Concession, certainly; but also the industrial buildings whose patina resided in documented pasts rather than any late Victorian iron work or art deco notably absent from many of these brutally basic factories. As in Lower Manhattan, those passionate about this industrial heritage increasingly included artists who sometimes, though not always, occupied these artist studios-in-waiting. Of course the artists knew about such potential uses way before the government, because they knew about Western cities on a much more 'street' or fine-grained level than the officials hopping on and off tour buses.

In the 1990s urban China began a huge push towards city branding, with the bigger cities – notably Beijing and Shanghai – going for 'global city' status. Picking up on twenty years of similarly ambitious policy making in the West, the east coast cities looked to building the cultural infrastructure as a key ingredient. Concert halls, museums, art galleries, theatres, performing arenas and so on were quickly assembled to present local histories coupled with Western art and entertainment. These initiatives looked to Western models of cultural quarters or precincts. At the same time the traditional cultural infrastructures were set within rapidly transforming cityscapes with all the skylines and shopping, leisure and entertainment options associated with the performance indicators acceptable to in-flight magazines. Trumping both of these were the large-scale events and festivals represented by the Olympics and the Expo, both part of a whole iceberg of such events now moving across the globe in search of local sponsors. Finally, from around 2002, Chinese cities began to promote the cultural industries and, from around 2005, the creative industries through a series of policy initiatives. The most immediately visible of these (as opposed to agglomerations, mergers and tax breaks) was the growth of 'creative clusters'.

The growth of the cultural and creative industries in China has led to an interesting extension of the work around 'immaterial labour' and 'creative work' being done in the West. Here we would point to another aspect of these 'industries' in the form of creative workers as 'cultural intermediaries'. In a city like Shanghai cultural

intermediaries refer first to those local and international actors who were concerned to transform the image of the city at the most visible scale – architects and master planners, a complex mix of Western expertise and Chinese ‘interpretation’ or ‘application’. It would include cultural consultants such as Charles Landry or Rem Koolhaas, or even Richard Florida and John Howkins, who were able to set a context within which ‘policy exchange’ might take place. Much more influential or at least pervasive was the rising influence of advertising, branding, design and media firms on the cityscape and the ‘imagined community’ of Shanghai.

Unlike the SoHo of *Loft Living* the artists, bohemians, critics, curators, buyers, gallery owners and so on in Shanghai were rarely ahead of the game. Foreign migrants usually followed the lead of local (or Hong Kong-based) developers, frequently buying into an imagined Shanghai which was being assembled elsewhere. As for local Chinese artists, historians, academics, dealers – they had no power to purchase that which they were re-valuing, only move into proto-clusters. It is an open question as to the extent to which their vision and their symbolic re-valuation was adopted by property owners and local officials. In Shanghai, a sophisticated city exposed to the many micro-currents of Western art practice, knowing how to recognize and use such re-valuation was something officials picked up very quickly. The correct ‘feel’ of an art cluster is one of the hardest things for a government to learn. It is related to a kind of aesthetic ‘autonomy’ that nothing in either the culture or politics of modern China seems to have prepared them for. The other non-visual art based cultural practices of music, performance, literature and even traditional Chinese culture have very little impact on the urban symbolic landscape.

In Shanghai the government directed nature of the new urban narrative along with the sheer speed at which it has been assembled produces an urban imaginary with great fissures, hidden conflicts, resounding silences and disorienting amnesia. The creative economy of Shanghai – its cityscape, its media industries, its cultural programming and leisure possibilities, its ‘creative industries’ of fashion, pop music and design – has mobilized an urban imaginary based on its claim to be ‘the most Western city in China’. It looks to ‘Shanghai Moderne’, where Western modernity made landfall, to re-invent an image of decadent glamour and excitement. Mao has censured the city for precisely that reason – it was a symbol of China’s shame. Now the decadence can be evoked as the shame is erased; the Bund is dwarfed by the iconic giants of the Pudong skyline. It is an open city, but now its own boss.

Yet the 1930s on offer is strangely one-sided. It effaces the years from the turn of the century to the rise to power of the Kuomintang and the Green Gang after 1927. Here, alternative Chinas and alternative Wests circulated and intermingled. Neither the nationalists nor the communists were interested in these stories. The return to power over the decadent 1930s also effaces more recent memories. Shanghai was the home of the cultural revolutionary leaders. Its memories closely mark the citizens, many of whom could only return from the countryside in the 1990s. Shanghai is also scarred by its rapid de-industrialization – a process as extensive as anything experienced in Manchester but whose narrative is buried and intermittent. Many, especially women, stopped work at the age of 45. Their connection with the city is their ownership of an apartment (courtesy of the privatization of their work unit) – a narrative satisfied by a real estate price graph rather than the image of a glamorous 1930s revisited.

The re-invention of the junk-spaces of the city, of new stories about the past and present has taken place not through the urban cultural intermediaries of the SoHo years but through real estate agencies and local government officials rapidly gaining knowledge from Western models and those intermediaries able to handle this knowledge. ‘Artists are the storm-troopers of gentrification’ went the famous graffiti; in Shanghai they are more like ‘embedded’ journalists and the actual graffiti is mostly supplied by foreign artists-in-residence.

Where are the spaces of these new kinds of subjectivity, where are the spaces of a new kind of narrative of the future of the city, where are these quarters / scenes in a city whose creative clusters are mostly sterile incubators of ‘design talent’? Where do someone else’s dreams stop and become a different future?

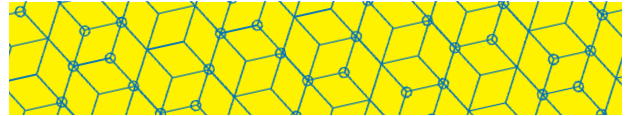
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# MONITORING PARTICLES AND POPULATIONS: EXPO-URBANISM AND THE RISE OF ECO-GOVERNANCE REGIMES

**MAURICIO CORBALAN  
AND SOENKE ZEHLE**



When UNESCO admitted Shanghai to its Creative Cities Network (CCN) in 2010 as a City of Design, it emphasized 'Shanghai's clear vision on the significant role creative industries can play in urban development'. The acceptance of Shanghai's Expo bid in 2000 has accelerated a process of urban renewal that attempts to turn China's commercial and industrial hub into an exemplary green metropolis, combining creativity and sustainability. This process is visible across the city – from apartment highrises that replace and shield from view old, often dilapidated homes, and the establishment of one of the world's largest metro systems to new green corridors and a 'pedestrianization' that facilitates urban walks despite the expansion of cross-city expressways. It has also become the core concept of the Expo itself. The 2010 Expo is not simply another case of urban renewal, but a restaging of the drama of sustainable urbanization as a tightly-monitored process under the biopolitical slogan 'Better City, Better Life'.

The greening of the Expo indicates the shift from development at all costs to the vision of a competitive green economy, reflecting the rise of a new geopolitics around climate change, raw materials, and corresponding (if often competing) approaches to sustainability. The emphasis on sustainability, hailed as a major innovation of (and by) the Shanghai Expo, actually begins in the 1970s – the fairs in 1974 (Spokane, US), 2000 (Hannover, Germany), and 2005 (Aichi, Japan) also included environmental themes. The Shanghai Expo is nonetheless unique in its emphasis on the future of the urban form and the sustainability of its contemporary articulations, including the Expo, a machinic ensemble whose creation has in turn transformed the city of Shanghai.

In the context of this process, the Expo has served as a catalyst of 'green development' and the implementation of a comprehensive eco-governance framework. The first world expos were held in the major cities of the west, and their function as trade shows (above all,

displays of the machinery of the industrial revolution) was a product of the mindset that flourished under the first internationalization of capital. Today, the speed of urbanization across the globe has occasioned another global environmental emergency. The Shanghai Expo stages this combined emergency of urbanization and pollution in a single event, situated in the world's largest manufacturing area, to document and embody a transformation of the urban form. In conjunction with the national government and a host of international governmental and non-governmental actors, Shanghai has established a vast system to administer and monitor this process of transformation.

Integrating some of the structural residue of what was once the biggest shipyard in China into its ensemble of pavilions, the 'Urban Best Practices Area' (UBPA) rises like the proverbial Phoenix out of the ashes of an industrial age. The main smokestack of the shipyard's old powerplant was decorated with a big thermometer to raise awareness of global warming. Such allegorical substitutions (giant empty construction halls to host the small displays of urban practices, abandoned smokestacks as sleek sensors of environmental conditions) amount to a strategy of urban experience design – smart cities with wireless infrastructures disconnect the urban form from the manufacturing base largely responsible for the generation of pollution. While the propaganda onslaught that celebrates China's massive upgrading of its energy and transportation infrastructures betrays the extent to which the country continues to depend on coal-and-steel based industrial development, the UBPA was to offer the (mainly Chinese) visitors glimpses of an urban form that is both under tremendous stress and still capable of dynamic transformation – if only such transitions were properly managed.

As the green transition will be planned or it will not be, the experience design of the Expo invokes the multi-level agency of a (neoliberal) developmental state

competent to manage the totality of the urban space. To visit the Expo is to participate in a giant experiment of rapid citizen education, including a carefully curated cosmopolitical sampling of the world beyond China's borders, but above all a crash course in environmental citizenship. In the classical citizenship model that prevails in the west, environmental awareness implies the design of specific protocols to access environmental information. This is a necessary step (if rarely successfully implemented, as the ongoing struggles over the re-municipalization of privatized resources like waste and water in many cities show) in order to become an active stakeholder in the decision making processes required by the collective management of natural resources. Not surprisingly, in Shanghai, such an eco-information regime was established without such participatory mechanisms. Instead, its design illustrates the extent to which the urban renewal associated with 'creative' cities has become intertwined with the architectural adjustments called for by an environmental governance regime.

To host the Expo, Shanghai cleared the huge site along the Huangpu River, which snakes through the heart of Shanghai, relocating 18,000 families and about 270 factories, including the colossal Jiang Nan Shipyard, which used to employ 10,000 workers. Such clearance is a common precondition of land development. The commitment to a green Expo – measured not least by the extent to which Shanghai would be able to feature blue skies, especially after the 2008 Beijing Olympics had failed to deliver – also implied a sophisticated system of environmental monitoring. This aimed to link, in a new eco-politics of space and mobility, the movement of tiny particle matter to the massive structures that characterized the historic industrial port area, the intricate network of environmental monitoring stations to large-scale infrastructures (including the construction of one of the world's largest metro systems), and even the rural hinterland, whose inhabitants were invited to visit the Expo at the government's expense only to be confronted with modelizations of future eco-villages designed to optimize agricultural output and restrict migration.

Needless to say, such a co-management requires corresponding protocols. When international agencies like UNEP speak of environmental governance, they mainly refer to the (transnational) coordination and harmonization of (local, regional, national) environmental regulation. When we speak of eco-governance in the Expo context, we refer to the much broader, more extensive and more invasive ways in which such protocols are established and compliance is monitored. Eco-governance is, first of all, not a national system, despite the massive

commitment of Chinese (and especially municipal) resources to its establishment. It is a system that directly involves a wide array of translocal governmental and non-governmental actors, whose idioms and techno-scientific expertise are used (and, of course, improved upon) by local authorities.

A case in point is the cooperation between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Shanghai Environmental Protection Bureau (SEPB). The Shanghai Expo made air pollution control a key element in its attempt to stage, in the context of a series of interlocking economic and environmental crises, a vision of the urban future – in an Expo enclave literally carved out of the city's historical industrial base. The EPA-developed AirNow International platform is at the core of the environmental monitoring system set up to guarantee a blue-sky Expo experience. All monitoring devices output data in interoperable formats. The system aggregates the data and offers online real-time air quality reporting from the Expo.

The Shanghai Environment Monitoring Centre (SEMC) has several main divisions, such as air quality division, water pollution division, biologic hazardous materials division and noise division. There are 46 monitoring stations in Shanghai, but only 8 of them have been selected by the NEP (National Environment Protection) to transfer the API (Air Pollution Index) to the public. SEMC collects information from each specific monitoring station to the appropriate 'information division'. The collected data is processed by their database and information systems and transferred later to internet or intranets. Their work is controlled and monitored by the Shanghai Environment Protection Bureau (SEPB), the 'executive office to which the SEMC reports'. 'Forecasting air quality is a craft', says the engineer in charge of the monitoring room of the SEMC. Three forecasters in their late twenties are gathered around a screen that is showing several wind scenarios for the next hours in the coastal areas of China. The monitoring room is constantly receiving 'modelizations' of air data from several sources. One is from a room situated in another part of the building of the SEMC. This room is connected to a data base that is linked to one of the governmental supercomputers at the Beijing National Environment Bureau. These data inputs are assembled and discussed at the forecaster's board, a deliberative process between the forecasters and the engineer in charge, measuring the mathematical models created by the modelization lab and the parameters delivered by other agencies, especially from neighbouring countries like Japan.

Sometimes the forecaster's board plays a crucial role when a potential pollution peak is predicted. Such a pollution peak triggers a decision making process in real-time. A team of members of the SEPB 'comes down' to hold a 'crisis' meeting and weigh the potential scenarios they have to address. Predicting an air pollution peak constitutes a source of pride for the forecasters, and this feeling could also be extended to the whole agency. Better accuracy is a priority demand by those international monitoring agencies and NGOs that constantly keep an eye on the smokestacks of China. During a crisis gathering at the monitoring room, the executive officers from the SEPB are briefed by the forecasters and engineers about the expectations of having a peak for the next week in a certain area of the city. As a command and control unit, this closed deliberative process among experts makes the strategic decisions required to avoid the expected peaks, including the suspension of activities at specific factories, the closing of building yards, or the banning of cars inside the affected area.

The communicative and techno-scientific process of air quality monitoring has real-time spatial consequences on the urban form, as it temporarily restricts activities across the city. Effectively a new form of socio-technological engineering, this 'particle control' is legitimized by way of recourse to (abstract) thresholds and the political agenda of guaranteeing a 'clean' Expo experience. The commitment to sustainability not only implies the establishment of a multi-level eco-governance regime, it also requires the city – and its inhabitants – to operate according to this regime's protocols.

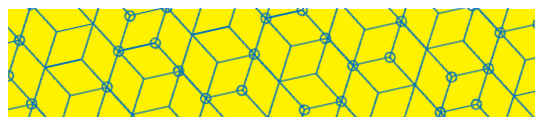
The notion of a shift from a discipline to control society does not fully comprehend what is at stake in such regimes, as even participatory media is used to self-regulate activity. The city's environmental protection department issues timely reports on the environment and air quality near and inside the Expo site. According to Zhang Quan, director of the Shanghai Environmental Protection Bureau, the bureau cooperated with more than 30 cities in the Yangtze Delta to ensure timely reports about the environment and air quality. The Bureau issues forecasts of the environment and air quality 24 hours ahead and warns of potentially high pollution 48 hours in advance so that action to prevent it can be taken. In Beijing, the US Embassy was monitoring the air quality of the city at their own facilities and delivered the data in real-time via Twitter. Instead of relying on government reports delivered the previous day, many citizens preferred to follow the constant flow of information delivered by the US Embassy. The participatory 'feeling' that creates this basic interaction with environmental

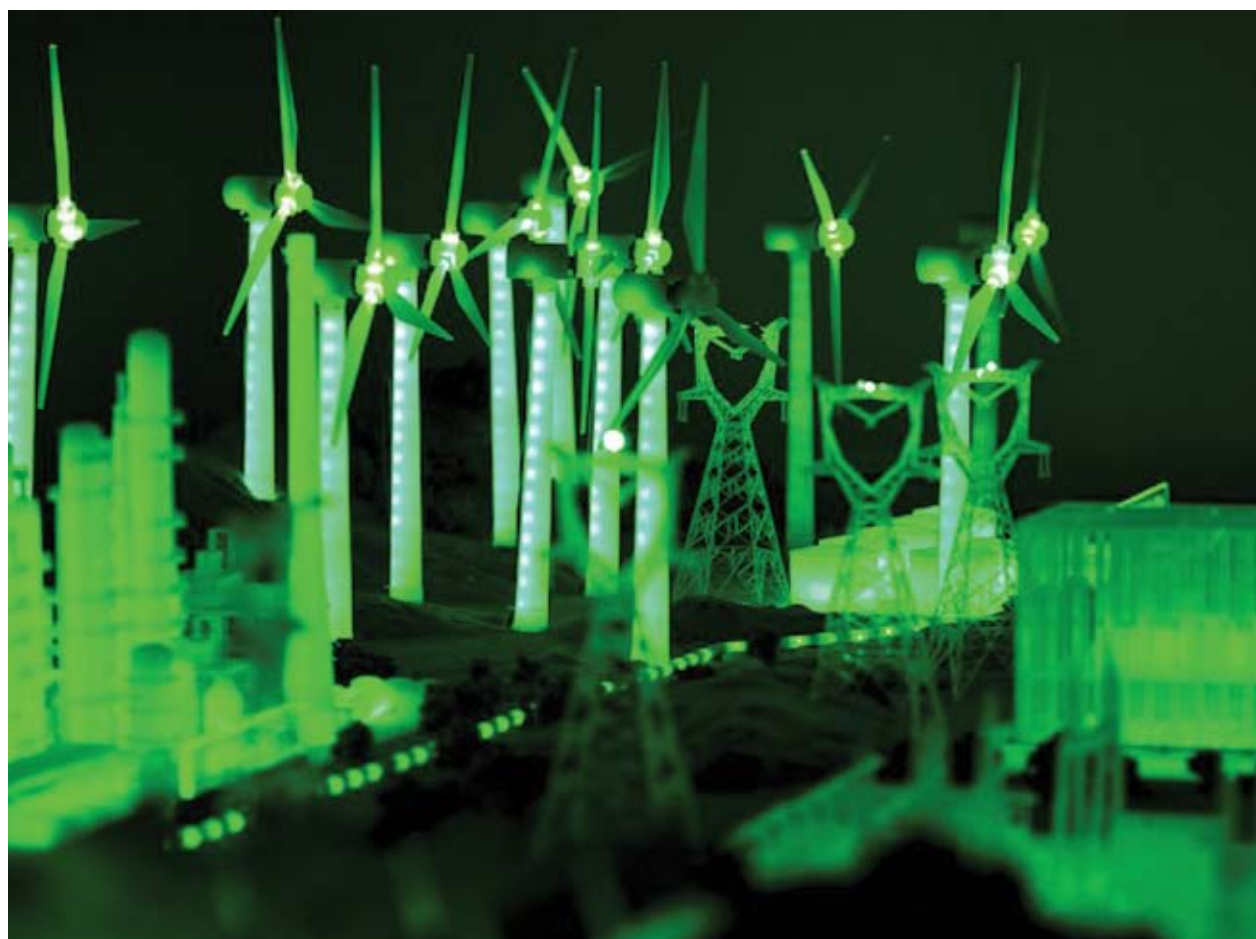
information via web 2.0 tools may affect the way environmental information is produced and delivered by government agencies. But it also integrates the workings of new eco-governance regimes more intimately with individual communicative practice, linking users to the real-time management of a dynamic urban form. The city as such is shaped and reshaped as such eco-governance regimes emerge, not simply the model Expo enclave. This too is a message from the future of the urban form.

Following environmental assessments of the Beijing Olympics, the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) conducted similar assessments of the Shanghai Expo and its claims to sustainability. Established in 1972 as the central UN node for global environmental cooperation and treaty making, UNEP has initiated a consultative process to redefine 'international environmental governance' and strengthen multi-level eco-governance regimes – governance is here used to indicate the integration of (commercial and non-profit) non-state actors above and beyond states and intergovernmental agencies. International, regional, and local case studies are part of this process of elaborating 'best practices' for eco-governance. The Expo study is remarkable not only because it documents the extensiveness of Shanghai's efforts, but also because it betrays the ambivalence of such assessments which – or so it seems – cannot but marvel at the speed with which such regimes have been put in place by a coalition local and translocal actors.

Invoking Peter Sloterdijk's genealogy of terrorism, Bruno Latour recalls that the chemical warfare in the trenches of World War One prompted the rise of air pollution as a matter of public concern. All of a sudden, an element that had always been taken for granted as an endless resource available for all living creatures became a matter of scarcity, pollution and death – and air turned into an object of management. Today, such management has become an integral element in eco-governance regimes that monitor the mobility of particles and populations.

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# SHANGHAI EXPO: SEEING THE WORLD IN SMALL

TIM WINTER



For six months in 2010 the city of Shanghai is hosting the largest, most spectacular and most expensive World's Fair ever. Held just two years after the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo is expected to attract a staggering 70 million visitors by the time it closes in October. At a cost of around US\$45 billion dollars, and involving the relocation of 18,000 families and 270 factories, the Expo will permanently transform large areas of central Shanghai. Perhaps more significantly, the Expo, with its theme of Better City, Better Life, is being held in a country currently experiencing a level of urban growth unparalleled in history. With more than half of the world's population now living in cities, many of which face uncertain futures, this mega event also confronts some of the key challenges facing humanity in the 21st Century.

Bringing together 190 countries, and more than 50 organisations and corporations that have a say in our urban futures, Shanghai 2010 offers an intriguing representation of the world as it is today. A unique forum, the Expo is a stage for many of the world's most important players to communicate to a huge audience their ideas about the future, about urban sustainability and about what makes for a better life. With the host city interpreting Better City, Better Life in terms of 'harmony', multi-million dollar pavilions proclaim and entice harmonies between man and man, man and nature, past and future, and some of the ways in which these might be created or maintained. In light of the breakdown of the

2009 Copenhagen climate change talks, the Expo thus represents an important alternative for much needed cross-cultural dialogues and international collaborations.

Shanghai 2010 is the latest event in a 160 year long tradition of World's Fairs and Universal Expositions. Renowned for their elaborate displays of technology and culture, expos have long been unique environments within which a sense of collective identity is evoked by the coming together of nations, as they are at once held in a spirit of competition for months on end. No exception, Shanghai is encapsulated by a moment in history defined by China's rise as a global superpower, and by the multiple challenges associated with sustaining life on an ever warming planet. But the Expo has also been planned and hosted at a moment in history where expressions like 'The War on Terror', 'Clash of Civilisations' and 'Axis of Evil' form part of the parlance of globalisation. Yet in the microcosm of the world that is the expo, such concerns are rendered invisible in favour of a language of 'harmony' and 'cross-cultural dialogue'.

Straddling the Huangpu river, the Shanghai Expo site divides the world, with all its countries, cities, institutions and corporations, into five zones: Asia; Southeast Asia and Oceania; Africa, Americas and Europe; Corporate; and Urban Best Practice. As with previous World's Fairs, the primary audience is a domestic one. Given that around 98% of visitors are Chinese, this event takes on particular

significance as the vast majority of these have yet to travel overseas. 'Seeing the world' happens via foot, bus, electric shuttle or via a new metro line that passes under the river. The language of tourism pervades the Expo experience. Chinese media have been recommending 'must see' countries on a near daily basis, and a visit is not complete without the purchase of an Expo 'souvenir'. The 'Expo Passport' – which can be stamped on departure of pavilions – has also become the event's unrivalled iconic collectable. Sold empty for US\$2, passports with a complete collection of stamps have been sold in online auctions for more than US\$1,000.

In hosting this World Fair the Chinese government has created a unique event of civic education. In the way the 2008 Olympics facilitated the world to learn about China, Shanghai Expo is enabling China to learn about the world. The format and layout of the Expo render this world visible and consumable in peculiar and interesting ways. Whether they are housed in separate pavilions or clustered together in the same building, the idea of nations as discrete, neatly bounded entities is normalised in the popular imagination. In a micro-geography of country as architecture, nation-states sit side by side, in neatly planned rows or face inwards creating spaces reminiscent of the public squares of historic European cities. There are no border disputes, trans-national conflicts or historical grudges as the global tensions of today are expunged in a geography of apolitical harmony. Indeed in all its cultural, ethnic and religious complexity, the world is presented as benignly cosmopolitan, where countries present themselves as unconditionally hospitable.

Particularly important is the ways in which the pavilions themselves afford such notions of hospitality. In a world of visa free Expo travel, the welcome by all, to all is unconditional. Across the site, countries employ multi-lingual 'cultural ambassadors' to help ensure their 'guests' have an enjoyable experience and leave with good memories. What's remarkable about the universality of this welcome, is that it takes place at a time when many nation-states are deeply anxious about the rapid growth in international migration and the challenges of policing borders. The free stamping of Expo passports lies in distinct contrast to the complex array of entry restrictions and conditions many countries would impose on their own soil to these same visitors.

Other complexities are dissolved away at the expo, in large part due to the logistics of visitor management. The sheer scale of the event, both in terms of the number of attractions and daily visitors, means pavilions designers are (wisely) reluctant to offer much, if any, detail about

the complexities inherent to creating better cities, better lives. And as the site as a whole scales down planetary geographies, table top models allow pavilion visitors to travel in time. Neon landscapes of wind-turbines and oil rigs evoke a better future of abundant energy for all. While idyllic pasts and simpler times are captured in replica models of villages, historic cities and the archaeological remains of lost civilisations. Seen together, these models efface and conceal with their visions of utopia and nostalgia.

Geographic anomalies infuse the Expo experience. New Zealand sits in between Malaysia and Cambodia in the Asia square, but not in the Asia zone; whereas across in Zone A (Asia), Morocco, UAE and Saudi Arabia all lie in close proximity to India. Of note is how the site's zoning reconfigures the world with China at its centre. With a pavilion three times the height of all others, China stands as an ever visible landmark around which visitors travel to other countries. The observant visitor cannot fail to notice the symbolism of placing the smaller pavilions of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau close by, quite literally in the shadow of the PRC. In both the expo's architecture and layout, visitors are also presented with tangible markers for assessing the strength and status of the world's nations, with some country's creating bespoke designs and the less rich and powerful congregated in 'joint pavilions'. The central location of the Chinese pavilion, together with the positioning of the USA and Japan at the far ends of the site, also offers visitors an interesting glimpse into the geographies of a new world order, as seen by the host country.

A visit to Expo means coping with an onslaught of messages about sustainable cities, the beauty of nations, and the promise of technologically rich futures. But hidden among the crowds, queues and giant LED displays is something much more intriguing: a mega event that, in its design, declarations of cosmopolitanism and culture of hospitality, offers us a glimpse into the state of the world as it is today. It is a prism through which though only certain features are rendered sharp, as much of the mess and complexity of our contemporary global moment fades away into the background.

A photographic essay that accompanies this piece is available at: <http://timwinter.carbonmade.com>

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# SHANGHAI'S STATE OF THE CREATIVE ARTS: AT THE OPENING OF THE ROCKBUND ART MUSEUM

GEERT LOVINK



The Rockbund Art Museum, situated on the Northern tip of the Shanghai Bund area, opened May 2010 in conjunction with the 2010 Shanghai World Expo (expected visitors 70 million). The museum is part of a redevelopment area and is housed in the 1932 art deco building of the Royal Asiatic Society, once the location of a natural history museum. As part of a larger real estate development, still under construction at the time of the opening, the museum will fit into a most exclusive part of the inner city. According to the brochure of the Rockbund Investment Corporation that also owns the new museum, the 'urban renaissance' at the birthplace of modern Shanghai celebrates 'the glamour of heritage reborn'. The aim is 'to create the most elite luxury area in Shanghai'. Rockbund will re-establish the northern tip of the Bund as a hub for arts and culture. Apartments are sold with the promise 'to live in the lap of glamour'.

Shanghai is a classic example of creative industries' marriage with real estate developers. There is no active cultural policy of the state, apart from the top-down decisions over where to allocate so-called 'creative clusters'. These areas throughout the city consist of former manufacturing facilities in order to boost the prices of these abandoned textile factories and create 'cool' neighbourhoods. It is unclear if these industries have been driven out of the metropolitan area because of

rising prices or if they left because of delivery problems and low rent elsewhere. Cause and effect chains picked up speed and are impossible to distinguish. As it was explained to me, the creative clusters are mainly occupied by more or less traditional medium-size businesses. What co-working initiatives like Xin Dan Wei do is facilitate office spaces for freelancers and small groups that just started their own firm.

I interviewed Hsiang-ling Lai, who arrived in September 2009 from Taiwan to start as new director of the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM). Director of marketing and development Shi Hantao accompanied her. Ms. Lai would like the museum to be a platform for issues in contemporary culture, a crossover approach of urban issues and visual arts that should also refer to the heritage of the original Shanghai Museum, which was located in the same building. International star curator Hou Hanru will do an exhibit, which asks the question what role a contemporary arts museum can play and invites foreign artists to do site-specific projects. In contrast, the Shanghai Art Museum will not go beyond the milestones in art history like Picasso or Dali. How do art and life relate, Lai wants to know. 'In Shanghai ordinary people do not visit contemporary museums that often and so far there are no plans from the municipality to build a contemporary arts museum. What they want are



private developers to establish a school, an art district, theatre or museum. Galleries are seen as commercial entities that deal with Chinese contemporary arts'. Instead RAM intends to build international relationships and work with overseas curators and art exchange programs.

Conversations also mentioned the curator/artist Shumin Lin, also Taiwanese and recently appointed CEO of the development of the Zendai Himalayas Centre real estate corporation. Lin, a 'PhD-holding hypnotist', is known for his light boxes, video installations and holographic art. Lin is said to be 'influenced by Buddhism, in particular the concept of reincarnation and explore themes of rebirth, humanity, humility and universality'. The Himalayas Centre will include a lifestyle hotel, theatre, retail space and a modern art museum. The complex is located in front of the Shanghai New International Expo Centre, 'an exclusive high-end residential area'. Before Shu-Min Lin became president of Zinnia Creative Development Co., Ltd. and Shanghai Zendai Himalayas Real Estate he was involved in the 2006 Shanghai Biennale and was on the jury of the 2007 Ars Electronica competition.

In the case of RAM, the board of the Rockbund still is the sole sponsor of the museum. I asked director Lin if she wasn't worried about what was going to happen to RAM in case of a recession or collapse of the real estate market. The absence of a cultural policy by the government is greatly felt. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo on the 53rd floor of the Roppongi Hills Mori Tower is mentioned as a model here. A few years ago a centre with artists' studios was opened in a rural area, a one-hour drive by car outside of Shanghai. After its initial success, artists moved out again because it was too far away and audiences didn't show up. Artists are drawn to the metropolitan atmosphere, even though rents are high there. The Shanghai visual arts centre M50 is often mentioned as a successful model of how galleries and studios can cluster together. The ShangART gallery, famous for its early promotion of Chinese contemporary arts in the 1990s and that has been so successfully expanding throughout Shanghai and the world, is also part of M50. Another area would be Tianzifang, a few narrow streets with 'boutiques and laid-back cafés that have been drawing crowds of yuppies, fashionistas, designers and expatriates'.

RAM intends to go beyond the exhibition hall and will emphasize the role of arts education. Because of the highly competitive entry examinations to university there is hardly any emphasis on the 'liberal arts' in China. There is simply no interest. In her previous jobs working for museums in Taiwan, Lai treated education as a must. The issue is not so much the quality of artists, as some

of the art academies in China are raising interesting new generations of visual artists. RAM likes to work with the 'young talents', students in their final year, and set up a program for them in a small space outside of the museum. Once a year RAM would like to dedicate an exhibition to the 'creative arts', be it architecture, fashion, graphic or industrial design.

In response to the creative cluster policy, Ms. Lia recommends to put more emphasis on software, and not on the hardware – people, not buildings. There should be mechanisms developed to encourage talents. Ms. Lia doesn't see the amateurs as a threat for the visual arts. Amateurs remain within the limits of the technical; they execute and, because of their lack of time to do research, rarely expand their talents in the direction of the creative arts. Having said that, RAM is open to interesting projects, be it from professionals or amateurs, like a video art competition in which the museum would like to showcase young work, also through its website.

'Peasant Da Vincis' is the opening exhibition of the Rockbund Art Museum, curated by the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. The exhibit features dozens of 'cultural readymades', built by Chinese farmers. The objects on display are a mix of imaginary machines, model airplanes, mini submarines, flying saucers, wooden helicopters and mechanical robots, carefully curated by Cai Guo-Qiang who constructed a few of the objects himself. Around fifty tiny birds fly around in the space, embodying the spirit of the countryside tinkerers. The artworks are anthropological artefacts, collected on a return mission to the Chinese countryside. They lack both the playful imagination of Jean Tinguely and the post-industrial violence à la Survival Research Laboratories. The constructions and designs remain within the known shapes of the car, boat, kite, plane and robot. What's on display is the pleasure of building, in this case, constructed by ordinary Chinese farmers. Their aesthetics of unlikely variation borders on techno-primitivism. Not so much unrealistic, the machines are deeply conceptual, and this is what must have been the attraction to put them on display in the arts context: pop conceptualism. As so often with everyday objects, they only become works of art because of the context created by the artist-curator, assisted by a team of exhibition builders, photographers, critics and transport workers. Cai's Peasant Da Vincis utilizes art as a vehicle to reflect on the changes in the Chinese countryside and the gained freedom, the 'anti-gravity' of the peasant imaginary. Bottom line: the exhibition is the artwork.

What is being played out here are possible futures for the 'Chinese peasant' beyond migration and poverty. Cai

Guo-Qiang has subtly played with the Shanghai 2010 World Expo 'Better City, Better Life' slogan by bringing peasants, 'art works' into the city. The larger question here is how the arts dream up a newly constituted countryside in a prosperous China in which the promised redistribution of wealth from the cities to the peasants has, at least in part, materialized. Some hints in this direction can be found in the catalogue essay by Zhang Yiwu, who talks about the 'possibility of the emergence of the Chinese peasant. (...) What Cai Guo-Qiang has discovered here are self-taught peasants inventing out of their own ambition'. The peasant Da Vincis 'attempt to use their strange inventions to break through the restrictions of habit and conventional wisdom, and show how free and open their minds are, how rich their inner worlds'.

A Shanghai artist I met called the exhibition 'sad'. No doubt there are romantic overtones. Cai Guo-Qiang has been collecting these industrial folk objects since 2005 and clearly put a lot of his own enthusiasm into the exhibition. His own installation, filling the first floor, is a room full of flying kites, held up in the air by tiny propellers. Elegant, nearly invisible pocket video projectors project the on to kites. The poetics of this massive modesty is caused through the hidden tech.

It is not the simplicity and hardship of the peasant life that is celebrated here. What is striking is the absence of electronic equipment and 'new media'. What we get to see is an early industrial aesthetic, a passion for speed and its flipside: the accident (as theorized in such a sublime way by Paul Virilio). The tinkering peasant is caught in the early to mid-20th century techno imaginary. Like in so many now classic Chinese contemporary art works of Cai Guo-Qiang's generation (b. 1957), it is the use of historical ingredients to create a deeply poetic atmosphere that is immediately understood and appreciated by the viewer. A visit to the countryside in order to recharge one's creative batteries? The problem here is not one of brutal appropriation, as all contributing rural artists are properly credited. In the exhibition, the video documentation and the catalogue we can find out a lot about their personal lives and backgrounds. It is also pleasant that there were no references whatsoever to Mao's reforging of the Communist Party towards the peasants, culminating in the peasant cult during the 'cultural revolution'. However, there exists no doubt a growing interest in 'the countryside'. Perhaps we could say that China's wild phase of urbanization and related hyper growth is coming to a close. As designer Lou Yongqi of Tektao Urban Design Consulting explained to me, there is no future anymore for farmers in the Netherlands. That chapter is closed. What we have in this part of Western Europe are large-scale agricultural

industries, operated by a tiny workforce. In countries like China with hundreds of millions of farmers there is still a good chance to introduce sustainable, profitable models for modern farming. Yongqi's Design Harvests project, situated on the Shanghai island Chongming, is a design & innovation pilot with a remarkable global involvement to 'revitalize rural villages in China by improving quality of life through the environment, communication, local business, public and domestic infrastructure. By creating links to an urban and rural network of social and economic exchange, communities are supported to foster everyday sustainability'.

Peasant Da Vincis transmits a strong sense of the personal dedication of the artist-curator. There is no hint of any exploitation. Yet, what remains is an intense sense of joy mixed with melancholy. In his catalogue essay David A. Ross writes 'the museum has to find ways to expand the notion of the creative'. Peasant Da Vincis achieves this goal, but it would be a true challenge to position this project in the midst of our global, digital, networked reality, which is – and we all know this – precisely Made in China. What is our craftsmanship? How do the lightness and indifference of the digital buzz weigh against the 'longevity' of agricultural life? Is the intensity of the real-time presence making us blind and deaf for the poetic qualities of our contemporary condition? Will the overkill of recording devices force us to return to the small towns and villages of our ancestors in order to regain the capacity to tell a story, in this case to recast the central role of the Chinese peasants into downtown Shanghai?

Why these characters are labelled Da Vinci remains unclear, as they do not even pretend to be inventors. Obviously Cai Gou-Qiang admires and celebrates his hobby inventors – but that doesn't turn them into Leonardo Da Vincis. Defying 'basic engineering principles' alone does not turn passionate builders into visionaries. What is lacking here is exactly the futuristic element, and this is what turns the exhibit into a romantic exercise. It is a homage to the Chinese peasant and their transformation, and sacrifices, to make possible the incredible urbanization (under the guidance of the neo-liberal Communist Party). It is the peasant who made the cities – and this is the simple yet strong message amidst the hundreds of Shanghai skyscrapers, on this symbolic place of the Bund, in this historic year of the Shanghai World Expo.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
CIA-GUO-QIANGS-ROMANTIC-RESOLUTION-  
PEASANT](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/cia-guo-qiangs-romantic-resolution-peasant)

# GUIJING MIGRANT VILLAGE

BRETT NEILSON

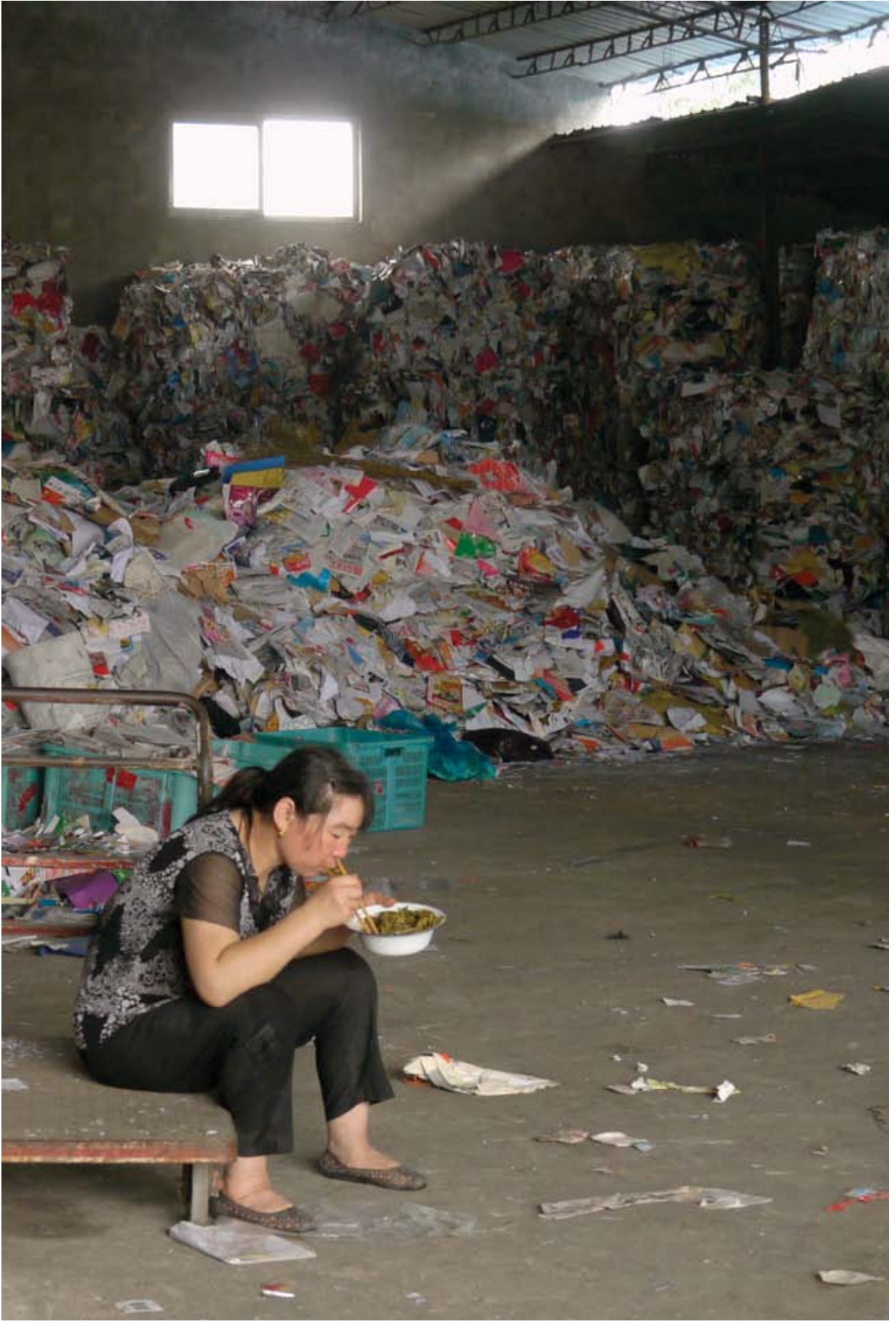


Borders are no longer only geographical lines or filters between states. Rather than existing solely at territory's edge, they have emerged as mobile control technologies strung across the world's infrastructures, circuits, cities and bodies. In China one of the most important borders is that between the urban and the rural. The movement of people between these spaces is deeply shaping Chinese society and its interactions with the state. Events such as the Shanghai Expo 2010 offer a hypermodern and green vision of the city. The migrant villages that have sprung up on the fringes of China's metropolises present a very different image: bleak, polluted and poor. These villages are sites of multiple borders, where the subjectivity of migrants is produced at the interface with governmental, nongovernmental and commercial actors.

As part of the Transit-Labour Shanghai platform, I undertook a visit with Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato to the Guijing migrant village adjacent to the Linzhao Xincun metro station in Pudong. During the week of our visit there were reports of the nighttime gating and locking of sixteen migrant villages in the southern suburbs of Beijing as part of an effort by the

local authorities to reduce crime. Our walk into Guijing village did not reveal evidence of such hard borders. Nonetheless the variance from other parts of the city was immediately visible. The presence of spray painted mobile phone numbers on walls and houses, left by individuals and agencies advertising informal jobs and documentation for migrants, marked our entrance into a different urban terrain.

The Linzhao Xincun metro station sits on the new extension of Line 8 that opened in July 2009. Just three stops beyond the Yaohua Road station, one of the major stops serving the Expo, the new metro station has significantly affected the local economy. One sign of this is the throng of rickshaw drivers who wait at the exit, hopeful of finding a ride. More importantly, the metro provides rapid transport to the city's wealthier areas, where many of the migrants living near the station travel for work. The subway also brings with it a host of border devices, not least the fare of 12 RMB or more that one pays for the trip to the city centre – a cost beyond the means of many of the area's denizens. Added to this are the Expo-driven security measures introduced across



Photographs by Angela Melitopoulos

the metro system, including baggage scans, closed circuit television and military guards.

A stroll into the village reveals something of the area's economy and labour patterns. Amid the muddy ponds, smouldering piles of rubbish and dwellings built beneath electric pylons, sit decommissioned shipping containers full of broken timber and used building materials. Further down the road are large hangars stacked with recycled paper and cardboard. Light trucks and pedalled carts ferry these materials into the area. A significant proportion of the local economy is linked into the informal patterns of waste collection that traverse Shanghai. The village is a site for the sorting and stockpiling of recyclable scrap that is collected by peddlers across the city. It is a place where waste becomes value and enters the global market of recycling not for environmental or moral reasons but for the subsistence it can offer.

We had travelled to the village to visit the New Citizen Life Center, a community centre established by Xintu, a Shanghai-based NGO (or non-profit organisation as rendered in Chinese to dispel any sense of opposition to government) that supports migrants through the provision of health resources, research and capacity building. The Centre's Director described the organisation as a bridge between government and migrants. She explained that the Centre provides a public service platform for the 'human development' of residents in the migrant community. With an emphasis on reproductive health, prevention of domestic violence and women's safety and self-protection, the aim is to provide the 'new citizens' with healthy living information, city life adaptation skills and increased involvement in community affairs.

To enter the New Citizen Life Center is to enter the space of the biopolitical. On the day of our visit small children were playing in a brightly coloured room with their mothers watching on. In an adjacent room, volunteers from the NGO Stepping Stones China were teaching older migrant children the names of body parts in English: finger, hand and elbow. The Director explained to us that the migrants in the village had poor access to health and education services due to China's hukou or household registration system. She indicated that the Centre was active in the distribution of contraceptive pills and had assisted in the recruitment of 100 migrant women to work as nighttime cleaners at the Shanghai Expo. Here was a place where borders traverse the body and the provision of health services is inseparable from the supply of labour.

In China the NGO sector works closely with government and commercial interests. In the case of New Citizen Life Centre, funding comes from Glaxo Smith Kline China. The Glaxo Smith Kline Corporate Responsibility Report 2009 describes the initiative as a 'local program' funded at GBP 250,000 over three years. This is part of what Pun Ngai calls the 'reorganised moralism' of transnational corporations in China. Such practices help to improve the public image of Glaxo Smith Kline and increase the value of its products in a global consumer environment highly sensitive to issues of health and labour. They also help to offset the effects of activist campaigns, such as those concerning the price of antiretrovirals in Africa, and create new markets for the firm, for instance among populations like that in Guijing village.

We see here the penetration of global capital into Chinese society in the form of providing 'good' governance in relation to health and labour practices. This creates the impression that transnational capital is protecting the rights of migrants from a despotic state that denies these same rights. On the ground, the situation is more complex. Governmental, nongovernmental and corporate actors form part of a larger assemblage in which migrants themselves are actors. The desires and movements of Guijing village's population cannot be wholly constrained by the sovereign and governmental powers that come to bear upon them. To traverse the multiple borders that cross this site is to discern a subjectivity-in-the-making, to follow the traces of conflictual processes that drive the current transition not only in China but across wider global terrains.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
BORDERS-ARE-NO-LONGER-ONLY-  
GEOGRAPHICAL-LINES-OR-F](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/borders-are-no-longer-only-geographical-lines-or-f)







Photographs by Angela Melitopoulos





# BETWEEN CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

SANDRO MEZZADRA

The categories of centre and periphery, of north and south, are increasingly unable to map contemporary economic, political, and cultural interdependence. The transnational experience of contemporary migrations points to the necessity of a new interpretative paradigm.

North and South, centre and periphery are 'spatial' categories; they refer, as much in historiography as in the social sciences, to the hierarchical organisation of the relation between social, cultural, economic, and political units differently collocated in a given space. This reminds one of the image of a geographical map, on which these relations would be visualised. In recent years, however, modern 'cartographic reason' has been radically critiqued from a variety of standpoints, which have questioned its capacity to reflect the most significant processes modifying the configuration of contemporary global space. At the centre of these critiques we do not simply find, as has been the case for a long time in the critical studies on geography and the 'production of space', the accusation of the implication of 'cartographic reason' in the projects of exploitation and domination that have characterised the history of modern capitalism and the system of states. What is rather pointed out today is a deficit of representation, an inability of the traditional cartographic instruments in registering the main coordinates of what increasingly appears like a real spatial revolution.

One of the chief protagonists of Italian geography, Franco Farinelli, has proposed the image of the labyrinth to represent the dilemmas faced today by his discipline. The labyrinth is a particularly suitable image to account for a situation in which the increasing difficulty to organise the representation of space around a centre, or a plurality of centres, is matched by the continuous multiplication of the scale and dimension on which the processes of connection and division of the different spaces are articulated, adding a new 'profundity' to contemporary global space.

This is a question that finds a direct counterpart in the field of traditional 'international relations'. In an important article on 'Foreign Affairs', Richard N. Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, has traced a merciless assessment of the defeat of American unilateralism, i.e. of the project of 'unipolar' order followed by the Bush administration. Haass, however, does not expect for the future years the coming to be of a 'multipolar' variant, but instead, what he calls a 'telluric movement with respects to the past': the progressive installment of a real 'non-polarity', of 'a world dominated neither by one or two, nor by a certain number of states, but instead by dozens of actors possessing and exercising different kinds of power'. The 'non-polarity' corresponds not only to the obvious difficulty to isolate the 'centres' around which international relations would be organised, but also, coherently with our discussion, to the multiplication of the actors of the system. The non-polar order is in fact characterised, Haass explicitly affirms, by the loss of the monopoly of states as exclusive protagonists of international politics. Regional and global organisations, large multinationals, 'global cities' and NGOs, networks and 'guerrilla' organisations are some of the new subjects that have entered as determining actors into the system of international relations, profoundly complicating its structure. 'Power', Haass comments, 'is currently in many hands and in many places'. Randomness and 'turbulence', in the specific sense given to this concept by James Rosenau, seems to be destined to characterise such a system, affecting the very concepts of centre and periphery.

We find a similar situation in trying to analyse the geography of contemporary capitalism, which is also characterised – as many analysts have pointed out – by a series of processes directly challenging the consolidated analytical models of the 'international division of labour' and any attempt to offer a precise cartography of the relations between centre and periphery. In other words,

the spatial hierarchies around which contemporary global capitalism is structured have also assumed a 'random' character unknown in previous historical moments. Structurally unstable, the hierarchical relations between the different spaces on which the global circuits of capitalist accumulation are articulated have ceased to connect relatively homogeneous areas according to the classical modalities of imperialism, unequal exchange, and dependence. What once were called 'developing countries' are today far from forming a homogeneous 'periphery' or a compact 'third world'; now increasingly differentiated from each other, they have often known within their own boundaries the creation of areas and sectors perfectly integrated in global networks living next to other areas and sectors suffering great difficulty, when not risking downright 'exclusion'. This finds a relatively precise correspondence in the evolution of the economic geography of the main 'Western' countries. Instead of imagining a spatial organisation of capitalism according to which the most 'advanced' (productive, financial, managerial ...) functions would be condensed in certain 'central' areas, and the most 'backwards' functions in others ('peripheric' and 'dependent' on the first), it is worth taking seriously the hypothesis that we are currently faced with the affirmation in large part of the world of a hybrid economic and social structure, in which what makes the difference is the proportion between the different functions, all of which are however tendentially present at the same time.

If faced with these processes the traditional concepts of 'centre' and 'periphery' seem to lose much of their explanatory potential, this does not mean, obviously, that global space is about to become 'smooth', homogeneous. Over the last years, in fact, attempting to integrate and correct an image of globalisation constructed around the metaphor of 'fluxes', a series of ethnographic analyses have underlined the different shades and cracks characterising global space. Particular attention has been paid to the crafting of the 'channels' that make determinate fluxes possible while obstructing others, focussing on the processes that continuously reproduce 'enclaves' and open 'lateral spaces' for the production and circulation of goods, in the context of a globalisation that proceeds discontinuously, in 'jumps', connecting and disconnecting at the same time spaces and subjects, economics, cultures and societies.

It is no longer a paradox, in this sense, that the processes of globalisation be accompanied by a continuous multiplication of borders, but with a fundamental transformation in their nature: borders themselves, while still catastrophically closing everyday on the bodies of women and men in transit, in the Mediterranean as in the

deserts between the United States and Mexico, seem to assume new characteristics of instability and randomness. Many scholars, consequently, have proposed to assume precisely the figure of the border as a fundamental point of view, empirically as much as epistemologically, to analyse the processes of globalisation and the spatial revolution these determine. And so extremely violent tensions, lines of conflict, relations of power and exploitation, scandalous inequalities in the distribution of wealth, come to the light exhibiting a growing complexity that makes it increasingly difficult to interpret the spatial coordinates of these global processes making use of rigid, fixed categories such as centre and periphery, North and South.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/  
BETWEEN-CENTRE-AND-PERIPHERY](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/between-centre-and-periphery)







## ON THE CITY'S EDGE

### ANNA GREENSPAN

At the city's outermost edges, Shanghai's past and future collide. Off the main roads, the streets give way to canals. Peasants grow vegetables in muddy water. Fields of crops still survive.

Yet only a few of the old farmers are left. Most of their former homes have been chopped up, each room rented to a migrant family for RMB 300 or 400 a month. The old people have gone. Shanghai's suburbs now belong to the young.

In the heart of these makeshift migrant communities, village roads mutate into new urban streets. Micro businesses – a mixture of stores and stands – cluster together: a mattress shop, a tiny one room video arcade, a motorcycle fix it shop, stores stuffed with plastic buckets, basic household goods and other random odds-and-ends.

Scattered throughout are food stalls. Some sell street snacks, others vegetables, meat, oil and grains. The most basic trader has nothing but a plastic bucket containing a single fish.

As workers on construction sites and factory floors, migrants function as the essential underpinning to China's new cities. Yet as micro entrepreneurs of a vast informal market, they have constructed a shadowy realm – intensely vibrant and dynamic – that exists outside all urban plans.

Despite vigorous attempts at gentrification, this unplanned shadow economy has yet to be contained. It spills out of the urban fringes, erupting as an uncontrolled and uncontrollable periphery, even within the urban core.

Wander in the older neighborhoods and streets give way to alleyways. Whole zones are pedestrian-only, as roads become too narrow and chaotic for cars to navigate. On the street everything is for sale – food of course, but also animal pelts, curios and sex toys. Barbers, tailors, dentists operate with the minimum of equipment – a few chairs, a table, a mirror, a bench.

During the planned economy era, it was the lack of an open food market that, more than anything else, locked the population in place. Without the ration tokens supplied by the state, people couldn't eat. Today migrants from all over the country hawk their regional delicacies.

Outside Shanghai's university gates one finds a cacophony of street food vending. *Baozi* (dumplings) are stacked high in bamboo steamers. Handmade carts, rigged up with either coal or gas, are used to cook pastries and skewers of all kinds, stinky tofu, fried noodles and 'pot-sticker' dumplings. In winter deliciously fragrant sweet potatoes are sold out of huge metal barrels. During the hot months durian pieces and fresh coconuts are for sale.

Even in the fanciest parts of town the grey market invades. Outside the villas, fashion boutiques and trendy coffee shops of the former French Concession, mobile peddlers sell plants and pottery. The informal recyclers call out for unwanted used goods. Carts appear on street corners piled high with vast collections of household goods. Residents stop by to pick up a hanger, a clothing peg, a piece of string. Nearby the *baozhi* stands and bing (crepe) sellers do a roaring trade as office workers line up to grab breakfast on the run.

Yet migrants do more than service white-collar workers. China's informal economy is also at the cutting-edge of a high-tech futurism whose innovations no one can predict.

Even the poorest of migrant communities has an Internet bar. Migrants are also at the forefront of the *shanzhai* phenomenon – a new playful piracy that has blurred the line between imitation and innovation.

By mutating existing products for local markets, adding new features, transforming designs and radically lowering costs, *shanzhai* technology has led to the celebration of an indigenous DIY culture in urban China, with a huge disruptive potential. To quote cyberpunk author William Gibson 'the street finds its own uses for things'.

Urban planners tend to associate development with the attempt to 'clean up' the chaos and disorder of the informal economy. City inspectors are given license to chase down vendors, seize their carts and keep their earnings. Throughout Shanghai vibrant street markets have been bulldozed and paved over. Shiny glass malls filled with chain stores and fast food franchises now stand in their place.

Yet if Shanghai is to fulfill its ambitions to create the city of the future, it must pay heed to the shadowy culture of its newer, younger and poorer population. The innovation out of which the future emerges comes not only from the grandiose visions of planners but also from the unanticipated disruption of the street.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/CITYS-EDGE](http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/citys-edge)





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[transitlabour.asia](http://transitlabour.asia)

[info@transitlabour.asia](mailto:info@transitlabour.asia)

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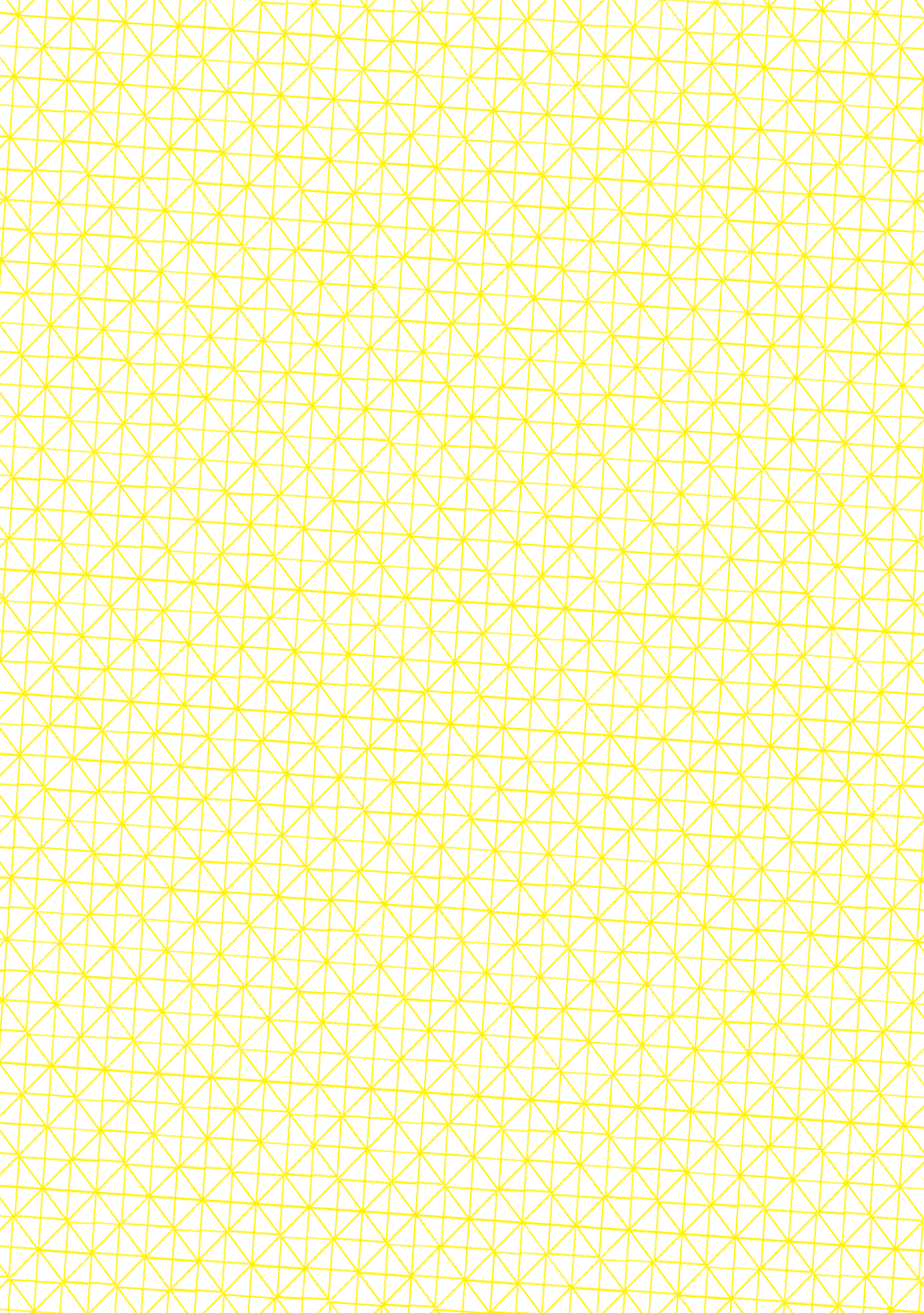
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