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PICTURE INDUSTRY

As an industrial product, pictures are hard to quantify in terms of value or use. Unlike most commodities, they are anything but concrete, we all consume them even if this act is not locatable in a tangible instance of exchange. Like portergests, these commodities haunt the concrete world they are meant to reflect, sliding as though self-lubricating all around the globe, depositing echoes of themselves wherever they travel like an ecotoplastic slime trail. In An Arles, one of these echoes, the "industrial" they are referred to the motion picture industry, which extends well past the confines and concerns of celluloid. It seems no coincidence that Los Angeles' most famous landmark, the Hollywood sign—built in 1923 by real estate developer H.J. Whitley—was one of these excess abandoned images, one of these echoes: not to its appropriation as a landmark, it was an advertisement for a housing development in the Hollywood hills, but once its initial purpose was fulfilled, it was left as a ruin on the hillside, its origins anything but historically significant and easily forgotten. This made it all the more easy for it to be reinscribed with meaning when opportunity arose. The sign originally read "HOLLYWOODLAND", a phrase that not only came to represent the burgeoning film industry, but also prophetically implied its mythic autonomy from the city that contained it. After all, there is the city of Hollywood, and there is HOLLYWOOD, the latter unconfinned by geography, or governance. Los Angeles is a pile of such homeless images (and this should be no surprise since it produces and discards them in excess), they are endlessly recycled, the contours of the place, the lev over bits and pieces that litter its psychic and geographic landscape, are constantly being reformed and rehistoricized. Perhaps this is why its semi-permanent stucco-clad architecture is cloaked in a smear of beige that extends from the mountains to the ocean, camouflaging the city's machinery in the same tones as the chaparral that surrounds it. These qualities often incite derision from those whose affinities lie with older conceptions of urban life, those who prefer the exposed mechanisms of monuments, downtowns, and pillars of granite and marble to anchor civic life, and their cities to the earth, for them, Los Angeles exemplifies a loss of stability, the transformation from tangible goods and hard commodities to paper capital and speculation; in short, a Wild West of sign exchange.

But this is beside the point, because what is truly at stake is the condition of being on display, being an exhibit. In the early 1500s, the moment of its coining, the term "exhibition" had only specialised legal meaning, referring to a giving of evidence: meaning literally to "hold out" before a higher power. But with the Great Exhibition of 1851, and in World's Fairs that followed, the antiquarian meaning and implications of the term blossomed. Joseph Pastori's Crystal Palace, the housing of the Great Exhibition of 1851, was a material manifestation of exhibition, operating as the prototype of the modern steel and open-frame, glass, curtain-walled architecture, a template for what would become the modern museum, the corporate complex, and the shopping mall. Yet, the Crystal Palace was not a technological sublime in its length and coverage, nineteenth century industrial construction, it had an overall feeling of "lightness," the glass panes alternating between reflections of blue sky and surrounding greenery. Its sheer ephemerality so perplexed contemporary critics that it was denied even its existence as architecture. It was perpetually new, a structure whose modular construction allowed endless substitution. At every turn, its interchangeable serial components shone with a "fiery like brilliance," [26] as if dropped from the heavens. Architecture and vision became a singularity rendered in iron, as though Alberti's diagram of Renaissance perspective had been made concrete; it was in truth, less a building, than it was a support for an image. Being inside it was an "one-eyed experience." [27] It was, in other words, a structure that could not be seen, and was periodically difficult to arrive at a clear perception of the effect of form and scale in this incorporeal space. Or as another visitor wrote, "There is no longer any true interior or exterior, the barrier erected between us and the landscape is almost as if it were a pane of glass, through which we see the landscape as if it were a liquid, the air has here, achieved solid form." [28] The threat that the structure posed to architecture proper was its challenge to humanism and the authorial mark. It contained no singular architectural event, no recognizable style. It was, instead, a frame, a guide by which discontinuous objects could be laid out as though in a picture. The architecture embodied not only a technological sublime in its modular and serial form, but exemplified the very concept of exhibition, of display, the transformation of objects into images. While its chief attribute was invisibility—its grand halls described as a container for "a perspective so extended" that it appeared to be "a section of atmosphere cut out of the world of buildings and monuments, placed in a machine, a container for vistas, a scrim upon which spectacle could occur; a proposal that was alien to the public affirmation of cultural stability that architecture had come to represent.

The structure itself took the industrial dream of endless production and limitless expansion as defining principles, innovating a design that eschewed the monolithic stone construction and the revivalist pastiche popular in its time, opting instead for a modular structure of four-foot-square cells comprised of wrought iron. Despite its immense scale (it was over 1800 feet in length and covered nineteen acres) and industrial construction, it had an overall feeling of "lightness," the glass panes alternating between reflections of blue sky and surrounding greenery. Its sheer ephemerality so perplexed contemporary critics that it was denied even its existence as architecture. It was perpetually new, a structure whose modular construction allowed endless substitution. At every turn, its interchangeable serial components shone with a "fiery like brilliance," [26] as if dropped from the heavens. Architecture and vision became a singularity rendered in iron, as though Alberti's diagram of Renaissance perspective had been made concrete; it was in truth, less a building, than it was a support for an image. Being inside it was an "one-eyed experience." [27] It was, in other words, a structure that could not be seen, and was periodically difficult to arrive at a clear perception of the effect of form and scale in this incorporeal space. Or as another visitor wrote, "There is no longer any true interior or exterior, the barrier erected between us and the landscape is almost as if it were a pane of glass, through which we see the landscape as if it were a liquid, the air has here, achieved solid form." [28] The threat that the structure posed to architecture proper was its challenge to humanism and the authorial mark. It contained no singular architectural event, no recognizable style. It was, instead, a frame, a guide by which discontinuous objects could be laid out as though in a picture. The architecture embodied not only a technological sublime in its modular and serial form, but exemplified the very concept of exhibition, of display, the transformation of objects into images. While its chief attribute was invisibility—its grand halls described as a container for "a perspective so extended" that it appeared to be "a section of atmosphere cut out of the world of buildings and monuments, placed in a machine, a container for vistas, a scrim upon which spectacle could occur; a proposal that was alien to the public affirmation of cultural stability that architecture had come to represent.

Writing in 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed that with the advent of photography (for him distilled in the verisimilitude of the stereograph), "Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact matter as a visible object is no great use any longer because its form is shapeless, and its color is a few negatives of a thing without seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please." (p 80) But when images themselves burn, they leave nothing in their wake. The Crystal Palace left no auratic ruin for tourists, burning up in an explosive fire that was all too fitting for a building seemingly made of gas. But the structure persisted, built and rebuilt with little concern for the authenticity of an original. An uncanny persistence that Dostoevsky noted when he wrote, "You believe in a crystal edifice that can never be destroyed, an edifice at which one would not be able to stick one's tongue out, or to thumb one's nose, even on the sly. And I am afraid of this edifice because it is of crystal and can never be destroyed, and because one could not stick one's tongue at it on the sly." [29] The only true damage that could be done to it couldn't come from the material world of fires and explosions, but from the symbolic order from which it gained its authority: exchange value marked its demise. When its last iteration burned in the outer boroughs of New York City, symbolic and physical destruction coincided, exemplified in the fire's attraction of more spectators than the palace's inauguration. One wonders what Holmes thought of the demise of Palace, if his theory of images was somehow validated by its spectacular collapse.

It was then, not some fifty years later, that architecture would succeed in cleaving the visual from the corporeal. Long before Le Corbusier's Maison Domno (1914-15) ushered in an age of functionalism and the "international style" (the ubiquitous style of the art exhibition space), architecture and time travel were one and the same, already having been born as a Cartesian virtual reality. Everything within the architectural field, from the accumulation of objects to the world framed by its windows, was an element in an expansive order, an abstract topography that inhabitants are invited to float above and through like ghosts in an indefinitely expanding world within a world. Le Corbusier's 1948 United Nations Secretariat building was the first glass curtain-walled architecture in Manhattan. The jeres were not unfamiliar, nor were the myriad technical problems. In fact, Corbusier was so frustrated by the difficulties that he abandoned the project. Glass architecture found its ultimate form here, an international style for modernism, where there was a building that could not be seen, that stood out and blended in, reflecting what Michel DeCerteau called "the city as text" on the surface of its modular panes. This was a peculiar brand of hiddenness, all too fitting for a practitioner who opted to produce under a well-publicized alias, just as many of his contemporaries who gave their work to modernism under a pseudonym (notably, all businesses begin with the adoption of a "fictitious" name, even if that name happens to be your own). Brecht famously stated that the image of the exterior of a factory could tell you nothing of the lives it contained. And glass architecture would be no different. When the lighting conditions of the Secretariat Building were completely reversed by night, the modular interior was only on display after working hours, devoid of its labour force. Corbusier allowed this desire to see in, without revealing anything more telling than what the reflective modular exterior offered by day: a procession of blank boxes, a stage waiting to be filled.

If the Crystal Palace was the first building that fully capitalized on the theatrical spectacle of exhibition, the readymade was the first art object to be solely constituted by theatrical distance. Here the ritual act of viewing became the artwork's material, the object itself a hollow shell, a decoy. Thierry de Duve put it succinctly when he wrote that, in the wake of the readymade, the only truth to which the art object could attest was the power of its own name, rendering palpable the "fact that would unite the spectators of the future around some object... that added nothing to the constructed environment and did not improve on it, quite the contrary, pulled away from it, bearing such other function that 'pure signifier'." [27] It seems no coincidence that just as Duchamp brought the foundational theatricality of art objects to the fore, the "zero point" of painterly materialism, of a war against images, would surface thousands of miles away as a theatrical backdrop. In 1913 Kazimir Malevich was asked to contribute costumes and set designs for the Cubo-Futurist play, Victory over the Sun. Aside from the almost unrecognizable costumes, Malevich produced a series of concept drawings for the sets, which, in stark black and white, appear like preparatory sketches for the Suprematist canvases he was then producing two years later. When asked about his tautologically titled Black Square (1915), and its placement at 45 degrees in the top corner of the room of the 1915 exhibition of O.G. Malevich's return back to these early set designs as its origin. The monochrome was thus situated as both the material negation of the painterly image (an object that operated by pictorial resemblance), and the symbolic negation of the very thing that made vision possible. The proposition of materialist critique carries with it a seductive promise, not only that the world of appearances can be punctured, shedding light into its darkened recesses, but also offers that there is something to be found lurking behind the curtain, a repressed "truth" that lies dormant within all things. Yet laying things bare often leaves nothing but an abyss.

While Black Square is often credited with being the first monochrome, this is not actually the case (not that being first matters). Some thirty years earlier this totem of total materialist refusal was realized by the poet Paul Ibbaud, in an exhibition staged in the apartment of the writer Jules Lévy in October of 1882. Such modernist notables as Edouard Manet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Richard Wagner were given a peek at what would be framed as their legacy. [28] For the exhibition, Ibbaud contributed a small black painting titled *Combat de nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit* (Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night), a joke that was stolen not once but twice. First by Alphonse Allais who produced a black titled *Album Primo-Antique* (1897) who expanded the series to a range of color swatches (and contained no mention of Ibbaud, despite their acquaintance) and later by Malevich, who in the same year as Black Square produced the painting *Red Square* which included a particularly life-like black readymade in the form of a (Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions). The invisibility of the site of work was here matched by the invisibility of the marginalized, both relegated to infrastructural obscurity. Daily life's representability was again scathingly parodied, the quotidian again displayed in the exhibition space in the apartment of the writer Jules Lévy in October of 1882. Such modernist images aren't an ancient bugbear, golden calves and the like operating as the exemplar of societies on their downward spiral, though Photography, not painting, has been the primary recipient of this ritual derision for the past half-century. Stoic deconstructive critique, and hedonistic celebrations of nihilism often result in identical outcomes; it is just the captions that change.

The late nineteenth century gave rise to a multitude of invisibilities, chief among these was the modern corporation. The corporation, which would achieve the most radical redefinition of personhood in a legal sense—re-imagining the very qualifications of the term "individual" as constituted by the state—was in its earliest stages—at the time of the World's Fairs. The subjectivity that arose in this period is typically characterized as fractured and anomic, an optically-centered scoposeity initiated by a constellation of discursive forces that are far too expansive to discuss here. However, the invention of the modern corporation as an individual under the law is perhaps the clearest and most complete expression of this transformation, although with the terms transposed, for instead of seeing what we thought was a unity fractured into disparate parts, the corporation as citizen-subject arises out of discursive fragments. What for the humanist was the indelible and infeasible fact of the individual was rendered porous and contingent, stripped completely from the notion of the body (a term corporations already embody, i.e. corpus). Corporations are instead a multitude of voices congealed into a singular entity, a transcription of an ephemeral set of compromises and competing agendas given a singular voice. It seems perverse for the ground-work of humanist democratic ideals to be deployed in this manner, an uncanny proposition because, if the same rule of law endows an immaterial entity the status of autonomous individuality as guarantees our own, then our own selfhood becomes troublingly precarious. This is why McDonald's can now speak in the first person, but it also provides for the possibility of a series of rules, provocations, and liquidities. As Gilles Deleuze noted, the corporation is "a spirit, a gas," and we must wonder what it means for this ghost to speak, for daily life is filled with such voices. [3]

While contemporary art has proven hesitant to allegorize this rupture, science fiction displays little reticence. In the 1968 episode of Star Trek, "Spectre of the Gun," Captain Kirk and crew set out under strict orders to contact an advanced yet unknown species called the Melkotians. Warned off by an automated buoy, they proceed to the surface of the planet, since their mission of peace came with the stipulation from their superiors that this contact must be made "at any cost" (peace at any cost being an American hallmark, a silent nod to the Vietnam war). On the planet the crew are transported into a schematic version of the American Old West, a world extracted from Kirk's brain by the recalibrated aliens. They find themselves in restaging of the shoot-out at the O.K. Corral, themselves occupying the role of the losers in the fight. Although the scene is notably fictitious (even to the crew), death is not. As Dr. McCoy observes "In the midst of what seems so unreal, a harsh reality. This is not a dream."

No matter what claims they make to the inhabitants of this virtual world, no one believes they are who they say they are, instead they are seen as an unwanted group of outlaws, familiar enemies who refuse to leave despite the townspeople's warnings. That the Old West town is partially missing walls, facades, and other architectonic necessities is explained within the narrative as being the result of missing information in Kirk's knowledge of history, yet the other reason for the town's appearance was the show's budgetary restrictions, which forced the producers to recycle parts of Old West sets on Paramount's studio back lot. The scene of the crew's confrontation with its own historical mythology (they were after all, space cowboys, colonizing "the final frontier") occurs in remnants of past Hollywood narratives, a bricolage of the ruins of past fantasies, past scenes, past viewpoints. As the crew waits for the impending showdown, it is reasoned that the only way to transcend this prison is to reject the fiction all too easily presented to us as a parable, doubling back on itself. Since the crew is held to the construction of a hat come closest to warn, "I know the bullets are unreal, therefore they cannot kill me. The slightest doubt, and the bullets will kill you..." and then offering, "they do not exist. Unreal, appearances only, they are shadows, illusions, nothing but ghosts of reality. They are lies, falsehoods, spears, without body. They are to be ignored." But realizing this is not enough, for they cannot remove the erial of doubt about the reality what they see, and this doubt, or more exactly, this belief in the facticity of images is exactly what will kill them. Only after a mindweld with Spock is the crew immune to the weapons used against them, the "false consciousness" of the world of images transcended. It is then they are allowed audience with the timid yet advanced aliens, an audience we never see in the episode, for we are still in the world of sets and allegories, just as the crew was when they landed on the planet, capable perhaps of understanding fictions, but not able to ignore them. An alien world that is beyond images is also beyond representation, a zero point that the crew is held to its itself worthy of, but as television viewers here we had yet to do the same, so we were left behind in our living rooms.

But what of Malevich's zero point of painting, and its proposed transcendence? With the climate in post-revolutionary Russia progressing into Stalinism, Malevich returned to his pre-Suprematist foundations, producing canvases that aped his antecedents, first Cubo-Futurism, and at its most extreme, impressionism. Stranger still, Malevich backdated these works, so that his Suprematist works remained the forgone conclusion of these styles, turning his own conceptual tool that functions in a particular way, and ceases to function if applied in a circumstance where it is asked to do something other than what it was designed for. To confuse this is to turn a relational idea into an ontological one. This confusion of the concrete for the abstract, of images for things, often results in the anxiety that the real no longer truly exists, of course, this occurs only after real, and our systems of exchange have been fully imagined (imagined) as concepts. Subsumed in a digital or ideological dispersal at the whim of a multitude of discursive instrumentalizations, its supposed dissolution has become so utterly complete that whatever it is that it is in order to exist, must have a determinable authorship and a plausible origin story is what renders these plays of "behind" images in a metaphysical sense, even if this something is an absence, the hole that the missing real has left behind.

As signifying surfaces, images are abstractions. The logic of the abstraction is the reduction of four dimensions to a two dimensional surface. Structuralist theory was uniquely obsessed with images, their arrangements, the expansive relations between them treated as a vast architecture. As Roland Barthes commented, the goal of structuralist critique is to reduce a narrative to a parable, doubling back on itself. Since the crew is held to the construction of a hat come closest to the endpoint of painting in his late thirties, the height of purism in form, there was nowhere to go but backward.

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But this is beside the point, for to confuse a photograph or film for an image is to subject the concrete world (the real relations between things) to another in a sequence of abstractions (photography and film) after it is first in four space-time dimensions, constructed of worldly material, and not simply reducible to an immaterial image/ritual act. This is a parable, not an ontological umbrella under which such media can be classified, but more a conceptual tool that functions in a particular way, and ceases to function if applied in a circumstance where it is asked to do something other than what it was designed for. To confuse this is to turn a relational idea into an ontological one. This confusion of the concrete for the abstract, of images for things, often results in the anxiety that the real no longer truly exists, of course, this occurs only after real, and our systems of exchange have been fully imagined (imagined) as concepts. Subsumed in a digital or ideological dispersal at the whim of a multitude of discursive instrumentalizations, its supposed dissolution has become so utterly complete that whatever it is that it is in order to exist, must have a determinable authorship and a plausible origin story is what renders these plays of "behind" images in a metaphysical sense, even if this something is an absence, the hole that the missing real has left behind.

But to accept this circumstance relegates our role, as viewers, to that of disappearance, dissolving into the intangible frames that surround us, into an aggregated mass: out of time, out of space, and into an abstract gleaming world. Yet, seeing ourselves as part of the mass, our individuality in a perpetual vacillation between disappearance and reappearance, does not have to be debilitating. Rather, it can be a source of strength. Autonomy has historically emerged from marginal zones; pirates and radicals hide like rats in the walls, housewives stage mini-revolutions in their kitchens, office workers in their cubicles. An understanding of this can make it clear that production is a common fact, a daily ritual of compromise enacted with various levels of awareness, but present nonetheless as a lingering force. We can be both inside and outside of the picture, one of its parts and one of its producers; there need not be a stratified hierarchy in our relationship to aesthetics. The images that alienate can be brought to earth, given bodily form. The truth of the matter is that all images require a material existence, and we must resist the urge to transform the material world into an image world. This is not an either/or choice, but a realization that images are indistinguishable from their material supports, one cannot exist without the other. The embedded compromises and negotiations present in any production and their subsequent lack of instrumental solidity need not be seen as dirty secrets. This would not be an absolutist proclamation of the corruption of authorship, or the fassens of images, but rather, an assertion that this authorial position is a communal one of transparency and subterfuge at once. In this realization, there is a middle ground of negotiation. All production—even "authorship"—is comprised of myriad transit points and competing forces which deceptively assume the appearance of solidity.

The world we see from transitional spaces—the world outside the window; the world from the perspective of escalators, people movers, monorails, and shopping centers—has become an intellectual loggymann, a storage container for all our alienations. These infrastructural interstitial zones stand as compromised, indeterminate way stations between chemical destinations. As an open field they occupy the space of bare fact, which we should approach with suspicion, but they are also unprocessed, and this has potential. Perhaps it is our presumption that all things, in order to exist, must have a determinable authorship and a plausible origin story is what renders these plays of compromise inscrutable. Seemingly monolithic expressions of power, such as images, are a similar accumulation of compromise and negotiation, containing gaps where any visitor may assert their own agenda. We too are collaborators, even if we choose to relinquish our place in the credits. These momentary openings, the pockets between, their ruins, their transitory spaces, their ignored seams and forgotten vistas, promise a site from which the either/or of utopian and apocalyptic thinking—or the political/formalist opposition—can be dismantled, and production can be both symbolic and literal at once.

Waleed Beshly, Los Angeles, October 2008
Typed but not read

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