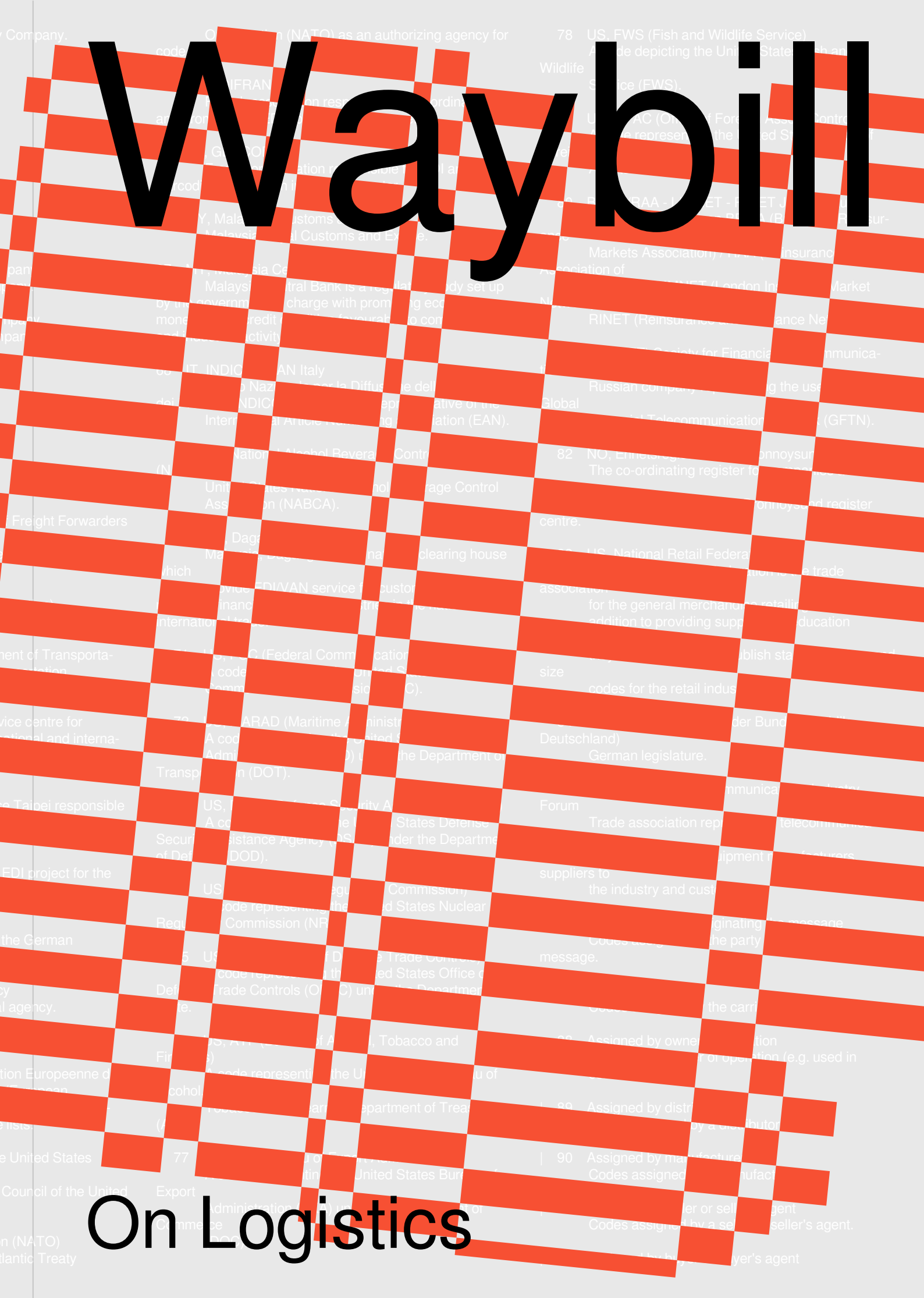


Waybill

On Logistics



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Editor:
Sampson Ohringer

Creative Direction and Design:
Christopher Good
Jacob Lindgren

Interstitials:
Christopher Good

Edition:
500

info@waybillmag.com
www.waybillmag.com

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Without Perspective: Excerpts Morgan Canavan



Oblique Drawing, A History of Anti-Perspective,
Massimo Scolari, MIT Press, 2015:

The works of Plotinus were collected in fifty-four treatises and arranged in six Enneads, of which the first and the fifth deal with aesthetic problems. For Plotinus, an image was the reflection of the thing that, in accordance With the Stoic principle of universal sympathy, shared the same nature as its model. The purpose of an image was not merely to reproduce the appearance of an object, but rather, to understand the nous, the intellect, and through it the universal soul. Yet the necessarily abstract images of art are meant neither to pique aesthetic pleasure nor imitate the appearance of reality nor provide moral teachings. Plotinus therefore found it necessary to establish the conventions today known as the statutes of representation. They stated that to achieve knowledge of the nous, the observer had to be acquainted with the physical nature of vision: this was the only way to perceive the message of the work correctly. In considering the problems of vision, in particular the reduction of distant dimensions and the weakening of color in distant objects, Plotinus claimed that the only view faithful to the true sizes and tones of color was the one very close to the eye, which represented the object in its completeness. Only this view made it possible to see things in detail and correctly assess measurements and overall size. Distant objects were indeterminate and thus

imperfect; all objects therefore had to be represented in the foreground, in the very fullness of light, with exact colors, and in all their detail and without shadows. This meant avoiding depth, since depth entailed shadow or obscurity and thus empty matter. According to Plotinus, the eye had to become "equal and similar to the object observed in order to contemplate it . . . one can never see the sun without becoming similar to it, and a soul can never contemplate beauty without being beautiful itself." This form of interpenetration was not possible with the "eye of the body" but only with the "inner eye." The importance of this claim is obvious: when seventeenth-century optics correctly resolved the geometrical problem of vision, it found that the "eye of the body" was only a channel of vision and that perception really began from the retina: what can really see is the "inner eye."

Similar arguments were advanced by mystics before Plotinus and by Christian theologians before him, but his claims are important because they were applied to the problem of representation. They implied that the space between the observer and the object was annulled, and thus also the point of view. Plotinus said that "there is no point at which one can fix one's own limits and say: this is as far as I am up to here." He claimed that perception "clearly takes place where the object is . . . to see, it is necessary to lose consciousness of one's own being, it is necessary in some way to stop seeing."

Plotinus's ideas did not have a direct influence on the painting of his day, but they certainly affected representation up until the Middle Ages. Their anti-perspectival characteristics, together with their breadth of philosophical conception, allow us to extend the symbolic scope of the limits that fourteenth-century optics put on fifteenth-century painting. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that parallel projection should have avoided the formation of depth by avoiding convergence, leaving aside the Euclidean "eye of the body." It would have been possible to see the geometry of real measurements and understand how the "eye of the sun" was bound to represent it without shadows. The fact that this happens beyond vision is what Plotinus described as "becoming equal and similar to the object." From the fifteenth-century onward, the inner eye, freed of its fixed mysticism and the symbolic insularity of painting, moved to become the place of exact knowledge, where measurement shatters the seduction of the gaze.

The understanding of the physical world has been expanded enormously with the aid of theories and explanations that use concepts not tied to the specifically human perceptual viewpoint. Our senses provide the evidence from which we start, but the detached character of this understanding is such that we could possess it

even if we had none of our present sense, so long as we were rational and could understand the mathematical and formal properties of the objective conception of the physical world. We might even in a sense share an understanding of physics with other creatures to whom things appeared quite different, perceptually—so long as they too were rational and numerate.

The world described by this objective conception is not just centerless; it is also in a sense featureless. While the things in it have properties,

none of these properties are perceptual aspects. All those have been relegated to the mind, a yet-to-be-examined domain. The physical world as it is supposed to be in itself contains no points of view and nothing that can appear only to a particular point of view. Whatever it contains can be apprehended by a general rational consciousness that gets its information through whichever perceptual point of view it happens to view the world from.

Powerful as it has proven to be, this bleached-out physical conception of objectivity encounters difficulties if it is put forward as the method for seeking a complete understanding of reality. For the process began when we noticed that how things appear to us depends on the interaction of our bodies with the rest of the world. But this leaves us with no account of the perceptions and specific viewpoints which were left behind as irrelevant to physics but which seem to exist nonetheless, along with those of other creatures—not to mention the mental activity of forming an objective conception of the physical world, which seems not itself capable of physical analysis.



Certainly, the way the logic of finance works and the succession of speculative bubbles which increases private and public debt impacts the real economy, provoking closer and closer recessions. The problem is that, with financial capitalism, on a global scale, it is extremely difficult to overcome the crisis by definancializing the economy, i.e., reestablishing a more balanced relationship between the real and financial economy, for example by increasing investments in the industrial sector or, as in the 1930s in the US, investing in the construction of the social state.

By now, finance permeates from the beginning to the end the circulation of capital. Every productive act and every act of consumption is directly or indirectly tied to finance. Debt-credit relationships define the production and exchange of goods according to a speculative logic, transforming, that is, the use value of goods (theoretically all produced or to-be-produced goods) in veritable potential financial assets that generate surplus value. The demand, and the indebtedness it implies, for a financialized use value, as happened with housing during the subprime bubble, induces further increases in demand precisely in virtue of the increase of the price of that good. This fully contradicts the law of supply and demand typical of neoclassical theory where an increase in price reduces demand. After the ascendant phase of

the economic cycle, when the inflated prices of financialized goods begin to diminish for lack of new buyers, the contradiction between debt levels (fixed in nominal terms) and prices of financial assets (which can both increase and decrease) violently explodes. This triggers a selloff of financial assets in order to be able to cover the debt contracted, a selloff that in turn causes a further reduction in prices and therefore more selling (this spiral is called a debt deflation trap).



The Enigma of Capital, and The Crisis of Capitalism,
David Harvey, Oxford, 2010. p. 42-43:

The circulation of capital also entails spatial movement. Money is assembled from somewhere and brought to a particular place to utilize labour resources that come from somewhere else. I deposit money in a savings account in my local bank in Baltimore and the money ends up in the hands of an entrepreneur in China who built a sock factory in Dongguan hiring migrant labourers (mainly young women) from the countryside. The means of production (including raw materials) have to be brought from yet another place to produce a commodity that has to be taken to market somewhere else. Frictions within or barriers to this spatial movement take time to negotiate and slow down circulation. Throughout the history of capitalism much effort has therefore been put into reducing the friction of distance and barriers to movement. Innovations in transport and communications



have been crucial. Increasing the openness of state borders to commerce and finance, signing free trade agreements and securing proper legal frameworks for international trade are also seen as essential in the long term. Imagine if the customs barriers in Europe had never been abolished. To take another contemporary example, the securitisation of local mortgages and their sale to investors all over the world was viewed as a way of connecting areas of capital shortage with those in surplus in a way that supposedly minimised risk.

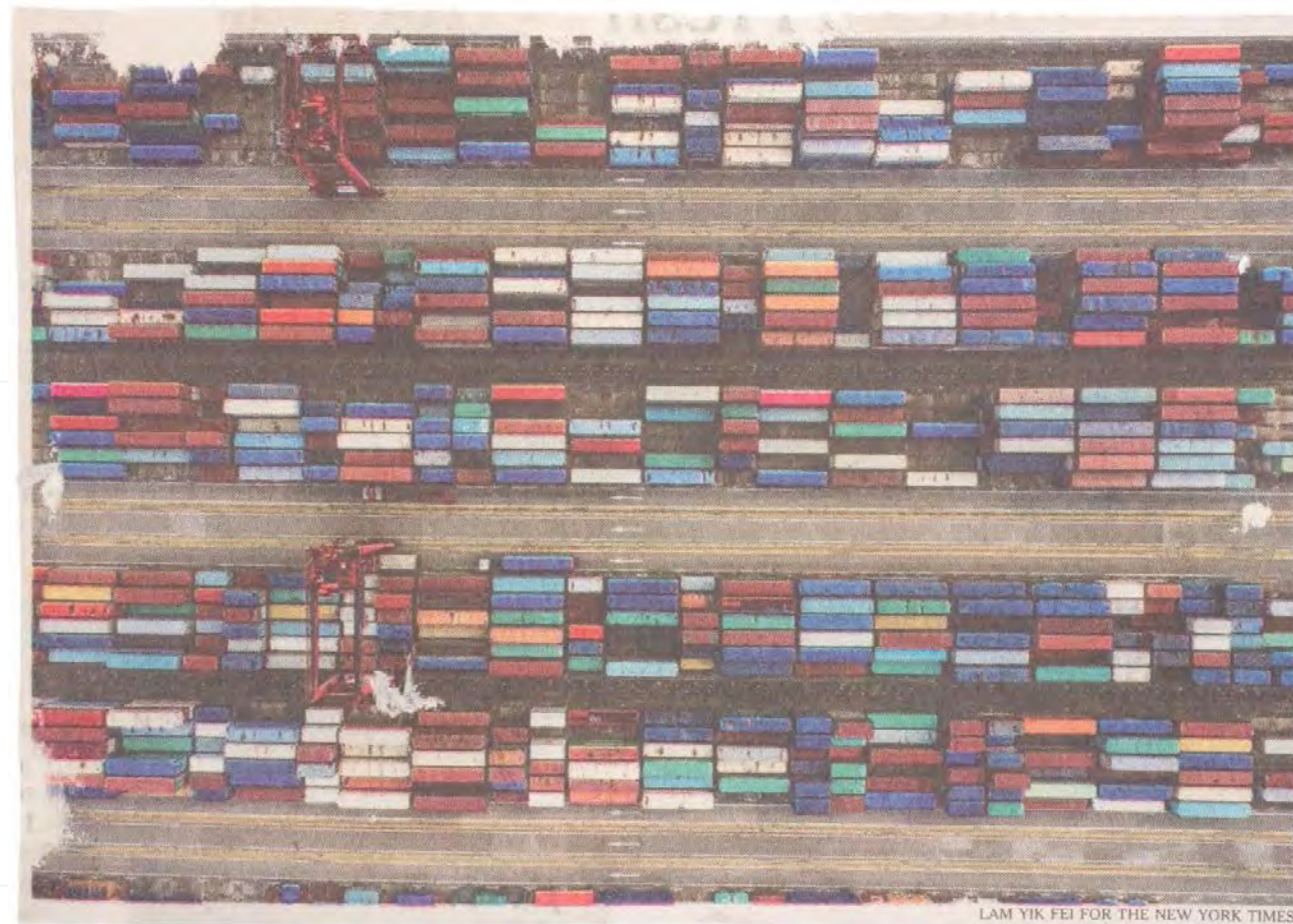
Throughout the history of capitalism there has been a trend towards the general reduction of spatial barriers and speed-up. The space and time configurations of social life are periodically revolutionised (witness what happened with the coming of the railroads in the nineteenth century and the current impact of the world wide web). Movement becomes ever faster and space relations ever closer. But this trend is neither smooth nor irreversible. Protectionism can return, barriers can be refortified, civil wars can disrupt flows. Furthermore, revolutions in spatial and temporal relations produce stresses and crises (witness the difficult adjustments forced on many cities by widespread deindustrialisation in the heartlands of capitalist production in the 1980s as production moved to east Asia) ...

Why do capitalists reinvest in expansion rather than consume away their profits in pleasures? This is where 'the coercive laws of competition' play a decisive role. If I, as a capitalist, do not reinvest in expansion and a rival does, then after a while I am likely to be driven out of business. I need to protect and expand my market share. I have to reinvest to stay a capitalist. This assumes, however, the existence of a competitive environment, which requires that we also explain how competition is perpetuated in the face of tendencies towards monopolisation or other social or customary barriers to competitive behaviour. I will return to this problem shortly. There is, however, another motivation to reinvest. Money is a form of social power that can be appropriated by private persons. Furthermore, it is a form of social power that has no inherent limit. There is a limit to the amount of land I can possess, of the physical assets I can command. Imelda Marcos had 6,000 pairs of shoes, it was discovered, after the overthrow of her husband's dictatorship in the Philippines, but that still constituted a limit in the same way that the very rich cannot own billions of yachts or MacMansions. But there is no inherent limit to the billions of dollars an individual can command.

...the system of containerization is based on the coordination of connections, in particular the relationship between all of the elements of the industry. This was where the earlier attempts at some form of unitized transport system failed. But crucially, as the container corner fitting demonstrates, there has to be a stabilization of relations, so that the connection between the container and the various modes of transport is 'guaranteed' through the universally recognized design. There has to be a fit between them - literally and conceptually. The issue of guaranteed fit is an important one in the literature on standardization.

The sociologists Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, in their work on classification, argue that standards are 'any set of agreed-upon rules for the production of (textual or material) objects'. The development of the ISO container exemplifies this: only with the collective agreement on the standardized sizes could the design be fully implemented. There's another form of guarantee as well, and that is the one whereby the container itself is governed by internationally recognized standards, guaranteeing the regularity of design and its ability to interact with other standards such as the redesign of infrastructure. Through what might be called 'structures of agreement' standardization

is the entrenchment of standards so that the various standardized parts of a system become 'crystallised' or solidified. Through this process of entrenchment certain technologies and procedures are developed that help the standardized system to function. With containerization, the corner fitting and twist lock would be a case in point: it enables the interconnection with various transportation networks. This argument concerning standardization and interchangeability—or interconnection—speaks principally to the importance of stabilizing the moments



of interconnection. And here we can turn to another sociologist to assist us with our 'interconnection of ideas'. Bruno Latour's work on the complexities of technological systems of various kinds offers a notable parallel to Siegfried Giedion's point about the repetitive qualities of the mechanical as opposed to non-repetitive nature of the human hand. Latour talks of delegation. This is a process where human effort is delegated to socio-technical machines, be that a washing machine for cleaning clothes, a television remote control for enabling lethargy or, in Latour's example from the Introduction, an overhead door closer for assisting with operating a door. An object can be said to 'displace, translate, delegate, or shift' its function from one of major effort

(such as opening a heavy door) to a minor one (displacing this into the light push of the door). Through the design of the simple device of the container corner fitting, the previous work, effort and time expended on conjoining the container and vehicle (through the lashing of ropes) is built into the device: it is delegated to it. That is to say the purpose of this device (to link container and vehicle) replaces the previous job of the dockworker. In this sense the action of the worker is delegated to the corner fitting and twist-lock mechanism, albeit a mechanism that has to be locked in place by hand in certain cases. Critically, the expenditure of effort in lashing ropes around non-standardized containers is replaced by the 'dream of efficient action' embodied in the device itself. This could be seen in another way: the technical know-how and skilled knowledge of stowage that longshoremen and stevedores previously practised and were paid for becomes delegated to the container - that is, unitization alleviates the craft of stowing cargo. However, even with the delegation to technical objects, the process

of stabilization is a relatively lengthy one, in that it takes time for a system of delegation to become entrenched or embedded, as seen with the previous discussion of the negotiations towards standardizing container design.

Low Relief Globalism Morgan Canavan with Sampson Ohringer



Photograph by Diana Pfammatter, courtesy of Sweetwater, Berlin.

Sampson Ohringer: How did you come across the texts that you included in *Low Relief Globalism*, and how did you choose those passages in particular to put together?

Morgan Canavan: There's a logic in the order—maybe in the distance, near to far. I would say that the work is not an illustration of those ideas. I read each of those after I began work on the sculptures and found resonance and space for my work in them.

For years I've made sculptures of newspapers. If you get a newspaper every day, it's a lot of information. Not interesting, could be interesting, biased, factual, something I knew about, something I didn't know about, and could be used or couldn't be used. Information, or content, becomes a material separated from narrative.

I formed my process in the studio during the Great Recession, and [often] read about finance and thought about its momentum. How

do economies not continually stop working? How is anything a profitable activity? Is the economy woven in Möbius strips, or does it ever run out of thread?

There's a scale to those books. I first thought about this [while] looking at a book of the aerial photographer George Gerster's Swissair posters, which reconfigure locational iconography as data viewed from the sky. Reading about the financial mechanics of the market, you're moving around corners of the planet, as if rearranging objects in a Morandi still life ... and the economies are each just trying to find pockets, or pools, or ways to arrange their resources. This is old-fashioned—I feel it goes back to the Gold Standard-era approach to banking—but the fact that anyone makes money in finance seems coincidental, because it's really a giant effort against inflation devaluing wealth and trying to not lose money to the gravitational force of inflation through time, to just make 3% or 4% or 6% back, and to keep the economy in motion. There are those who make a lot more than 3% back, but if nothing else, the effort is just to not lose money through time. As an artist, I feel skeptical about even this base process.

Reading the newspaper, I started looking at shipping containers and thinking about the language of those photographs. Show us what trade looks like in one picture. These newspaper images of containers are shot from far away, and always from high up, maybe from a drone, helicopter or rooftop. There is a pattern to that language of images. Then, turning the page in the newspaper to the stock indexes and comparing one day to the next, it's like a wallpaper where the number of flower petals change and turn.

Within the language of trade imagery, the shipping containers themselves are a pattern that changes continuously. The pattern is visual, but the number of containers in a port or on a ship are barometric indicators of other forms of pressure. The perspective in these photographs shapes the language as well. Through super-telephoto lenses, the photographs distort towards an isometric or axonometric perspective that positions a viewer in an informational relationship to what is depicted. It reminds me of the differences between looking at Sol Lewitt's drawings of "Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes," seeing the actual painted cubes in a sculpture garden, and the mental geometric exercise they are the result of.

From these newspaper clippings of shipping containers, I started to read about isometric drawing and found resonance in the difference between the thing in front of you and the ideal, or mind's eye, view of that same thing. Each text [and each] visual trope became a footnote to one another.

SO: What was the impetus behind exploring and utilizing shipping containers within your broader artistic practice? How does this

series relate to your practice at large? How do you envision the relationship between the textual fragments, newspaper clippings, and container sculptures?

MC: My work with newspapers established to me that I could use information as material. Additionally, changing the density of the object changes its speed of meaning. I feel that by focusing on these details of object making, it is possible to posit new conclusions about everyday objects. The container sculptures are themselves cut out and collaged from the *New York Times Business* section. The physical process is different, but the artistic process and my intentions for the work are identical. The textual fragments I gathered for this book correspond to my sculptural effort through a maintained scale and distance.

SO: Can you talk about the relationship between how the shipping containers operate visually—given their miniature scale—and how they operate conceptually?



MC: The visual is a matter of fact. Each '40-foot' shipping container is around 1-1/4 x 1 x 5-1/2 inches in size, placed on the floor in stacks. Walking up to the sculpture on the floor in a gallery creates something like a bird's eye perspective in the viewer: it's as if we have an omniscient viewpoint of the work. There is the suggestion that the room is a landscape, or the work is in a space with different boundaries than the gallery. Space is really part of the work. The circumstance of these works occurs through the difference between scale and size. Through their size, these sculptures adjust the viewer's own scale, or position their scale, with a different set of terms. Like the sun looking at the earth; rescaling the viewer is significant. Looking past the perceptual suggestions of the sculptures, there's a reverse process.

Conceptually, I find the way that it operates is by drawing you back into considering what the scale of an actual shipping container really is. After all, agreements about the dimensions of shipping containers allowed for the scale of globalism to increase in the '60s and '70s.

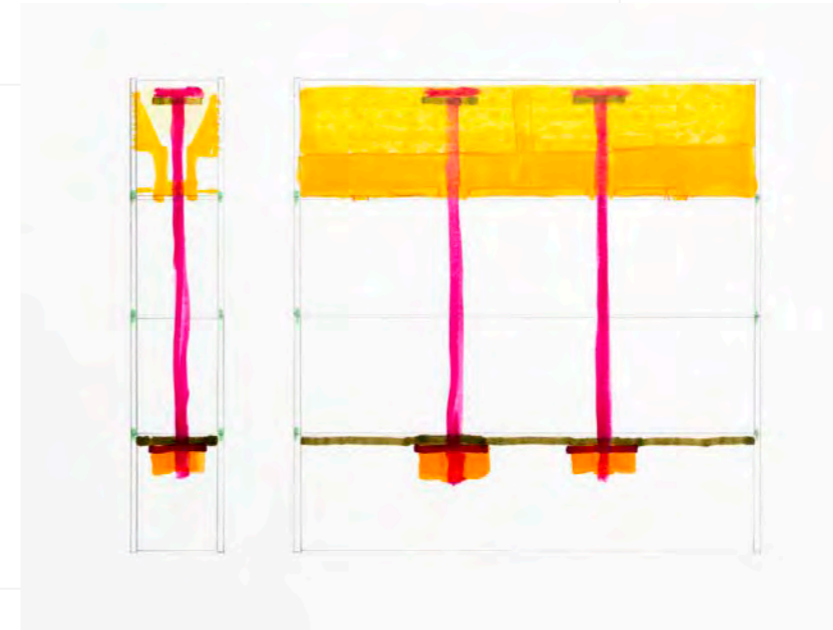
Another visual aspect of these sculptures is how their colors combine. Their palettes were discovered through a difference or contrast. Like the Financial Times' pink newsprint, containers are painted and labeled by companies to become identifiable

and distinguishable from one another. Within these constraints, I found room for different aesthetic arrangements of blocks of color. These decisions were made thinking through the objects.

The shipping containers I worked with are readymade objects, formed in injection molds and painted. Or that is how I imagine they were made when I look at them. Some of them are also colorful inside. The plastic, instead of just being gray, is often tinted orange or green or blue

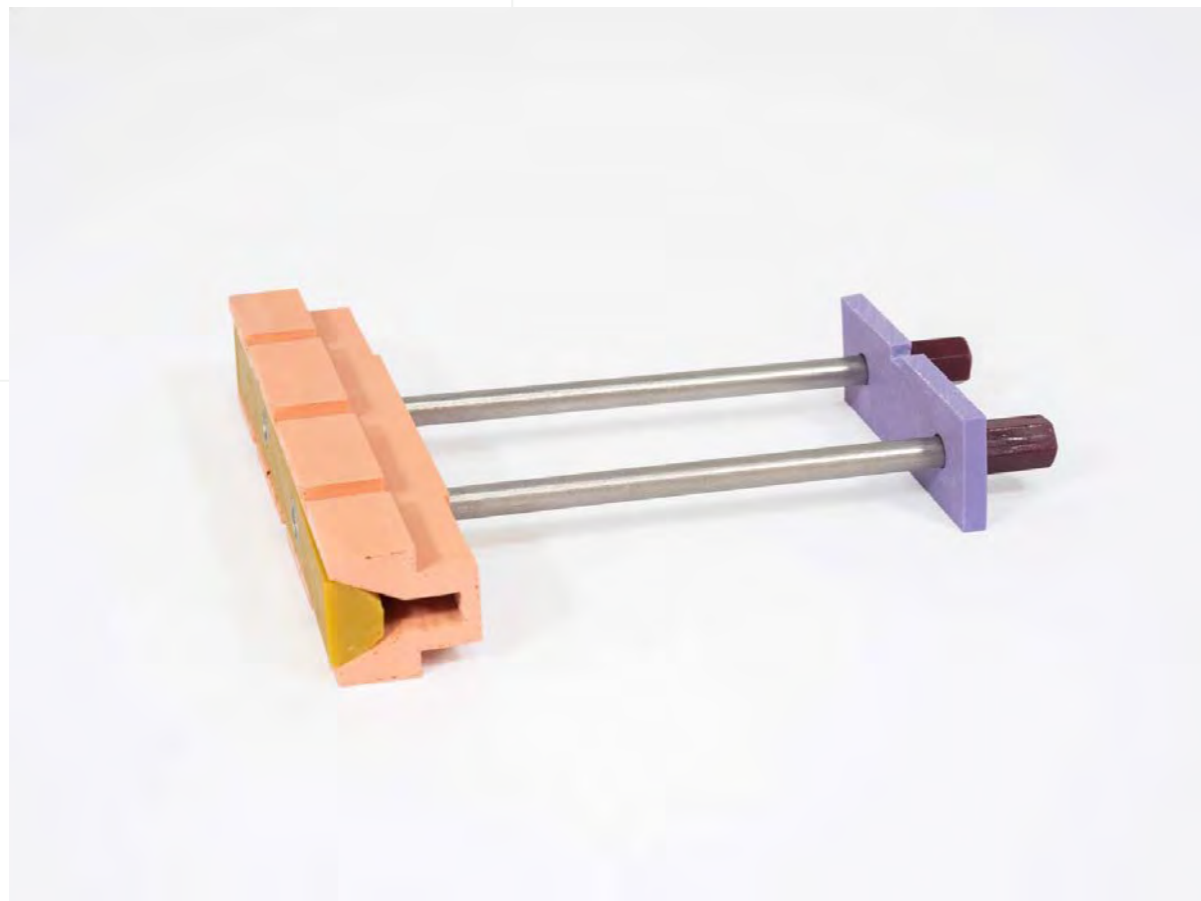
as an undercoat to the paint. I noticed this layering of materials in the readymade object at the same time I was thinking about how the parts would affix into a sculptural object, how the sculpture would be held together. It would be easiest to just superglue all the corners together. If I were a different artist making this work, I wouldn't even worry about fixing them together. But I was curious how I could make their formalist arrangement a decision, to give gestalt to the way these objects lock together. I made an apparatus that clamped the containers internally. In each vertical stack there is a stress mechanism inside: as coupling nuts at the underside of the sculpture are tightened, a wedge on the top forces a bracket to spread outward along the sides. This expansion is almost imperceptible, moving the walls of the container maybe 1/64 of an inch, if even that. This tiny movement locks the whole stack together. The entire stack could be lifted up by the top container without falling apart.

The mechanism and the internal components are cast out of a resin that could be saturated with color. There's also a vibrancy in pigmented plastics that doesn't exist in paint, because color fills the entire substrate. Light is held inside the material, inside the color. The colors are synthetic, but not out-of-the-tube. In the studio, I spent hours mixing batches and palettes of color. If these clamping



components were cut in half, the color goes all the way through. I think of color-poured-through-form as very metaphysically defined. This was really interesting to the formalist in me: if the lacquer on the side of a car is scratched, or an Anthony Caro sculpture is dinged, a cultural, “pop” break occurs. Sea foam green, bright yellow, or red split and reveal materials that feel quite different: primer, carbon steel or Bondo. The sculptural components inside my containers don't work like that. They exist in this other way, where the outside of the mechanism is the same as its interior and there's a perceivable continuity all the way through them. Conceptually, the color makes the mechanism apparent, even if it isn't visible.

There's two sets of sculptures that we're talking about, really. There's the set that are built into HO scale model shipping containers and then there's the set that's built into identically sized clear acrylic containers. Both use the internal clamp I just described. In the acrylic set, you can look into the object and see what is inside. If you look at stacks of containers at a port—which we always see from a great distance—and you imagine what's inside them, how does the logistical mechanism work, in your imagination? I overemphasized how mechanical these small sculptures are in their construction. Holding the sculpture together was a way to find space to make it something more internal, more psychological, or more specific to my mind, while working within the format determined by readymade objects and existing imagery.



What can or can't the viewer see? The pieces are called Without Audience, Stressed Internally and With Audience, Stressed Internally. The two sets, shipping containers and acrylic boxes, have different forms of address for a viewer: the thing that is available for someone to perceive, and the thing that I perceived while making it. A drone, a telephoto lens or an isometric drawing provide a view that everyone can understand, but in a perceptual form that is not natural to human eyes.

SO: In the past, you've mentioned using stress or compression as material, so it's striking to hear you now talk about the sculptures in psychological terms. Is that a connection you actively take into account when making your work?

MC: It's still something I'm actively thinking about in the studio now. I'm not inherently stressed out by looking at things, but I keep myself present to the complexity of something, or the enormity of something, and to how I experience that. I feel like right now we're in this epoch where this stress or density of scale is always in the background. Say you go to Costco and maybe you look at the stacks of cases of bottled water. And you don't necessarily think about it. But if you look at it, draw it away from its use and analyze it as an object, it's a volume of plastics, cardboard and water, a perverse redistribution of materials. Capitalist compound objects are all around, if you're open to seeing them. Those particles are passing through all the time, but even if you're looking for it, it's not necessarily apparent. Does capitalism exist for itself now? It doesn't necessarily exist for the wealth of any person, or any single company, or any country. It has its own momentum and force where certain decisions will be made and gaps get filled the same way endlessly, creating the same form no matter what the variables are. Maybe all that bottled water isn't really for us.

And there's an angst to it. A byproduct of my studio method, as a Los Angeles artist who did not study or grow up in Los Angeles, is that I often feel that I'm creating work in solitude. Going really deep into that, it became a subject unto itself. The sculptures are not easy to make, and my inclination is to try and slow meaning down. Subsequently I find myself working in very indirect processes. There's something very personal—that the work carries stress consciously, like a capacitor rather than a resistor. I don't go to the studio to work out my psyche, but I am making work about things that deeply affect me in a way that is hard to articulate, and sculpture has become the way I articulate it. It's not something that would make for a good essay or a good movie, though I am equally concerned with what is available to an audience observing my work.

I don't feel like I've answered your question, but it is a good question. I don't know if I've found the bottom of it yet. I've always been interested in visual art as deeply perceptual, but in terms of the sort of psychological intensity of things ... The work

is not emotional, right? Using stress as a material is different than portraying or documenting stress, or doing research on its impacts and side effects, that would be something different from how I am working with stress and implying its psychological meanings in the work.

SO: Well I'm also struck by the idea of stress as a material and the way that it can be scaled up and down the same way that the sculptures themselves are smaller-scale versions of shipping containers. It's interesting how it plugs your sculptures directly into those supply chains since stress, regardless of the amount, is acting in much the same way on the full-scale containers and their miniature counterparts.

MC: In "Shipping Container (Object Lessons)," Craig Martin wrote about the commonality of how shipping containers are linked and the unitization of their corner connections. And that's a really sculptural idea: how do things go together? What keeps these two components from being independent of one another? How do they meet? You raise an interesting idea, that stress can be scaled. When I talk about stress as a material, I do mean both in terms of physics, pushing the material beyond the point at which it's at tensile ease, but also something I impart on my work the way another artist's thumbprint might leave a trace in their work. Material can hold anxiety.

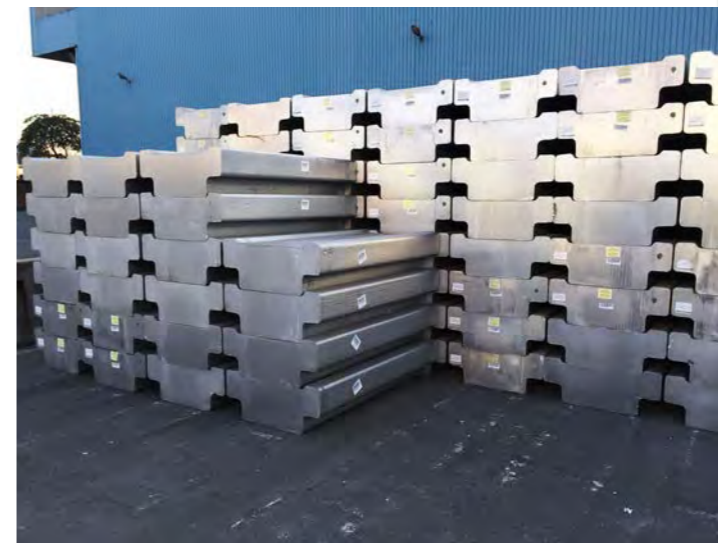
Capitalism has its forms of connections and stresses too. For me it's really ethereal—capitalist connections are real, but very quickly intangible. Moving money electronically becomes more like the general exercise of mathematics, it's not really about anything physical like the number of dollar bills or how many Kit-Kat bars sold last week. I'm sure sometimes it is that tangible though, for instance there was there was an article in The New York Times in 2013 about Goldman Sachs' purchase of an aluminum storage company, Metro International Trade Services, which at the time stored more than a quarter of all the aluminum available on the market, in giant ingots, formed and machined into a shape that can be nested in a stack and moved around with a forklift with a shipping label. It's not exactly raw material, not made into a product yet, and also not scrap metal. The ingots have a sort of suspended state of materiality. Goldman Sachs made more money by moving aluminum from one warehouse to another, than by just selling the material on. This caused delays, allowed the flow of production to back up and increased the rent cost of storing the material. Taking a material that would go straight into manufacturing, and freezing it in the moment before it goes into manufacturing and making it do nothing, and then profiting off of the suspension of it, profiting from preventing it from actually becoming tooling on a machine, or turning into an injection mold for airplane panels, or being sliced and pressed into soda cans. How do economics work without production? I'm just a Sunday economist, but I think it's a direction

that we have been heading in for a while.

I could make With Audience, Stressed Internally using real containers—take a stack of real shipping containers and cut through the roof and make a clamp that holds it all together. But unless you're seeing it from 400 yards away in a skyscraper or with a telephoto lens, without positioning its viewership, the scale would

no longer function. Seen up close, this hypothetical sculpture would go back to this size that we don't really know shipping containers at. Occasionally I work with vendors that have shipping containers in their parking lots for extra storage and I never can grasp the size at that distance.

David Walter Banks for
The New York Times



It's as if I'm seeing this object for the first time, because I so rarely see them up close. The text painted on them becomes a sort of hieroglyphic image of actual text, whereas With Audience, Stressed Internally is graspable, like looking through the newspaper. The air in the gallery becomes material to scale. Images of shipping containers illustrating trade relationships operate at a scale in the mind.

SO: The question of perspective is central to this project. You draw a parallel between the bird's-eye perspective of the viewer in the gallery seeing your sculptures and that of a drone photographing a container stack at a

port. In revisiting the texts you included earlier, Nagel in particular, there seems to be this argument that this sort of Modernist attempt at an "objective" top-down perspective is almost inherently impossible, or at the very least abstract—because it is by definition no-one's perspective. This also seems to parallel, in some theoretical way, what you asked about who capitalism is "for." It's just a decentralized, perspectiveless phenomenon.

MC: The intangible aspect of that Goldman Sachs aluminum story is that the impact, the cost of a soda can increasing a fraction of a cent, is not observable to the consumer. What if consumers were the audience, the viewers, of the economy? I think capitalism would differ.

In high school, I had an English professor who corrected my writing: “thoughts cannot be abstract.” To his point, I am thinking about the things we’ve discussed in terms abstracted from the real applications and obligations of these objects. Perhaps this orchestration [of materials] “without perspective” is where I enter the work, the point at which the tone of these objects become observational. What are the edges of what is perceivable in the day-to-day we live in? Sculpturally, I’m thinking about those edges.

SO: It’s interesting you bring up comprehension (or lack thereof) of the full-size containers, given that they’re built to be moved, to stay in transit—much like capital, as we’re discussing it —while your sculptures were made to sit stationary on the gallery floor and be observed from this bird’s-eye perspective. How do you see that tension, between the kinetic energy of containers and the staticity of sculpture, playing out in your work?

MC: For a while I was titling these sculptures for myself as ‘objects without perspective.’ Since this project, I’ve been making work that are objects even more without perspective. The container sculptures create a certain kind of viewership to point towards a different relationship to the global economy. For me, the best scenario of someone viewing these works, there would be a movement in the back of their mind, and seeing the work might lead them to think about things that are different from a zoomed out point of view. Artistically, that’s one of the work’s reasons for being. Kinetic energy—I don’t know, that’s an interesting term. I mean, when you say kinetic energy, are you talking about the movement of goods, or are you talking about the connection of things?

SO: I suppose both. Shipping containers are not really built with an eye to aesthetics, but to be moved around and banged up and put on a train and then put on a boat, and to always be moving, unloaded, reloaded, and put back on the ship.

MC: As a sculptor in general, I deal with objects where I’m changing their density. And in doing that, the objects get removed from their regular existence in the world. When that object gets taken out of whatever process is part of, the density changes and the meaning of that object changes. Maybe I’m guilty of this same sort of mechanism as Goldman Sachs used moving aluminum around and around, where I’m suspending the object. But for me it isn’t an economic process, the purpose of the process is to elucidate, consider, or shift the position of its meaning.

SO: I’m curious about the fact that these started out as model train set containers. Did you ever think about trying to fabricate them yourself instead?

MC: I did, definitely. They are HO scale shipping containers. HO

scale is a model train scale that specifically depicts intermodal shipping. There are several other scales for train models, and the larger it gets, the more it becomes like a toy, a size easier for a child to handle. And the smaller that it is, the more you have this landscape or environment of the world that you’re building around your trains and train tracks. My family is into model trains. The way my grandfather would represent a Pennsylvania coal town and this sort of landscape around his childhood, you know, so it’s super pictorial. Plein-air sculpting. It’s also infrastructure: the coal getting taken out of the ground, the hopper cars getting loaded, the power plant, and the town with telephone poles and street lights. It’s an arc of industry. HO scale is small enough to put all that in your basement yet big enough to still have legible text and rivets and lightbulbs.

I thought about how to make them myself and made plaster casts and 3D prints. I was thinking about casting them in bronze, as a way where they would really solidify within a gallery space, like an early 20th century bronze figurine unifies into the bronze ground it stands on. But the ready-made model train shipping containers were perplexing trying to reverse engineer how these miniature containers were made. Even after opening them up and looking inside, there is still a mystery to their making. I know how to make things and think about printing processes and consider how one layer of an object meets the next, and how different materials build up and combine into something new. For me, the text on the readymade containers is really incomprehensible, in terms of how it was applied, and so there’s a fascination with observing this limit. Looking at and considering them became a process of zooming in.

SO: Right.

MC: You know, it’s a very fully readymade object. I bought these containers from different suppliers and different brands —but it doesn’t matter what brand, they all fit together. Other details are totally different—like some of the door mechanisms are this bas relief, extruded out from the rest of the container in a beautiful way, but then there are others where the door latch is made of wire with small brackets. There’s this impossibility to them, that feels like a refraction of... I suppose I can wrap my mind around the fact that we live in a world where there is global trade and most things end up where they are supposed to, for enough of the time, that it keeps going. You order something online from China and three months later, it actually arrives at your door, but it’s still hard to believe this all works. One time I talked with someone who managed shipping for a manufacturer and he told me: “Yeah, when you give a box to FedEx, anything could happen. Usually it gets there. Usually it works out, and sometimes it gets dropped a few times but...” There’s this faith in the system. It’s obvious, but astonishes me.

SO: And you know, part of this project as a whole is asking: how

do you represent something that is, because of its global scale, so incomprehensible. Can you elaborate on what you mean by the impossibility of the detailing? Does that parallel the impossibility or incredulity you mention about the supply chain generally functioning as intended?



MC: There are two calculations going in different directions. One is the enormity of its scale, the enormity of how traversed everything is versus the tininess of something. How much information can you put into how small of a thing? But I'm really interested in that second slope: how do you move in closer to an object, how do you overload an object or overextend its underlying logic?

A lot of other work I've made in the past seven years is viewed at reading distance, the range where a visual encounter becomes really meaningful. You don't necessarily have to read it, but that's the distance where you start to understand what's going on materially in the work in a different way. However, these readymades defeat that for me, where I can't figure out how they're printed and my mind is held by that. They're not printed on directly, because the text is on a corrugation but isn't out of focus. There's a stretch to the image that is complex. They are masked and painted in some way. I started to think if I was to try and make something that detailed, how would I do that? I imagined if an injection mold could be designed as a painting mask, where an exact fit is formed around the surface, but openings in the surface of the mold would allow for text to be painted through. One of the things that gets me going in the studio is: I know how a given object is made, but what could be a way to make it materially that allows for a complication in meaning?

But how does that relate to the incomprehensibility of trade, or the economy, or the movement of goods? I always have this feeling that globalism is new. And it's not new at all. It existed at the beginning of modernism, it's just that it eventually got around the rest of the planet. It's not a new process. Reading about the West Indies Trading Company is like the same structure as Amazon, in some ways. Graham Harman suggested the arch of these objects (companies) in his book *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. I'm not saying Amazon is an extra-national military—

SO: We're getting there.

MC: Yeah, you know, just given enough time. The Dutch West India Trading Company was around for 173 years. Amazon is, what, 26 years old? Give Amazon's web services or its consumer marketplace another hundred and fifty years and what is its form?

SO: One parallel I notice between how you discuss the newspaper photos of containers and the stacks of model containers you assembled is in how the meaning of the stack as a whole varies, or doesn't, based on the individual containers that make up that stack. And then, at sort of another level of discussion, how is the symbolism of a container affected, or not, by what is actually inside of it.

MC: Sometimes people see a Tony Smith sculpture or have their first experience with a minimalist sculpture and they have a

heightened experience of looking and not seeing anything. I think that with looking at actual shipping containers, that perceived obfuscation is real, where you know you could have any object or part of an object, up to a certain size. Headphone cables, manganese, steel slabs, refrigerator foam, plastic envelopes and cars all repackaged in a form that is not for consumption. The opacity of experience is a sort of anti-theft mechanism; if you have 900 Maersk or Hapag Lloyd containers that all look the same as one another, how would you choose which one to break into? That is an exaggerated way of pointing out that it almost doesn't matter what's inside the shipping containers at the port. Obviously, the shipping companies and layers of infrastructure exist to move what's inside the container, so really it does matter. But if we are talking about meaning rather than infrastructure, there is a redirection.

My friend was recently sent a fake order through Amazon. She received a solderless circuit breadboard that she didn't order as part of a scam where sellers fabricate a sale in order to review their own products as their "customer." Another time, she received an ugly hat. But the mechanism of the scam could allow for most any objects we can imagine. This scam is an inversion of another where customers would buy something like a camera and return the box to the seller filled with a bag of bolts.

A different friend of mine has a neighbor with buckets of dirt. My friend thought that his neighbor was growing worms and selling them over the internet, and we were debating how you would pack dirt and earthworms. I think you could just fill the box with worms and soil, no bubble or plastic, just a box.

Some containers are colorful, but the color is not inherently meaningful or Pop. As far as how blankness rescales into my work, I know what the inside of my shipping containers look like. When you know how it's made and what is inside, the meaning changes. I don't feel that my shipping container works have opacity to them—not literal opacity, but opacity of what is moving through them—because the containers were always intended to be shown with the plexiglass works, which inductively suggest what the shipping containers contain, what their assembly is and what their terms are.

SO: Do you want to talk more about the relationship between those two parts of the show, the plexiglass works versus the containers?

MC: In terms of the opacity of the sculptures, if you happen to contemplate an object, you may imagine what's inside of it, or why it's there. If you follow Tony Smith back from his drive down the Jersey turnpike, driving back from New Brunswick, Port Newark and Elizabeth expanded over the Meadows wetland in the '60s and '70s. The lanes have been painted, cut up and stitched back together. The bitumen has faded from the endless blacktop. Sodium vapor lights have been installed. Now, at night, from the highway you can



look off the Jersey Turnpike at the stacks of hollow metal containers and look through them. They could hold anything, right? I think that the *Without Audience, Stressed Internally* works allow for this kind of redirection. The interiors of these objects are visible. It's malleable in a way that is structurally irrational, but not less real. It actually could be anything. I don't think of the scale model and plexiglass sculptures as binary, but it is more: what's observable, even if only visible to the mind?

1. Wagstaff, Samuel, and Tony Smith. "Talking with Tony Smith." *Artforum*, Dec. 1966, <https://www.artforum.com/print/196610/talking-with-tony-smith-36795>.