

————— Perspecta 54 —————

Atopia

The Yale Architectural Journal

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Ilona Gaynor **Threads
of Deviation**



“People are always shouting they want to create a better future... It’s not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.”¹

– Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1981

In recent years, we have seen an important shift in how fiction is read, understood, and applied across design and architecture as a consequence of the seismic shifts and re-alignments taking place within contemporary politics. The discourse of Speculative Design, for example, proposes that while the materiality of the future can be designed and envisioned (often through gadgety objects, subjected to the tropes of science-fiction), it also attempts to re-impress our cherished ideals of the present onto them, often forcing a socio-technological dualism between desirable and undesirable futures, without taking into account the agency of actors in networks. At first glance, this notion may feel somewhat comforting. However, in its supreme inertia it destructively mistakes the intersectional and material integrity of the individual that most conceptions of democracy are based upon. This also takes for

granted the contingent complexities and lack of reconciliation within our political instincts – which are always in a state of flux. In political science, the fluctuating range of “acceptable” public discourse is often framed through the concept of the Overton Window. This is generally understood as a modest and incremental translatory tool for examining and shifting the finely tuned gears of popularly accepted discourses across political climates, governing policies and potential political wins. But the results of both the Brexit referendum and Trump's presidency seem to be signs of a new, entropic permissiveness. As *Politico* notes, “revealing that not only is the Overton window far wider than established politicians and the media had previously assumed, but that the political imagination has expanded.”² While the shift in the Overton Window may seem benign to the fields of design and architecture, it has altered not only how fiction(s) might be read and disseminated but how they might be applied within these disciplines.

“What are we offered by way of hope? Models, plans, blueprints, wiring diagrams.”³

**– Ursula K. Le Guin,
*A Non-Euclidean View of California
As a Cold Place to Be*, 1992**

1. Milan Kundera and Michael Henry Heim, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: by Milan Kundera* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1987).
2. Derek Robertson. “How an Obscure Conservative Theory Became the Trump Era's Go-to Nerd Phrase.” *POLITICO Magazine*, 25 Feb. 2018, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/25/overton-window-explained-definition-meaning-217010.
3. Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Non-Euclidean View of California As a Cold Place to Be* (1992).

As I briefly touched upon in a 2014 article published in *Architectural Design*, designers understand the simple fact that there is a certain pleasure to be found in a thing well made. It is a pleasure so simple, it seems, that it does not warrant further investigation. Architects and designers find little point in discussing the obvious fact that, without a certain minimum degree of precision, a building or chair cannot stand up. Likewise, one is pleased to come across a structure that holds together apparently against all odds. Yet, the fact that the work of a designer has brought ingenuity and finesse to their craft seems too basic and obvious to draw comment.⁴ However, this seemingly simple form of pleasure may be more complex than initially thought. The following essay posits fiction as an applied position on design, an approach that allows for chicanery, conjecture, and material forces to collide throughout the planning/design process, a horizon of design that invites an exploration of the “aesthetic of precision,” as a quality of design. Yet this precision is not granted by any given system, craft, or technology, as it is “at work when stratagems and language are given force through exact placement and timely action. Situations in which a single spatial

intervention is made can turn a world on its head, creating, undoing or transforming the whole.”⁵

As designers, we must ask: what does geometry actually do? And what are the vectors at which language, design, and fiction can intersect with other fields, such as law, politics, and finance? Beyond being able to relate to these disparate fields, how can geometric thought create a conceptual and material framework for design in which it can operate by means of perspectival modes of organization – grasping the environment that, in turn, enables us to act upon it. As such, the preoccupations of the following works and ideas do not belong to the object but to a cataclysmic operation: a stacked, layered, aligned, and misaligned “fine thread of deviation.”⁶ This phrase was coined by labor rights activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She characterized this concept as a “saboteur,” working within the factory – in which one thread purposely misplaced on the loom could destroy a full day of production. Unlike Flynn’s emancipatory program, the aim of this work is to form a somewhat dispassionate and reflexive vocabulary. In doing so, we may start to unravel our mutable disentanglement with fiction as a tool for discernment, control, disruption, and disobedience.

4. Ilona Gaynor and Benedict Singleton, “What We Want Is in That Room,” *High Definition: Zero Tolerance in Design and Production AD* (Wiley, 2014).
5. Ibid.
6. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency* (Chicago: I.W.W. Pub. Bureau, 1917).

As Benedict Singleton shrewdly observes:
Many cultures have come to the conclusion that designers are not to be trusted. The Ancient Greeks even had a dedicated term, *metis*, for this dimension of design, which is implied where extraordinary effects are elicited from unpromising materials, linking the construction of artefacts with daring military stratagems, programmes of seduction, insidious courtly intrigues and even the ability of foxes and rats to evade capture and control.⁷

Likewise, in this context, the countermeasure could be considered as both a material and structural tool, as defined in military operations with precise meaning: “the measures deployed at which to break the bond between a weapon and its target... the target dissimulating without fleeing or vanishing... Ground slips into figure, surface into threat, and the grid goes dark. An octopus disappears into the night, but it is a night which it can itself secrete.”⁸ It is within this contortion of materials, countermeasures, and the “combined wisdom and cunning intelligence” that the geometric coordination of ‘things’ (people and objects, moving around in space–over time) enables design to prospect beyond the potential of one perspective, to offer a truly complex underpinning, even if those corollaries are suspended in fiction.

Everything Ends in Chaos (2011) investigates these ideas through the means of finance and, by this, means to attend to “a physics, rather than a theology, of power.”⁹ Presented as an indexed narrative proposal–modeled after a financial catastrophe – it centers around the coordinated (and allied countermeasures) of a wealthy woman’s kidnapping. The proposal examines the mechanisms of risk assessment, financial calculation, and rather more literal and legal forms of judgement, as a material force for design.¹⁰ This kind of design references the vocabulary of Gurley Flynn’s work as the “saboteur” in that “history does not point to an effective countermeasure to sabotage, because sabotage itself is a history of countermeasures.”¹¹ It is, as an act, able to weave an arc of techniques through “surveillance and management; between the design of human activity and inhuman sites.”¹²

When the saboteur
starts to think backwards about herself
and hers
she does not let the opportunity slip
out of her hands. Anything might be
sabotaged.
What was firmly rooted lies rotted.
What was cast solid is perforated.
Into those openings the
saboteur sticks her fingers.

– *The Sabotage Manuals*,
Ida Börjel, 2014¹³

7. Benedict Singleton, “Anthropene Nights,” *Special Issue: Scarcity: Architecture in an Age of Depleting Resources. AD*. Volume 82 (Wiley, 2012).
8. Evan Calder Williams, “Manual Override,” *The New Inquiry*. 2016, and quoting Vernant. J.P. Cunniff *Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).
9. Grégoire Chamayou and Steven Rendall, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).
10. Gaynor and Singleton, “What We Want Is in That Room.”
11. Williams, “Manual Override.”
12. Ibid.
13. Ida Börjel, “The Sabotage Manual” Commune Editions (Oakland, 2014).

In this sense, the designer, not unlike the trickster, the pickpocket, the subordinate, or the saboteur, becomes the driving force of two forms of productivity: the structure of productivity itself and its purposeful collapse via the “withdrawal of efficiency.”¹⁴ Similarly, *Everything Ends in Chaos* offers us a spectacle of misdeeds: a dissimulation of material and abstract stratagems that navigates a series of accumulated grifts, eventually leading to collapse — designed to make visible legal and financial countermeasures, set forth as a byzantine labyrinth of technical feats:

“foregrounding the risk of precise action in asking what is gambled in narrowing margins of space and time, where exactness matters and becomes a force in its own right... for itself becomes something different when intensified to this point, where visceral situations are coupled with the unflinching detachment that their complexity

requires, and acumen — literally, sharpness — becomes the deciding vector.”¹⁵

This not only highlights the fact that while “abstract systems that undergird societal structures are powerful forces of design production in themselves,” — they are also able to “generate new situations as fast as a handshake or as slow as a building.” This revelation takes its cue from Gurley Flynn, “putting vinegar on the loom, doubt in the smile, glass in the motor, milk in the bearings, shit on the spikes, sand in the soup, and worms in the code,”¹⁶ the acts of which, business as usual or the sleight of hand can present identical properties — both that can be mistakenly seen as the entropic outcome of the same orderly mischance.

Images 48–53: Ilona Gaynor, *Everything Ends in Chaos*.

14. Gurley, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency*.
15. Gaynor and Singleton, “What We Want Is in That Room.”
16. Gurley, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency*

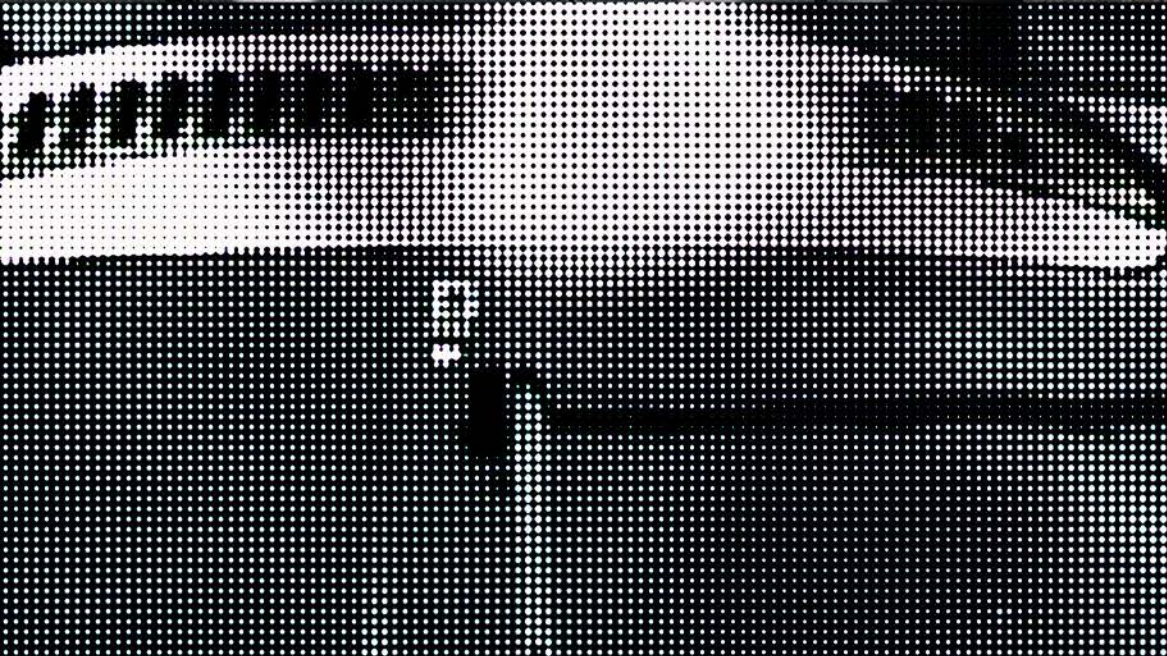
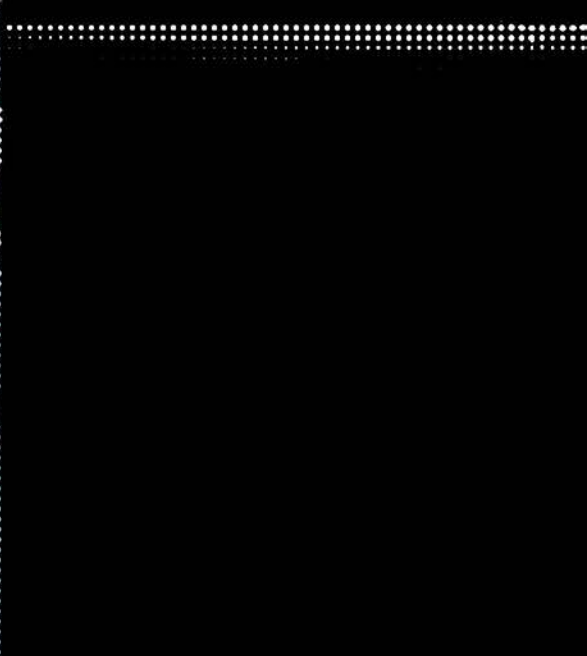
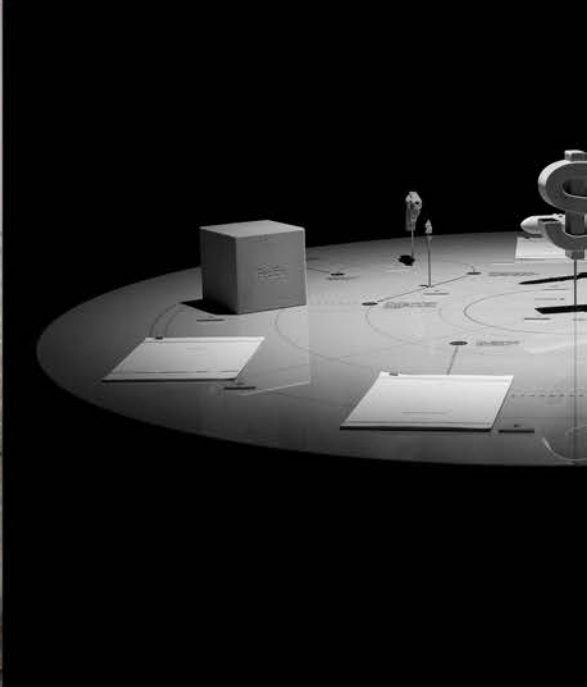


Image 48



Image

In various ways, the Law can be considered as existing along the same line of principles. Akin to the themes threaded throughout this text, the Law also manifests itself as a topographical way of thinking: an instrument of moving vectors and abstract mechanisms, culminating in the functional maneuvering of arguments, subset countermeasures, and persuasive ensnarement. As citizens, we vaguely understand that the Law's primary function is to pose a series of hierarchies through a system of rules, written to be applied as a functional means to give order to our dynamic social environment. The Law, however, also uses fiction in order to transcend its own epistemological foundations, serving as an intermediary between itself and its applications. Topographically speaking, unlike the constricted thresholds of the built environment, the Law *applies* fiction in ways that are more comparable to the structural vernaculars of cinema than to any given system of design, in that the foundation of legal practice makes use of semiotic maneuverability to conceal its lack of autonomy.¹⁷ Fiction, in both of these contexts, serves as artifice and an instrument of thought that contradicts reality, used to achieve a goal indirectly, in which the direct route is not viable. Within the application of Law, this is both used as a means to avoid complexity and a

tool for contestation, in a combined balancing act between continuous semantic reorganization and the constraints of bound legality. A key example of this can be found in the concept of "corporate personhood." By the nineteenth century, corporations had become major institutions that were rivaling governments. By the 1950s, corporations had outstripped the number of natural citizens, and, consequently, the Law saw the largest development in corporate legal practice, unprecedented in any other legal sector throughout its lifetime. As a result, we saw what was considered to be the conception of the "corporate singular entity," separating the corporation and its interests from the State, bestowing the corporation with autonomy, rights, and sovereignty. Incidentally, on March 25th 2015, the official announcement emanated across a backdrop of red velvet walls and crackling flashbulbs: Godzilla had been designated a legal citizen of Japan. A man dressed in a Godzilla suit proceeded to sign paperwork, thus declaring its citizenship before Kenichi Yoshizumi, the mayor of Shinjuku, noting that "While Godzilla has on multiple occasions destroyed the Shinjuku Ward, it is a character that is the pride of Japan." *The Green Playbook* (currently a work in progress) presents the retelling of Godzilla, both as a novel and a political/legal playbook.

17. Olaf Tans, "Staging Law's Existence: Using Pretence Theory to Explain The Fiction of Legal Validity." *Ratio Juris*. Vol. 29, Issue1. (John Wiley and Sons, 2016)

Godzilla is known internationally across our screens as a famed, city-stomping lizard. He is a by-product, resulting from a proliferation of nuclear testing in the Post-War era. Originating in Japan, and first appearing in the socio-science fiction film *Gojira* (1954), it was written and directed by Ishirô Honda. It focuses on the particular critical analogy of Post-War power and the development of nuclear energy, as narrated through the lens of Japanese popular culture. Furthermore, the film hones in on large-scale urban destruction, as well as various attempts to counter it. While such a monster has been used to straddle a variety of cultures throughout cinematic history, its particular significance was made through its cultural translation from a Japanese context into an American context. Unlike the original, *Godzilla: King of Monsters* (1965) shifted its focus from being a cautionary tale, exploring the various social and political aspects of scientific dread, to a means through which a popular audience could whet their appetite for monster movies and large-scale destruction. While this assimilation may sit all too comfortably in the present climate of US politics, of which can only be summarized neatly by the irony of the phrase “Make America Great Again,”¹⁸ it is within this very landscape of complicit contingency that such a proposal might exist. As political scientist John J. Mearsheimer once remarked, “In the

anarchic world of international politics, it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi. The cycle of violence will continue far into the new millennium. Hopes for peace will probably not be realized, because the great that shape the international system, fear each other and compete for power as a result.”¹⁹

While fiction is commonly understood to be unencumbered by the liminal codes of what constitutes reality, we have been confronted—in this moment—with an ‘insurrection on the truth,’ a centripetal force of known falsehoods in what Orwell had previously described as a “key aspect of which, lying with lack of precision, can pose a danger to our society.”²⁰ Likewise, this notion is echoed in Hannah Arendt’s idea that we have a “right to unmanipulated factual information... without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax.”²¹ With such a context in mind, *The Green Playbook*, although a work of fiction, aims to give structured form to a disordered reality, as it is built upon a politics predicated on fear—rather than function, a solution predicated on function—rather than fiction, and a fiction predicated on philosophy—rather than fallacy. It is a novel that collapses the use of linguistic, legal, biological, subterranean, and mechanical properties through the tracked movements of an unstoppable object crashing its way across a metropolitan city.

18. Ronald Reagan, “Make America Great Again – MAGA” 1980.

19. John J. Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History*, vol. 105 (690) p. 162.

20. George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1946).

21. Yasemin Sari, “Arendt, Truth, and Epistemic Responsibility.” *Arendt Studies* 2 (2018): 149-70. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48511486>.



Image 51

Image

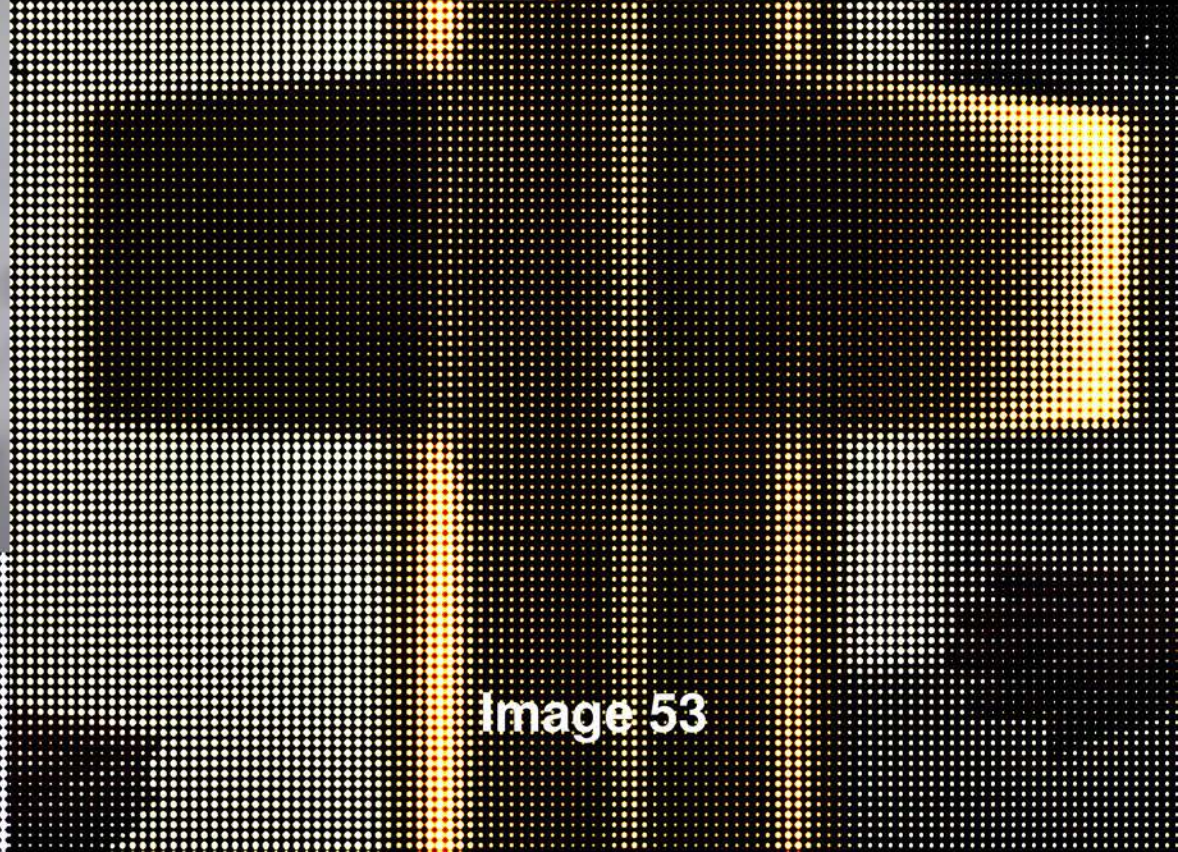
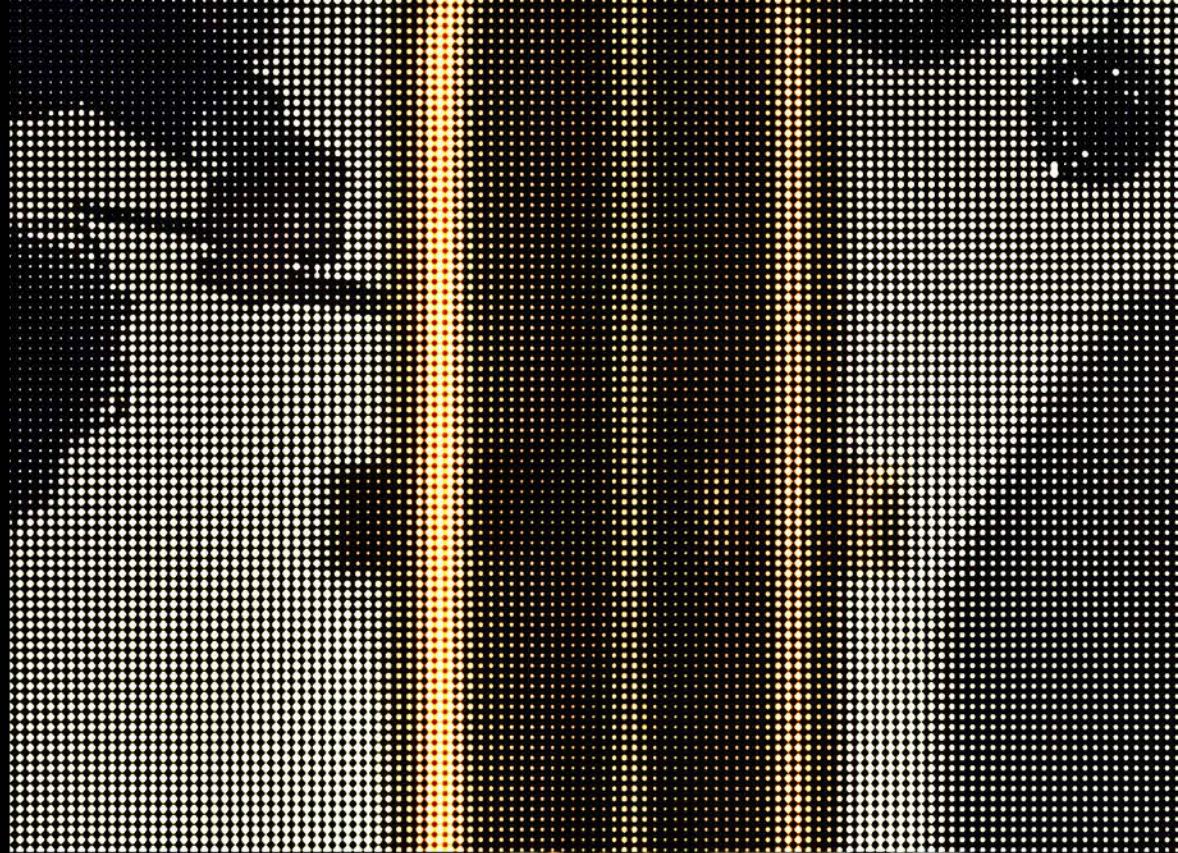
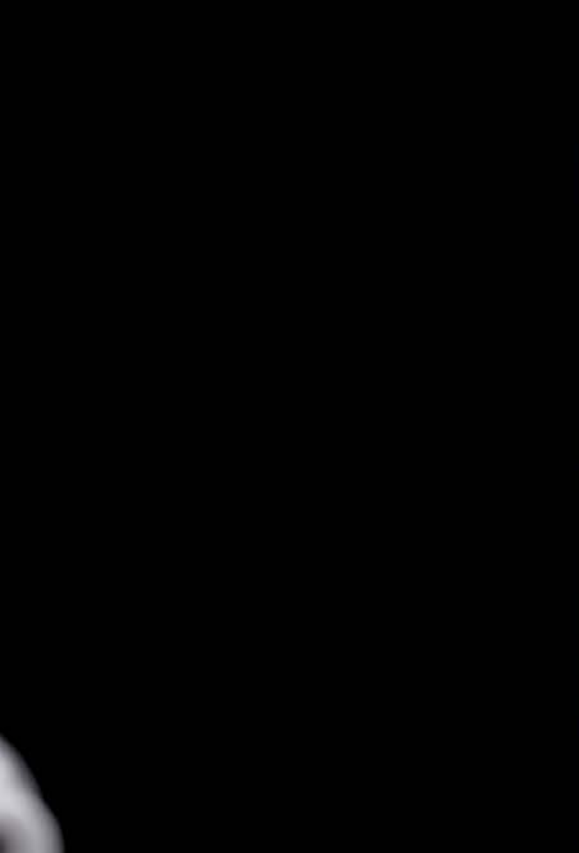


Image 52

Image 53

“This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.”

– Legal Disclaimer, noted across works of fiction: literature, film, television and the broader theatrical arts.

Franz Kafka has shown us that the intricacies of our reality carry with it not only a legal dimension but political and theatrical ones as well. Yet, it is not always clear how this manifests itself beyond a reasonable and inculcate sense of what can and cannot be said, thought, and done. It is not uncommon, especially within the discourse of architecture, to see similarities drawn between the theater, the courtroom, and the trial, as well as architecture’s consequent affinities to re-enactment, representation, mass-media, and performance. As Barthes writes in his 1973 essay, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein:”

The theatre is precisely that practice which calculates the place of things as they are observed: if I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, he will not, and I can avail myself of this masking effect and play on the illusion it provides. The stage is the line which stands across the path of the optic pencil, tracing at once the point at which it is brought to a stop and, as it were the threshold of ramification. Thus, it

is founded—against music (against the text — representation).²²

Not unlike K’s inability to discern the progression of his own fate in Kafka’s *The Trial* (1915), *The Ascent* (2017), a play in four acts, is centered around a simulated plane crash that takes place as part of a morale boosting training day for the staff of a mid-sized company. Recounting the day’s activities, the workers’ dynamic quickly descends from structured chaos into deadly mayhem. Written as a parable comedy, *The Ascent* highlights the cruel ecosystems of power, attempting to examine the nature of class politics through the lens of the Contemporary workplace, as seen from multiple social and visual vantage points. The play is meant to be performed on a theater-set that is designed to spatially represent an American Airlines 757, with its interior detailing the demarcation of class divisions—both in terms of spatial divides and enclosures. Minimal in its geometry, the plane’s structure—rendered in white and formed in tubular steel—is transparent in mass, as it was designed to be reduced to a three-dimensional line drawing. It is meant to be seen in plan-view from above, as printed within the accompanying manuscript. The cabin is divided into four compartments: First Class, Business Class, Economy Class, and Pilots Quarters. Within each section, there are rows of folding chairs that are proportionally spaced in correspondence to their class; some passengers have more legroom than others.

22. Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” *Screen*, Volume 15, Issue 2, Summer 1974, Pages 33–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/15.2.33>

While the concept and fate of labor is still highly undefinable, the idea of the institution is still being thought of as *the mountain to be conquered* or a *ladder to be climbed*, and these are still the most prominent spatial metaphors that most of us imagine, even if the skyscraper has become the indicative spatial metaphor for ascent, with the penthouse being the a prime position in which to plant one's flag. Yet, despite such definitive vertical geometries, the operation of such institutional structures has become more abstract and difficult to foreground with any kind of topographical form.²³

As Kinkle and Toscano suggest “the immaterial and the systemic are amongst the dimensions of modern economic life that make it so that capitalism ‘itself’ poses problems for plot and image.”²⁴ Therefore, any attempt to fully discern the complexity of relations, impulses, and directives, either through mental exhaustion and exploitation, often result in escape attempts. As Trüby points out: “Before the design of the skyscraper, comes the design of the escape from the skyscraper.”²⁵ As such, it could be argued that escapology has become a hodological language of the working man's attempt to save himself, like a bank-robber reverse engineering the architect's plans for the fortresses that conceal their prize in a liminal way. The working man exits through door-ways, windows, or, in severe cases, plummeting to Earth from the fifty-first floor. Of course, this rings true to the common workforce, but there are exceptions to the rule. Escaping *from* something could

alternatively be positioned as escaping *to* something. Politicians, lawyers, and CEOs could be considered members of this privileged classification, whereby their discernment of infrastructural codification becomes their most important asset. Conflicts meet entanglements that, in turn, translate into moves, slippages, and sleights of hand – most of which are rarely unilateral but, presumably, shrewd and decisive. This is not to suggest that the established schemata are only visible to a select few but that they are simply more fortifiable in their positioning. Likewise, having a view from high above is strategically more advantaged than having a view from down below, even if the horizons are limited. Among many possible examples, Beau Willimon's *House of Cards* (2013) character Frank Underwood stands out for his rigor. We are first introduced to him as the US democrat house majority whip. Throughout the TV series, we watch him politically, socially, philosophically, geographically out-manuever, and selectively destroy his opponents in what he describes as “devouring a whale, one bite at a time.” However, his actions and discourse are not without direction. Yet, rather than the previously referred to “vertical ascent,” we bear witness to him not only arranging himself but “the arrangement of the material and people – in space, over time.” In this way, he eventually positions himself literally away from the edge of the frame, moving himself into the center, to assume the role of POTUS.²⁶

23. Ilona Gaynor, “Our Attempts to Ascend. Escape Routes, and Cosmic Trapdoors” *Working-Promise Catalogue*. Biennale Internationale Design (Saint-Etienne, 2017).

24. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (John Hunt Publishing, 2015).

25. Stephan Trüby, *Exit-Architecture: Design Between War and Peace* (SpringerWienNewYork, 2007).

26. Gaynor, “Our Attempts to Ascend. Escape Routes, and Cosmic Trapdoors.”



Image 54



Image 55



Image 56



Image 57



Image 58

Cutting through the stack, Underwood is unique in that – like the work of Harry Houdini – he has mastered a larger cosmic perception through a position of knowledge and mechanization but with the fortitude to “escape his shrinking space, while afterwards being able to recover his expansiveness.”²⁷ This dynamic refers back to this idea of the maneuver to something, rather than maneuvering away *from* something, as a contemporary working paradigm. It is within these moves, conflicts, and entanglements that a comparison can be made to Houdini’s handcuffs, chains, and locks. They are the artifacts of our emancipation, a contemporary material force that gives form to an aesthetic practice that works to counter capital’s limited horizons – as an easily-definable, cosmic trap-door. Houdini, like Underwood, is the exception to the rule,

a shaft of light piercing through the smogged confusion that makes up the ecosystem of power.²⁸

To summarize this proposal of applied fictional practice, evasively absent of the object, I will quote Gurley Flynn one last time, “*I have not given you a rigidly defined thesis on sabotage because sabotage is in the process of making.*”²⁹

**Images 54, 56–58: Ilona Gaynor, *The Ascent*.
Exhibition view at the
International Biennial of
Design in Saint Etienne.**

**Image 55: Ilona Gaynor,
The Ascent.**

27. Adam Phillips, *Houdini’s Box* (Faber & Faber, 2001).

28. Gaynor, “Our Attempts to Ascend. Escape Routes, and Cosmic Trapdoors.”

29. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Walker C. Smith, William Ernst Trautmann, and Salvatore Salerno, *Direct Action & Sabotage* (IWW Publishing Bureau: 1910).

Note

This text draws upon previous ideas and interviews published in *AD* (Wiley) 2014, and the catalog *Working-Promise, Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Etienne*, 2017.