CRITICAL DISPLACEMENTS: ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF 'WEARABLE' STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT. In this article, we discuss the potential of wearable structures to provide effective social commentaries and address the political representation of refugees, migrants, and nomads. We take Lucy Orta's *Refuge Wear* as an occasion to address a series of socio-political considerations around wearables, textiles, communication, and technology, as well as the role of urban and social environments in determining architectures of mobility. Finally, we provide a critique of framing concepts such as relational aesthetics, heterotopias, nomadology, or deterritorialization—to propose a rethinking of wearables based on the idea of critical habitats and responsible resource-based philosophies.

Keywords: *wearables, Lucy Orta, relational aesthetics, mobility, nomadology*

Presented in 1992 as a response to the situations resulted from the first Gulf War, designer and experimental artist Lucy Orta's series *Refuge Wear* can provide a retrospective point of departure for discussing how 'wearable' structures could strengthen a social-political potential to address unresolved concerns—from migration and the statute of refugees, to contemporary forms of nomadism and habitation, exile and displacement, economic recession and increasing homelessness, cultural dislocations and fundamental human needs, urban architecture and the architectures of society. Giorgio Agamben has argued that, "given the by now unstoppable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional political-juridical categories, the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today (...) the forms and limits of a coming political community."[1] Refugee crises, migration, economic disruptions, and the escalating state of tension, war, provocation, and uncertainty affect the fabric of the social, yet may prove to be instrumental in dismantling the

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" in *Open*, No. 15 / Social Engineering, 2008, p. 90.

nation-state, deconstructing stereotypical identity politics, and rethinking environmental, living, or safety conditions. They reflect on the shifting boundaries between bodies and architectures, calling for a critical revaluation of the conceptual parameters we use to address or instrument issues of emergency, citizenship, collective participation and solidarity, as well as forms of (creative or aesthetic) social activism.

1. *Refuge Wear* **and Wearable Technologies: Textiles, Technology, and Social Fabrics**

"Our focus for redefining the role of clothing was directed towards basic needs such as protection, survival shelter, and cocooning," said Lucy Orta, leading to a complex inquiry "into the communicative aspects of clothing" that reflects "on notions of visibility/invisibility, the role fashion plays in the construction of individual and collective identities, and how we can harness the power that clothing exhorts on us through its extreme diversity and universality in ways which can alter our daily actions or, perhaps, even change society."[2] Characteristic of Orta's early drawings and projects, this focus has made the body-less objects of *Refuge Wear* an image of the precariousness of human conditions. By rendering visible a series of neglected or ignored realities, the project was conceived as both a protective item and conveyor of message—a shielding shelter and a mobile instrument for communication.

As prototypes, the experimental variants were not meant to function on a daily basis but served as platforms for public debate. *Refuge Wear* is defined by practical and symbolic concerns—the protective clothes and transformable shelters reflect the intermediary status of being, protect against anonymity, and provide a "vehicle of survival" in conditions of displacement or homelessness.[3] While the inclusion of images, symbols, and texts reflects stratified semiotic layers,[4]

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[2] "*Habitent*—a dome tent that converts in matter of seconds into a waterproof cape; *Ambulatory Survival Sac*, a sleeping bag that divides into two-parts jacket and rucksack; and *Mobile Cocoon*, reflecting on basic survival strategies such as mobility, warmth, protection from harsh elements, recluses from an increasing alien and hostile society."—Lucy Orta, "Questioning Identity" in Abbie Coppard ed., *Aware: Art Fashion Identity*, Bologna: Damiani editore, 2010, pp. 33-35.

[3] The design is multi-functional (it provides a minimum personal space for sleeping, is transportable, and folds up into small packages) and incorporates materials with technical characteristics (anti-UV, anti-abrasive, micro-porous, thermo-chromic, the use of Kevlar and Teflon) to perform and protect in adverse circumstances.

[4] The relationship between the manufactured garments and their meanings has been analysed at length by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System*, who argues that the way we perceive garments is usually through their representation, in an interplay between text and image. But while his analyses focus on garment and representation, they fail to properly account for the materiality and functionality of these garments in everyday and symbolic use.

the theme of survival poses a series of questions about the individual, the collective, and the global. In Orta's later project *Survival Kit*, it becomes a means to reflect on emergency, rescue, or humanitarian situations in mixed and superposed objects of textual communication, symbolism, and functionalism echoing the lost social dimension of solidarity.[5] Orta has insisted on numerous occasions that communication is the motivating motor behind her works and interventions—to communicate a form of art that mingles genres, performances, interventions, object-making, installations, or multimedia while providing the means to stimulate social awareness. Whether such iconographies of social connectivity, symbolic links, or military-industrial complexes hold the ability to address socio-cultural stereotyping, counter policies of disempowerment, or constitute aesthetic politics lies in the potential of these assemblages to effectively stage and negotiate the increasingly severe crises of political representation, as well as re-address the very question of technology.

　　Refuge Wear is a series of garments and textile structures that can be instantly transformed into mobile corporeal architectures. The project continues to be a resource for reflections on the complexities and challenges of the world we live in today, relying on the critical role of design thinking and practice as a means through which more integrated ways of being can be generated. Thought, sense, act, and relation translate the volatility between design and artistic practice—design *as* artistic practice and art *as* design practice—but also the volatility that underlies the very notion of wearables. It is this volatile and multi-faceted character of her creations that continues to differentiate Lucy Orta's designs from other works that reflect more clear-cut distinctions and definitions of the wearable. *Refuge Wear* has been discussed in the context of "undecidables"—conceptual artworks in the domain of the wearable which cross the usual framing mechanisms of art, craft, and design—as "politically motivated dwellings" where notions of transparency, reflection, usefulness, usability, and ambiguity "can be traced in the history of craft practice as much as in our conceptualization of technology for society."[6]

　　Craft practice is fundamental to Orta's constructions, whose interest in fabrics with 'multi-technical' properties, fibre combinations and transformations, and knitted-fabrics reflects her search of "a correlation between the technical specificity of the fabric and the poetics of the final object."[7] Virginia Postrel has argued that "textiles are technology, more ancient than bronze and as contemporary

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[5] See Lucy Orta, *ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

[6] Sarah Kettley, "Framing the Ambiguous Wearable," .pdf version available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251531128_Framing_the_Ambiguous_Wearable (last accessed on May 30, 2017).

[7] Lucy Orta interviewed by Andrew Bolton, September 2000 – May 2001, in Andrew Bolton, *The Supermodern Wardrobe*, London: Victoria & Albert Museum Publications, 2002.

as nanowires." Humans have co-evolved with their apparels, as familiar technologies have become indistinguishable from nature. How fabrics have come, in today's popular imagination, to belong almost exclusively "to the frivolous world of fashion," is a matter of "cultural amnesia" caused largely by the rise of computers and software as the very definition of "high technology," intense global competition which has brought down prices of fibres and fabrics, and environmental campaigns that have equated 'synthetic' and 'toxic.'[8] This deprivation of "valuable analogies for understanding how technology and trade transform economy and culture" has made us indifferent to incremental innovations, the invisible ubiquity of microfibers and 'smart textiles' being just a more recent example. While fabric advances will be reframed to make textiles part of energy and environmental conditions, our computer-centric era relates them to information technologies. "If the goal is to shrink the distance between nature and artifice, us and it, no technology is as powerful as fabric," concludes Postrel.

Smart materials and garments protect the body against nature and society, extending its physical functions. The integration of technology into our clothes for reasons of control, improvement, or enhancement supposes an intimate relation to technical objects and materials that in turn impacts how we experience our bodies and ourselves. According to Anneke Smelik, the body is not a given, it is dressed up for performing an identity—our own identity is 'wearable' and constantly shifts the boundaries between body and technology.[9] The idea that one 'performs' rather than 'is' one's identity, refers to a constructivist notion of identity, as a socio-cultural construction in constant flux, transformation, mutation, and becoming. At the same time, re-fashioning the body is a powerful expression of resistance to dominant orders—whether for dodging the authorities, resisting surveillance, or in response to practical needs or socio-political restraints—that challenges normalizing and regulative practices, stages acts of resistance, and generates new forms of thought and action.

The technological, biological, and performative character of Lucy Orta's wearable structures has been discussed in terms of "critical garment discourse"— "work in the form of fashion or clothing that concerns not just the body, but notions of dress—and dress, not just as historically viewed or normatively considered, but as experienced, situated, and located, and empowered as a medium capable of

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[8] Virginia Postrel, "Losing the thread" published by Aeon on June 5, 2015: https://aeon.co/essays/how-textiles-repeatedly-revolutionised-human-technology (last accessed on May 30, 2017).

[9] Anneke Smelik, "Cybercouture: Transformations of the Body and Identity" h http://tijdelijkmodemuseum.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/cybercouture-transformations-body-and-identity-anneke-smelik (last accessed on May 30, 2017).

significant commentary."[10] These commentaries need to take place as part of increasingly networked collectivities and spatial fields, within the flexible and trans-disciplinary framing systems where bodies and identities are performed. The dress also confronts one of the most profound issues raised by new technology—the possibility that human identities would take on the properties of machines or be at their mercy.[11] As a technologized object, the dress can be symbolically imagined as a tool of communication or a man-machine hybrid, but inherent in it is the potential for systems and technologies to control the wearer. The fashionized mechanization of the body and the integration of both into larger technological systems would produce new practices, possibilities, and aesthetics that transgress the boundaries of both body and machine.

In a number of works such as *Connector Body Architecture*, *Life Guards*, *Nexus Architecture*, or *Portable Protest*, Lucy Orta conceives clothing as a form of social assembly or counter-site where individuals and communities dispute socio-political and cultural constructions; a terrain for social commentary and creative construction of alternative lifestyles that would nurture a more profound sense of engagement and involvement; as performative projects of material infrastructures and symbolic superstructures where social links and bonds are made manifest. The projects emphasise the highly differentiated and circumstantial nature of the networks they set in motion, echoing Bruno Latour's conceptions of technology as society made durable and society as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling.

According to Latour, the social becomes visible only when new collectives consisting of human and non-human participants are formed, as actuated by deviations from accepted facts or values. But such collective experiments, argues Matthias Gross, are operational only if we abandon "abstract platitudes and flowery metaphors;"[12] otherwise, talk of collective experiments might simply be an empty formula or synonym for difficult processes of participation. Further links between Orta's practice and Latourian conceptions may lie in the function of *translation* as "displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that

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[10] Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Dress for Stress: Wearable Technology and the Social Body" and "What is Wearable Technology Art?" in *Intelligent Agent* 8.1 (Social Fabrics), Intelligent Agent Inc., 2008.

[11] Bradley Quinn, "A Note: Hussein Chalayan, Fashion and Technology" in *Fashion Theory*, Volume 6, Issue 4, 2002, pp. 366-368 especially.

[12] See Bruno Latour, "Technology is society made durable" in *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, edited by J. Law, Sociological Review Monograph, Number 38, 1991, pp. 103-132, as well as the analyses and critical observations formulated by Matthias Gross in "The Public Proceduralization of Contingency: Bruno Latour and the Formation of Collective Experiments," *Social Epistemology*, Volume 24, Number 1, January-March 2010, pp. 63-74.

didn't exist before, [that] (…) modifies two elements or agents."[13] In his works, Latour has observed technical objects as intermediaries, or translations that enable human "actants" to achieve definite goals. Because technical involves, by definition, a certain displacement or detour of the original actor, technological mediation is an instance of "shifting" into an ensemble of alternate materials that can carry out this task: "It is no longer an individual or group with a single goal that acts but rather a composite entity, made up of the aims and properties of all the enlisted actants and the strategies and negations involved in making them behave as one."[14] In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour also speaks of the delegation of actions to technology— technologies abstract formerly human functions in a transgression of the common sense dichotomy between words and things. It is not only physical acts but semiotic acts that are delegated to objects, where matter—in the composite form of technical objects—rather than language "signifies."

While technical objects are the "articulations," we ourselves and our world are born of the mediation of artefacts. The current techno-social condition reflects the interplay between human organizations and the organization of nonhumans or matter that characterizes human collectives. Such articulations lead Latour to adopting the term 'quasi-object' from Michel Serres, to explain its extant rather than historical role in the history of exchanges, consumption, actions, and transactions between objects and subjects. As Harris explains, the human is the focus of historical successions of contingent networks, "the nexus of relations, the site where properties are exchanged" and systematic or global totalities are dismantled.[15] What technology does is to rework differences in space, time, and agency in order to create new associations and new patterns of social relations. As the mediator is the opposite of an intermediary, mediation crafts new actants, hybrids, and events. However, Krarup and Blok have raised objections to Latour's passing-by of how human moral convictions fold or hybridize (quasi-)objects, arguing that "What was supposed to be an object-subject-hybrid thus tends toward a different line of reasoning: the subject as object-object-hybrids."[16]

The intimate relation between fabric, technology, and social environments poses a series of derivative concerns that conceptions of wearable structures need to address, we emphasise here the issues of *protocological control* and *communicative*

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[13] Bruno Latour, "On technical mediation: Philosophy, sociology, genealogy" in *Common Knowledge*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 1994, p. 31 apud. Jan Harris, "The Ordering of things: Organization in Bruno Latour," *Sociological Review*, 2005, p. 165.

[14] Jan Harris, *ibid.*, p. 166.

[15] See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: An Essay on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999 apud. Jan Harris, *ibid.*, p. 167 and pp. 171-173.

[16] Troels Megelund Krarup and Anders Blok, "Unfolding the social: quasi-actants, virtual theory, and the new empiricism of Bruno Latour" in *The Sociological Review*, Volume 59, Issue 1, 2011, pp. 45-46.

capitalism, since they underline how technologies are subject to policies and mere communication is subject to de-politicization. According to Susan Elizabeth Ryan, the increasingly mobile and participatory public of today favours performative and interventionist practices over traditional art objects. The breaking down of barriers between aesthetics and functionality unmasks the relations between what we put on our bodies and the infrastructures of democratic societies. The increased interest in dress embodies what Gilles Deleuze termed "control society," the formation that has replaced Michel Foucault's notion of a "disciplinary society," the nomadic present of which is the vehicle for the dress, notes Ryan. Dress is not only the primary surface of our environment—like other technologies, it is "ruled by codes and susceptible to protocological control."[17] Joanna Berzowska has also shown that electronic textile research remains heavily influenced by funding sources and policy decisions.[18]

They reflect funding structures and interests of the consumer electronic industry, the military, or the health industry, failing to account for the close proximity of textiles to the body or deliver appealing product ideas that respond to personal, social, and cultural needs. In order to become wearable, wearable computing needs to integrate and assimilate ideas and methods derived from knitting, weaving, and other crafts. In her 2005 work *Urban Life Guards #0317*, Lucy Orta has tackled the issue of how military resources are used to dislocate, deterritorialize, or "keep order" instead of being used to facilitate the survival of wrecked communities—technologies that are available to NASA and the military are rarely, if ever, brought to the aid of forced migrants in regions of natural or social disaster.

Following Agamben's observation that what hinders communication is communicability itself, political theorist Jodi Dean has argued that communication has detached itself from political ideals of belonging and connection to function as a primarily economic form of capitalist production. Dean's distinction between *politics as the circulation of content* and *politics as official policy* reflects how "the proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite—the post-political formation of communicative capitalism."[19] As "communicative capitalism," the political impact of networked communications technologies is profoundly depoliticizing—as caused by the shift in the basic unit of communication from message to contribution, the fantasy of activity or participation

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[17] Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Re-Visioning the Interface: Technological Fashion as Critical Media" in *Leonardo*, Volume 42, Number 4, 2009, pp. 311-313.

[18] Joanna Berzowska, "Electronic Textiles: Wearable Computers, Reactive Fashion, and Soft Computation" in *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, Volume 3, Issue 1, (16) 2005, pp. 58-75.

[19] Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics" in *Cultural Politics*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Berg 2005, p. 53.

which is materialized through technology fetishism, and the fantasy of wholeness which relies on the production of a global that is both imaginary and Real. Particular technological innovations can become a screen upon which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected, claims Dean.[20]

When "ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications," no singular act of resistance, statement, or transgression is political in and of itself—it needs to be politicized, that is, articulated together with other struggles, resistances, and ideals.[21]

2. Architectures of Mobility

Orta has often argued that her work illustrates how clothes facilitate movement both within the garment and within space and society. The transformation from shelter to clothing is fundamental to freedom of movement and freedom of choice, creating new relationships and new cultural exchanges for Homo Mobilis.[22] Her questioning around the ways in which individuals are lost at the periphery of their right to exist, the dissolution of identity, or the need to address the continual flow of indigenous people, asylum seekers, and refugees suffering from exclusion and marginalization—is translated into structures that reflect the instability of notions such as intimacy, privacy, security, as well as habitation and the practices of inhabiting spaces. Social bonds are re-imagined based on the uncertainties that define the existential act of living, providing alternative perspectives on the nature of urban environments too. Her nomadic modules have been characterized as

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[20] Id., *ibid.*, p. 62.

[21] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 55-57. In analysing the relation between technoculture and feminism, Jodi Dean notes that the ideology of new economic-political-cultural formations termed as "technoculture" links together the elements of speed, virtuality, hybridity, morphing, publicity, and interconnection. This ideology is characterized, "by the rise of networked communication, as in the Internet, satellite broadcasting, and the global production and dissemination of motion pictures; by the consolidation of wealth in the hands of transnational corporations and the migration and immigration of people, technologies, and capital; by the rise of a consumerist entertainment culture and the corresponding production of sites of impoverishment, violence, starvation, and death." But technoculture is also characterized by the decline of patriarchy and what Slavoj Žižek called the "decline of symbolic efficiency"—a societal principle of uncertainty that characterizes how people relate to the world by subjecting it to chance and contingency, that feminists can address to expose the decline of the big Other in the era of post-patriarchy.—Jodi Dean, "Feminism in Technoculture" in *the review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, Volume 23, Number 1, 2001, pp. 23-47.

[22] Lucy Orta interviewed by Andrew Bolton, September 2000 – May 2001, in Andrew Bolton, *The Supermodern Wardrobe*, *ibid.*

"protective bunkers detached from the notion of territory," "survival caravans in modern cities," or "rafts for the homeless on reprieve" (Jean-Michel Ribettes)[23] that crystallize survival instincts and the necessity to preserve physical integrity in the context of restricted or enforced mobility. They comment on torn social fabrics, alien urban matrices, and social disappearance, from the perspective of both individual and collective habitation.[24] Complex issues such as the fragmentation of society, precarious isolation, marginalization are attributed to the indifference of the centre and call for a reconfiguration of relationships to urban environments and between citizens. Delocalisation, the condensations of ever-changing social situations, and the need to further bind the physical and social links existing within societies provide unstable conditions for resetting urban connections and strengthening collective resistance, so as to defend both disaster victims or political refugees, and the elderly, the poor, the invisible, or the socially disenfranchised.[25] Sculptural, tactile, and spatial expressions of society incite to a more sustained dialogue around principles of design, social awareness, and concepts of visibility— which need to avoid authoritarian structures and propose new modular paradigms that redefine social environments and spatial scenarios.

Western social activism has been criticized for its preoccupation with rather marginal aspects and its failure to address a series of complex issues, including a thorough discussion of who profits from the mass production that follows catastrophes and states of emergency. When objects are simply exhibited in galleries instead of being presented on the streets or as part of broader contexts, the radicalism of their approach is placed in the damper of the exhibition space and emasculated of its social mission.[26] Post-conflict habitation, the ability to house large number of refugees, war, dislocation, or homelessness call for a psychological and ethical anchor to be incorporated in the term 'habitation.' What is important is the process and form of habitation, its ability to engender substantial participation, collective

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[23] Jean-Michel Ribettes, "Les Refuges de la Vanité" in *Lucy Orta: Refuge Wear*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1996.

[24] Projects like *Collective Wear* or *Body Architectures* (1994-1999) are larger-scale domes and collective tent-like sculptures that sought to illustrate the opposite effect of the individually isolated units in the *Refuge Wear* series. The surface skins of these enclosures are equipped with different appendages that represent individuals within communities and evoke the complexities of sharing space and collective habitation.

[25] See Diana Drummond, "Lucy Orta, Art for our time" in *Textile*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 2006, pp. 208-213 and Bradley Quinn, "Intimate distances: Space, Society, Humanity and Hope – The Work of Lucy Orta" in *Lucy Orta. Body Architecture*, Munich: Silke Schreiber Verlag, 2003.

[26] Augustin Ioan, "Adăpostul revizitat" ["Shelter Revisited"] in *Artă, tehnologie și spațiu public* [*Art, Technology, and Public Space*], edited by Ciprian Mihali, Bucharest: Paideia, 2005, pp. 55-66, pages 57-61 in particular.

engagement and responsibility, introspective territories, and existential redefinitions; the reconsideration of relations between materials and their durability; and the characteristic of shelters to be traversed by the power lines of extreme circumstances. Ultimately, most artistic interventions do not solve the problem of refugees and those without a home—they only make it visible, aestheticize the conditions, or subject situations to different instances of visibility, surveillance, and control.

In her theorization of the global city, Saskia Sassen has argued for the need to recapture people, communities, and cultures by recapturing the geography of places involved in globalization and opening the city as a site for the contradictions of the globalization of capital. New forms of power and politics need to emerge as power is lost on national levels, which could link subnational spaces across borders. Both transnational spaces and the city become sites where global capital and the disadvantaged sectors of urban populations can dispute, claim, and formulate new spaces.[27] There is a constant tension between nomadic people who are able to survive—despite their limited resources—by roving over great expanses of the land, and the developed world which exploits extraordinarily abundant resources from the basis of an excessively small territory, reduced to the nerve centres of a few world capitals. "This concentration," claims Jean Attali, "engenders an indifference not to the fixed divisions of space but to the local determinants of mobility." Indifference to the determinations of extension, its distances and partitions, as well as the subordination of mobility to a centralized and controlled logic of exchanges, have caused space to lose its meaning as the foundation of 'human settlements.' Yet the loss of historical and ideological identities of cities—the European city especially and, we would argue, by extension: the historical and ideological construction of identity itself—is paramount precisely because it exposes its foundational logics of exploitation: "(...) the loss of identity only reveals the tension that underlies the realization of an historical exploit."[28]

The political thinking of the twentieth century, notes Stefano Boeri, has been dominated by the primacy of geographic representations, projecting onto the spatial dimension the variables and unpredictable elements linked to the different phases in the reinvention of the political identity of states.[29] In this paradigm, the material territory of contemporary Europe, for example, is essentially the horizon of projections and political representations that reflect constituent uncertainties, imbalances, and ambitions, as the European space remains a vague, shifting notion

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[27] Saskia Sassen, "The Global City: Introducing a Concept and its History" in Rem Koolhaas, Harvard Project on the City, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Mutations*, Barcelona and Bordeaux: ACTAR / arc en rêve centre d'architecture, 2000, pp. 110-113.

[28] Jean Attali, "A Surpassing Mutation" in Rem Koolhaas et al., *Mutations, ibid.*, pp. 275-276 and pp. 277-279.

[29] Stefano Boeri, "Notes for a research program" in Rem Koolhaas et al., *Mutations, ibid.*, p. 358.

in the mainstream thinking of community policy. The history of European architecture could provide a framework for generating new typologies of habitat, since it is not based on an evolutionary history of styles, but a succession of colonisations and external reinterpretations of monuments and cultures of inhabitation within a tolerant and 'open' system of rules.

The invention of new urban entities or typologies of habitat demands the reuse and reconversion of the existing urban materials, claims Boeri, as the spatial dispositif creates original spaces by the superposition of exogenous traditions and local syntaxes of territory. When identity is no longer linked to border projects or politics of local recognition, its material phenomenologies can encompass adaptation, idiosyncrasy, openness, and transformation, since the paradigm is not based on aggregate representations of the continental territory, nor defined by inner and outer limits.[30] The stable, rigid, and determined figuration becomes an interlace of asynchronous, shifting—constantly mobile, adaptive, and transformative configurations.

Erol Yildiz observes that the constituting nexus between migration and urban development is mostly ignored, and the contribution by migrants to urbanity scarcely acknowledged.[31] Through their economic activities, migrants create hybrid *multi-home spaces* beyond national, ethnic, or foundational considerations. These places reflect a kind of *transtopia,* with spaces in which differing, contradictory, plurivalent, ambiguous, local, and trans-border elements fuse with one another, generating new urban structures and forms of communication; places of transition, where marginalized actors move into the centre of observation; loci where dominant norms are interrogated and different urbanities are generated.

3. Interpretation Matters

3.1. From Relational Aesthetics to Heterotopias and Alterotopias

Lucy Orta's work has often been discussed on the basis of its "relational" potential. In Nicolas Bourriaud's notorious study on *Relational Aesthetics*,[32] artworks are defined by their constitution of existential modes or action models within the existent real, rather than the formation of imaginary or utopian realities. Autonomous and private symbolic spaces make way for the sphere of human interactions and its

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[30] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 362-362 and p. 365.

[31] Erol Yildiz, "Urban Recycling – the City in Migrant Economy" in *On Curating*, (Work, Migration, Memes, Personal Geopolitics), Issue 30 / June 2016, p. 132.

[32] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002.

social context, in a radical upsetting of the aesthetic, cultural, and political objectives of modern art. Relational spaces are an interstitial condition of human relations where the subversive and critical function of contemporary art make manifest the oscillation between contemplation and utilization that defines the "operative realism" characteristic of the dispositif of artistic production. Artworks operate as part of interaction and, as such, produce relational space-time and inter-human relations, places of alternative sociality, critical models, and constructed conviviality.

Yet it is *détournement* and metaphor—rather than "relational aesthetics" as such—that define Orta's work. In her project *Nexus Architecture*, for example, fabric tubes act as a metaphor for creating social alliances. As Orta explains—her investigations take many different forms such as pilot enterprises, object-making, public interventions, installations, or relational objects, which all function differently and are potentially operational; they create new sets of dynamics between individuals and the group, address issues of identity, and aim to assist marginalized people to re-engage in society.[33]

Bourriaud's theory of relational art has since come under intense scrutiny. Arguing that relational art is "a branch of artistic practice that is largely concerned with producing and reflecting upon the interrelations *between* people and the extent to which such relations—or communicative acts—need to be considered as an aesthetic form," Anthony Downey observes that the examination of the politics of relational aesthetics is engaged with the politics of social formations, rather than an examination of political content. While the formations and inter-subjective relations that emanate from relational art practices would both represent and produce what Bourriaud calls "new models of sociability," what remains unaddressed are the practicalities of relational art and, more importantly, the ability of relational art practices to operate outside and radically reconstitute the service economy that underwrites both neoliberal world orders and the relationships formed within them.[34]

This is critical in evaluating the possibilities of relational art to remediate the socially de-personalising effects of neoliberal, post-industrial, and globalised demands. "Do these works expose tensions within social relations or just epitomise them?"—asks Downey synthetically, challenging how relational art practices can avoid re-applying the invasive practices of neo-liberalist commodification to the so-called private realm and the interstitial relational space between art institutions and their public. What needs to be questioned is whether these works offer a critique to

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[33] Lucy Orta in correspondence with Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Lucy Orta*, edited by Nicolas Bourriaud, Roberto Pinto and Maia Damianovic, (Contemporary Artists Series), London and New York: Phaidon, 2003, p. 10 and p. 22.

[34] Anthony Downey, "Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics" in *Third Text*, Volume 21, Issue 3, May 2007, p. 271.

these practices or simply reflect their ubiquity, since the increased commodification of relationships, artistic practices, opposition, and the sphere of political action fragments, absorbs, and distorts the transitive power of critical statements.[35] "The proposition that relational art practices produce unprecedented inter-human relations that are ethically and politically cogent—and beyond the compromised relations we associate with a neoliberal world order—needs to be substantiated rather than hypothesised," claims Downey, pointing to the lack of a causative and convincing analysis of the politics of socially inter-subjective relations.

The broad use of terms such as conviviality, democracy, dialogue, or politics in the context of contemporary aesthetics needs thorough consideration in a milieu where political arenas seem increasingly compromised and aesthetics is called upon "to provide both insight into politics itself and the stimuli for social change."[36] On a similar note, Steve Martin argues that relational aesthetics can be seen as a manifesto for new political art confronting the service economies of informational capitalism, but also read "as a naïve mimesis or aestheticisation of novel forms of capitalist exploitation."[37] What *Relational Aesthetics* fails to address is precisely a critique of the political economy of social change, that is, "a consideration of how relational art produces a social exchange that disengages from capitalist exchange" and resists the value form.

Chris Townsend insists that it is imperative to reconsider the issue of individual and spatial mobility, the redefinition of boundaries, and propose different approaches to how capital flows circulate across these boundaries. Lucy Orta's temporary shelters provide a direct challenge to the nation-state's imagination of space as static and insular—"Orta's interventions in space, her creation of communities 'in the wrong place' asserts for the invisible, human, subjects of late-capitalism the same rights as are given to the intangible, inhuman flow of capital." Townsend too questions the naïve investment in the public function of the art institution as site of social transformation theorized as part of relational aesthetics, as well as the "wide-eyed" notion of the socially transformative capacities of art. Instead, he proposes that we approach Orta's work in terms of the relation between body, space, and architecture—and consider "the ways in which Orta makes palpable, makes haptic, bodies that are usually invisible in the spaces that they occupy, the ways in which she takes a claim to space by those who have no power to engineer either social or architectural spaces." A more appropriate theoretical model through which one can apprehend Orta's practice would be Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* as a space where multiple and contradictory uses co-exist, within the

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[35] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

[36] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 273-274 and p. 275 respectively.

[37] Steve Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics" in *Third Text*, *ibid.*, p. 371 and p. 376.

defined and organized boundaries, and despite the intention of their design: "A *heterotopia* is, effectively, a space whose use is not always that for which it was intended, and whose users are not always those expected or intended to be within it."[38]

Heterotopias secretly undermine language and destroy syntaxes; they deny history under a new temporal regime, allowing us to understand the city as a matter of articulating different languages and social forces. Heterotopic environments ultimately "suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships" that they designate, producing dispossessions—the way we use, inhabit, design, and traverse spaces and architectures, the way we appropriate them are political acts.[39] These political acts circumscribe the various degrees of emplacement that define relations of proximity, as well as the dislocations, contradictions, and resistances to homogenization or rationality. They recall Lefebvre's conception of the urban space as the generative unification of differences, through assembly, reassembly, and creative encounters: "contrasts, opposition, superposition and juxtapositions replace separation, spatio-temporal distances"[40] to constantly de-centre and regenerate centres.

But the traditional understanding of heterotopias as sites of resistance may obscure their primary function, claims Robert J. Topinka—to make order legible. Heterotopias are sites in which epistemes collide and overlap—they juxtapose real and incompatible spaces into one and ultimately lead to a different thinking about power relations.[41] A more nuanced way to theorize Orta's wearable structures and their operational potential may lie in Jacques Rancière's notion of fiction as a form of political subjectivity that creates new modes of sensing. Fictions are forms of dissent that constitute the very essence of politics, since they do not polarise or generate conflicts of interest, but keep the possibility of confronting specific visions of the world with alternative, co-existent ones. If design is to be understood as Fiction in the context of contemporary aesthetic practices and, as such, seen as disagreement towards given discourses, it can also create new frames of sensing and "allow for the development of new forms of subjectivity."[42]

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[38] Chris Townsend, "Lucy Orta" in *Art & Architecture Journal*, No. 62, London: Summer 2005, pp. 37-39.

[39] See Diane Agrest, "The City as the Place of Representation" in *Design Quarterly*, No. 113/114 (City Segments), Walker Art Center, 1980, pp. 8-13; Michel Foucault as quoted in Mar McLeod, "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces" in Debra L. Coleman, Elizabeth Ann Danze and Carol Jane Henderson eds., *Feminism and Architecture*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, pp. 6-7.

[40] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (2003, p. 9 and p. 125) quoted in Peter Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'different spaces'," *History of the Human Sciences*, Volume 19, Number 4, 2006, especially pp. 76-77, 83-84, and p. 87.

[41] Robert J. Topinka, "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces," *Foucault Studies*, No. 9, September 2010, pp. 54-70.

[42] See Jacques Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible: Aesthetics and Politics* (2004) and "Ten Theses on Politics" (2001), as commented by Mònica Gaspar Mallol in "F(r)ictions. Design as Cultural

3.2. Nomadology and Deterritorialization

Paradoxically, while interpretations based on relational aesthetics, heterotopias, or fictions provide nuanced positions and conceptual frameworks, the very subject of their reflection remains largely obscured, aestheticized, or assimilated by decontextualization, subsumption, and 'correct' mystifications—always interpreted from certain positions of power. An illustrative figure is the very figure of a nomad, which has inspired immanent forms of resistance—from Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of "nomadology" and "society against the state," to Hardt and Negri's "new barbarism" of nomadic, rhizomatic, and multitudinal subjectivities that resist capitalist power and state domination. As Riccardo Ciavolella remarks, the philosophical abstraction of the "nomad" mainly refers to past nomadic societies, calling for a different vision of politics that surpasses the rhetoric of spatial exteriority to power and infra-political resistance in a global world saturated by territorialized powers and capitalist logics.[43]

Deleuze and Guattari have theorized the possibility of a space of liberty inside power, seeking primitive examples of "barbarian" attitudes that conflict the encoding forces of modernity—ideological domination, social hierarchy, spatial territorialization, and political centralization. However, as Ciavolella argues, their lineage segmentation as an organizing principle of capitalist and state societies is, in fact, a re-Westernization of the primitive and the nomadic by means of reversing the anthropologists' topographical imagination of power—the will for spatial autonomy of the primitive nomad becomes the capacity for resistance inside power of the modern one against vertical, transcendental, and all-encompassing power of the state and capitalism.

From this perspective, emancipation relates to a partial exteriority, an "alterotopy" that is at the same time outside power to avoid it, and inside power to resist it. Political thinking needs to create new concrete phantasies—or fictions, we would add, in the sense given by Rancière—which act on dispersed and shattered people to organize a new type of collective will that resists the domination of power.

One of the problems with the term nomadism, claims John K. Noyes, lies with the dual productivity of mobile subjects—while the global economy produces two mobile lifestyles as the limit conditions of subjectivity, the late capitalist world

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Form of Dissent," paper presented at *Design Activism and Social Changes* conference, Design History Society, Barcelona, September 2011, pp. 2-4.

[43] Riccardo Ciavolella, "Alterpolitics or alterotopies. A critique of nomadology with reference to West African Fulbe" in *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, No. 72, 2015, pp. 23-24.

subjectivity is defined by mobility. As lifestyles are increasingly promoted as dependant on a virtual world-space, the technological negation of both physical space and solar time creates an ever-widening divide between the mobile rich and the mobile poor—"Mobility casts subjectivity between the ideal freedom of the disembodied wanderer and the brute reality of the refugee."[44]

Power practices today are based on the global redrawing and reconsolidation of the lines separating the mobile-rich from the mobile-poor, or as Noyes says, "mobility's executive branch from the mobile-disciplined." The dual status of mobile subjectivity becomes a vital issue for postcolonial theory, since nomadism can only be operational as social (dis)arrangement and subjective (dis)order. The main question, however, remains how (by what agency), but also why the figure of the nomad might be expected to resolve the conceptual tensions between a mode of production and a mode of thought—"How do we take a conceptual model of a lifestyle, a socio-economic regime, a mode of production as a model for critical thought? In short, what does it involve to move from nomadism to nomadology? Can there be forms of writing and reading, forms of thought that mimic a nomadic lifestyle without partaking in the power structures of imperialism?"[45]

The distinction between critical theory's evocation of the nomad and the actual fate of nomadic people—whether victims of war or poverty, refugees or urban homeless, as well as those who struggle to survive in the context of global economy—leads to viewing nomadism as no more than a metaphor for a certain mode of critical inquiry. The conceptualization of the nomad is therefore consumed by its problematic metaphorical appropriation. Instead of grasping nomadology as a metaphor, we need to grasp it as a materialism with specific historical and economic coordinates, claims Noyes—"(...) if there is cause to speak of nomadic critical moves, these must rest on a more carefully considered relationship between the politics of nomadism and its representations."[46] Since capitalism relies on both the production of lifestyles and the reintegration of these lifestyles into its own modes of production, a distinction between the incorporation of nomadic modes into capitalist production and the nomadic opposition to capitalism must be made, as a consequence, the very *concept* of nomadism remains only a product of the expansion of capital.

Globalization itself is simply the reconfiguration of existing understandings. When understood as deterritorialization—that is, a movement away from territorial understandings of politics—it nevertheless fails to conceptually elaborate the

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[44] John K. Noyes, "Nomadism, Nomadology, Postcolonialism: By Way of Introduction" in *interventions*, Volume 6, Issue 2, 2004, p. 160.

[45] Id., *ibid.*, p. 164.

[46] Id., *ibid.*, p. 165.

notion of territory, which has remained largely neglected, disregarded, or taken as obvious and self-evident. While often discussed in political science—in forms as various as legal issues of secession on border disputes, problems of refugees, nationalism, or core-periphery relations—the term itself refers to the political usage of the emergent concept of space, which is itself bounded and exclusive, calculated and extended in three dimensions: distinguished on the basis of calculation rather than scale. As Stuart Elden argues, in explaining how globalization is but the continuation of Cartesian thought by other means, resting upon the same idea of a homogenous and calculable space, "the abstract space we have imposed over the world is taken more and more as real in itself, rather than as a reflection of something below it, something that it seeks to represent. (...) Modern conceptions of territory are founded upon a particular ontological determination of space, which therefore requires us to rethink the geographies of globalization."[47] What late capitalism does is to extend the mathematical, calculative understanding of territory to the entire globe.

3.3. The New Borderlands

Looking at the complex relation between visual arts and questions of representation, Marion von Osten aims to dismantle the scepticism about the impossibility to represent "reality" by addressing the very issue of how to re-present a movement—and, by extension, a person in transit or a hypothesis.[48] Echoing Giorgio Agamben's considerations around the ways in which migration, the figure of the refugee, or citizenship continue to be linked to the idea of the nation-state, her interest focuses on the possibility to translate transnational and translocal existences into new terms and imaginaries that hold the radical potential inherent in migration to challenge the given national political pre-conceptions.

Von Osten analyses how modern artists have undermined the logics of visual narratives "by cutting, collaging, and mixing materials and forms, deconstructing meaning, experimenting with non-figurative expressions and poetic imaginaries beyond the traditional role of depicting." For modernist artists, the driving force has always been the deconstruction of forms and narratives, "going beyond figurative representation and ideological realism," in search of new aesthetic languages.[49]

Cultural agents need to critically reflect, counter, challenge, and formulate radical questions in order to reveal the manifold and complex set of material and

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[47] Stuart Elden, "Missing the point: globalization, deterritorialization and the space of the world" in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, No. 30, Issue 1, 2005, p. 10 and p. 16.
[48] Marion von Osten, "New Borderlands" in *On Curating*, *ibid.*, pp. 101-102.
[49] Id., *ibid.*, p. 101.

immaterial, human and non-human actors. In the "Mapping the Mappers" project von Osten presents, the modern state is under constant pressure to re-adapt its functions and technologies as a response to the transnational movements of people; individual European nation-states are incorporated into a larger system of supra-states, trading blocs, which also have the function of "managing" migration and questioning the sovereignty of the nation-state as the only actor. As von Osten shows, the practices of the border regime, the controls, and the new security provisions are ambivalently intertwined with the practices and strategies of clandestine movements—revealing how civil rights are also differentiated and regulated into different, stratified spaces.

Because urban metropolises are intersections of transit and migration of people, knowledge, cultures, goods, services, and capital—corporal, informational, and financial flows change the rules of what defines national territory, space, and identity. One particular case is the extraterritorial and abstract border space of the airport, where mobile bodies operate within bureaucratic systems of inclusion, exclusion, and proceduralization particular to transition states. Monika Codourey discusses the airport as a "transnation state spatialized through a new order of architecture, a manifestation of technology of abstract procedures of transition, inclusion and exclusion, adopting emergent patterns of socio-spatial mobility in a globalized network."[50]

While airports develop a series of sub-territories that are only accessible to select groups of travellers, displaced persons, refugees, and immigrants are again the unwanted part of spatial segregation regimes and in-between nation states. Rules and procedures regulate the socio-spatially segregated territories of "frequent flyers," "kinetic elites," price-conscious tourists and business travellers, or "enforced cosmopolitans," as the geo-political concept of nation state and the concept of global "Empire" modify the relationship between geographical and political space. When boundaries of nations are negotiated within regulated areas inside the actual countries, these spaces can overcome the violent legacies of the nation state only by undergoing "a process of effective border fortification and cultural homogenization." Border conditions turn into actual spaces—the transit area is in fact "an jurisdictional enclave inside the territorial boundaries of a nation," echoing Étienne Balibar's observation that borders do not disappear but are instead intensified and being both "multiplied and reduced in their localization and their function, thinned and doubled, even becoming zones, regions and countries where people are forced to reside and live."[51] Airport borders become a transit condition of the mobile body.

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[50] Monika Codourey, "Mobile identities, technology and the socio-spatial relations of air travel" in *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, Volume 6, Number 1, 2008, pp. 102-103.

[51] Étienne Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality," *Differences*, 7, p. 220 apud. Monika Codourey, *ibid.*, p. 105.

"Instead of thinking from within the national container," says von Osten, "migration has the potential to function as a model for an understanding of different patterns of movement and residency that points to a post-national future in which neither place of birth nor so-called origin can be decisive in the constitution of the civil rights of the citizen." Such social and political organization beyond borders can lead to the possibility of articulating subjectivity differently in the future—beyond the nation-state[52]—and perhaps reclaim the political statute of the human in itself. As Agamben has shown, "there is no autonomous space in the political order of the nation-state for something like the pure human in itself," which is inconceivable in the law of the nation-state. The refugee is "a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state" because, "by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis." An apparently marginal figure, who "unhinges the old trinity of state-national-territory," the refugee should instead "be regarded as the central figure of our political history."[53]

Critical Habitats in a World that Matters—an Open and Different Conclusion

What may be paramount to discussing how wearable structures respond to such conditions is a revaluation of Emily Apter's notion of "critical habitats," as informed by geopoetics and an ecologically engaged conceptualism that critiques relationships between media and environments.[54] Exploring forms of global identification along the lines proposed by Negri and Hardt—but critical of their rather "romantic invocation" of the "nomadic revolutionary"—, Apter discusses habitat as a means to focus attention on how global financial and information economies are being embedded within geopoetic signifying practices across media. Frederic Jameson's "communicational signifier" is useful in approaching how media and environment are increasingly difficult to disentangle as a semiotic system—when both are conceived "as codes capable of mutual translation," critical habitats need to be defined "as a concept that explores the links between territorial habitat and intellectual habitus; between physical place and ideological forcefield, between economy and ecology."[55]

Media environments camouflage what globalization does to local habitats by dissolving political responsibility in information flows, as technically driven aesthetic procedures adapt (or fail to adapt) to the conventions of political art. According to

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[52] Id., *ibid.*, p. 106.
[53] Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," *op. cit.*, p. 93.
[54] Emily Apter, "The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats" in *October*, 99, Winter 2002, p. 21.
[55] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

Apter, the tension in the model she develops is one between the "grounded" and locally critical representation of "real" habitats and the more globally produced—or virtual—habitats that are constituted by communication networks. This tension could be made productive "in the context of aesthetic strategies of global identification that resists both the trap of a myopic, self-enclosed regionalism and an eulogistic acceptance of new technologies of communication for their own sake."[56]

World of Matter—an international media, art, and research platform that investigates contemporary resource ecologies by bringing together artists, architects, and photojournalists with substantial research experience on globalization together with theorists working in the areas of geography, art history, and cultural theory—is a project focused on identifying innovative and equitable approaches to resources. Inspired by Jacques Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics, this collaborative effort employs "the destabilizing and reframing qualities of aesthetics" in order to "instigate a rethinking of the relationship between discursive practices and the material world."[57] The human-centred vision that everything we encounter can be a resource for human consumption has driven many environmentally and socially disastrous developments—and now needs to be abandoned. The mere attempt to "culturalize" the discourse on the ecologies of natural resources—by multiplying images or forging new socio-cultural vocabularies—fails to effectively de-centre the anthropocentric perspective. Dominant resource and, we would add, political paradigms need to be confronted with "a supply of open source material."

One intervention in particular—Helge Mooshammer's discussion around the co-operative of things (commons, externalization, thingness, imagination)—calls for finding theoretical frameworks more apt for the complex interplay of human and non-human forces and recognize "that the multiple crises of today cannot be overcome purely by readjusting the settings of old-school economic operations." New ecological understandings call for new political economies.[58] Philosophies that have come to discuss the social life of things—such as speculative realism and its "air of a radically new vision in which thingness might become a cathartic object of critical inquiry"—pose the even more serious question if the recurring focus on the independence of the life of things does not merely serve as means of obviating human responsibility for what is actually happening to the world.

In the world of art especially, a new aestheticisation of objects and their material qualities "might actually conceal a certain fetishization of tradable objects,

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[56] Id., *ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

[57] World of Matter, "From Supply Lines to Resource Ecologies" in *Third Text*, Volume 27, Issue 1, January 2013, p. 76. More information on www.worldofmatter.org.

[58] Id., *ibid.*. p. 77.

precisely in times of volatility. Is this rehabilitation of the thing allowing a purified market of exchange in through the back door, as it were, one that is again managing to exclude all potential externalities from its calculations?"[59] Answering this question—which can be addressed in multiple contexts today, the field of wearables inclusive—might be the beginning of a radical discussion where critical displacements of how we see the world challenge the very idea of 'ourselves.'

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[59] Id., *ibid.*, p. 83.