

Extracting Concepts

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For over ten years, we have run research projects that grapple with questions of labour and its transformations across sites in China, India, Australia, Greece, Chile, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Germany. These investigations have taken us to locations such as recycling villages, semiconductor factories, e-waste dumps, container shipping ports, warehouses, copper mines and smelters, data centres, and railway terminals. Dubbed Organized Networks, Transit Labour, Logistical Worlds, and Data Farms, these projects have involved collaborative team research orchestrated in cooperation with local participants, many of whom are activist researchers. Labour precarity has been a consistent preoccupation of our investigations, which have engaged with questions of logistics, software, infrastructure, and data politics. We have sought to understand how digital technologies and logistical media have not only enabled the proliferation of precarious labour regimes across different worksites and economic sectors but also generated fantasies of openness, participation, and seamlessness that have papered over these same conditions of precarity. Organizing this research has involved engaging researchers across sites who have different interests, employment statuses, and levels of attachment to and investment in these projects. Consequently, labour precarity is not only an object of our inquiries but also a condition of their possibility. The following paragraphs reflect on this predicament and our negotiation of it.

First, let us say that we have no illusions about the potentially extractive nature of our research process. Our structural position, as tenured professors with generous research funding from government sources, dictates consideration of the interpersonal and transactional economies at hand. Even as we recognize that precarity goes all the way up and affects us in terms of performance measures and pressures to raise external funding that have real impact on our working lives, there are material differences at play. These differences relate not only to employment statuses and to symbolic authority, however tenuous and contested the latter may be, but also to the positioning of researchers across variegated landscapes of formal citizenship and political economy. Clearly, a researcher positioned in Germany has access to different opportunities than those available to a researcher in, say, India, although the latter may enjoy more secure employment than the former. Staying attuned to these variances has been an important part of how we have approached the practice of collective research, since, as busy academics enmeshed in ever-more demanding cycles of work and performance, our visits

to research sites have been necessarily time-limited. Analogous to work in Australia's mining industry, where workers spend short stints of time in remote extraction sites before returning to the city, you might say that we are "fly-in-fly-out" researchers. We think it is better to be straightforward about this situation than to cover it over with pretty talk about ethnographic reflexivity or theoretical idioms that seek to depict our position as a contingency in a method assemblage (or some equally justificatory conceptual equivocation). All of this we see as necessary, without even taking into account the planetary impacts of the carbon fuels we have burned travelling to globally dispersed research sites.

A core question that motivates our research is how to make infrastructural worlds, technical systems, and labour struggles intelligible in the context of differential geo-cultural dynamics and institutional conditions of knowledge production? Grappling with this question generates techniques of organization and the collective work of concept production. We tend not to find ourselves gravitating toward Moodle, MOOCS, or any of the online platforms designed to consolidate existing institutional hegemony through economies of data extraction and technological solutionism parading as open-access education. While unavoidable, the administrative work of interface management is a subtractive experience well-suited to the abolition of pleasure. One of the high points in building online forms of presence and connection arrives at a relatively early phase of project development. Here we are thinking of work we do with designers in devising an aesthetic grammar and conceptual coordinates which help orient the trajectory of inquiry, or at least serve as points of departure and compulsive infidelity. For many years, Kernow Craig was superb in forging a design signature that trafficked across our project websites and publishing activities. The isotype method of designing a language of work and political struggle by Otto Neurath was especially influential in the case of *Logistical Worlds*. More recently, Amir Husak and Paul Mylecharan have played key roles in the design logic of *Data Farms* and the *Low Latencies* imprint we have initiated with the *FibreCulture Book series* and *Open Humanities Press*. A smartly crafted design logic does wonders for concepts that need to communicate with a blade.

What are the relations between system and subjectivity, infrastructure and expropriation, labour and exploitation, politics and possibility? These are among the many questions that precipitate the collective work of inquiry that comprise the series of projects mentioned above. We are doubtful about the extent to which this research impacts beyond the forms of sociality and collaboration we experience in sites of investigation and the generation of texts, images, videos, sonic atmospheres, and experiments in digital methods more generally. We don't pretend that our research intervenes in material conditions on a grand scale. Delusions like that are best put to the side, only to be hauled out if required in reports read by few. Labour is always affective, though the toll on the body is exacted in highly uneven ways.

A credo of our research process has been no free labour. From locally based researchers to designers, translators to minibus drivers, programmers to event organizers, we have made sure to pay. No doubt, adhering to this credo has been a leaky process. Probably someone has come on board through friendship circles without making it onto our books. We can just imagine someone reading this contribution to *Synoptique*, quoting selectively, and calling us out. It wouldn't be the first time. When you fly in and out, nobody has your back. Nonetheless, we feel that we have been more rigorous in payment than we likely have been in concept production and theory making, and, ultimately, we feel that such rigour may be more important. The academy, if nothing else, has turned us into mildly competent accountants. Yet, whatever our attention to the spreadsheets, the mere act of payment is not enough. Not only is there the question of when the money comes—an important issue for those on the precarity treadmill—but there is also the matter of how much to pay. The latter is a vexing issue when working across different global sites and involving researchers in a process that often involves their own mobility across these sites. How much to pay a researcher in Greece, for instance, as opposed to one in Chile or Germany? With differently pegged rates in national labour markets and different expectations about how much work a certain amount of pay might warrant, the conundrums become thicker. Knowing that territorial demarcations, hierarchical relations between currencies, and the control of

labour mobilities determine pay rates across jurisdictions does not make the dilemmas any easier.

Our approach to these issues has been to pay the same amount to researchers working in different global sites. We leave it to our collaborators to determine how that translates into time and energy. Our graduate students have always amazed us with the intelligence and mature composure they bring to the scene of collective research, often undertaken in circumstances that exact a high emotional and physical toll. It is clear to us that the stakes are especially acute for graduates undergoing training for an education economy with few guarantees. The various media forms we employ and produce across the life of any particular project help give expression to co-mingling voices that slice the horizon of collective research with the intensity of situations marked by the force of history and the violence of capital. Like Paulo Freire's educators, media are never neutral. Unlike these good souls, however, media have no sense of duty, even as they define our situation. Brains and bodies coupled with technical operations forge the contours of cognition.

The artist Robert Smithson once wrote: "The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts" (1967). It is time to run the brutal honesty of this statement up against the reality of extractive economies, which have proliferated under conditions of digital mediation and platform capitalism. Fieldwork is dead, gone the same way that dominant academic fields position the arts of critique. This is not only because researchers have become time-pressured mavens, forever distracted from making worlds by the need to check their h-indexes. It is also because, much to the grief of anthropologists, the interview and focus group have monopolized the dynamics of the encounter. Far from lamenting this situation and longing for a return to participant observation practices that dripped in the blood of colonialism, we prefer to experiment with new institutional forms. Collectivizing research is part of this effort. As we have discussed, such experimentation, in our experience, takes place under compromised conditions. At the very least, we have become aware that theorizing comes at the price of somebody else's labour.

References

Smithson, Robert. 1967. "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site." *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer): 36-40.