Container Aesthetics: The Infrastructural Politics of Shunt's The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face

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> "If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance."
> —Allan Sekula[1]

September 2014. I've gathered with a small group of strangers outside a corroded, sea-green shipping container. We're told to remove our shoes and to place them in white shoeboxes, which we'll carry with us for the next forty-five minutes while traipsing barefoot in a series of shipping containers. There's water and sand to trek through, so this seems a sensible measure. But it resonates loosely in other ways too. Shipping containers and shoes: twin emblems of "globalization." The shoeboxes have the rough proportion of the containers, and we're the force propelling them on the journey ahead. (See figure 1.)

When viewed from the outside, the six shipping containers that Shunt stacked on a defunct coaling jetty in South East London look as though they are waiting to be hoisted onto the bed of an idling lorry or the deck of a ship. But on entering the first container for the start of *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face*, this familiar icon of global trade is made utterly strange. Instead of cargo, the London-based performance collective has filled these forty-foot elongated boxes with thickly crafted environments that range from a jungle safari to something that resembles a terrifying dinner party. The structure of the performance as a tour through these discomfiting scenarios leaves audiences little chance to orient themselves to the bewildering worlds that Shunt fashioned inside its containers.

The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face ran for six weeks during August and September 2014. As a recent example of artists retooling shipping containers into performance

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Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the American Society for Theatre Research in Baltimore (2014), Queen Mary University of London, and York St. John University. Many thanks to Katy Fox-Hoddess, Eirini Nedelkopoulou, Morgan Wadsworth, Aylwyn Walsh, and Brandon Woolf for helping to clarify the claims presented here. I am grateful to members of Shunt who generously discussed *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* with me.
[1] Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), 137.

Theatre Journal 68 (2016) 57–77 © 2016 by Johns Hopkins University Press

Figure 1. Visitors prepare to enter the first container for the start of
The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face. (Photo: Susanne Dietz.)

space, Shunt's immersive performance tour is just one instance of an overlooked in-frastructural aesthetic that proliferates in contemporary art. Shipping containers have long been objects of artistic representation, but today they are also increasingly used as an actual structure for displaying and housing art, like makeshift galleries and pop-up theatre venues. More than simply an aesthetic choice, the physical infrastructure for a performance like *The Boy Who* owes much to the popular trend of container architecture. Today, a disused shipping container can be bought for less than $2,000, making it a sustainable and economical shell for myriad uses. During the past decade the advent of container cafes, container hotels, container malls, and luxury container homes has led architects and designers even to tout "cargotecture" as "a new important market niche."[2] With migrant-detention centers, military barracks, and jails now being built out of the stuff, shipping containers are proving their profoundly democratic poten-tial: they are as fit to be playgrounds for the rich as they are prisons for the poor. The staggering rise of container architecture globally is quickly transforming the shipping container into a fixture of everyday life.

  But the fashion for container architecture does not come out of the blue; it is made possible in the first instance by the global restructuring of the capitalist production process that began in the 1960s. Vessels of some sort have always been needed to transport cargo. Yet, the turn to standardized and intermodal containers for moving

[2] Luis Bernardo, Luiz Oliveira, Miguel Nepomuceno, and Jorge Andrade, "Use of Refurbished Ship-ping Containers for the Construction of Housing Buildings: Details for the Structural Project," *Journal of Civil Engineering and Management* 19, no. 5 (2013): 628. For a glimpse into the world of container architecture in London, see the projects designed by Urban Space Management, available at *http://www.containercity.com/*.

goods without regard to size or shape proved groundbreaking.[3] The first commercial boat stacked with shipping containers set sail from a New Jersey port in April 1956, and within decades containerization revolutionized the shipping industry. Shipping containers sped up the loading and unloading of boats and trucks, and more crucially enabled further innovations that drastically reduced the labor time required to circulate commodities globally. With the price and time required to transport goods overseas plummeting, enterprises could affordably expand their economies of scale and relocate industry to wherever worker militancy and labor costs were lowest. Put simply, the shipping container is a cornerstone of the vast logistics infrastructure that subtends "supply chain capitalism" today.[4] "Without it," as Marc Levinson notes in his sweeping history of the shipping container, "the world would be a very different place."[5]

Given the extraordinary infrastructural importance of the shipping container, a performance like Shunt's *The Boy Who* should strike one as immediately odd. And yet, the strangeness of containers as an infrastructural aesthetic in contemporary art tends to go unnoticed. In this essay I call attention to this widespread phenomenon, which by dint of its omission in scholarship and criticism has been deemed "unnotable." What institutional, geopolitical, and historical conditions must first conspire to allow artists to convert a linchpin of global trade into the physical infrastructure for performance? And what are the consequences of container aesthetics in contemporary performance? These questions cannot be treated separately, since the political stakes of this infrastructural aesthetic are thoroughly imbricated in the economic conditions that make it possible. This is not to suggest, however, that the political potential of a performance like *The Boy Who* is overdetermined by its thinly mediated connection to global capital. To examine Shunt's shipping containers as an infrastructural aesthetic requires not just accounting for the fact that *The Boy Who* uses containers as performance space; one must also interrogate how, by repurposing the tools of capital's logistics infrastructure, Shunt aestheticizes capitalist infrastructure itself. In other words, any analysis of this infrastructural aesthetic must consider the material effects of transforming shipping containers into art.

Just as Shunt is not alone in reusing shipping containers as infrastructure, *The Boy Who* is just one entry into the expanding cultural field of container aesthetics. Shipping containers today are widely regarded as a symbol of global capital, thanks in part to their appearance in blockbuster movies and white-cube galleries alike. Much has been written on the aestheticization of containers in media like film, television, and photography; most often, scholarship and criticism reads cultural representations of shipping containers under the light of late capitalism, as either its ideological symptoms or potential "cognitive maps" that can help people locate themselves within its confusing terrain.[6] Such scholarship provides valuable lenses for studying the container

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[3] On the history of the shipping container, see Rose George, *Ninety Percent of Everything* (New York: Picador, 2013); Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think*, trans. Charles Marcrum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Nelson Lichtenstein, ed., *The Traveling Box: Containers as the Icons of Our Era* (New York: New Press, 2011).

[4] Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism* 21 (2009): 150.

[5] Levinson, *The Box*, 15.

[6] The most extended study of container aesthetics and cognitive mapping to date is Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015). For other examples,

aesthetics of contemporary performance, but the focus on representation cannot account fully for what is at stake when artists use actual containers in their art.

Taking *The Boy Who* as an example, this essay offers a method for studying the infrastructural politics of container aesthetics today, one that attends to both the politics of representing containers in performance, as well as the material conditions that undergird such performances. To begin, I situate *The Boy Who* within the broad landscape of container aesthetics to show how Shunt's postdramatic dramaturgy stands out for disorienting audiences instead of helping them figure out how they relate to the capitalist infrastructure to which containers belong. I explore the political potential in confounding audiences with the instruments of global capital, especially at a historical moment when it seems all too easy to feel at home in postindustrial society. As I argue in the second half of the essay, the utility of Shunt's infrastructural aesthetic runs into severe limits, however, once we move out of the realm of container aesthetics and into the various urban and transnational infrastructures that supported *The Boy Who*, and that it supported in kind.

Infrastructural Aesthetics

Shoeless and with shoeboxes in hand, we're ushered into the first shipping container, although it looks nothing of the sort. The walls, made of pristine paneling instead of weathered metal, are awash with yellow light, and the narrow space is nearly empty save for a skinny table that spans the center of the container lengthwise. An erratic figure in lavish pearls and an unnerving latex mask has been waiting for us. Her white pantsuit matches her white wig. She bids us to place our shoeboxes alongside others already there. Perusing the boxes, she discovers a surprise in one—a trove of jewelry. Before anyone can lay claim to the contents, it's time for us to move on. (See figure 2.) Our host pulls back curtains to reveal another room—actually an extension of the one we're in. From where we stand the new space seems to stretch far into the distance. But as our minds adjust, we realize this is only a perceptual gambit: the dimensions of the room gently narrow, upsetting our perspective and making this room appear longer than it actually is. We're beckoned to proceed through a door at the other end. A stranger next to me volunteers to go first, and, once she's disappeared, the rest of us follow.

Aesthetically, the shipping container may have "all the romance of a tin can," but it has anchored the global production process for nearly the past half-century.[7] Containerization was a key component in the spatial fix capitalism unleashed to contend with the long downturn in productivity and wage growth that began in the 1970s, and it remains essential to global manufacturing and consumption today.[8] In a country like the United Kingdom, an estimated nine out of every ten purchased items has, at some point and in some part, traveled in a shipping container. Without the estimated 20 million containers circling the globe at this very moment, the world of capital as we know it could not go around.

Today, shipping containers are not just floating on the high seas and clogging up our highways; with their proliferating cameos in films and television shows, they occupy

see Joshua Clover, "The Seafarer," *The Nation*, November 5, 2013, available at *http://www.thenation.com/article/seafarer*; and Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July / August 2009): 8–15.

[7] Levinson, *The Box*, 1.

[8] See David Harvey, "Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix,'" *Geographische Revue* 2 (2001): 23–30. On the "long downturn," see Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from the Long Boom to the Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London: Verso, 2006).

Figure 2. Visitors move into the second room of *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face.*
(Photo: Susanne Dietz.)

a growing place in cultural imagination. For many, the shipping container exceeds its status as "the single most important technological innovation underpinning the globalization of trade": it is the very emblem of globalization itself.[9] Still others go further and suggest that the shipping container is a central "principle" for how we think and organize our lives.[10] Despite the ubiquity of shipping containers, their social prominence in no way equates to a general understanding of the complex economic process they index; in fact, the wide circulation of the shipping container in film and television tends more to cloud than clarify its defining historical preconditions and consequences.

The container's modest box-like appearance only helps to conceal the complicated web of social relations that flow through and engulf it. Containers invite easy visual consumption, thus tempting viewers to believe that what they see is what they get—although, of course, everyone knows that there is more to a container than meets the eye. After all, what is a container for if not to keep out of sight the things it is designed to ship? This commonsense explanation of the container's mystery is reassuring; it comforts us to know that there are things about the container that we just can never know. But the puzzle of the container does not stop with what is inside it; we rarely have any idea where a container is headed or whence it came. From here, the mysteries only mount, piling to such a height that it becomes impossible even to fathom the sheer extent and scale of the systems that enmesh a container.

In this regard the shipping container is more than a tool or symbol of supply chain capitalism; it testifies as well to what Fredric Jameson, over thirty years ago, called our

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[9] Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 31.

[10] Klose, *The Container Principle*, x.

"incapacity . . . to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects."[11] For Jameson, the profound restructuring of production that unfurled in the 1960s jeopardized the ability to imagine one's place within the emerging world space of late capitalism. Whereas workers under industrial capitalism might have known reasonably well where they stood in the production process despite being alienated from it, the advent of the global factory gave rise to a structure of feeling among "First World subjects" that they "inhabit a 'postindustrial society'" in which production in the familiar sense had disappeared along with traditional class divisions.[12] The aesthetic forms used to represent previous social organizations of capital, Jameson argued, were inadequate for grasping this dizzying space of late capitalism. What seems at first glance to be an aesthetic problem is also thoroughly political. Just as someone might feel overwhelmed in an unfamiliar city without a map, so also can late capitalism be politically debilitating if individuals cannot locate themselves within it. According to Jameson, the reorganization of capital compromised as well the forms of political intervention traditionally associated with a communist project. This led him to famously recommend "an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*" that would be useful for developing new modes of collective struggle.[13] Jameson could not prescribe a singular form that a cognitive map might take; instead, he envisioned myriad political art practices that would provide individuals a "situational representation" through which they could define their "relationship to the totality."[14]

Given the dual status of shipping containers as both tool and symbol of global capital, it seems reasonable to assume that artworks featuring containers might have unique potential as cognitive maps. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle test this very premise in their recent book, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, which takes stock of varied attempts at cognitive mapping since Jameson first issued his call. Toscano and Kinkle identify several promising examples, most notably the films and photographs of Allan Sekula. But they also chart the acute risk of container aesthetics to compound rather than diminish disorientation, typically by nurturing a false sense of bearing and comfort. The biggest culprit for Toscano and Kinkle is the fashion in story-based media to deploy a shipping container as a "narrative emblem and device."[15] This tendency is exemplified in the second season of the US television show *The Wire*, which opens with Baltimore port workers finding thirteen Eastern European sex workers dead in a shipping container. The revelation confirms general intuition that whatever mystery the container has to hide is a dangerous one. But the misery narratively loaded into *The Wire*'s container is too literal; the gruesome discovery, Toscano and Kinkle argue, cannot encompass the extent of "the structures of power that subtend the circulation of commodities."[16] By focusing on the grisly contents of a single container, the show suggests that the menace begins and ends with this particular container. Thus the shipping container as a revelatory space of suffering ultimately yields "a new kind of opacity," redirecting

[11] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 44. Jameson introduced this argument about "cognitive mapping" in "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984). See also Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 347–60.

[12] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 53.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 51, 52.

[15] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 197.

[16] Ibid.

our gaze from the exploitative world of capital to a criminal organization.[17] According to Toscano and Kinkle, this narrative-driven fetish has a visual arts complement in the popular landscape port photography of shipping containers by artists such as Frank Breuer and Edward Burtynsky. Unlike *The Wire,* images like these actually attest to the enormity of the logistics infrastructure. They do so, however, by replicating a pleasingly minimalist geometry that succumbs to both the modernist lure of "seriality, repetition and modularity" and the romantic sublime.[18] The sprawling spectacle of order that these photographs convey evinces a heartening sense of permanence and rationality, which reassures viewers that they are in good hands. Such beautiful images are opportunities to relish in being bewildered, as they obviate a desire to inquire into the systems in which the containers circulate.

Although Toscano and Kinkle consider the potential of cognitive mapping in a range of media, they exclude contemporary performance. Their study offers a useful method for tracking the drawbacks of container aesthetics as a representational practice, but it reaches a limit when it comes to examining shipping containers as an infrastructural aesthetic. Consider, for example, Clare Bayley's play *The Container* (2007), which tells of a group of asylum seekers making a desperate journey to England inside a shipping container. The drama offers a poignant portrait of the travails of migrants, but its realist dramaturgy creates the very sort of story that Toscano and Kinkle insist "risks defetishing too fast," since its single narrative sidelines imagination of the complex systems of which containers are a part.[19] And yet, the emphasis on narrative and visuality cannot account for the full dynamics of Bayley's play as it is performed. When *The Container* premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, directed by Tom Wright, it unfolded in an actual shipping container located outdoors. Instead of viewing the hour-long performance in the proscenium, the twenty-eight-person audience was crammed inside the container along with the cast (See figure 3.).[20] This infrastructural fact of performance does not free *The Container* of a story-generated container fetish—if anything, the intimacy of shared space intensifies it by leaving audiences even less room to consider the container's consequence beyond what the narrative provides. But *The Container* does more than aestheticize capitalist infrastructure: the staging also reuses it. To grasp the political stakes of a performance like *The Container* requires attending to more than how it alludes to or represents shipping containers.

The taste for containers as an infrastructural aesthetic in contemporary performance is far-reaching, being found in established theatres and small experimental ensembles alike. In addition to realist plays like *The Container* that turn to shipping containers as a narrative device, there are also productions that replicate the sort of logistical sublime that Toscano and Kinkle identify in landscape port photography. Es Devlin's set for a 2015 production of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* at London's Royal Opera House, for instance, used containers as the building blocks for Bertolt Brecht's dystopian metropolis. As Mahagonny grows over the course of the opera, so too does the number of shipping containers onstage. This culminates after intermission in the stunning reveal of a mountain of containers—some real, some trompe l'oeil set pieces—stacked to the ceiling of the grand theatre.

[17] Ibid., 201.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 207.
[20] When the Young Vic revived this production of *The Container* in 2009, it was staged again in an actual container.

Figure 3. Scene from Clare Bayley's *The Container,* directed by Tom Wright, outside of the Young Vic Theatre, London, July 2009: (l-r) Amber Agar, Abhin Galeya, and Hassani Shapi. (Photo: Peter Macdiarmid.)

However, many performances that use shipping containers do not foreground them aesthetically to the same degree as *The Container* or *Mahagonny*. Most often, artists repurpose shipping containers to take advantage of their inherent infrastructural qualities. Touring performances like the situational game *3rd Ring Out* by Metis (2010) or David Rosenberg and Frauke Requardt's pop-up dance drama *Electric Hotel* (2010), for instance, favored containers primarily for their portability and durability. This emphasis on infrastructure is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the most famous examples of container aesthetics in contemporary performance have attracted little or no critical consideration to their use of containers. Take, for example, Christoph Schlingensief's notorious 2000 provocation *Bitte Liebt Österreich!* (*Please Love Austria!*), a faux reality show that gave the Austrian public the chance to watch a group of asylum seekers live for a week inside a complex of containers built in the center of Vienna. Each day viewers could go online and vote for which contestant they wanted kicked out of the country. Critics and scholars have scrutinized Schlingensief's xenophobic travesty and the riots it caused, but have paid only perfunctory attention to the fact that the performance was housed in containers.[21] More recently, Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven converted a single container into a portacabin for his traveling public installation *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)* (2014). Verhoeven replaced one side of the container with glass, which allows passersby to watch him inside meeting men he connects with through the dating app Grindr. His performance has courted controversy because critics charge him with exploiting and violating the privacy of unsuspecting gay men.[22] Despite the

[21] See, for example, Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 179–84.

[22] See Jacob Bard Rosenberg, "Wanna Play? Game Over," *Mute Magazine,* October 7, 2014, available at *http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanna-play-game-over*.

press that *Wanna Play?* has generated, as was the case with *Bitte Liebt Österreich!*, no substantive comment has been made on its infrastructural aesthetic. Of course, such critical indifference seems understandable, since the controversy both triggered had little to do with the containers themselves. But this also speaks to the very effectiveness of containers as infrastructure; after all, a reliable infrastructure should not require attention or compel interest into why or how it persists.

The infrastructural unremarkability of these and many other performances is itself remarkable, given how widespread yet historically specific container art is. Moreover, it evidences a profound and overlooked political consequence for this infrastructural aesthetic. Two decades ago artist and essayist Allan Sekula observed that "containerization obscures more than the heterogeneity of cargoes."[23] For him, the new deep-water facilities that were built to accommodate container ships had pushed ports out of major cities and the minds of many, thereby compromising the social consciousness of capitalist infrastructure. However, reminders and remainders of logistics can be found all around us today, thanks partly to the spread of container architecture. In a city like London, which exemplifies the type of urban transformation that Sekula described, containers are fast becoming part of daily life, housing everything from shops and hotels to schools and storage units. But the proliferation of container architecture does not necessarily restore infrastructural awareness of the sort that Sekula, along with Jameson, claimed to have been imperiled by the global restructuring of the labor process. Container architecture brings people into close, even intimate relation with the instruments of capital, only to risk further mystifying capitalism by changing the container into something mundane or a passing fad. Similarly, performances that use containers as an infrastructural aesthetic risk making containers into natural features of the social topography. Container architecture might help relieve "our social confusion" in a postindustrial society, but unlike Jameson's cognitive maps, it acclimatizes us to this world without offering a way to "regain a capacity to act and struggle" against it.[24] Such are some of the hazards of this infrastructural aesthetic, which a performance like Shunt's *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* throws into sharp relief. It glimpses another political potential for container aesthetics in contemporary performance, one that departs from the desire for cognitive mapping, as well as the habituating function of container architecture.

Performance Logistics

Compared to the immaculate and airy space we've just left, this next room is claustrophobic. We've entered a kind of club, replete with poster-covered walls and blaring EDM. Wherever we are, we're late to the party, which is already crowded with dancers and another masked host attempting to sing karaoke. The only instruction we're given is the sound of the door, which we just came through, closing. Some dance, the rest sway awkwardly. And soon the music shuts off, replaced by a voice from a loudspeaker instructing those who've been told they're "winners" to move along. The group I arrived with didn't receive any such encouragement, but apparently the rest of the room has. As they leave the music resumes and we take their place dancing.

Throughout *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* visitors tour the sort of richly textured environments that characterize immersive theatre, a performance genre that Shunt has

[23] Sekula, *Fish Story*, 49.
[24] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 54.

helped define over the previous two decades.[25] Even though Shunt does not ground *The Boy Who* dramaturgically in its shipping containers, they can hardly be ignored. The containers do more than enclose *The Boy Who*; as an infrastructural aesthetic, they contain what is otherwise a fragmented experience. By wavering somewhere between dramaturgical avowal and infrastructural indifference to the containers, *The Boy Who* breaks with how container aesthetics tend to operate in contemporary performance. Shunt prohibits visitors from taking the containers for granted, but at the same time does not indicate what should be taken from them. *The Boy Who* is a far cry from a cognitive map because it disorients audiences at every turn.

Generally speaking, an immersive performance like *The Boy Who* would seem to exemplify a postdramatic move away from story to event. As W. B. Worthen observes, however, the turn toward *eventfulness* in immersive theatre can just as easily grant performance texts new dynamism and clarity. Worthen's case in point is Punchdrunk's enormously popular *Sleep No More*, which is based on *Macbeth*. Although the "'immersive' epistemology" of *Sleep No More* breaks with many theatrical conventions, Worthen insists that the resulting event is "predicated on a surprisingly conventional view of dramatic performance."[26] Not only does it offer "fully formed" characters, but Punchdrunk's use of space also yields a "thematically resonant environment" that does not so much upend Shakespeare's text as it "materializ[es] elements of the play's verbal texture as objects."[27] In other words, *Sleep No More*'s immersive space catalyzes Shakespeare's play.

By contrast, the carefully crafted spaces that audiences enter in *The Boy Who* provide little opportunity to explore a preexisting text. Advertisements for *The Boy Who* on Shunt's website included evocative quotes from books like Charles Kingsley's 1863 children's novel *The Water Babies* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, yet visitors would be hard pressed to draw meaningful connections between these texts and what awaits them on the tour. The textual clues work less like signposts that indicate clear destinations than they do breadcrumbs that Shunt has sprinkled around the containers; they are not necessarily misleading, but where they lead is largely up to those who find them. The performance concludes, for instance, by playfully alluding to Kingsley's novel:

To exit the final room I climb up a rickety set of metal stairs to an outdoor walkway built on the roofs of the very containers through which I had just wandered. From this new vantage point I can see that the containers are arranged end-to-end in a quadrangle, something I had not realized while navigating the enclosed space. And the outdoor area the containers create— the middle of the square—has been flooded with water in which a single container is partly submerged with one end angled up into the chilly night air. Standing naked atop this sinking container is a bearded performer, sometimes playing an ethereal swan song on an electric guitar or trying on a red sequined gown. Floating in the water around him are dozens of dolls, both the stranded container's cargo and the water babies of Kingsley's title.

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[25] On immersive theatre, see Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012); and Keren Zaointz, "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014).

[26] W. B. Worthen, "'The written troubles of the brain': *Sleep No More* and the Space of Character," *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): 83.

[27] Ibid., 86.

This final tableau is more visually arresting than symbolically meaningful. Given the subtlety of the allusion to Kingsley's novel, it seems at best an incidental task for audiences to decipher exactly why Shunt materializes *The Water Babies* in such a wryly literal way. In an earlier segment visitors explore a container transformed into a sandy jungle environment, but whether this is a nod to *Heart of Darkness* is hardly clear. The lonely performers I stumbled upon throughout the tour could have been variations of Mr. Kurtz, but this seems more my own attempt at untangling the performance's scattered textual references than an interpretation generally shared by others. We might do well to take a cue here from Shunt itself, which described *Heart of Darkness* in its permit application to the Royal Borough of Greenwich as "starting material." Rather than stage the novel, Shunt noted that its performance would offer "a more experiential and lyrical play with the content of Conrad's most famous book."[28] Texts in *The Boy Who* are prompts, not organizing principles, for performance—if not also a convenient way for Shunt to make its plans legible to city administrators and prospective audiences.

All this is to say that, unlike *Sleep No More*, Shunt's performance is not bounded by a story or coherent fictional universe. *The Boy Who* may not rely upon a narrative or a preexisting text to orient audiences, but neither does it leave them completely at sea. Just as the containers, in their physical resemblance to tunnels, lead progressive movement through the forty-five-minute performance tour, they also shape imagination. Shunt's shipping containers delineate the performance spatially, as well as experientially. The closest one comes to a guide in *The Boy Who* is its infrastructural aesthetic. The containers help to anchor the performance without overdetermining the disquieting encounters that comprise it. When the doors locked and lights suddenly cut out in one unadorned container, my awareness of what I was trapped inside shaped my response to the sensations generated by a powerful speaker system. The noise and vibrations of whirring and slamming metal suggested that the container, with us inside it, was being hoisted onto the deck of a ship. Soon the sound of splashing water washed through the pitch-black space, making it seem like our ship had set sail. What came to my mind at this moment was the dreadful news that day of thirty-five Afghan migrants found in a shipping container in the nearby Tilbury docks; horrifically, one person had died during the desperate passage to England.[29] Such an experience resonates with what Bayley delivers in *The Container*, albeit with a crucial difference: whereas the story that propels *The Container* gives audiences little choice but to interpret the infrastructural aesthetic as a narrative device, there is no guarantee where one's mind will wander during the moment of darkness in *The Boy Who*.[30] Nonetheless, it is to the shipping containers that thoughts inevitably return, even in moments when they are hidden from view. But instead of commanding how to make sense of the *The Boy Who*, the containers function more like an infrastructural punctum that interrupts and transforms experience in contingent and often radically subjective ways.[31] The constant

[28] "Shunt Jetty Proposal" (n.p.), submitted on April 25, 2014 to the Royal Borough of Greenwich as part of application 14/1099/F, "Temporary Performance Venue and Supporting Infrastructure (Portacabin-style Units) between 14th August and 27th September 2014," available at *http://publicaccess.royalgreenwich.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=summary&keyVal=_GRNW_DCAPR_77306*.

[29] "Tilbury Docks: Man Dies after 35 Found in Container," *BBC News,* August 16, 2014, available at *http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-28817688*.

[30] On darkness and theatre, see Martin Welton, "The Possibility of Darkness: Blackout and Shadow in Chris Goode's *Who You Are*," *Theatre Research International* 38, no. 1 (2013): 4–19.

[31] On the "punctum" in photography, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

adjustments required when moving from one environment to the next only makes it harder for thoughts and associations to cohere, while exacerbating the idiosyncrasy of each visitor's experience. No sooner had the lights switched back on in the container than my group was ushered into an entirely different world.

Such is the type of interpretive blockage that saturates and buttresses *The Boy Who*. The performance never promises audiences anything like readymade thematic coherence or legibility, let alone instruction as to how to make heads or tails of it. Like other postdramatic performances, it seems organized through what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls "parataxis." Rather than convey a preformed opinion or position, Shunt coordinates myriad performance elements, including whatever visitors and the contingencies of live performance contribute.[32] Meaningfulness arrives, if ever, via the interpretive, associative, and even meditative work that audiences themselves perform in response to the constituent parts that comprise the performance. Shunt provides no captions to clarify what to make of the event, no *Gestus* to crystallize a particular historical condition pertaining to containers. Only adding to this, Shunt plays with the senses of visitors in various ways throughout the tour. The containers are full of smells and visual ruses. I was constantly aware of the changing textures beneath my bare feet; in one container I felt sand, in another water. This all makes for a disorienting event to say the least, thematically as well as perceptually.

But *The Boy Who* is hardly alone in contemporary performance for causing such confusion; many other examples of immersive and postdramatic theatre could be said to offer as much of a baffling experience. Within the field of container aesthetics, however, Shunt's dramaturgy stands out. There is no way to mistake *The Boy Who* for a cognitive map, even as reminders of the logistics infrastructure are ever present. Much was made of the containers in its advertising, and the names of global shipping firms like Hanjin and Hamburg Sud remained emblazoned on their corrugated steel sides during the performance run. Although the performance was likely frustratingly bewildering for many visitors, this bewilderment also frustrated the inclination that pervades container aesthetics in film and visual art to clarify or comment on something about containers themselves.

Barely a generation ago Jameson could confidently state that late capitalism felt like a newly discomfiting place. Despite escalating economic and political turbulence, this novelty seems to have worn off. The very fact that one can go and grab a coffee in a shipping container and not think twice about it seems evidence enough of this. Whether one likes it or not, we have grown accustomed to not knowing *exactly* where we stand in the terrain of global capital, even as the differing levels of social privilege we each enjoy becomes increasingly hard to deny. If one does not feel adrift, how can one desire a cognitive map? Herein lies the political potential of Shunt's container aesthetics, or at least one that it allows us to glimpse. *The Boy Who* proposes that the tools of global capital can still be disorienting. Of course, the confusion that Shunt's containers evoke is heavily mediated, to the extent that most visitors likely left the performance simply confused—capitalism or not. But nonetheless, and at the risk of repeating a Brechtian

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[32] For Hans-Thies Lehmann on parataxis, see his *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 86–87. As theorized by Lehmann, postdramatic performance levels dramatic hierarchies within theatre and broadens what can govern a theatrical situation. This is perhaps best illustrated by the table of contents he offers in *Postdramatic Theatre*, wherein "Text" is but one of the "Aspects" that propels performance, alongside "Space," "Time," "Body," and "Media."

cliché, Shunt's infrastructural aesthetic makes capitalist infrastructure seem strange again. In this regard *The Boy Who* departs markedly from most container architecture, especially those container houses in which one can feel actually at home. The actual political utility of such an intervention is certainly up for debate, although the potential remains. The costs of Shunt's infrastructural aesthetic, however, are profound. To fully grasp them requires moving outside the containers of *The Boy Who* and looking toward the conditions that made the performance possible in the first place.

Pop-Up Politics

I linger atop Shunt's shipping containers after the tour ends, taking in the nighttime view of the Thames and the former docklands to the north. From here, I can also see that a crowd has filled the rest of the pier, which, to accompany the run of The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face, *hosts an outdoor bar made of recycled containers. Visitors stand in line to buy cocktails served out of one container and order food from another, before grabbing a seat in one of several container lounges outfitted with cushions. I can't hear them where I am, but there's also a band playing for the guests on a stage housed in a container. When I look west to North Greenwich, all I can see besides the darkened sky are construction cranes and the steel skeletons of what soon will be apartment towers.*

Shunt is no stranger to working outside the conventional physical and institutional infrastructures that support London theatre. Since forming in 1998, the ten-person collective has created and curated performances in an array of what it calls "unusual locations within London." This includes long-term residencies in a railway arch and beneath London Bridge train station, as well as more recent productions in a tobacco warehouse and a biscuit factory.[33] For *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face,* Shunt joined forces with the marketing and event services firm Managing Mayhem, whose clients have included the Olivier Awards, Louis Vuitton, and Mini. "Experimental marketing, pop-up venue or music festival," Managing Mayhem's website advertises, "we are proud to produce it all."[34] For help modifying the shipping containers Managing Mayhem turned to Adaptainer, one of the UK's oldest container-conversion specialists.[35] Shunt received top billing for *The Boy Who*, but the performance was only made possible through the support of the property investment company Knight Dragon Developments, which provided the disused coaling jetty, as well as the permits necessary to refit it as a performance space. Knight Dragon's owner, the Chinese jewelry magnate Henry Cheng Kar-Shun, is worth an estimated $20 billion, making him the second richest property investor in the world with holdings in the UK.[36] At present,

[33] Shunt first made its reputation by hosting cabaret nights under a railway line in the East London neighborhood of Bethnal Green from 1998 to 2004. In 2004, with support from the National Theatre, it moved to the monumental vaults beneath London Bridge Station, where it opened the popular Shunt Lounge. In 2010 it was forced out of the station due to construction. See *http://www.shunt.co.uk/*. For more on Shunt, see the interview with one its founding members, Mischa Twitchin, "The History of Shunt and Their New Show Money," London Theatre Blog, November 3, 2009, available at *http://www.andreweglinton.com/ltbarchive/2009/11/03/mischa-twitchin-on-the-history-of-shunt-and-their-new-show-money/*.

[34] See Managing Mayhem's website, available at *http://managingmayhem.co.uk/*.

[35] For Adaptainer's blog and video about *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face*, see "Mystery London show opens in pop up shipping containers," September 14, 2014, available at *http://adaptainer.co.uk/container-conversion/pop-up-shipping-containers-the-boy-who-climbed-out-of-his-face-shunt/*. A short film of the build for *The Boy Who,* directed by Flora Azqueta, is available at *https://vimeo.com/104547227*.

[36] Among Knight Dragon's other UK projects is a high-profile development in Knightsbridge. See Daniel Johnson, "Duke of Westminster No Longer UK's Richest Property Magnate," *Telegraph*, December 6, 2013, available at *http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/constructionandproperty/10500634/Duke-of-Westminster-no-longer-UKs-richest-property-magnate.html*.

Knight Dragon's central project is the redevelopment of North Greenwich, the site of *The Boy Who*.

Once a prominent location for manufacturing, shipbuilding, and electrical production in London, North Greenwich was ravaged by deindustrialization in the 1960s and quickly fell into disrepair as all its factories and power plants closed by the 1980s. The peninsula is located directly on the Thames near central London, but extreme contamination combined with the absence of passenger rail and underground service left the area a largely uninhabitable wasteland for decades.[37] Like the rest of London's former docklands, which includes the financial center Canary Wharf, the 200-acre site is currently undergoing extensive regeneration. Over the past two decades hundreds of millions of pounds have poured into the area now rebranded "Greenwich Peninsula." The original Greenwich Peninsula master plan was unveiled in 2004 as "one of the largest regeneration schemes in Europe."[38] Knight Dragon expanded the plans in 2015 after buying full control of the project from its partners. Its revised scheme aspires to transform Greenwich Peninsula into a "digital creative arts district," with 13,000 homes, 3.5 million square feet of commercial space, and a cutting-edge film studio to boot.[39]

The Boy Who's geographic and political enmeshment in this real estate landscape is impossible to ignore, but one should take care before blithely branding Shunt a shill for property developers. Partnerships between immersive theatre and the business world are hardly unheard of, especially in London, where Punchdrunk has created bespoke performances for Sony, Louis Vuitton, and Stella Artois.[40] As even critics acknowledge, dwindling government support for the arts has made hawking video games, handbags, and alcohol vital for experimental though expensive performance. Shunt's move to Greenwich Peninsula is as much a comment on the state of arts funding in the UK as it is a case of artist opportunism. Judged in relation to many other examples of corporate patronage, *The Boy Who* hardly seems egregious. Nonetheless, the consequences of this infrastructural backing should not be shrugged off. Redevelopment of Greenwich Peninsula made *The Boy Who* possible, and Shunt's performance supported Knight Dragon's pursuits in kind.

In his study of Toronto's postindustrial transformation, Michael McKinnie registers how theatres can help ease a city from "a Fordist urban space of commodity mass production into a post-Fordist space of service provision."[41] For one, the arrival of a

[37] On the history of North Greenwich, see Mary Mills, *Greenwich Marsh: The 300 Years before the Dome* (London: M. Wright, 1999).

[38] "First Residential Milestone Reached in Landmark Greenwich Peninsula Scheme," Wates.co.uk, August 7, 2014, available at *http://www.wates.co.uk/news/first-residential-milestone-reached-landmark-greenwich-peninsula-scheme-1213*.

[39] Paul Norman, "Curtain Raised on £5bn Greenwich Masterplan," CoStar UK, April 2, 2015, available at *http://www.costar.co.uk/en/assets/news/2015/April/Curtain-raised-on-5bn-Greenwich-masterplan*. See also Judith Evans, "Greenwich Urban Village Given Final Approval," *Financial Times,* November 20, 2015, available at *http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/970b8e1a-8eda-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b.html#axzz3sGBzsVlv*. The commercial website for the redevelopment project is available at *http://www.greenwichpeninsula. co.uk*. The revised plans also decrease affordable and social housing for the area. See "What's Dr Cheng's Prescription for Greenwich Peninsula?" 853blog, November 5, 2013, available at *http://853blog. com/2013/11/05/whats-dr-chengs-prescription-for-greenwich-peninsula*.

[40] See Adam Alston, "Funding, Product Placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk's *The Black Diamond*," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, no. 2 (2012): 193–208.

[41] Michael McKinnie, *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 52.

theatre to a formerly industrial district can announce that an area once "devoted to manufacturing goods" has opened for the business of "offering services."[42] McKinnie notes as well that the very presence of a theatre in a disused factory or warehouse can be "reassuring": in the midst of deep social and urban transformation, an industrial building repurposed as a theatre provides a "nostalgic invocation of a stable past."[43] *The Boy Who* resonates with McKinnie's model of theatre and "civic self-fashioning" to the extent that the performance helped spread word of Greenwich Peninsula's makeover into London's newest hub of entertainment and luxury living.[44]

Yet, Shunt's shipping containers could not offer the same sort of comforting sentiment that McKinnie finds in theatres that privilege a postindustrial city's existing industrial edifice. This is because shipping containers depart from industrial buildings in both form and function. Most notably, a shipping container is designed to move. This potential lends containers the transient temporality that has made them the go-to structure for the "pop-up" cafes and stores that are especially popular in London. Container architecture is performative architecture; it announces what it enacts—impermanence, flexibility, and interchangeability. Thus it is perfectly suited to the "projective" lifeworld that defines "the new spirit of capitalism," which replaces the rigidity of the factory shift with a network of gigs and projects.[45] In addition to its distinctive temporality, a shipping container also lacks the history of an industrial building; both might bear cosmetic traces of rugged past use, but they diverge in their historical resonance. Although containerization's emergence accompanied deindustrialization historically, the global spread of containers hinged on the disappearance of factories in cities like London. In short, a repurposed shipping container provides no continuity with a fondly recalled Fordist past and its mythologized promise of certainty and stability.[46] Moreover, container architecture in London tends to appear alongside redevelopment projects that do not so much repurpose built environments as demolish them. Today, shipping containers are popping up as restaurants, galleries, and shops at construction sites from Hackney to Brixton—affordable stopgaps that erase the past to usher in a dicey future.[47]

[42] Ibid., 55.

[43] Ibid., 89.

[44] Ibid., 18. On theatre and urban transformation in London specifically, see Charlotte Bell, "Cultural Practices, Market Disorganization, and Urban Regeneration: Royal Court Theatre Local Peckham and Peckham Space," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24, no. 2 (2014): 192–208; and Michael McKinnie, "Rethinking Site-Specifity: Monopoly, Urban Space, and the Cultural Economics of Site-Specific Performance," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19–34.

[45] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005), 104.

[46] Some commentators suggest that shipping containers perform a different sort of reassuring function. Container architecture is frequently celebrated as a testament to sustainability and thrift in a time of economic austerity and ecological catastrophe; see J. Vijayalaxmi, "Towards Sustainable Architecture: A Case with Greentainer," *Journal of Civil Engineering and Management* 15, no. 3 (2010): 245–59. Still others see a repurposed container as an "enclosure of stability amidst deterritorializing capital"; see Wade Hunt, "Enclaves of Deterritorialization: Jameson, Subject-Proletariats, and Shipping Container Architecture," *Affectus* 1, no. 2 (2014): 141.

[47] For an overview of the connection between shipping containers, pop-ups, and urban redevelopment in London, see Dan Hancox, "Fuck Your Pop-Up Shops," *Vice*, February 21, 2014, available at *http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/shipping-container-elephant-park-dan-hancox*. Hancox focuses on the shipping container mall The Artworks, built in 2014 on the site of the Heygate housing estate in Elephant and Castle, which was destroyed to make room for new apartment towers.

Long a prime site of investment for the world capitalist class, London real estate prices have skyrocketed since the economic crisis as wary speculators increasingly prefer brick-and-mortar assets over shifty financial tools. Greenwich Peninsula exemplifies the staggering development-by-demolition projects that have sprouted to take advantage of this booming property market.[48] Construction cranes, manicured pathways, and amenities like the O2 Arena and Emirates Air Line gondola service have all but supplanted the district's industrial infrastructure. The defunct coaling jetty used for *The Boy Who* rests in the very center of Knight Dragon's current construction phase. Shunt's performance inaugurated the jetty's new identity as "The Jetty," which Knight Dragon markets as a "temporary platform for immersive performance" and "home to a pop-up cocktail bar and a street food venue."[49] During the run of *The Boy Who*, shipping containers housed more than Shunt's performance: everything on The Jetty—its bar, kitchen, lounge area, and concert stage—was put in a shipping container. The transience promised by the containers visually matched the construction underway directly across from the box office (also made of a shipping container). Visitors picking up tickets for *The Boy Who* could not miss wall-size signs advertising new luxury towers like "The Lighterman" that promised prospective buyers "a unique opportunity for riverside living in a new district for London."

The Jetty's position in this redevelopment project points to the function that Knight Dragon envisioned for it and *The Boy Who* to perform. The firm promoted Shunt's performance as just the start of plans to festoon the former wasteland with art and "a dynamic programme of pop-ups celebrating Greenwich Peninsula."[50] Pop-ups in London come under regular scrutiny from detractors, who deride them as "a lunge to inject coolness and spontaneity" into areas that lack such status, but which could profit handsomely from having it.[51] Whatever the willful blind spots of these arguments, it stands to reason that convenience and cost alone did not make shipping containers the infrastructure of choice for the Jetty's pop-ups. The crown jewel of Shoreditch, arguably the hippest and most dramatically gentrified neighborhood in all of London, is a pop-up mall built from matte-black shipping containers at which shoppers can eat Korean fusion tacos before taking a taxidermy workshop. The Jetty's containers therefore are more than a provisional necessity as the area undergoes construction; they are also a pitch to investors introducing Greenwich Peninsula as the next Shoreditch.

As part of Knight Dragon's permit application to transform the jetty into a pop-up performance venue, Shunt submitted a performance treatment that framed *The Boy Who* as a chance to explore "the connection that Conrad makes in *Heart of Darkness* with London and the Thames and a mysterious and unexplored land (which was The Congo)."[52] Knight Dragon certainly shared Shunt's interest in taking audiences on an

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[48] For a brief recent history of London's property market and regeneration projects, see Lindsey German and John Rees, "Neoliberal London," in *A People's History of London* (London: Verso, 2012), 284–98.

[49] See *http://thejettygreenwich.co.uk/*. The website is published by Knight Dragon.

[50] Ibid. In June 2015 Knight Dragon followed *The Boy Who* with the performance, *Heartbreak Hotel*, which was staged in the very same containers on the Jetty. Knight Dragon has released plans to transform the Jetty into a permanent performance venue. See images of the proposed space in Knight Dragon's catalog for the Greenwich Peninsula development, available at *http://www.knightdragon.com/greenwich-peninsula/current*. The Jetty is also joined in the area by the visual arts space NOW Gallery.

[51] Hancox, "Fuck Your Pop-Up Shops." On pop-ups and performance in London, see Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 119–28.

[52] "Shunt Jetty Proposal." The main application form for repurposing the coaling jetty was filed for Knight Dragon by Neil Smith; see application 14/1099/F, "Temporary Performance Venue."

expedition of sorts. The "mysterious and unexplored land" they hoped visitors would discover, however, was Greenwich Peninsula, known for so long as a contaminated badlands. Just after *The Boy Who* closed, the *London Evening Standard* ran a feature on Greenwich Peninsula praising its future as a "hi-tech village for arty, foodie, design-savvy Londoners."[53] As evidence, London's most-read newspaper pointed to the crowds that filled the Jetty's shipping containers during Shunt's brief stay.

It is not enough, however, to credit the turn to shipping containers in a performance like *The Boy Who* to an artistic choice by Shunt or even a marketing ploy by Knight Dragon.[54] The very possibility of Shunt's infrastructural aesthetic, like container architecture more generally, must also be situated historically within dynamics of the logistics infrastructure for which the containers were designed. "For many, *logistics* may only register as a word on the side of the trucks that magically bring online orders only hours after purchase," but, as geographer Deborah Cowen goes on to explain, the term more aptly describes "[t]he entire network of infrastructures, technologies, spaces, workers, and violence that makes the circulation of stuff possible."[55] Originally a military term, *logistics* took hold of the business world in the 1960s as a management science that championed reorganizing production processes according to the costs and speed of circulating goods. Today, the priorities inaugurated by the so-called logistics revolution undergird the "lean" and "just-in-time" manufacturing systems that define work and retail globally. But logistics is more than a management science; it comprises the very physical and information infrastructures that have allowed the supply chain to supersede the factory, and for enterprises to subordinate production considerations to the sphere of circulation. Logistics encompasses a vast international network of fixed and variable capital that includes everything from manufacturing facilities to mega-ports, container ships to freight trucks, management consultants to dock workers. As a result, production today tends to be spread across a disaggregated system flexibly arranged according to the rationale of lowering total costs. The logistics infrastructure exploits international wage differences and curbs worker militancy, typically by relocating manufacturing within the so-called periphery. If wage demands or strike activity disrupt the production of widgets in one location, logistics allows capital to

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[53] Harry Mount, "London's Ultimate Village: Greenwich Peninsula," *Evening Standard*, October 9, 2014, available at *http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/londons-ultimate-village-greenwich-peninsula-9784838.html*.

[54] It should be noted that Shunt's artistic director, David Rosenberg, has created performance in shipping containers before *The Boy Who.* This includes the traveling performance *Electric Hotel* mentioned earlier.

[55] Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 1. The literature on the "logistics revolution" is vast. In addition to Cowen's work, my perspective owes primarily to the following: Brian Ashton, "Logistics and the Factory without Walls," *Mute*, September 14, 2006, available at *http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-factory-without-walls*; Sergio Bologna, "Inside Logistics: Organization, Work, Distinctions," *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 29, 2014, available at *https://viewpointmag.com/2014/10/29/inside-logistics-organization-work-distinctions*; Edna Bonacich and Jake Wilson, *Getting the Goods: Ports, Labor, and the Logistics Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Markus Hesse and Jean-Paul Rodriguez, "The Transport Geography of Logistics and Freight Distribution," *Journal of Transport Geography* 12, no. 3 (2004): 171–84; Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World* (New York: Verso, 1997); Brett Neilson, "Five Theses on Understanding Logistics as Power," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (2012): 322–39; Thomas Reifer and Thomas Ehrlich, "Labor, Race, and Empire," in *Labor versus Empire*, ed. Gilbert Gonzalez et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17–35; Thomas Reifer, "Unlocking the Black Box of Globalization," in *The Traveling Box*: *Containers as the Icons of Our Era*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: New Press, 2011); and Alberto Toscano, "Logistics and Opposition," *Mute,* August 9, 2011, available at *http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-opposition*.

turn to its other widget factories until the conflict runs its course or a more permanent replacement is found elsewhere.

Even though shipping containers are a linchpin in this time-sensitive system, the logistics infrastructure easily withstands the steady stream of containers falling out of circulation. This has less to do with the system's built-in resilience than its fundamental contradictions. As a management science, logistics strives toward cybernetic ideals of "continuous flow," but infrastructurally it is far from the finely tuned machine for which it is often mistaken. Inter-firm competition, security threats, and sovereignty disputes all combine to hamper global circulation. Moreover, the very global divisions of labor and consumption, which logistics enforces, plagues global capitalism with severe structural inefficiencies and imbalances, the most conspicuous symptom of which are the empty containers piling up in Western ports. Each year tens of thousands of containers that arrive full of goods to deindustrialized countries are left stranded, since to send one back to its point of origin empty can cost more than just commissioning a new one.

For the arts, this situation means that the very availability of shipping containers depends on a contingent nexus of historical, economic, and political factors. Thus the historical possibility of containers as an infrastructural aesthetic owes much to the history of the logistics infrastructure. Disused shipping containers can certainly fulfill practical needs in sustainable ways. However, their creative reuse, be it as a pop-up mall or performance space, adds to the fiction that the problem at hand is not the untenable contradiction of the global division of labor, but rather a shortage of curators and entrepreneurs with the creative acumen to find innovative solutions for supply chain scrap metal.[56]

Like container architecture more generally, performances that use containers as an infrastructural aesthetic are not weeds that sprout unexpectedly from a smooth-functioning system. They have become part of normal logistical operations, just one fruit from the soil of supply-chain capitalism. For such reasons, Shunt's *The Boy Who* both alludes to and participates in the logistics infrastructure. The performance's entanglement in this system only intensifies when we consider the knock-on effects that urban redevelopment has on London's status as a key "logistical city."[57] Although London has shed its status as a major center for manufacturing, it remains a crucial node for global capital as a site of consumption, finance, and, thanks largely to its property market, profit absorption for the international capitalist class. The systems that *The Boy Who* supports are as infrastructurally intricate and globally expansive as those that made it possible for Shunt to stage a performance inside six containers in Greenwich Peninsula. Shunt's performance may usefully unsettle visitors by reminding them of their inability to comprehend such vast complexity, but this begs the question: What possibilities exist, if any, for unsettling the logistics infrastructure?

[56] This is especially true for the many examples of container architecture that use specially manufactured, bespoke containers instead of recycled ones. They evidence that the stakes of container architecture are not just material, but also ideological.

[57] Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 184.

Infrastructural Disruption

To study the "infrastructural politics of performance" entails interrogating what supports art, as well as what art supports.[58] For some, infrastructural inquiry is a useful corrective to the tendency in political art discourse to embrace disruption. As Shannon Jackson warns in *Social Works*, an emphasis on disruption can draw attention away from the work that art does "supporting infrastructures of both aesthetic objects and living beings."[59] And when formulated as a "routinized language of anti-institutionalism and anti-statism," the favor for disruption can actually lead artists and critics to "unexpectedly collud[e] with neoliberal impulses that want to dismantle" infrastructures of human welfare.[60] This lucid insight leads Jackson to privilege instead instances of "infrastructural avowal"—art practices that support, and are supported by, "sustainable social institutions" and "democratic governance." In doing so, however, Jackson tends to narrow her focus to "civic" infrastructures.[61] But if infrastructural inquiry entails examining the supports that go into and radiate from art, we must also consider the nexus of reliance that exists among performances and systems whose priorities are different than or even antagonistic to ensuring social welfare. As I have insisted, the logistics infrastructure is just the sort of system that deserves scrutiny.

The very essence of logistics is, Jasper Bernes argues, "exploitation in its rawest form," geared first and foremost to extracting surplus value. As "capital's own *ars belli*," logistics is "constitutively hostile" to workers and their needs, since "wage differentials are built into the very infrastructure."[62] The raison d'être of logistics is to maximize profits by lowering labor costs and expanding markets. Like capital itself, its means and ends are welded together by seemingly paradoxical impulses: logistics promotes social coordination and supports life, but for the purposes of reproducing an atomized capitalist society whatever the human and environmental costs. For Bernes, the essential nature of the logistics infrastructure is enough to dismiss outright its potential redemption or reform. Other opponents maintain a possibility for refunctioning logistics, at least in part, to suit a postcapitalist world. While the nuances of the debate over the "reconfiguration thesis" are beyond the scope of this essay, most interlocutors tend to agree on a political promise for infrastructural disruption in the present—if not a final strategy for bringing capitalism to its knees, than at least a shrewd tactic for ongoing and future campaigns.[63] Support for infrastructural disruption owes less

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[58] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011). My understanding of infrastructural politics owes primarily to this and the following works: Shannon Jackson, "Working Publics," *Performance Research* 17, no. 2 (2011); Marlis Schweitzer, *Transatlantic Broadway: The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Brandon Woolf, "Putting Policy into Performance Studies," *Performance Research* 20, no. 4 (2015). On the potential of theatre as a means of mapping infrastructures and systems in London, see Joanne Tompkins, "Site-Specific Theatre and Political Engagement across Space and Time: The Psychogeographic Mapping of British Petroleum in Platform's *And While London Burns*," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 2 (2011).

[59] Jackson, *Social Works*, 39.

[60] Ibid., 16.

[61] Ibid., 14; Jackson, "Working Publics," 10.

[62] Jasper Bernes, "Logistics, Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect," *Endnotes* 3 (2013), available at *http://endnotes.org.uk/en/jasper-bernes-logistics-counterlogistics-and-the-communist-prospect*.

[63] In addition to Bernes, main entries in the debate over the "reconfiguration thesis" include: The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2015); and Toscano, "Logistics and Opposition" and "Lineaments of the Logistical State," *Viewpoint Magazine*, September 28, 2014, available at *http://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/28/lineaments-of-the-logistical-state*.

to some vaguely defined adventurism than it does to the example set by international movements that have already turned to logistics as a terrain of struggle.

As capitalism has gone to ever greater lengths to exploit the world's population, it also has created new opportunities to be disrupted. The global factory that logistics made possible may have weakened chokepoints in manufacturing, but in doing so exacerbated others in the sphere of circulation. Bottlenecks at seaports, transit warehouses, and highways are today tighter than ever. Moreover, the pursuit of just-in-time production often provisions local economies with only the inventory needed in the short term and without the productive forces necessary to replenish them. By creating such a system, analysts like Brian Ashton argue, "global capital leaves itself vulnerable to attack."[64] Even industry leaders stress the systemic risks: "In today's globalized and interconnected world," a recent joint report from the World Economic Forum and the consulting firm Accenture notes, "any major disruption has the potential to cascade through supply chains and permeate other systems."[65]

To date, workers at ports and inside major logistics companies like DHL and Walmart have done the most to identify and take advantage of vulnerabilities in the logistics infrastructure. To win contract gains and protest work conditions, employees have taken part in work slowdowns and strikes and in some cases committed sabotage or sequestered bosses. Infrastructural disruption has been a tactic for logistics workers to intervene in issues beyond the workplace as well. For instance, in the United States, longshoremen have staged work stoppages in solidarity with Black Lives Matter; and the wildcat strikes that swept Suez Canal ports in February 2011 were pivotal for toppling the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. But it is not just workers directly involved with logistics who are choosing it as a field of intervention. Social movements globally are taking aim at the logistics infrastructure to tackle a range of causes, from the occupation of railway lines by Indigenous tribes protesting land dispossession and pollution in Canada to the blockades of Israeli ships by the "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions" campaign.[66] In late 2011 tens of thousands of people repeatedly descended on the Port of Oakland in California, partly in retribution to the nationwide police repression of Occupy encampments.[67] As Deborah Cowen writes: "It is impossible to avoid the movements and actions that have emerged in recent years around the world that respond to or target logistics space."[68] These interventions do more than

[64] Ashton, "Logistics and the Factory without Walls."

[65] Quoted in Deborah Cowen, "Disrupting Distribution," *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 29, 2014, available at *https://viewpointmag.com/2014/10/29/disrupting-distribution-subversion-the-social-factory-and-the-state-of-supply-chains/*. The consequences of a 2015 lockout of port workers in the United States, which shut down all container traffic to the West Coast, illustrate the potential of infrastructural disruption. The port's employer-enforced closure caused losses of $2.1 billion per day and forced container ships to moor off the coast of California for weeks. See Hiroko Tabuchi, "Trappings of Chinese New Year Left at Sea by West Coast Port Dispute," *New York Times*, February 19, 2015, available at *http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/business/for-lunar-new-year-port-dispute-hampers-festivities.html?_r=0*.

[66] See, for example, Cowen, "Disrupting Distribution"; and Charmaine Chua, "Logistics, Capitalist Circulation, Chokepoints," The Disorder of Things (blog), September 9, 2014, available at *http://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/09/09/logistics-capitalist-circulation-chokepoints/*.

[67] On the Oakland port blockades, see Olive McKeon, "Solidarity Means Attack: Choreographic Analysis and the West Coast Port Blockade," *Activate* 3, no. 1 (2014); and George Avalos, "Occupy Shutdown Costly for Oakland Port," *Oakland Tribune*, December 14, 2011, available at *http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_19540367*.

[68] Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 227.

take a stand against business as usual: they impede the very flow of capital that makes business possible, moreover demonstrating a deeply practical orientation to a world spun by logistics.

Counter-logistical disruption of this sort presents a profoundly different infrastructural politics than possibly could be expected of the performances studied in this essay. Among these examples, *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* is remarkable for its potential to remind visitors of what it means to be disoriented by the instruments of global capital. And yet, Shunt's performance, whatever its political utility might be, also displays the acute political limits to shipping containers as an infrastructural aesthetic. The militancy of counter-logistical tactics is not meant to invite quick dismissal of a performance like Shunt's, but rather to demonstrate that logistics can be more than a source of mystification and exploitation: it is also an opportunity for struggle.