

# Exit Does Not Exist

A Sculptural Installation

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## Introduction

*Exit does not Exist* was my thesis exhibition held in the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Commons Gallery March 14 - 22nd, 2010. It was an installation assembled from common materials often found near underpasses, dead-end streets or abandoned neighborhoods across America: tarps, electrical conduits, a street lamp, and shopping carts. These items were used to re-compose a freeway underpass space built to scale in the galley. Tarps and pipes were used to build the architecture of the underpass itself, and electrical conduits referenced typical electrical infrastructure of these kinds of spaces, but were also built to look like cloverleaf designs of the freeway system itself. Other items were also altered slightly to lend an eerie feeling to the space. The street lamp was turned on its side and slowly warmed up and turned off every 12 minutes, the shopping carts, strewn in piles under the ramp, were spliced, thinned, and then welding back together.



Plate 1

In creating a surrealistic version of such a prevalent but invisible space, I wanted to draw attention to the persistent way in which the precarity of working-class life is actually “built in” to the urban and national infrastructure. To explore the mechanisms by which these leftover spaces are made, and then used and reworked by an urban population, I sought to create an allegorical space where the relationships between ordinary objects could comment on extraordinary societal woes.

## **Background**

The bulk of the research for *Exit does not Exist* came from my personal experience as a blue-collar construction worker raised in an economically depressed county of New Jersey. My hometown had all the visual signs of economic hardship common to so many communities across America. I used to spend countless hours late into the night hanging out in an empty parking lot of an abandoned department store with whatever random kids were around. The police would intermittently chase us away into the darkness of the woods. The feeling that there was nowhere else to go was never sharper than when law enforcement ran you off. It reminded you that there was really nowhere you were permitted to be. The streets and parking lots, however rundown and drab, belonged to someone else. The paradox is that I conceived of these privatized and policed spaces as more of a wilderness than a civilization. Growing up in this environment, its logic appeared self-evident because I only vaguely understood that aggressive culture of law enforcement was an appendage of a larger force.

The presence of continuous financial stress also shaped me. It acclimated me to a fundamentally combative way of thinking, where I imagined myself as merely an

individual, alone with my struggles and responsible only for myself. I was too young to grasp that my own attitude stemmed from my parents' own financial struggles and worries and that both my stress and my parents' were really the ambient effects of a rising "debt economy" (Graeber, 2011). Yet, it was easy enough to observe that my parents' struggles were not their own. They were interwoven with the problems of their neighbors, who were also under constant financial stress, many struggling with addiction and depression.

Using teen angst as fuel, I quickly fled suburbia for Philadelphia, a city that literally appeared post-apocalyptic in certain neighborhoods circa 1998. I found the physical and societal decay obtuse and horrifying; yet it resonated with my earlier experiences. Urban Philadelphia seemed to be even deeper in the same wilderness than where I had come from—more destitute and raw. Dilapidated buildings were in various stages of collapse, some boarded up and still being lived in without heat or utilities; they littered large swaths of north Philadelphia. I used to fish along the Schuylkill River off and around elevated highway infrastructures.

Entire communities of destitute, often mentally ill, people had built dwellings into the landscape. These desecrated places were extraordinarily impactful on my perspective. I began to see them as concrete examples of some sweeping structural failure in our governance, and thus in ourselves. I knew these habitats were puzzle pieces to something critical I didn't understand.

My experience of living in these spaces, my struggle to keep my head above water, as well as seeing many people I love succumb to financial collapse, has taught me deep compassion for the sick and unlucky. Only after vigorous lifelong reflection, have I

learned that the poor weren't merely unlucky, and certainly not all inadequate, or lazy. They were not losers. They were being actively attacked, in concrete and abstract terms as part of a multifaceted infinitely complex web of forces. Many of the critical systems governing the conditions of their lives had gone rouge; I began to think of the decrepit state of institutions like police departments, public schools, post offices, and libraries, as indicative of this process (Kunstler, 1993; Robert, 2004). As public institutions operated mostly in survival mode, corporate ones replaced social safety nets with opportunities for consumption. The introduction of markets into places where they had no business was disproportionately affecting the poor (Jurca, 2001; Piketty, 2013).

It occurred to me that New Jersey and Philadelphia were not merely alternate universes outside of the rest of America, they were just two examples of many more convergent points in our landscape where similar dynamic socioeconomic forces congealed. The contradictory pervasiveness and invisibility of these realms fascinated me even more than the litany of failed policy that sustained them. Distracted by an increasingly complex technological world and misinformed by a mediatized political landscape, the public domain was one of magical thinking, uncertainty and fear. In some ways our systems were making adversaries of us all through twisting the public's view of the dissemination of blame (Gerbner, 2010). This in turn affected the public's sense of reality, which was distorted to such a degree that understanding the causes of their existing conditions was impossible. I began to think that the visceral nature of these places could shed light on some powerful aspects of our universally problematic situation.

For this project I spent more time in these spaces, capturing their material textures, hanging out with people. While renovating stores in the Ala Moana Mall with a construction company, I used to drop off perfectly good material otherwise bound for the dump to a shantytown by Ke'ehi Lagoon in Honolulu. I began to slowly assist people in working on their dwellings as I got to know them. As I did my errands, I was basically scavenging for them. I was eventually made to stop by the owner of the land they were squatting on. I began to understand a sentiment present there. As my weekly interactions with them became more involved, the vibrant characters I met came into better focus. I was developing a more nuanced understanding of these places and the people who call them home.

While exploring these ruins, I also discovered a creative colorful world, evolving and adapting. This was best exemplified by the most at-risk populations in these communities, the feral kids running around after dark, like my earlier self, and also the homeless. Aspects of their encampments, found in spaces under the freeway or in-between train tracks and backyards, basically in between private property and government infrastructure, express a melancholic beauty in their pure utilitarianism. The creativity apparent there, however disheveled, was one of honesty and directness. Cardboard and shopping carts found in Target and Wal-Mart parking lots, as well as tarps, were used to create a temporary privacy and expressed and expanded the material's intrinsic values. As a whole, these spaces took on a hyper-real aesthetic that resembled something one might see in a post-apocalyptic science fiction film. Far from the sanitized private enclaves tucked away in gated communities, or even the humble single-family homes of crumbling blue-collar neighborhoods, these spaces were conceived out of that

degraded reality of big-box stores, but also fantastically detached from it. Having experienced fully how thin the line is between having a home and not... I found myself thinking more and more about these spaces that don't have access to the American dream, but in not having that access, also managed to clearly comment on that space as well.

## **The Exhibition**

### **Freeway as Metaphor**

For *Exit does not Exist* I sought to create an imaginary universe based on these in-between spaces as an attempt at critical commentary and intervention on the larger political-social infrastructures that create the conditions of their existence.

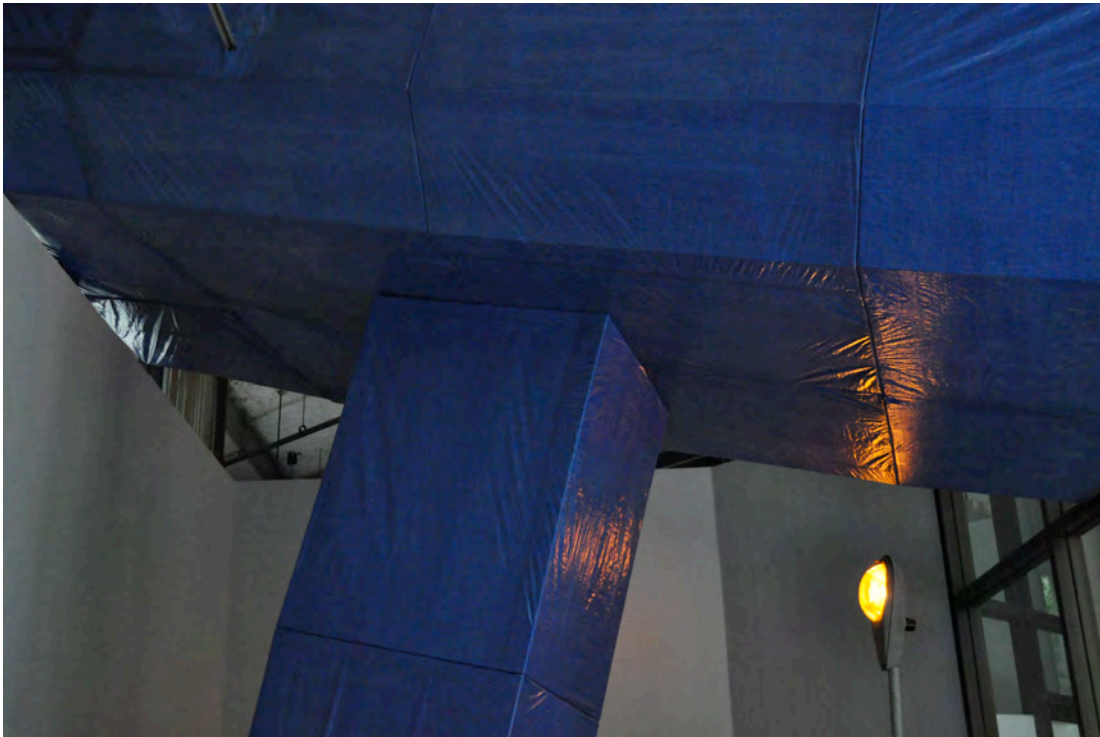


Plate 2

The freeway was my working metaphor for the contemporary suburban world as a system out of control. Its history, form, and function resonated for me as a set of prevailing ideologies now threatening to devastate the human habitat (Kunstler, 1993; Stuever, 2004). This network first built in the late forties, made the “American Dream” possible. By the early sixties, they were a means of escape from the scourge of the inner city, and an opportunity to own land and a single-family home (David, 2004; Jurca, 2001). In this respect, the freeway could perhaps be considered America’s most enduring civic monument to the idea of the middle-class. In many ways it is the most symbolically accurate physical manifestation of some of our culture’s deepest aspirations and values—expansionism, manifest destiny, and escapism— which have also been our undoing.

The freeway and suburbs came to fruition only to hint at their own impossible nature. The freeway ravages the landscape, carving out enormous swaths of old real estate and farmland so that it can build paths to new real estate. It also leaches away hours of motorists’ lives as they come to depend on it to get from home to work. The predicament of the person sold the fantastic idea of living “near the city” but “in the country,” was that he or she was to actually receive neither, and to instead be constantly stuck on that freeway. The freeway now finds itself in a cyclical tailspin where its justification is itself, regardless of its actual ability to sustain the American Dream. It encapsulates our reckless tendency to flee the messy conditions of our lives, which were once something fresh and new. Newly built fantasies almost immediately become ruins.

## The Ramp Structure

If the freeway presents itself as an image of mobility, access, and escape all at once, so its underpasses are an acknowledgement of the perversity and paradox of the real situation—that there really is no access to social mobility via the suburb, and the



Plate 3

freeway’s imperative offers very little ability to escape the endless loop of escapism. I found the prevalence of shantytowns and tent cities under and around freeway jug handles both ironic and fitting to this situation. Mostly these underpass spaces are “no-places” in the American landscape, largely devalued and hence ignored by governments and residents alike, loopholes in the collective national imagination of success, access, leisure, and freedom consumption. Yet, I also began to see the neglected spaces in our infrastructure as, in fact, the last remnants of the public domain (which were in fact, created in spaces that were not public at all). I wanted to use this type of space, expand it

into a theoretical portal, and display it in the arena of the gallery. It could both express the endless loop of American escapism and transport the viewer through its physical and logical gap to a world tossed on its side.

The ramp was constructed with blue tarp material commonly associated with homeless encampments seen beneath overpasses and entrance ramps, rather than concrete. I constructed it by pulling the tarps taut over electrical conduit frames, and suspending the whole structure eighteen feet from the ground, giving the impression that the off-ramp ran through the gallery at a twisted angle. It was as if the gallery, as a fictional space, could capture this phantom freeway and make visible just this one twisted section running above our heads, a small bisection of a massive form that one had to finish in the imagination as finally meeting the ground hundreds of yards further in the distance. In using the tarp and poles instead of concrete, I wanted to suggest a comparison in method between establishment urban development and makeshift lean-to construction. It was also to imply that the tarp cities residing underneath our highway infrastructure are literally built into the fabric of our society. The disparity in size between the ramp structure and the gallery was to highlight the absurdity of an environment built for humans by humans, but scaled for cars. The surprising shift in material aimed to summon the idea that things are not what they appear to be, a common manipulative language of inversion upon which most propaganda functions.

Because the structure was skewed in the space, or not square to any walls, it created compound angles everywhere it touched the existing surfaces. The dynamic way in which it tightly conformed to those surfaces afforded it an exaggerated “built in” quality. But the support “pillar,” also made with tarp and poles juttled down from the

bottom of the ramp at a right angle, and touched the floor at only one point. It gave the structure the peculiar quality of deliberate instability. The tarp also provided a sense of weightlessness at odds with its imposing scale, I wanted to imply that the structure was the product of dreamlike logic summoning the freeway as a ghostlike presence—the husk of an idea that when realized, only advertised its own future as ruins.

## Shopping Carts

A cast of about twenty empty shopping carts, streamlined to a fraction of their original width, occupied the space beneath the overpass in clusters. I reduced the carts to having only three wheels and being only nine inches across at their widest, making them unstable and insubstantial. Their lack of dimension meant that they were no longer useful and no longer scaled to a human shopper. On a metaphoric level, they stood for the consumer-citizen experiencing a sense of contraction and pressure felt in rough economic situations. They stood for the ghost-like presence of the “pure consumer” divorced from a sense of intrinsic value, drifting slowly into poverty, and condemned to yearn for things utterly out of reach and hollow.



Plate 4

I positioned the carts to appear strewn across the space like rubbish to compound their abject uselessness. I aimed to communicate a sense of helplessness and comedy in their position. This loss of identity was subtly emphasized by the removal of the store logos as well, leaving empty rectangular spaces where they were once framed. There was a kind of ridiculous disassociation in which the shopping carts were left intact enough to still hint at where they came from in a brand ambiguous way, while being transformed enough to feel lost and anonymous. In spite of their differing colors and designs, they read as a mass. They were now more similar to each other than to the carts in the parking lots from where they came. With these, I attempted to imply a paradox of consumer-citizens who have a cultural investment in the “cult of the self,” while also needing a sense of fraternity, usually defined more by what they don’t have than what they do.

## **One Street Lamp in the Grid**

If a viewer did not already pick up on the strange warping of space and time in the Ramp’s twist, the pillar’s precariousness, and the shopping cart’s thinness, the huge wooden telephone pole mounted horizontally made this very apparent. The pole ran the length of the gallery and was wedged tightly between the walls at knee height so that it lay on its side, yet at the same time seemed to float off the floor. The metal boom and working streetlamp arced up into space, implying a shift in the laws of gravity. It was a way to hint at a world turned on its side. The pole also acted like a threshold, which only a percentage of guests stepped over. Beyond it lay one of the arrangements of shopping carts in heaps against the wall.

The streetlamp pulsed on and off every 9 to 14 minutes in a sequence unrelated to the time of day outside. The mercury vapor light underwent a somewhat organic cycling of colors each time it turned on and warmed up. First from white to blue, and then from blue to deep orange. This sequence was intended to indicate a system out of balance with



Plate 5



Plate 6

natural cycles, a glitch perhaps, in the passing of time, where its fluidity and cycling could create the surreal sensation of an environment suspended in perpetual twilight.

For me the turning on of streetlamps signaled the end of the day in relative terms, controlled by automatic daylight sensors that varied in sensitivity, they warmed up in sloppy unison. Since a lot of kids from my generation were instructed by their parents to come home when the streetlamps turned on, it signified a kind of retreat from the street back into the perceived safety of the nuclear family. A movement metered by both the time of year, and the idiosyncratic behavior of spotty technology. It was a poke at our puny attempts to stave off coming darkness with artificial light. It was also a play off the sensation one has that things are not quite functioning as they should be when a streetlamp randomly turns off and on by itself during the night.

As a symbolic element, it supported those of the shopping carts and ramp. The light figured as a sputtering recognition that our systems of organization are breaking down, a glitch in the neo-jingoistic rhetoric of technological advancements that are said to guarantee social progress (Noble, 1999). It invoked the subconscious dread we harbor in realizing the calamity of this logic and recognizing it as a form of endgame capitalism (Hedges, 2009). Through mimicking an inconsequential hiccup in our power grid I tried to infer a vague sense of the apocalyptic in the seemingly mundane.



Plate 7

## Off White Field of Meaning

The walls of the gallery were painted to look the way underpass walls do after graffiti is painted over many times with old paint rollers, using leftover colors perceived to be neutral enough, but not necessarily matching the original color of the wall. Only instead of miscellaneous grays and browns common to concrete urban surfaces, the colors were off-whites and so also read as a patchwork of past coating used for the art gallery. By appropriating the sentiment of graffiti censorship, and reframing it for the context of the gallery, I hoped to begin to confuse and integrate the space of the freeway underpass with the space of the gallery, to show that both are part of a larger infrastructure of ideologies and values. This was a subtle move, but supported by the more obvious ways in which I integrated with electrical conduit system of my structure with the gallery itself.



Plate 8

## Cloverleaf Intersection

To further emphasize the integration of the spaces, I brought in large amounts of electrical conduit already present in the gallery, but usually hidden or unnoticed from visitors. The best place to see the actual connection was where the conduit led to the foot of the ramp structure and resembled the room's own existing conduit, which hugs the walls and floor.



Plate 9

Following the conduit became impossible as it disappeared from sight, and could only be tracked speculatively from outside the structure. This was intended to suggest that the line might keep going infinitely, morphing into other structures of the building. This was a way to literally connect the gallery to the structure of the overpass as well as to all the installation's corresponding pieces. The key element was the cloverleaf design

standing only about knee high at the far end of the gallery, which represented the freeway itself made out of carefully bent and laid out electrical conduit.



**Plate 10**

While most of the other street elements I used created a dramatic sense of scale within the gallery, this structure was meant to provide a bird's eye view, or a view from an airplane window. With the parquet floor below it, the structure read a bit like futuristic highway system superimposed onto the farmland's rectangular shapes and geometric layout. This smaller scale of the cloverleaf form offered the most visual narrative in relation to the rest of the elements in the installation, and then made all of the conduit in the space more visible and meaningful, propelling questions regarding the "source" of this energy system.

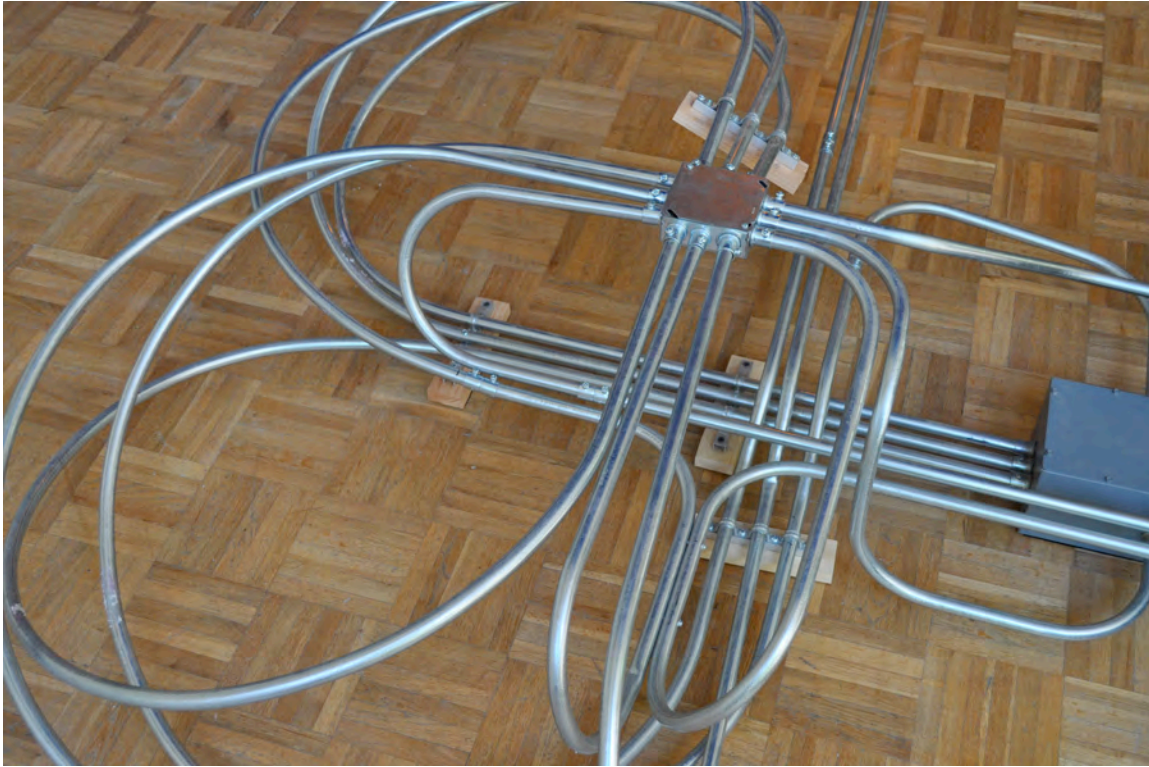


Plate 11

The organic shape of the cloverleaf resembled a model of a molecule or proton from science class, an image of energy itself. The central form became the hub for electrical conduit that snaked out to all sides of the gallery. Some terminated into nearby junction boxes, while others sprawled out into space and became more rigid looking with right angles and strait pipe lengths. The unusually large junction box covering the floor outlet read like an industrial grade adaptor—a detail that also advertised a point of connectivity to the gallery, rather than attempting to conceal or downplay it. The connection with the most visual weight entered the bottom of the leaning pillar and disappeared out of immediate sight. This conduit controlled the energy source and intervals for five different lights that turned on underneath the tarp, projecting silhouettes of its internal structure onto its surfaces in five different positions.



Plate 12

In all, the pipes, leading both to the strange structures of the underpass as well as the real infrastructure of the gallery, reinforced the idea of interconnectedness between these spaces. This notion was further reinforced by a number of other visual clues throughout the space: the paint patches on the wall, the way the ramp structure spanned through the windows in the gallery allowed a very specific line of sight through the building; the continuity in color between the blue tarp overpass and the existing blue ductwork of the gallery suspended from the ceiling right above it; a red shopping cart positioned under a bright red fire alarm switch; and the way the telephone pole snugly fit between the walls.

I hoped that these strategies would challenge our tendency to over compartmentalize. By visually breaking down or confusing what physical elements related to the “real” gallery and which were related to the “fictional” elements of the underpass, I hoped to break the confines of both the freeway and the gallery’s theoretical space. With this, I tried to create the conditions to consider the work less in a vacuum and more in a web.

## **The Power Plant**

The most truly entangled web of the spaces was one of the hardest to see. The viewer had to follow the conduit to the pillar structure and look into the source of the five lights under the tarp. The whole scene could only be viewed from an open slit in a section of the tarp, whereupon the viewer discovered that some of the conduit became the armature of the overpass structure itself, while other pipes actually congealed into an

organic looking menagerie inside the structure. Viewed from a limited vantage point, a number of previously unseen aspects of the piece where unveiled. The bungee cord construction that held the tarps in place could be seen from the inside, and the trajectory of the conduits could almost be fully traced by the eye as they led to an abstract form resembling something between a bomb and a flower. This form I called *the power plant*, a fuel tank with pedal-like appendages bent out of electrical conduit. Equipped with built in halogen bulbs to give them the effect of phosphorescent activity, they took turns illuminating the interior space from different angles. The lights emanating from ports in the body of the plant, coerced the viewer to wonder about this new interior space which houses clearly vital processes that are seen as both entrenched and opaque. I made the narrative aspects of the show culminate there because I wanted it to be conceived as a kind of nucleus.



Plate 13



Plate 14

By establishing it as a pivotal position in a multifaceted web of connectivity I hoped to put particular attention on a peculiar fact. The inside of every other component of the show could only be seen from an oblique angle. The tarp overpass could be looked all the way through from a spot only out in front of the gallery which actually also afforded a rare view of the massive tree on the front of the art building, usually not seen because the top windows of the back wall of the gallery are usually covered. One could also see that the inside of the telephone pole through the glass outside the gallery was hollowed out by rot and black from the seeping of sap and arsenic. But all the viewer knew about the inside of the conduit power plant structure, which read as either a homemade explosive or a budding flower, was that it was intermittently full of light and darkness. The view to the ultimate source of power was ultimately obstructed. It was a nuanced approach to invoke the surreal presence of misunderstood machinations of power. Unclear whether the power plant was growing out of the structure or growing into it, the viewer was left to ponder its relationship to everything it connected to.

## **Conclusion**

I wanted *Exit Does Not Exist* to feel like a meditation on a bizarre reality of our time, the disassociated masses, held together by superfluous nonsense and force (Negri and Hardt, 2000). Absorbing the blowback of its empire's expansionist bent, the public accepts this state of perpetual war and perpetual debt. The mentally ill sleep on the street destitute and abandoned, while the dissemination of responsibility is distorted by an anamorphic apparatus, which serves to hypnotize us. Our ghost-like presence is divorced from a power that is felt but not fully described or ever seen.

The idea was to make the whole scene look strangely familiar, reminiscent of every underpass street corner in America at dusk, of streetlamps warming up in unison, prompting the neighborhood kids to retreat back to their houses for dinner. Adults consummate their subordinate role in the system by becoming an automobile commuter, coming home after working long hours to pay for their car, to luxury goods they barely have time to enjoy. These are patterns literally built into the landscape that indoctrinate its subjects into eternal rhythms of movement from no place in particular to no place in particular.

*Exit Does Not Exist* suggests that this type of in-between space is where the whole history of American escapism might lead. Ironically enough, to endless highway clover leaves and traffic jams, to enormous and small carelessly built houses in developments congested with strangers who fear each other, to a sociopolitical climate that leaves people disenfranchised and powerless. I wanted it to hint at a possible future and a possible presence even where people are ultimately enslaved to a system in decline, ensnared in its cyclical structures devouring itself with its own momentum and trajectory. It was my plea for us to re-consider the forgotten places in our landscapes and what they might mean; to peer into them, and imagine them as portals through which we can see into the future of all things neglected. The aim was to imagine this trajectory of a culture with an increasing sense of insecurity, often without a real sense of community, feeling adrift and futureless and to suggest that, the desecrated places of our current world are symbolic of our own future condition and our values.

I wanted *Exit Does Not Exist* to vaguely imply that in the twilight of consumer capitalism, where an empire of magical thinking feeds on itself and collapses from the

inside, there is still an opportunity to perceive and change. Growing within its carcass is an ethos being born. Because the conditions we yearn for in our national dreams of escape don't exist, we must convert our tendency to disassociate into a focused commitment to the realization of new dreams.

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