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Off the Grid, An Introduction

The conception that objects have fixed and unalterable values is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us.

John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

Someone once said to me in passing that “civilization” is just an ideologically-loaded way of saying “infrastructure.” Meaning, I think, that when we talk about ancient civilizations, we are mostly having a conversation about complex infrastructures. Most especially those civilizations we remember because their infrastructures continue to inspire us: Roman roads, Mayan temple systems, the gold mines and complex trade routes of the Empire of Ghana, Stonehenge. Likewise, when hinting that some places — like Europe — are more civilized than others — like Borneo or Alabama — this too can be

understood as a claim about the prevalence and functionality of existing infrastructural systems.⁽¹⁾

Such “civilizational” infrastructures include not just gas, electricity, and water networks, but also unemployment insurance, universal health care, and retirement plans. Considered thusly, infrastructure is not solely a thing built from concrete and steel, but is also constructed of ideas and bureaucracies. The lines of functional government or of global trade routes or of diplomacy (rather than war) are etched into societies in much the same way as are street plans, sewer systems, and internet cabling. In this volume, though far from here alone, all these civilizational infrastructures are rolled up into a single, if conceptually voracious, term — the grid.

The grid — it sounds a ridged thing, built of metal and stones and tight-mouthed bureaucrats tasked with putting all the things and all the people into the right slots. Concrete reinforced with steel. Social structures reinforced with paperwork. There are narrower ways of defining the grid than this, as “a network of lines that cross each other to form a series of squares or rectangles” or “a framework of spaced bars that are parallel to or cross each other; a grating” or “a network of cables or pipes for distributing power” etcetera.⁽²⁾ In the essays gathered here, however, *The Grid* seems to deserve to be written with caps (like *The Man*). Grid: catchall of infrastructure. Grid: be all of civilization.

When you fall or fail in life, the grid (in this expanded understanding) is what catches you. It is the hospital system

that puts you back together and the welfare system that sets you back on your feet. And, when all else fails, it is the mortuary system that lays your body to ground. When the British first arrived in Singapore they were aghast at the dead lying under thin earth and scattered around willy-nilly. Many of the locals, whom the British were setting about “civilizing,” followed the rules of fengshui (right placement), and this included a completely irrational (from the British point of view) burial system. Worse than nonsensical was the fact that every colonial attempt at a construction project was met with arm bones here and jaw bones there sticking up out of the dirt. It was ghastly (for the British), and thus came the cemeteries, those great civilizational griddings of the afterlife ground down into dirt and into culture, until colonial Singapore’s dead, like England’s, were put properly into place.⁽³⁾

- (1) The opposite is also the case. When speaking of a “decent into barbarism,” it is possible that what is meant is the return to a life of minimal infrastructures.
- (2) From the Google dictionary (called simply “Google”) search terms: ‘grid’ and ‘definition’.
- (3) It is worth noting that the British were also in the process of rationalizing their mortuary systems during the same period. Both at home and abroad, the dead were being brought to order. All of what I know of the history of the dead in Singapore I learned from an exceptional essay by the then master’s (now PhD) student Siti Hazariah Binte Abu Bakar, whose MA thesis in anthropology (McGill University) was on undertakers in Singapore.

As much as they organize the spaces of “civilization” (like streets or graveyards), grids are also about temporal rules and rhythms. A well-gridded life, or being “on the grid,” thus means having access not just to safe drinking water (no corpses near the water mains), but also to a predictable biography. As Stef Jansen’s recent ethnography of the interminable in-between time of postwar Bosnia makes clear, the loss of the “normal” gridded rhythms of life leads to an intensification of yearnings of all sorts. In postwar Bosnia, in what Jansen calls the “meantime” of peace-without-governance (or the non-terminal yet incurable blight of “Daytonitis”) the obligations (infrastructures) that hold a good life (civilization) in place are rarely, and only randomly, met. The bus does not come on schedule, the Hausmeister does not replace broken light bulbs or doorbells, the paperwork to attend university cannot be obtained, a job (when luck has it, is found) does not pay. Months go by and no paychecks come. None and nothing. And the garbage is not gathered. And one cannot find a policeman, or see a doctor, or retire. The cement in the streets cracks; the power flickers on and off; the TV reception is terrible; the cell phones work in certain spots, but only sometimes. And life, instead of marching smartly along from birth through education to work to retirement, or through dating to marriage to childbirth and growing one’s own family, simply goes all wonky. Some of these things will happen, randomly, to some people. Life, after all, is still there, but the grid has gone missing, and with

it the sense of sensible progress. Without it, personal biography and everyday life are constituted by meandering in circles in hopes of happening upon something: a light bulb, a husband, a bus, an apartment, a dentist appointment, a box of fresh berries, and so on and on. Here, the grid’s absence is both felt and mourned. So much sorrow comes from being denied the possibility of walking a known path, be it just across town or across the whole of a life.

What does it mean then to be “off the grid,” when the grid itself is such an all-encompassing prospect? What yearning does a collection by this name index? Surely not the erasure of the entire grid. Nobody wants a nation that “works” like postwar Bosnia. And yet the double-sided coin of civilization/infrastructure has failed to capture something, and “off the grid” both breathes and quivers with hopes for an expanded life.

The essays collected here answer these questions in such diverse ways that one begins to feel the whole of it only when they are read together, as pieces of a single thought. They, each in their own way, find the grid and its edges, faint and fuzzy, but there. And they explain and describe it as did the blind men who approached the unknown elephant of lore: “Here the beast is long and flexible, warm with breath and scattered with hairs,” says one; “Here it is a muscular tufted snake that whips about at great speed,” says a second. “And here,” murmurs a third, “it is thick as a tree but with horn rather than root

at its base — a great heaving pillar of a beast.” And the others too, tasked with the heavy round of the belly, or with wide, soft flapping ears, or with tusks and fragile eyes, work together to define a something. Vague yet precise, unimaginable but whole, as intelligent as the men are wise.

So too does the grid, or rather “being off of it,” gain definitional form in these essays. It’s a funny form though, like asking for a flower and getting smell, as the authors each dance differently away from firm edges toward infirm ones. No cemeteries will reign here. And this is an important point, for if the British worked hard to impose on the deceased squares of land with walls around them to serve as a gridded home, then the postcolonial-more-earnestly-capitalistic Singapore of today has banned burial altogether. In Singapore you must now be cremated upon death — hell on ancestor worship, that law — and once burned, some of the dust of you escapes inevitably into the sky. The grid that was imposed is overcome. The body that was bounded is diffused and caught up in the air, where it mingles with the particulates of trees as the palm oil plantations on the far coast burn (Myers). Monocultural capitalism diffused into air. Dead humans turned to dust and blown away. Fuzzy atmospherics are created by new policies and new economies. Outside, today’s residents of Singapore breathe in what is off the grid. As surely as microplastics infiltrate fish, the aftereffects of postcolonial laws

infiltrate us. The grid, of course, is not gone, but remains; what once were cemeteries are now the solid foundations of air-conditioned urban towers. Finance takes the land and makes a new air for the insides while the atmosphere absorbs the rest.

This “looking for the cultural shifts that make old lines obsolete and new lines hard to grasp” is a central analytic of this collection. The taxonomical classification of beasts discussed by Lena Reitschuster in this volume leaves out a spider that nurses its young with “milk” until “they reach sexual maturity”. Thus, the author continues:

[a]lthough the jumping spider, or *Toxeus Magnus*, shares a set of qualities with other animals of the class Arachnida — defined as joint-legged invertebrate animals — it differs severely from its assigned class regarding its reproductive behavior. The nursing habits of the spider have not been observed before due to assumptions about the spider’s behavior that were based on its classification into the class Arachnida, which, in turn, was based on its physical features, rather than empirical verification (31)

This jumping spider is not so much off the grid as bifurcated by a line of that grid meant to separate the mammal and the arachnid. The line we see, via the truth

of the spider, was once a good infrastructure for sorting the known world. It's now a bad one because it leads to wrong conclusions. Likeness in one square of the grid (eight-jointed legs) is taken to index likeness across a number of squares (indifference to progeny). Spiders don't nurse, ergo spiders don't care for their offspring. And research stops. And care, a term we need to know a great deal more about, remains without nuance, without subtlety, and critically lacking an expanded model. But why a taxonomy, or grid, at all?

My anthropologist's instinct is to turn toward Mary Douglas' insight that things that stand between systems (like shrimp that live in the sea but are not fish) cause perturbations in those systems that do not so much reform the lay of lines but eject the cause of the trouble. "Don't eat the shrimp, they are off the grid." This is one story; humans order worlds by repeating matrices of relationships near to them.⁽⁴⁾

Reitschuster however, uses the spider to tell a different tale: don't reject the creature, but instead reject the grid that cannot account for it, and not just the grid but the historical subjectivity that produced it and the contemporary scientific practices that continue to rely upon it. In this way, the fact of a lactating spider

is the poster-child for a decolonization effort akin to that which kicked the British out of Singapore. A grid comes with values and it grinds those values into the management of scarce land and strange species alike. One can reject that which cannot be accounted for (grandma under the thin soil of a Singaporean garden, shrimp, lactating spider) or one can reject the system that cannot account for it (British colonialism, Jewish dietary laws, traditional taxonomy). This new mode of ordering is in this essay glossed as the "interdependency and situatedness between species that constitute every life form." "Off the grid" is thus a leap in conceptual ordering. It replaces the "line" with enfolded relationships, ties of affinity and dependence, atmospherics in which dust and ruined palm trees are pulled into the lungs of all species alike, including the humans and some of the spiders (because not all of them have lungs, it turns out).

But what of the air conditioning units — the lungs of buildings — that purify this new entanglement, that work to make a barely habitable city (too hot, too smoky) wealthy, comfortable, and populous? How might these be understood in a new ecosystem's thinking of context, interdependency, co-constituency, and interrelatedness? How are the ruins of world — the "trashinfrastructure" of civilizations, past and present, so vast now that they might be called by the umbrella term "environment" — made to remain outside of enclosures? We do not lack for strange things (lactating spider

(4) See Lévi-Strauss. See also Bakke.

inclusive), for chaos or for creativity. Nor are the particulate and the unexpected disallowed by the contemporary grid; they are rather held to the (out)side, filtered out, sidelined, and, when necessary, translated through systems that, like lungs, make the unexpected of the world into useable, systematizable, standardizable, navigable and profitable products (as Anna Tsing has so masterfully shown). This process of creating standardized environments can be done materially, by things like air conditioning (for building pods) and pressurized cabins (for highflying pods) or organizationally, for things like businesses (profit pods) and governments (nation pods). What is wild — the polluted air, the thin air, aimless idle behaviour, the migrants and activists — is kept outside. Or, just as often, only let in once rendered safe, by the lungs of translation, to the interior. The world may burn, but the air inside is nevertheless sweet.

This is the contradiction driving most of us a bit batty at present, and it leads to a question many of the essays herein have also asked: What is the relationship between being “off the grid” and being on it? And how might activities in one domain (off) translate over to and effect the other (on)? Without a good answer, one’s ambiguity (Hunt) or *flânerie* (Cardoso), risks being forever marginalized as the great filtering lungs of the grid reject and reject and reject certain forms of living in order to maintain other ones.

Infrastructurally, these essays chew at the grid,

trying to find where it breaks down or can be broken. Within the Solidarity movement in late socialist Poland, there was the feeling that communism could never be destroyed, that the Soviets could never be routed out and flung away. Despite this sentiment, though, cracks in the system were everywhere and evident. Dissent worked like ice in concrete upon these cracks, swelling and making them larger, and then melting and slipping away. The cracks were endlessly troubled and exasperated and pushed into chasms without the larger task of a total system’s overthrow ever really being conceptualizable. “Everything was forever, until it was no more,” to quote a particularly propitious book title (Yurchak). It all came apart so fast. Before all that, however, there was a shared public feeling across the Eastern Bloc that the structures of rule had gone wrong in ways large and small. People still did work, but with an understanding that the system that caused society to function wasn’t right anymore (if it ever had been). This sensation from late communist Poland is shared by the essays gathered here, as is the impulse of a society that can see — can pinpoint very precisely — where its ways no longer work and then, like Solidarity, weaken what binds the whole thing together: namely, The Grid.

There is thus something more radical than is at first glance obvious about a community, or a home, or a practice, or a taxonomy, or a diegesis that is “off the grid,” even if it is not “out of control” (Hesselberth 126).

The state may govern borders and determine where bodies are buried; it may grid a city's street system and issue the permits that allow alternative communities to flourish for a while, before being permitted to be bulldozed to make room for condos. But there is always an in-between, and always a relationship to lines that can be broken, or severed, or tied up into curious knots. This is known. It is also known that "grids, no matter how seemingly certain, are subject to constant reformation and reorganization" (Dowdy, this volume). But what we begin to understand, and what each of the essays collected here grapples with (in its own way), is that after what is known is something else. After the British build graveyards, after the modern state bans them and burns all the bodies to ash, after the atmospheric already betray the grid there is something else.

Here is what I think that something else is: an attempt to demonstrate — in theory and in practices — that infrastructure and civilization can be negatively correlated. Infrastructure can (and perhaps must) become less in order for civilization to become more. "Off the grid," in other words, intimates that degriding — or the lessening, loosening, or disembedding of infrastructure — is the next necessary step for a better world. Crucially, this needn't mean taking a step backwards. The essays herein do not dream of a life on planet Bosnia where we all meander about in search of a grid that has abandoned us. "Off the grid" can, rather,

be a step forward — civilizational progress is still a part of this story — toward a world that is (infra)structured differently.

And while "off the grid" can, in one sense, be taken to be individualizing, it needn't be. The super-rich may be pouring money into the construction of impermeable compounds in New Zealand. They may be planning to survive the coming climate- (or zombie-) apocalypse "off the grid" and in style. But this is an old-fashioned way to approach a grid and the project of being off of it.⁽⁵⁾ It's like taking the logic of a grid and then applying it only to oneself without allowing for any of the quixotic and queer interconnections or unexpected entanglements for which these essays argue. Better to be "off the grid" in good company; better yet to off-grid the world in a systematic attempt to institutionalize or infrastructure sustainability, conservation, and care into something after, rather than merely off (yet simultaneous

- (5) There is a scene in *World War Z* (dir. Forster, 2013) in which one such off-grid bunker is overrun by hordes of half-rotten, ambulatory corpse-people (zombies). It is a perfect snapshot of that moment that neither the best-made walls of the rich nor well-laid graveyards of modern civilization, nor nature's own call to death and rot ("the circular economy") can keep the dead from rising from their graves and consuming everything. Capitalism in the shallowest grave of allegory, plus Brad Pitt.
- (6) Or as my erstwhile (Canadian) editor suggested, not "Make America Great Again" but "Make America Anew".

to) the existing system/grid.⁽⁶⁾ Better to think sidewise, to use the lines available to us to pattern and give rhythm to life differently. Better to think of the ways the lines that structure our stories can be understood not as the firmware of civilization but as affinities, or “an opening of inside on to outside” (Dowdy, this volume). Infra-no more, these authors describe and dream of a differently-structured world. But which Latinate prefix will guide us as the below of infra- gives way to the beyond of “off the grid”? Might it be ultra- (above-)structured and yet also local? Or perhaps intuo- or hiostructured and filled with care, consideration and wonders? Or, exstructured, such that we feel the opening and movement outward from an enclosed interior? Or perhaps easiest, just interstructured, as between us we build the sort of a web that even a lactating spider could love.⁽⁷⁾

(7) Here is a novel worth reading on the subject of spiders and their webs: Tchaikovsky, Adrian. *Children of Time*, Pan Books, 2015.

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