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# Composing the Cities of Flow: Unitary Urbanism and the Ontology of Water Infrastructure

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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COMPOSING THE CITIES OF FLOW:  
UNITARY URBANISM AND THE ONTOLOGY OF WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

COMPOSING THE CITIES OF FLOW

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Dock Currie

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
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Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

## Abstract

A renewed interest in ontology and the ontological station of erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans has provoked interest in the implications that such station might hold for the built, metabolized, and governed environment. It is the contention of this work that the contemporary manifestation of hydro-social assemblages, water distribution networks, reflects and is produced by a totalizing spectacular ideology that relies on such networks being imbricated in such a manner as to de-emphasize or deny their ontological standing. Perceiving in the Unitary Urbanism articulated by the situationists of the 1960s an anticipation and critique of such spectacular ideology, and its vested stake in the ontological debasement of the constitutive elements of the urban ecological whole, the particular and particularly isolated disciplines which maintain such debasement, namely architecture and politics, are found wanting in their inability to transcend the separations that such spectacular ideology entails. It is contended moreover that an understanding of how the contemporary western urban environment is premised upon an ideologically ossified episteme, of what is or is not possible to know of the constitution of everyday life, might open up the possibility of different compositional and aesthetic arrangements more amenable to an ontological respect for the erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans that comprise such urban environments, and compositional and aesthetic arrangements that democratically account for the participation of those erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans as they asymmetrically participate in a newly conceived of commons.

## Keywords

Water Resources; Aesthetics; Ontology; Ecology; Politics; Architecture; Environmentalism;  
Political Economy; Urbanism; Materialism; Realism; Actor-Network Theory; Assemblage  
Theory; Democracy; Post-phenomenology

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## Introduction I

(When the Emperor Has No Clothes, Fire the Fashion Critics)

If we see the earth as a spaceship, and go further to invoke the comparison of a lifeboat, it is of course of vital concern to everybody in the boat if the crew or the passengers start polluting the supply of food and water, distributing supplies on a grossly inequitable basis, knocking holes in the bottom of the boat, or worst of all trying to blow the boat out from under us.

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the publics living under the ideological contour of those states: first, the neoliberal states becoming-antagonistic-towards institutions which generate knowledge that is not commensurable with the aims of that neoliberal state and the aims of global neoliberal ideology, and hence set about subverting such institutions, and set about creating environments and aesthetic constitutions which deny the knowledge such institutions generate (indeed to deny 'knowing' anything other than the image that neoliberal ideology fashions for its subjects); and second, the public submits to such subversion and acquiesces to their neoliberal state's spectacular logics, and are as of yet incapable of generating such knowledge sets themselves. This work is therefore about how the urban environment, as it is constituted today, serves these spectacular logics – the logics of global neoliberal capital – serves to sever and de-emphasize relations to the material ecological whole on which the urban itself ultimately depends. This work is about how such a severing and de-emphasis takes the form of an ontological debasement and banalization – that is, takes the form of an implicit, tacit, and unconscious denial of the reality of the parts of the ecological whole that have been ideologically sectioned off.

Neoliberalism, at heart, is a political form that emphasizes capital's purported ability to regulate and manage itself, "maximizing the role of the private sector in determining priorities" as Nato Thompson writes, "and deemphasizing the role of the public and the state's function in protecting and supporting them."<sup>2</sup> However, ideology is not simply a choice but rather inherently a totalisation, and indeed neoliberal ideology is invested in not only the promotion of a market based system of relations in the global and urban spheres, but is moreover invested in the construction of a kind of neuter urban commons that would most readily allow for that totalisation. It is this aspect of ideology, the fundament of what we will call 'spectacular' – i.e., that which serves the 'spectacle' of global neoliberal capital – that will be addressed here as it inheres within contemporary urban hydro-technical assemblages and their composition. "It's not about saving money. It's about imposing ideology," as University of Victoria climatologist Andrew Weaver commented on the closure of the ELA, "what is happening here is that the government has an ideological agenda to develop the Canadian economy based on the extraction of oil out of the Alberta tar sands as quickly as possible and sell it as fast as it can, come hell and high water, and eliminate any barriers that stand in their way."<sup>3</sup> Make no mistake, the policies of the current government are ecologically unsound – as has been pointed out else-

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<sup>2</sup> Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 – 2011* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "Canada's PM Stephen Harper faces revolt by scientists" *The Guardian*, Published July 09 2012, Accessed July 12 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/jul/09/canada-stephen-harper-revolt-scientists>.

where – but the conceptual framework from which normative judgements like ‘ecologically unsound’ may be generated is indeed also in question here. The current work is therefore about how this ideological imposition takes place, first through the aesthetic manipulations of the urban environment to foster ontological commitments in its denizens that are in accord with the smooth façade of neoliberal ideology itself, and second through the specialization of urban knowledge sets – ‘specialized sciences’ as Lefebvre calls them – which would inhibit compositions of the built environment which do not accord with these manipulations. That is, this work will ask first how hydro-technical assemblages are constituted in such a manner as to remain essentially benign, or indeed helpful, to the auspice of the neoliberal spectacle, and second how even the most basic of conceptual tools like ‘politics’ or ‘architecture’ are actually implicated within and integral to this mollification and making-innocuous of the ecological whole.

In an open letter to the government upon learning of the closure, John P. Smol, Canada Research Chair in Environmental Change, along with seven of his colleagues at the ELA, wrote that “water is essential for life. Clean water is crucial for the health of all Canadians, and lakes are part of our social, spiritual and economic well-being.”<sup>4</sup> And indeed while their interest is first and foremost in the continuation of the ELA and their research into how to best preserve and upkeep the metabolic health of Canada’s freshwater corpus, this is no less true for, and is indeed integrally connected with, the possibility of and capacity for urban water distribution networks, and hence the possibility of the urban as part of the ecological whole whatsoever. Neoliberal ideology depends on the health of the ecological whole, too – though, as the closure of the ELA gestures towards, the spectacular edifice of neoliberalism is incapable of confronting or engaging with the ecological whole in anything other than a relation of exploitation and domination. Neoliberal ideology is not only antagonistic to institutions that speak to its unsustainable appropriation of materials from that ecological whole, but is moreover vested in the concrete composition of urban environments in its own spectacular image – and indeed *only in its own spectacular image* – a spectacular image that veils this being-unsustainable. The spectacle of neoliberal ideology on the one hand relies on the health of the ecological commons, though it is incapable of anything other than the rampant appropriation and exploitation of that ecological commons, and so the spectacle of neoliberal ideology therefore also relies on constructions and disclosures of ‘the urban’ that veil this tension; constructions and disclosures which allow it to act on its antagonism towards alternative knowledge sets (like those being generated by the ELA) with a

4 Smol et. al, “Water and Wisdom” *Globe & Mail*.

minimum of opposition and push-back, i.e. with a minimum of democratic inclusion or participation.

The ends of the material appropriations of water are flowing beneath our feet and within the walls but the aesthetic composition of the urban environment is such that their appearance at the tap can be taken in the abstract, divorced from the social and technological manipulations applied to those materials in the event of their appropriation, and divorced from the consequences of those appropriations in the broader ecological whole. The current work concerns, therefore, how such aesthetic and environmental separations serve ideological ends, how they imply certain epistemic delimitations and ontological commitments, and how these spectacular separations might be recognized and acted upon. Again, this thesis is about the urban environments which are dependent upon the health and well-being of the broader ecological whole – rather than about the broader ecological whole itself – but nonetheless this work is specifically about the aesthetic/ideological edifices of contemporary neoliberal politics which act against institutions like the ELA – institutions whose analyses and investigations are inconvenient to the kinds of virulent and unsustainable constructions and appropriations that neoliberal ideology would, and indeed does, otherwise employ.

How the urban environment is produced by and represents the ideological spectacle of contemporary neoliberalism allows, and indeed fosters, the sort of ambivalence towards the kind of acts that reproduce these relations – or rather, fosters a sort of ambivalence towards acts that are themselves ideologically produced to seem benign but are indeed profoundly violent. That is, these acts ensure the endless parasitic reproduction of their actor – the arbiters of neoliberal ideology and spectacular global capital. They survive upon the ideological veil constructed through these acts, like the closure of the ELA. For example, how ‘the natural’ is ideologically constructed and codified as hermetically distinct from the urban – the codification being here an ideological gesture or act – allows for a sort of ambivalence towards the aesthetic absence of materials like water in the urban as they occur anywhere but at ideologically sanctioned positions like the mouth of the tap. This work is an attempt to view the visual and aesthetic banishment of water infrastructure from the contemporary cityscape as profoundly symptomatic of neoliberal ideology and demonstrative of its predilection to the inauguration and maintenance of a series of lazy dualisms which keep some determination of ‘us’ on one side and ‘nature’ on the other. In other words, the spectacular delimitation of the urban as in opposition to the spectacular delimitation of nature – and not recognizing the urban as itself, in a more fundamental respect, ‘natural’ – is characteristic of neoliberal ideology and the spectacle it serves.

We should be concerned about analysing and interpreting the aesthetic composition of the urban – what ideological purposes it may be serving and how it contours the possibility of our knowledge or knowing as such – because it is indeed not simply neutral in its vulgar there-ness, but is rather more than the partisan construction of merely one ideological field (Rob Ford’s Toronto, the Harper government, global neoliberal capitalism as such, etc.), it is indeed the ongoing project of many ideological fields! Both spatially and temporally, an accurate topology of the urban ecological whole is all the more difficult but at the same time all the more necessary. Water is a useful subject in this respect because it so viscerally connects the urban to the broader ecological whole (of which the urban is nevertheless itself a part), and also because it has been so pedantically agitated into the completed objects of the urban socio-technical assemblages: underground, hidden, tamed, de-based, instrumentally ‘for us.’ Neoliberal ideology maintains the spectacular visual absence of water because it accords with an ontological debasement and de-emphasis of water, which allows it to continue its abuses of the broader ecological commons, largely premised upon this ‘for us’ – though, as we will see in chapter three, the ‘us’ in ‘for us’ is itself a distinctly exclusionary set. To this we will propose alternative ontological commitments, ones which require no ideological veils or exclusions, and a kind of urbanism commensurable with such ontological inclusiveness.

## Introduction II

(This work is not a political work.)

A critique of the specialized sciences implies a critique of specialized politics, structures, and their ideologies. Every political group, and especially every structure, justifies itself through an ideology that it develops and nurtures: nationalism or patriotism, economism or state rationalism, philosophism, (conventional) liberal humanism.

– Henri Lefebvre

“This machine kills fascists” is written on Woody Guthrie’s guitar.

I always enjoyed that “this machine kills fascists” was written on Woody Guthrie’s guitar but there was inevitably something about it that seemed somehow inimical-to-itself about this phrase – enantiodromic, turning, running back upon itself. The tension is put into relief against the phrase that his friend Pete Seeger had on his banjo: “this machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.”

On the one hand Guthrie’s admirable sentiment, but on the other a corrective – a warning to not speak the language of the wrong you seek to correct. This work is therefore neither a political nor architectural work: it doesn’t take up the tools of the edifice it seeks to overturn. In seeking to articulate how the spectacular edifice of neoliberal ideology does not merely molest or distort the commons, but rather supplants it with a discursive irreality of its own design, we should like to avoid drawing upon the conceptual resources of that discursive irreality as much as possible. While politics may very much predate both neoliberal ideology and the function of global capital, it is nevertheless, today, entirely amenable to them in its contemporary delimitation to a hermetic set of ‘political’ gestures. As the Editors of the Situationist International – whose conceptual framework will figure prominently herein – write:

[It is] necessary to leave the terrain of specialized revolutionary activity -- the terrain of the self-mystification of “serious politics” -- because it has long been seen that such specialization encourages even the best people to demonstrate stupidity regarding all other questions; with the result that they end up failing even in their merely political struggles, since the latter are inseparable from all other aspects of the overall problem of our society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “The Bad Days Will End” *Internationale Situationiste*, No. 7, 1962.

Admittedly, the etymological roots of 'politics' do not accord with how politics has been ideologically striated and structured, and one could say that politics does not necessarily refer to the specialized set of 'political' gestures in the composition of the commons but rather the entire gamut of possibilities that stem from the foundation of a *Polis*, from which the city itself also springs. As Heidegger writes, "the polis is the historical place, the there in which, out of which and for which history happens."<sup>6</sup> But politics, when it engages and brings into relief all the interconnections and imbrications of everyday life, is nonetheless never merely political. And indeed a politics which exceeds that which is merely political – by bringing together not only all that which belongs to the polis, but moreover all their possible permutations together – ought not to be conceived of as politics at all. Rather than subsuming them in saying that these things 'belong' to the polis, we should instead say that they are 'of' the polis, but no less than the polis is of them.

This work is, therefore, not a political work. Rancière and Žižek's endeavours are those of rescuing the term 'politics' from its ossified and, in their terms, apolitical form – that is, the dominant and reactionary thing that is indeed called 'politics' but actually serves only to foreclose the possibility of an actual politics and an actual political act. This is not how we will treat politics. We will neither treat 'politics' as the dark precursor of the kind of End of History that Fukuyama describes, avoiding the fatalistic resonances that such a conception would imply, nor will we treat 'politics' as the corrective to this, as Rancière and Žižek do. It is neither the endeavour of the current work to effect a similar rescue operation, nor would one even be desirable. It is the aim of the current work to show how politics, when it is really 'being-political' in the way that Rancière and Žižek would want to understand it, is no longer merely political at all, but is then something else entirely: a holistic constitutive act, or a holistic set of constitutive acts, of a kind that would engage many registers, amongst which 'politics' would be, by necessity, merely one. In order to address how water is *ideologically suppressed, epistemically absent and ontologically unaccounted for*, then, this work will therefore – and indeed must – address the spectacular disciplinarity that has been deployed towards these ends; that is, to the ends of the reduction of life with water to its most debased and banal forms. Water as it features within the city cannot be exhausted by what Lefebvre calls 'the specialized sciences,' – it can be engaged by them, certainly, but one will inevitably bump up against the predilec-

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* Tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 128.

tion of spectacular disciplinarity to subsume all other disciplines ‘below’ any particular discipline that one may be working with. This work will therefore attempt to take up a kind of meta-discourse of water insofar as water is itself at once ‘political’ and at the same time drastically apolitical, revealing the discursive limits of politics as it reveals the discursive limits of all the other ‘specialized sciences’ when read in abstraction from one another.

So on the one hand, this project will then be understood to be a *Political Ecology of urban water infrastructure* – but a Political Ecology that is, again, not merely political, but rather a Political Ecology of a kind advocated by Bruno Latour, wherein the words ‘ecology’ and ‘politics’ are not simply juxtaposed “without a thoroughgoing rethinking of either term.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, in understanding how water is at once *structured by* and in turn contributes to the *structures of* politics and architecture, we should look instead to how compositional gestures and the ecology of the urban commons mutually co-determine; how they either allow for or inhibit our engagement with water in everyday life. In “excavating the flows that constitute the urban,”<sup>8</sup> as Maria Kaika writes, we should like to produce a Political Ecology focused on how water features in the urban milieu, but that nevertheless has two broader aims: first, a radical critique of the structural dualisms of man/nature, subject/object, and inside/outside; and second, a positive project aimed towards the thoroughgoing amelioration and evacuation of these dualisms and an instantiation of water into a reconceptualised and alternately configured assembly of a kind which entertains not merely the political register but the political, the architectural, the ethical, the linguistic, the poetic, the revolutionary, amongst all others. In other words it is to be contended that we ought not only to seek to liberate water from these philosophically illegitimate dualisms, but to moreover extrapolate how we might work ‘with’ water to better the cities that we both inhabit. Though equally well, on the other hand, twinned with this Political Ecology, this project will also be understood to be a *Unitary Urbanism* of water infrastructure.

What ‘Unitary Urbanism’ is meant to evoke will be taken up in detail later, and its role in the dissolution of the kind of disciplinarity that is revealed in the excise of Political Ecology lauded. Suffice it to say for now, though, that a great deal of cerebral effort has been poured into the endeavour to think through the composition of the commons ontologically as of late – mainly in the last ten years – amongst a dizzying array of new materialists, object oriented ontologists, speculative realists and

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7 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* Tr. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

8 Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 25.



the like, but that relatively little effort has been spared to think through how this composition bears upon the edifices of everyday life, especially in the built environment. This is rather to ask the question of an ontological kind of urbanism, or an urbanism premised upon a considered ontological position of a materialist or realist kind, that is: can we have cities and hydro-technical assemblages which are premised upon an ontological care and solicitude towards other members of a newly conceived commons – ourselves, for whatever we are, along with materials like water and the assemblages that they entail – and moreover what might these sorts of cities look like? What I would like to suggest here is that such cities have indeed already been proposed by the situationists of the 1960s, if admittedly not in these specific terms, and we need merely read into their articulation of Unitary Urbanism an ontological component, which it nonetheless indeed already implies.

The play between the Political Ecology of urban water infrastructure (articulating the topology of the hydro-social urban whole and where it results in spectacular disjuncts) and an ontologically premised Unitary Urbanism of water and the networks and assemblages that water is enmeshed in (demanding the overturn of the systems – the ‘politics’ or ‘architectures’ that entail such spectacular disjuncts) will comprise the basis of the current work. Chapter one will articulate the relevance of recently emerged discourses of ontology, most especially ‘Speculative Materialism,’ to the project of Unitary Urbanism, and the relevance of a Unitary Urbanism to the compositional implications of an ontological materialism. It is argued that they complement one another in that a Unitary Urbanism is given licence by a materialist ontology to account for all the actors and assemblages that comprise the city that are otherwise unaccounted for, and a materialist ontology is given licence by a holistic compositional project like Unitary Urbanism to realize such recognition in building arrangements of the city that are proper to it. Chapter two specifically interrogates architecture as the sedimentary form of a spectacular disciplinarity that otherwise produces its own conditions and further reproduction – the ideological debasement and aesthetic banishment of materials like water being part and parcel thereof. Finally, chapter three specifically interrogates neoliberalism as the specific exclusionary political form that such reproduction – the reinscription of the spectacle – not only instantiates but relies upon in kind.



## Chapter One

### Water in the Metropolis: Speculative Materialism and the Spectacle

The self isn't a unity and the world isn't a unity, and so Kant had the wrong problem. The problem shouldn't be to show that the unity of the world is correlative with the unity of the self, but to show that the disunity of the world is correlative with the disunity of the self.

– William James

Water dives from the clouds without parachute, wings or safety net. Water runs over the steepest precipice and blinks not a lash. Water is buried and rises again; water walks on fire and fire gets blisters. Stylishly composed in any situation – solid, gas or liquid – speaking in penetrating dialects understood by all things – animal, vegetable or mineral – water travels intrepidly through four dimensions, sustaining (Kick a lettuce in the field and it will yell 'Water!'), destroying (The Dutch boy's finger remembered the view from Ararat) and creating (It has even been said that human beings were invented by water as a device for transporting itself from one place to another, but that's another story). Always in motion, ever-flowing (whether at steam rate or glacier speed), rhythmic, dynamic, ubiquitous, changing and working its changes, a mathematics turned wrong side out, a philosophy in reverse.

..

– Tom Robbins

In what follows, the material substance of water and its place within the contemporary North American and European metropolis will be of central concern. It is to be contended that we, the denizens of Western cities, have a flawed *political* and *architectural* relation to water. We have tolerated, implicitly, an egregious lack of potable water for those in the global south, and done so through a tacit – and lazy – indifference. We have tolerated the ecological damage wrought by the concrete edifices of these politics and architectures in the form of what Sloterdijk has called an 'enlightened false consciousness,' wherein the reality of a situation is inescapable but we nevertheless acquiesce to ideological forms that posit the reality as fundamentally not-there. This has occurred because of the urban environment that we live in and how it is ideologically managed and segmented into a series of

benign disciplines of 'the urban' that neither speak to one another nor compose the urban commons together. If we are to understand how wanton indifference obtains in relation to the broader global commons and the unseen commons of the urban ecological whole we must understand it as stemming from the auspices of the sectioned and compartmentalized urban form.

It is not simply that our politics or architectures are in-and-of-themselves flawed; it is not that we simply practice the wrong politics, or the wrong architecture, and that there is a right politics and a right architecture to deploy. No, what is to be contended here is that these indifferences and enlightened false consciousnesses towards how water is figured as a material in and out of the city are the result of our relations to water being indeed variously political or architectural, and in their not having been conceived of or practiced together – in and amongst other modes of relation – in the composition of a unified urban environment. There is no right politics, no right architecture, because they can only fulfil their promise when they are overturned by a relation that operates on each of their registers, as well as all others, at once. This implies a radical change to the standing of what is possible and what is real.

It is therefore also to be contended here that this flawed political and architectural relation – our relating to water merely politically, or merely architecturally – is integrally and inextricably tied to, and caused by, a more basic and fundamentally flawed *epistemological* and *ideological* relation to water. Indeed this flawed epistemological and ideological relation to water is, moreover, premised upon a flawed ontological relation to water – water having been ideologically produced and presented as 'for us' rather than 'in itself.' This mode of relation has seen the political and aesthetic exclusion of not only water itself but equally well all those other assemblages that depend on water. It has seen such exclusion in its privileging the otherwise 'human' assemblages of extant urban ecological commons – that is to say, the commons as it exists today – at the expense of its other, often unrecognized, often 'non-human,' members. To be sure, it has also seen the political and aesthetic exclusion of certain erstwhile considered 'human' assemblages in virtue of its being premised upon a logic of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, that has often times seen those who would otherwise be considered 'humans' figured as 'less than human.'

These arrangements of a merely political politics and a merely architectural architecture are therefore neither acceptable within a commons that recognizes the ontological autonomy of nonhu-

man members, and networks of erstwhile considered humans and nonhuman actors, nor do these arrangements actually fulfil their promise of the continued well-being of the erstwhile considered human actors that these arrangements do purport to account for (most notably as the constitutive subject of neoliberal ideology). This work will therefore articulate a unified program of reorientation or alternative comportment towards water, as indeed towards materials generally as they engage with the urban ecological whole, in both a mutually co-determinate Political Ecology of urban water assemblages and a Unitary Urbanism in which water, by necessity, must figure prominently. In understanding how water has been ideologically de-emphasized and understanding the kind of city that results from this de-emphasis, it is to be hoped we might foster a more robust and articulated practice of the urban, a more engaged and sustainable environmental ethic, and a more liberatory and emancipatory metropolitan aesthetic.

It is the intent of this work to articulate, first, how our merely political and merely architectural relation to water in the contemporary metropolis gives rise to the contemporary epistemological comportment towards water as that which has been ideologically instituted as the discursive limit of what is possible to know or to do. Then, we should like to look to how that ideological apparatus fosters and gives rise to contemporary metropolitan politics and architecture, and importantly how this cyclical relation might *come to be otherwise*; how we might relate to water differently, and, in so doing, free ourselves towards a city with a mode of relation that entails the work of each individual discipline but conceived of together as the holistic work of building the urban commons. That is, through the bringing together of contemporary ontological philosophy and the radical politics of the situationists, we would like to articulate a set of holistic compositional gestures which entail both a politics and an architecture commensurable with a revolution in citizenry, where contributions are not simply made by persons and delineable sets of people, but also actors and delineable sets of networks. The qualities and characteristics of water lend themselves to articulation in the terms of this kind of assemblage and network analysis; its propensity to flow, to mix, to solve and to cycle demonstrate precisely the discursive and rhizomatic essence of assemblages and networks as such. “Networks of human and non-human actors emerge around water use that have a sense of order, enabling actors to take further action, further ordering the networks and their environment in the process,” as Pieter van der Zaag, Alex Bolding and Emmanuel Manzungu write, and “since the material things are intricately interwoven in these networks, the actors using the water may find it difficult to adapt their action to

the new institutional reality, unless they re-adjust the entire assembly of the network, including its material parts.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed they function by, as Erik Swyngedouw writes, “assembling human and non-human actors in a more or less coherent but heterogeneous network that sustains the socioenvironmental transformation process.”<sup>10</sup> That is, while hydro-technical networks and assemblages develop and function as ostensibly unrecognized, the distribution of and infrastructure surrounding water continue to inform the parameters of the city available to the ideological intentions of the state (and more generally what we will later call spectacular global capital), but only as the invisible limitations of a system which has as its aim the ostensible nullification of limits whatsoever, i.e. the affirmation of its own intransience as it features within specific arrangements and ubiquity as a consistent feature of the urban ecological whole. In other words, while the city depends on water, ideology depends on the city being understood to be not entirely dependent upon anything. We would like to lay out some of the reasons that water and its hydro-technical assemblages ought to be democratically included in the figurations of the urban commons, and some of the reasons why this is nevertheless not the case today.

### Anthropocentric Exceptionalism and Speculative Thought: Ethical Consideration

With that in mind, then, it is important to articulate why the inclusion of nonhuman ‘actants’ – as Bruno Latour calls them – like water and its concomitant assemblages, is important for the composition and function of what we would otherwise call politics, the development of architectural aesthetics, and the redress of environmental concerns. It is, however, not at all the case that we must choose between strictly anthropocentric concerns and the concerns of an otherwise indifferent cosmological whole, as is contended by some (cf. Brassier), but rather it is the case that just as we can show philosophical care and solicitude to ‘the other’ of the social sciences, we can equally well work in productive collaboration with delineable actors, networks, and assemblages. Indeed the concerns of these composite actors and networks, more often than not, are not so far from the terrain of the specifically ‘human’ concerns of the specific erstwhile considered ‘humans’ who often times make up parts of

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<sup>9</sup> Pieter van der Zaag, Alex Bolding and Emmanuel Manzungu “Water-networks and the actor: the case of the Save River catchment, Zimbabwe” in Resonances and Dissonances in Development: Actors, Networks and Cultural Reportoires Ed. Paulus Gerardus, Maria Hebinck and Gerard Verschoor (Denmark: Koninklijke, 2001), 257; 274.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Swyngedouw “Producing Nature, Scaling Environment: Water, Networks, and Territories in Fascist Spain” in Leviathan Undone? Towards a Political Economy of Scale Ed. Roger Keil and Rianne Mahon (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 122.

those delineable assemblages and networks. Even when our concerns and interests do diverge, it is ethical by and within the terms of our extant democratic ethics to maintain and engage in relations fairly and earnestly, as though between any two social assemblages whose interests diverge. Though, moreover, it is within our interests to engage with such differences, even and especially, if our extant ethical frameworks are overturned or radically altered. That is, a fully articulated commons capable of mediating such divergence ought to have a similarly articulated ethical component, though not one which relies upon the lazy humanism of neoliberal ideology. Indeed, rather than simply falling back upon a convenient ontological privilege with which we might brush those offending concerns of other delineable actors and networks aside – if only because the radically democratic composition of such a commons would be less amenable and available to the codified exclusion of those who may have been, or may yet become members of such a commons. As Latour writes:

This way of looking at things does not entail an anthropomorphism that would take us back to the premodern past – a past that is only exoticism on the part of the moderns, of course – but rather the end of a ruinous anthropomorphism through which objects, indifferent to the fate of humans, were in the habit of intervening from the outside and acting without due process to sweep away the work of political assemblies. . . indeed, appearances notwithstanding, the famous ‘indifference of the cosmos to human passions’ offers the oddest of anthropocentrisms, since it claims to give form to humans, while silencing them through the incontestable power of objectivity devoid of all passion! The nonhumans had been kidnapped and turned into stones that could be thrown at the assembled demos.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed it is precisely because an objectifying delimitation of ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ is axiomatic to our ‘politics’ and our ‘architectures’ that they are not conceived of together and with other modes of composition – mythopoetic, musical, sociological, environmental, and the like. Our tacit acceptance of ontological privilege has reduced us a merely one kind of commons, the kind alleged to be good ‘for us,’ available to humanist delimitation and specialized purview, even if the ‘us’ in ‘for us’ has historically been a fairly rarified set (subjects proper to the global auspices of neoliberalism, as is discussed in chapter three). With a critique of a merely anthropocentric demos thus in place – the case for “including nonhumans in the demos”<sup>12</sup> having been made – the means and methods of such inclusion will then be laid out in the articulation of the philosophical relevance of ‘object oriented ontologies,’ for the purposes of, as Reza Negarestani writes, “understanding some of the disjunctive

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<sup>11</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 30.

impasses between speculative thought and politics as well as possibilities for mobilizing a politics capable of using the resources of speculative thought.”<sup>13</sup> To be sure, it is not so much that we should like to draw out some of the disjunctive impasses between speculative thought and ‘politics;’ given how we are treating ‘politics’ these are indeed implicit and implied. Rather we should like to draw out how speculative thought is inherent to a unified practice of the city – that you cannot have one without the other – and that this unified practice, taking its licence from a speculative thought which considers the ontological autonomy of others within a newly conceived commons, is useful for understanding: first, why water has been figured as it has in the contemporary city, as absent; second, why we ought to see this as a problem, because it serves the interests of neoliberal ideology and not necessarily its subjects; and third, how it may be otherwise, through the holistic evacuation of specialized disciplinary approaches to the urban.

#### Anthropocentric Exceptionalism and Speculative Thought: Democratic Inclusion

So, why is it important that materiality play a role in the composition of the demos? Why must we tear down the ontological throne that that we have built for ourselves at the head of the cosmological whole? The critique of anthropocentrism and humanism have been a major theme in social and political thought over the past half-century. The ontological privileging of human – or some iteration of who gets to be called ‘human’ and who doesn’t – has had tragic and nightmarish consequences, to be sure, not the least of which seems to be the acknowledgement – in the humanities at least – of the perilously untenable nature of the philosophical position of the coherent and autonomous ‘subject.’ With respect to its otherwise exclusionary inauguration, the demos – having been originally a catchall meaning, as Rancière notes, “to be outside of the count, to have no speech to be heard”<sup>14</sup> – has transformed itself admirably from the excluded exterior of the Arche of Agamemnon to the inclusive interior of another Arche of its own design. But democracy is only authentic to its roots when it is *indeed inclusive*, when it makes a place for the placeless and counts the uncounted. Faith in the coherence and autonomy of the human subject, its ontological privilege – its otherwise theologically derived ecstasis from the world – has prevented us for too long from having a democracy constituted

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13 Reza Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy” in The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism Ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2011), 182.

14 Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics Tr. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 32.

not by the negative precursors of *those who cannot take part* but rather by the very figuration of its own origin, the inclusion of those who were fundamentally and essentially excluded, or more specifically included and figured as excluded and figureless. As Latour writes:

Let there be no misunderstanding: Political Ecology is not going to be simpler, nicer, more rustic, more bubolic, than the old bicameral politics. It will be both simpler and more complicated: simpler because it will no longer live under the constant threat of a double short circuit, by Science and by force, but also much more complicated, for the same reason – for want of short circuits, it is going to have to start all over and compose the common world bit by bit.<sup>15</sup>

It is no longer the case that we can rely on the mere self-evidence of our status as primary and in some sense 'above' the cosmological whole, as it is nonetheless composed, for the composition of a collective that is capable of addressing the problems of the day (many of which have been brought on by the very anthropocene that has given rise to that uncritical self-evidence). Indeed, as the editors of *The Speculative Turn* volume write:

The danger is that the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy has not only reached a point of decreasing returns, but that it now actively limits the capacities of philosophy in our time. . . in the face of the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divides between human and machine, there is a growing sense that previous philosophies are incapable of confronting these events.<sup>16</sup>

And we would easily and without reservation add the specific crisis of the worldwide availability of potable drinking water as well as the strain placed upon water resources by, for example, the procedure known as 'fracking' – the chemical and hydraulic fracturing of rock layers for the purposes of harvesting natural gas (a procedure whose detriment to the water-table is not yet entirely understood, though could be potentially devastating). It is not so much the specific hydro-technical practices of neoliberalism and their ecological consequences that we are considering here, however, but rather that the condition of our tolerance for these practices and their consequences is actually built into the constructed environment of the city and its political forms. That is, spectacular ideology acts with both hands, plundering with the one, and with the other composing an environment in which their plundering is either unseen, or not seen as such. As Lefebvre writes, "the urban is veiled; it flees thought,

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<sup>15</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 82 – 83.

<sup>16</sup> Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*, 3.



which blinds itself, and becomes fixated only on a clarity that is in retreat from the actual.”<sup>17</sup> Whether you are indeed for or against the specific manipulations and deployments of water by neoliberal ideology is beside the point; the point is rather that the city is composed in such a way as to deny the possibility of its interment of water truly being considered. What is water in the city outside of the epistemic veil of spectacular disciplinarity? We do not yet know.

### Liquid Materiality: “Nature” and “Human” in Flux

Materiality has, without a doubt, been of central concern to political and architectural thinking, and indeed has been of central concern with a more or less explicit reference to their ideological and epistemological foundations, at least since the time of Marx. The appropriation and reconfiguration of material is, and is in no uncertain terms, the basis of the sets of relations upon which history unfolds for those of a Marxist orientation, at least in the sense of the historical materialism that Marx outlines. And yet, as Jane Bennett points out in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, “this materiality most often refers to human social structures or to the human meanings ‘embodied’ in them and other objects.”<sup>18</sup> Or rather, it is still not the material itself which is being addressed in a particular composition of the commons, but rather still our ideologically contoured and mediated relation towards the material, our privileged ontological station as it pertains to a still otherwise inert and infinitely malleable ‘nature.’ It is this concept of an unstructured and undifferentiated ‘nature,’ demonstrably both structured and differentiated, which must be scrutinized, for as Bruno Latour asserts, “the terms ‘nature’ and ‘society’ do not designate domains of reality; instead, they refer to a quite specific form of public organization.”<sup>19</sup> Material exceeds our relation to it, and in so doing returns to us in unexpected ways, we have no *unified* account for the autonomy of matter, i.e. what the water ‘does’ once it leaves us.

For example, we certainly have an account of how we bring it under the nomos of the polis, appropriate it, and eventually expropriate it back into the wild, but we have very little figuration – especially within politics – of its being otherwise. That is, we have little holistic appreciation for its being outside of our relation towards it – or at least that is what our contemporary urban forms would seem

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* Tr. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

<sup>19</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 53.



to imply – and, as such, the erstwhile understanding of materiality, and the contours and figurations of how material features within the structures and systems of *exclusively our design*, is critically and unforgivably insufficient (insofar as we ought not only consider water when it is immanent or integral to the urban, though this is exclusively how neoliberal ideology considers water). We have no program for making the specialized disciplines of the urban account for the autonomy of water; nor should we want a merely political account that has appropriated architecture; nor a linguistic account that has appropriated politics; nor any other permutation of one ideologically constituted discipline consuming another. As Lefebvre writes:

“The urban phenomenon, as a global reality, is in urgent need of people who can pool fragmentary bits of knowledge, the achievement of such a goal is difficult or impossible. Specialists can only comprehend such a synthesis from the point of view of their own field, using their data, their terminology, their concepts and assumptions. They are dogmatic without realizing it, and the more competent they are, the more dogmatic. This gives rise periodically to a kind of scientific imperialism in fields such as economy, history, sociology, demography, and so on. Every scholar feels other ‘disciplines’ are his auxiliaries, his vassals or servants. He oscillates between scientific hermeticism and confusion – academic Babel. . . How can we make the transition from fragmentary knowledge to complete understanding? How can we define this need for totality?”<sup>20</sup>

Rather we ought to work towards an account of water as a member of a holistically conceived commons, of which politics will by definition be a part. As Latour writes:

As human politics notices that it no longer has any reserve or dumping ground, what we begin to see clearly is not that we must at last concern ourselves seriously with nature as such, but, on the contrary, that we can no longer leave the entire set of nonhumans captive under the exclusive auspices of nature as such.<sup>21</sup>

This artifice is specifically perceptible to us only in the analysis of the modes of their ideological construction as originary and self-evident, or rather in the very production of their being-originary and their being-self-evident. As Kaika writes:

“Barring the flow of water between the natural, the urban, and the domestic sphere reveals that nature and the city are not separate entities or autonomous ‘space envelopes,’ but hybrids, neither purely human-made nor purely natural; outcomes of the same socio-spatial process of the urbanization of nature. . . water itself is also recounted as a hybrid. As it flows from spaces of production to spaces of consumption, it

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20 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 54; 56.

21 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 58.

undergoes changes in its physical, socio-political and cultural character. When it reaches our faucet in the form of potable water it is neither purely natural nor purely a human construction.”<sup>22</sup>

We too, after all, are hybrids, and therefore never merely human, comprised of the very same material that we so section off and call ‘nature’ blithely, as though it has nothing to do with us: in addition to our bodies being composed of water to the tune of 60 to 80 per cent, as is widely understood, there are other more disquieting contributions that should be taken into consideration. “My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human,” as Bennett writes, quoting biologist Nicholas Wade, “the crook of my elbow, for example, is ‘a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria. . . . They are helping to moisturize the skin by processing the raw fats it produces. . . . The bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome.”<sup>23</sup> We ought not subscribe to a ‘humanist’ delimitation of politics and architecture as hermetic and isolated disciplines, then, because it excludes those nonhuman members and assemblages who have a rightful stake in the composition of the collective commons, because it has historically, and even now, excluded members who are human but have been ideologically figured as ‘less than human,’ and because the determination of ‘human’ itself is spurious and untenable.

It is critical, then, that we attempt to not simply ‘track’ the autonomous materiality of water in terms of a purely positivistic scientific genealogy or archaeology of movement, but to recognize our implication within those movements, those flows – to recognize not only the extent to which we are comprised by water but to moreover recognize the extent to which water, and its concomitant assemblages, structure the composition of everyday life within the context of the Western cityscape. This is not to say, however, that we ought to collapse all difference or delineation, that we ought to recreate the intractable indifference of two philosophically illegitimate constructions, man and nature, into one – but instead this is simply to try to “horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota” as Bennett writes, to move strategically and scrupulously “away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and towards a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of [erstwhile considered] humans and nonhumans.”<sup>24</sup> The manifold assemblages and delineable/appreciable actors that swarm around water, even when only restricted to how it factors in the contemporary me-

<sup>22</sup> Maria Kaika, *City of Flows*, 5 – 6.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 112 (qualification added).

tropolis, would all benefit from a more robust inclusion within the processes and procedures that form and structure *their* environment – as it is indeed their environment too – though such inclusion is only possible under conditions of a radical reconfiguration of those very processes and procedures. Indeed we would all benefit from a more interrogative and self-critical understanding of our constitutive involvement in and around these assemblages.

### Spectacular Ideology and Alternative Ontologies

The spectacular city is itself constituted as a technology of separation that inhibits the possibility of erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans recognizing each other as ontologically ‘there’ equally – be they present to or absent from one another – and leaves us with the unsatisfying condition of either encountering materials like water as merely ‘for us,’ or not encountering them at all. “Give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman,” as Bennett encourages polemically, “seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate.”<sup>25</sup> In order to have water contribute as a non-human actor itself within the newly reconstructed demos, then, we should seek to disentangle ourselves not from an abstraction or idealist notion of nature, but rather from our own adherence to or respect for these artificial abstractions and idealist systematizations – from our own ideologically informed epistemes of what is and is not possible to know and to do. Rather than any feature or quality of water and its assemblages being inherently irreconcilable to the possibility of a kind of holistic commons and its being included in the demos – the collective that determines the organization and production of everyday life – its erstwhile exclusion is instead due to our own lazy allegiance to the easy dualisms that inevitably spring from an anthropocentric episteme and its ideological production and maintenance, and the aesthetic composition of an urban environment that is commensurable with such dualisms.

Indeed this is why, as Debord wrote, “the crisis of urbanism is all the more concretely a social and political one, even though today no force born of traditional politics is any longer capable of dealing with it.”<sup>26</sup> That is, the concrete and reified edifices of an ideological privileging of ‘the human’ represent not only a politics which is insufficient in its being merely political, but moreover an ecological whole which is today so problematic precisely because its contemporary expression

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>26</sup> Guy Debord “Critique of Urbanism” in Tom McDonough, The Situationists and the City (London: Verso, 2009), 153.

is proper to that merely political politics. The contemporary expression of these spectacular forms is the environment which develops and has developed as a result, and therefore seems so normatively intransigent because its hermetic isolations (apartment, building, block, neighbourhood) accord with the hermetic isolations of the disciplines responsible for its production (politics, architecture, art, etc.); as opposed to the contiguous whole that would develop under the auspices of the commons which conceives of these disciplines together – obviates them in a holistic conception of how the urban ecological whole might otherwise be.

What is required in order to effectively work against and stave off the proliferation of illegitimate anthropocentrism in our ideological comportment towards water and its political and architectural instantiation and incarnation – their being manifest in the ‘meat’ of the city – is to connect an ontological project, one which accounts and allows for the interests of each discernable member of the cosmological whole, to an alternate ideological project, one which in its inception already has a kernel of this cosmological whole grounding the ethico-political priorities that it seeks to make manifest. “This means emphasizing practices that do not contradict one another,” as Isabelle Stengers writes, emphasizing practices which “have diverging ways of having things and situations matter,” which, instead of contradicting one another, “produce their own lines of divergence as they produce themselves.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, insofar as our Political Ecology of water infrastructure is premised upon such a conception of ontology, the relevant ideological project is then, as McKenzie Wark writes, “a social or political agenda only to the extent that objects are social and political in and of themselves.”<sup>28</sup> The city must be approached not as an ossified relic of a one time lapse in ontological respect for the social and political nature of objects, but an ongoing feedback loop wherein the specific constitution of the city, its architecture and politics, is at once premised upon and prefigures its own epistemological and ideological comportment, and the specific constitution of what is understood to be possible or impossible, at any one point, is both premised upon and prefigures the forms and figurations that the city will become. The banalization of material – its being ontologically emptied-out by the ideological apparatus – is incarnated in the politics of architecture of the city and serves in turn to produce and proliferate the ontological banalization of material at the level of ideology and epistemology.

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<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “Wondering about Materialism” in *The Speculative Turn*, 378.

<sup>28</sup> McKenzie Wark “(P)OO Praxis (Object Oriented)” as presented at *OOOIII The Third Object Oriented Ontology Symposium*, The New School, September 14<sup>th</sup> 2011.

## Philosophical Kinships of the Subterranean Urban

As has been said, the two modes of approach here are a Political Ecology and a Unitary Urbanism. A Political Ecology that is not merely political, to discern the topology of water's treatment in the city having been sectioned up into ideologically benign 'specialized sciences,' and a Unitary Urbanism that aims at the overturn of these ideologically constituted disjuncts. The former is used to distinguish an ideology which requires epistemic acquiesce from that episteme, and the latter tries to distinguish the commitments of that ideologically constituted episteme from the alternative ontological compartments it veils. As Lefebvre writes, "ideology and knowledge blend together, and we must continuously strive to distinguish them."<sup>29</sup> So in order to articulate how one register of flawed relations gives lease to the others, two bodies of thought will be called upon and deployed herein: first, the contemporary philosophical movement commonly called 'speculative materialism,' insofar as it speaks to the ways that materials such as water have come to be regarded as mere correlate to anthropic concerns, and hence banalized, robbed of their otherwise autonomous ontological standing. And second, the urbanism and politics of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, insofar as they presciently articulated a critique of the ways in which this banalization would be codified not only in the consumer-image that they would come to call 'the spectacle,' but more precisely how it would come to be instantiated and concretized in the very architectural and political forms that constitute everyday life.

To be sure, the situationist critique can also speak to the way that the architectural and political forms – which reproduce themselves endlessly as the substantive material engine of 'the spectacle' – denigrate life, deemphasize autonomy, and create the conditions under which the banalization of 'the object,' which the speculative materialists are so very concerned about, has occurred and continues to occur. And indeed the speculative materialist critique of the ontological privileging of the human and of human concerns illuminates the desecration of everyday life by an otherwise functionalist architecture that the situationists so vehemently abhor (indeed we ought to understand the implicit humanism in the Functionalist par excellence, Le Corbusier, he did after all ontologically privilege the human in his having invented his own anthropic system of architectural measurement, based off the 'ideal' form of the human body – "idiosyncratically identified by Le Corbusier as a six-foot English policeman"<sup>30</sup>). Speculative Materialism and Unitary Urbanism complement one another, both in

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<sup>29</sup> Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Sadler, The Situationist City (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 51.

means and ultimately in ends. The situationists advocate for a mode of urbanism that accounts for all its constituent actors and assemblages and all the ways that they might relate to each other in novel and productive ways, and the speculative materialists advocate for a recognition of all those constituent actors and assemblages that would necessitate such a mode of urbanism.

In order that these two frameworks are sufficiently deployed, then, water – having been striated, abstracted, and indeed visually excluded from our direct consciousness in the politics and architecture of the contemporary city – must not only be *avowed* again, seen and appreciated in the aesthetic sense, but must contribute to such a commons *as a constitutive actor and part of constitutive assemblages with manifold actors and concerns*. From hydroelectric penstock operators to the breeding grounds of city vermin; from the bathroom taps in the downtown nightclub to the authors of municipal bylaws tasked with regulating sprinkler usage; from the downstream estuaries to the high-rise construction crew – how water is treated politically and architecturally bears directly on each of these, and to the extent that there is a more or less codified place for water and its concomitant assemblages of humans and nonhumans in the otherwise architectural and political makeup of the city we can say that such a city is more or less able to deal with and address their concerns. As Latour writes:

We shall say of a collective that it is more or less articulated, in every sense of the word: that it ‘speaks’ more, that it is subtler and more astute, that it includes more articles, greater degrees of freedom, that it deploys longer lists of actions. We shall say, in contrast, that another collective is more silent, that it has fewer concerned parties, fewer degrees of freedom, and fewer independent articles, that it is more rigid. We can even say of a two-house collective, made up of free subjects and indisputable natures, that it is completely inarticulate, totally speechless, since the goal of the subject-object opposition is actually to suppress speech, to suspend debate, to interrupt discussion, to hamper articulation and composition, to short-circuit public life, to replace the progressive composition of the common world with the striking transfer of the indisputable – facts or violence, right or might.<sup>31</sup>

That said, such a commons is only possible once the separation inherent to the isolated disciplines – like a merely political politics or a merely architectural architecture – is evacuated. It is the separation inherent to such hermetic compartmentalizations that reproduces itself into the alienated composition of everyday life. To be sure, the ideological and epistemic critique the situationists levy against late capitalism, as manifest by the spectacle, is such that “at its heart we find the expression of a dynamic

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<sup>31</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 86.

– conveyed within and through our built environment – of alienation, not only internal to the self, but of self from other.”<sup>32</sup> And indeed the situationist critique of an ideologically instantiated alienation, of the propensity of the spectacle to reproduce the ultimate interiority of the subject/object dualism in both the composition of the commons and the built environment, lends itself towards the philosophical project of speculative materialism, carrying with it that kernel of respect for the cosmological whole. As Tom McDonough writes, for the situationists “the aim of revolution would then lie not only in the abolition of class society (the social basis of this alienation) but in the construction of a world in which the reciprocal recognition of subjects would replace their mutual misrecognition; the end of commodity relations would also be the end of the other apprehended as an object, as a thing in a world of things.”<sup>33</sup> It is hard to understate how vital this is to the philosophical kinship between speculative materialism and situationist thought, insofar as the political and architectural project of both is ultimately the same: democracy as the inclusion and respect of those who have been excluded and denigrated.

At heart, it could be said that both situationist thought and speculative materialism are radically democratic insofar as they imply a demand for the recognition of all members of the cosmological whole. As Debord writes:

This ‘historic mission of establishing truth in the world’ can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomised and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realised democracy – to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and surveys its own actions. . . this is possible only when individuals are ‘directly linked to the universal history’ and dialogue arms itself to impose its own conditions.<sup>34</sup>

Water, having been erstwhile relegated to the level of instrumental necessity is here figured as delineable actor, incorporated into the compositional assemblages of the city not as the merely subservient correlate to the anthropocentric composition of the urban as ‘human habitat’ but as collaborative actor in the ongoing construction of the urban as the collective home of all its inhabitants, erstwhile considered ‘human’ or otherwise.

However, each of these conceptual toolkits alone cannot sufficiently address the political and architectural banalization of water, but can only go so far towards including and codifying a place

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<sup>32</sup> Tom McDonough, *The Situationists and the City*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 119.



for water in an articulated collective of the kind that Latour describes in the quote above. It is only together that they offer us not only a means of speaking about things like water itself, in the sense of “an ontology of objects in general, not a taxonomy of human comportment,”<sup>35</sup> as Harman writes, and also a means of substantively engaging with the political and architectural exclusion of such things from the composition and day to day excise of the collective (again, in their being figured merely politically, or merely architecturally). Speculative Materialism, as a strain or type of philosophical realism, is useful in that it offers us, as Graham Harman writes, “a serious effort to defend the credentials of an independent reality beyond appearance, or a substance beyond every series of qualities, of a world-in-itself in which the human subject plays just one limited part.”<sup>36</sup> Though, were one to establish the credibility of a world comprised of things-in-themselves of which we could speak, one would still lack a means by which to interpret the project of a collective commons proper to those things. That is, were one to establish the ontological autonomy of water, how would one then discern the project of a commons proper to water as a newly recognized member of the metropolitan assembly? As the editors of *The Speculative Turn* volume write, “a more serious issue for the new realisms and materialisms is the question of whether they can provide any grounds or guidelines for ethical and political action. Can they justify normative ideals?”<sup>37</sup> The issue, however, is that there is no objectified ‘they’ that must justify such ethical and political action – the critique of a merely ethical ethics or a merely political politics notwithstanding – rather there ought to be merely an ‘us’ which includes all the constituent members of an urban ecological whole, to whom the project of such a commons would be proper.

### Anticipated Objection: The Ontological Indifference of Water to Human Concerns

The argument against all this, however, goes something to the effect that if one were to establish an autonomous ontological standing for the world outside of ourselves, then there would need to exist some segment of ontology that would be irreducible or incommensurable with human concerns and politics. “Our knowledge may be irreducibly tied to politics,” as the editors of the *Speculative Turn* volume note, “yet to suggest that reality is also thus tied is to project an epistemological problem into

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35 Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 56.

36 Ibid, 106.

37 Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*, 16.



the ontological realm.”<sup>38</sup> This is true, but the fact that nonhuman assemblages may potentially be otherwise indifferent to their implication within a politics, and exist completely outside the scope of politics at one time or another (as, for instance, the water at the bottom of the ocean does before being reinserted into the cycle through tidal mixing), does not mean that their fates and well-being are not integrally and inextricably tied up with erstwhile considered human political projects (and the limitations inherent to their being figured as merely political therein), nor that they would not benefit from having their constitutive makeup understood and worked with. As Engels writes, “we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature. . . we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst.”<sup>39</sup> Recognizing our implication and imbrication within what is normally sectioned off as ‘nature,’ apart from us, requires a working-with – in the sense of an articulated cooperation – by the erstwhile considered human and nonhuman actors that make up the entirety of the urban ecological.

So while there is admittedly horizons of ontology that are not currently under the auspices of ‘human’ politics, in order to “uncover the limits and potentials of a politics oriented by speculative thought”<sup>40</sup> we should say that the project of a commons is nevertheless always relevant to ontology insofar as the fates of those horizons of ontology not currently in contact with the margins of ‘human’ politics are nevertheless bound up with the fates of those human politics, whether conceived holistically or delimited to their spectacular merely political form. We need to “acknowledge the need to forge new conditions of articulation between politics, epistemology, and metaphysics,”<sup>41</sup> as Ray Brassier writes – as “the failure to change the world may not be unrelated to the failure to understand it”<sup>42</sup> – but at the same time, in order to critique and foster alternatives to the ways in which water has been banalized, and denied this understanding in the contemporary metropolis, we need a positive compositional orientation that is commensurable with and capable of accommodating the kind of Political Ecology of water infrastructure being established here. Such a positive unitary project can be found in the work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, a group of French radicals in the 1960s.

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38 Ibid, 16.

39 Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (Chippendale, Au: Resistance Books, 2004), 12.

40 Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, The Speculative Turn, 12.

41 Ray Brassier, “Concepts and Objects” in The Speculative Turn, 54.

42 Ibid, 54.

## Political Ecology of the Situationist City

The situationists were urbanists in the truest sense – as opposed to those were called ‘urbanists’ at the time – in that they fed off the energies of the city and tapped into those flows of urban life to find that which was novel, creative, life-affirming, and dangerous. Situationist thought “was founded upon the belief that general revolution would originate in the appropriation and alteration of the material environment and its space,”<sup>43</sup> as Simon Sadler writes, indeed as Attila Kotayani and Raoul Vaneigem once wrote together, “we have invented the architecture and the urbanism that cannot be realized without the revolution of everyday life, that is to say the appropriation of conditioning by everyone, its unlimited enrichment and triumph.”<sup>44</sup> One of their ranks, Günther Feuerstein, refused to even abide by the conventional functionalist abstraction and alienation from the environmental conditions of the city, nor would he allow his apartment to mirror the epistemic and ideological insularity that he perceived in the way that apartments are ‘meant’ to function, as Sadler writes of Feuerstein:

Ripping out his air conditioning and throwing open his windows, he could swelter, shiver, and struggle to hear himself think above the roar of the city; later he might bump and hurt himself against one of the myriad sharp corners in his flat and sit at his wobbly table and on his uncomfortable sofa.”<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, soon after their founding in 1957 the Situationist International started publishing positive not only positive political and architectural critiques – that is, how they thought the city should be, what should be changed, what should be demolished, what should be possible – but critiques of the normative conceptions of politics and architecture as such. Indeed after several years of simply conceiving of politics and architecture differently, it became clear to the situationists that politics and architecture alone would be insufficient, and that only by a thoroughgoing shift in every register of our relation to the city and the materials that comprise it, politically, architecturally, ethically, poetically, ideologically and epistemologically, would we be able to effect any real change.

This project became known to the situationists as ‘Unitary Urbanism,’ the effort to reconceptualise the city as a space in which such an inclusive emancipatory kind of everyday life might unfold. “It is known that initially the situationists wanted at the very least to build cities, the environment

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43 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 13.

44 Attila Kotayani and Raoul Vaneigem, “Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office” in *The Situationists and the City* Ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 149.

45 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 8.

suitable to the unlimited deployment of new passions,” as Guy Debord wrote of their then budding enterprise, “but of course this was not easy and so we found ourselves forced to do much more.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, the situationist project is conducive and commensurable with the aims of the speculative materialist ontology insofar as it is not simply the alteration of one or another form within everyday life, be it political or architectural, ideology or the episteme fostered by it, but rather the thoroughgoing revolution of all of these at once, a revolution of everyday life in the sense of a radical alteration of all forms of everyday life. Their interrogation of the city and the politics and architecture that populate it is not so much aimed at simply those politics and architectures, but rather aimed at opening up – in much the same respect as speculative materialism – the possibility of their being otherwise; at the point of origin of a new arche, one that would ground something itself radically new.

Urbanism, that is, city planning or architecture when defined in the limited sense of that which is proper to the architectural realm (as opposed to ‘an architecture of life,’ perhaps, or ‘a politics of sense’), is described by the situationists as “capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment.” To be sure, when conceived of as solely the shaping of buildings rather than the shaping of lives led and environments inhabited, politics and architectures not only serve the logic of capitalism’s taking over the natural and human environment, but more accurately produce them as discreet and distinct categories in the first place. “Following its logical development towards total domination,” as Debord writes, “capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular décor.”<sup>47</sup> The ideological instantiation of itself within the metropolitan landscape is here understood not as the development of habitat that it otherwise masquerades as, but rather as the patristic replication of forms that will encourage *more of the same*. It produces materials like water as separate and inert, commodifiable and merely phenomenal, and then engenders political and architectural forms, as political or architectural, that will ensure this separation’s endless repetition and banalization. “The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical” as Debord writes, “it is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.”<sup>48</sup> The cyclical passage through ideological and epistemic banalization to political and architectural figuration that will encourage such separation, alienated comportment, and reduction to material’s merely phenomenal charac-

46 Debord, “On Wild Architecture” Tr. Tomas Y. Levin in On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957 – 1972 Ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 174 – 175.

47 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 95.

48 Ibid, 10.

ter, is here revealed to be the particular project of a system whose aims are ultimately identical to the modes of its enacting those aims, its own endless and ostensibly seamless reinstantiation into the contours and content of everyday life.

Indeed as Debord concludes, “the spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.”<sup>49</sup> The specific spectacle that inheres in the contemporary metropolis is the spectacle of global neoliberal capitalism, an ideological edifice which, as Maria Kaika has so wonderfully explained in *City of Flows*, has made water in the city aesthetically present or aesthetically absent in such a way as to accord only with its own reinscription into the built urban environment. That is, neoliberal ideology enslaves and negates water in the city both by making it disappear beneath the sheath of the urban environment and also by making it appear within certain sanctioned sites in their sanctioned and commodified form.

### Saturated Fictions: Orientation Towards the Spectacular City

In order to address the totalizing nature of the spectacle as it is manifest towards us in everyday life, the situationists developed an ethic of the city that was aimed towards addressing its wholesale negation of life and the real, and termed it ‘Unitary Urbanism’ in contrast to the politics and architectures of their day. “Unitary Urbanism first becomes clear in the use of the whole of arts and techniques as means cooperating in and integral composition of this environment,”<sup>50</sup> as the situationists note – at once “the fruit of a collective creativity of a new sort”<sup>51</sup> and “linked to a qualitative change of comportment and way of life,”<sup>52</sup> Unitary Urbanism was proposed as the means of “a true collective creation, at the level of art.”<sup>53</sup> From within the existent figurations of the contemporary western cityscape their project was the thoroughgoing negation of these figurations and the production of something new, the productive reconfiguration of all registers of everyday life in accordance with a radically democratic reassessment of who and what is qualified to contribute to a newly minted collective. Theirs was a recognition of the banalization inflicted upon the urban assemblage by the structural conditions

49 Ibid, 117.

50 Debord, “Toward a Situationist International” in *The Situationists and the City*, 94.

51 Constant and Debord, “The Amsterdam Declaration” in *The Situationists and the City*, 104.

52 Constant, “Inaugural Report to the Munich Conference” in *The Situationists and the City*, 106.

53 Ibid, 106.

of that assemblage's incipient organization and through this recognition they sought to redefine the conditions under which actors might not only delineate themselves and cooperatively coexist within that urban assemblage but continuously mold and shift that urban assemblage towards more liberating and emancipatory forms. As Debord writes:

The present-day planning of cities, which appears as a geology of lies, will make way with Unitary Urbanism, for a technique for defending the always threatened conditions of liberty, just as individuals – who do not yet exist as such – will freely construct their own history.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, in the excise of Unitary Urbanism as a program which articulates the false codification of our relation to the world – where world serves as mere correlate to and component within a dialectic of originary privileged beings and preordained categories and organizations of reality – the denizens of the city are compelled through Unitary Urbanism to rethink not only the structural and geometric forms of politics and architecture, but to fundamentally rethink their very existence within the cosmological whole and how that whole might be otherwise organized and structured; to envision a future not only for themselves, but for the actors that are yet to be palpably defined but nevertheless have stake within that future assembly. As Latour writes:

The venerable word 'Republic' is admirably suited to our task, if we agree to bring out the overtones of the underlying Latin word *res*, 'thing' as Latour points out, "as has been frequently noted, it is as if Political Ecology found again in the *res publica*, the 'public thing,' the ancient etymology that has linked the word for thing and the word for judicial assembly since the dawn of time: *Ding* and thing, *res* and *reus*.<sup>55</sup>

One of the primary tools developed by the situationists in the pursuit of an analysis of the ways in which the city acted upon its denizens, the modes of life and living – or their negation – that were fostered by different districts or different flows of city life, was the *Derive* – the psychogeographical 'drift' through the city, or, in other words, a purposeful but directionless walk. Noting its latin root 'derivare' McKenzie Wark places particular emphasis on its etymological progenies 'derive' and 'river.' The *derive* was their psychogeographical access to the methods of the spectacle's producing disinterest and also the ways in which it might be productively subverted, or detoured. "Its whole field of meaning is aquatic, conjuring up flows, channels, eddies, currents, and also drifting, sailing or tacking against the wind," as Wark writes, "it suggests a space and time of liquid movement, sometimes predictable but sometimes turbulent. . . the word *derive* condenses a whole attitude to life, the sort one

<sup>54</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 149.

<sup>55</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 54.

might acquire in the backwaters of Saint-Germain-des-Pres.”<sup>56</sup> The drift, as it came to be known, was a method for interrogating the construction of environments and what they sometimes inadvertently gave rise to, but often what they were purposefully and strategically configured to engender. As Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow write of their contemporary spin on – and digital reconceptualization of – the derive, it “emerged out of an interest in the seen and unseen, the half-percieved and mispercieved things at the limits of our perception, and in the reanimation of the lost bodies and past events that constitute this invisible world. The world is not entirely what it appears to be, and the surface of the visible world needs only to be lightly scratched to reveal the invisible worlds above and below.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed what is most salient in the composition of the contemporary city is not necessarily what is seen, and meant to be seen, but rather what is inherently and specifically composed as unseen. It is here that we find water, in the dramatic performance of its having been banalized: in its either having been entirely visually excluded, as is the case through most of its incorporation into the contemporary metropolis, or its occasional feature as mollified bourgeois ornament, its fetishized commodified form, “architectonic prostitution”<sup>58</sup> as the futurists so eloquently phrased it.

The archaeology of water’s having been all but erased from the perceptible cityscape must in a certain sense be treated as having originated in the same movement of the enlightenment that both inaugurated the conditions of the spectacle’s totalisation and gave rise to our ontological scepticism – or ignorance – towards the autonomy of materiality outside of the correlationist pairing of thought and being, human and world. The critique levied against Kant, in particular, by the proponents of a speculative materialism is such that, in his haste to escape the otherwise intractable articulations of the conditions of knowledge offered on the one hand by the empiricists, and on the other by the rationalists, he foreclosed the possibility of any real knowledge whatsoever; thereby inscribing an indifference towards the fate of ‘the things themselves’ within any otherwise positive political project that would accept his premises in their philosophical composition. “If Immanuel Kant deserves credit for anything, it is for recognizing the trench-warfare conditions of the metaphysics of his time, with its increasingly pointless proofs and counterproofs” as Graham Harman writes, though as he continues, “Kant’s unfortunate solution was to adopt an agnostic attitude toward the nature of things-in-

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56 Wark, *Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Time of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011), 22.

57 Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow “The Shape of the Real: The Work of the Einstein’s Brain Project” in *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* Ed. Damian Sutton, Susan Brind, and Ray McKenzie (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 121.

58 Maria Kaika, *City of Flows*, 18.

themselves: the rough equivalent of escaping trench warfare by wearing earplugs.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed in the articulation of a positive political project that derived not from an earnest relationship with the things-themselves, but rather from a transcendental dialectic, Kant also inaugurated the very enterprise that would so effectively capitalize on this alienation, i.e. modernity as such. It is in the language of modernity that Maria Kaika so admirably lays out how water was appropriated and striated by the logics of the city and eventually hidden behind, underneath, and within the forms that resulted.

“Despite their importance for the function of the contemporary city – technology networks are today largely hidden, opaque, invisible; disappearing underground, locked into pipes, cables, conduits, tubes passages, and electronic waves. . . however, urban networks have not always been opaque. Along with their ‘urban dowry’ (water towers, dams, pumping stations, power plants, gas stations, etc.), they have undergone important historical changes in their visual role and their material importance in the cityscape.”<sup>60</sup>

Water networks in the metropolitan landscape were developed in symbolic lockstep with a generalized apotheosis of the promise of modernity, the enlightenment project and its meta-narrative of historical salvation through technical-rationality and the advancement of ‘human’ concerns. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century water networks could be said to have been literal maps of a faith in the advents of modernity, as Kaika writes, “urban space became saturated with pipelines, cables, tubes, and ducts of various sizes and colors; things that celebrated the mythic images of early modernity, literally carrying the idea of progress into the urban domain and providing the confirmation that the road to a better society was under construction and paved with networks.”<sup>61</sup> At this point water did indeed feature heavily in our politics and architecture, but featured only at the level of fashion; allowed to transgress its ontological subjugation – though not challenge it, importantly – only through its having become commodified and fetishized. Indeed as Kaika notes the visitation and appreciation of water logistics used to be a prestigious activity for the middle and upper classes of both America, who would visit dams, and Europe, who would take part in boat tours of the sewage systems of London and Paris<sup>62</sup>.

Having been entirely given over to the enlightenment telos, however, and having abandoned themselves to the modernist line-of-flight, the West eventually came to perceive themselves as

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59 Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 145.

60 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 28.

61 Ibid, 38.

62 Ibid, 39.



enmeshed and implicated in a kind of split between the promise of modernity and its actual consequences. Indeed as Kaika writes, “by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cities in the industrialized world were left with the uncomfortable situation of being filled with material statements of an unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) promise, accentuated by two world wars and a period of economic depression. Urban technology networks and construction became material embodiments of disillusionment.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed disillusionment is, if not *the means*, at least one of the means that the spectacle employs in its constructive reinscription of alienation, not only in politics and architecture, but in the ideological structuration of everyday life. It maintains a rotating cast of actors who are allowed to appear at times, but who nevertheless lack any durable position as autonomous member of the assembly that the spectacle otherwise prescribes. As Debord writes, “while all the technical forces of capitalism contribute towards various forms of separation, urbanism provides the material foundation for those forces and prepares the ground for their deployment.”<sup>64</sup> The infrastructural necessity of water distribution networks did not at the same time necessitate water’s inclusion in any other sense but an instrumental summoning at the end of those pipes and conduits. Having progressively lost their symbolic import as fetishized objects of the promise of modernity, as Kaika notes, “the networks became buried underground, invisible, banalized, and relegated to a marginal, subterranean urban underworld.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed what is psychogeographically palpable in any drift of the contemporary cityscape is the virtual nonexistence of a visible testament to the proliferation of water logistics.

For the spectacle, having established an episteme in which materials are only important and accounted for in their phenomenal character, the visual exclusion of water distribution networks can therefore be understood as its ultimate mode of banishment. As Kaika writes:

Their contemporary hidden form contributed to severing the process of the social transformation of nature from the process of urbanization, blurring the tense relationship between nature and the city further. . . the apparently self-evident commodification of nature that fundamentally underpins a market-based society not only obscures the social relations of power inscribed therein, but also permits the disconnection of the perpetual flows of transformed and commodified nature from its inevitable foundation, i.e., the transformation of nature.<sup>66</sup>

With the qualification that, in contrast to Kaika’s articulation, we should instead say ‘the production

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63 Ibid, 43.

64 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 95.

65 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 29.

66 Ibid, 49.



of nature' in the sense of its having been produced to be transformed in the first place. The separation imposed upon the constitutive actors within everyday life is such that water is not only separated from 'nature' but separated from a 'nature' which is itself already produced in its having been ideologically separated and produced as distinct from the urban ecological, and, more generally, the cosmological, whole.

### Veiling Water: Ontological Obfuscation in the Spectacular City

What is veiled in the constructive burial of distribution networks is not simply the social relations of power that require such burial, but the ontological negation of the real that is inherent to those social relations as such, i.e. the very core of the spectacle's self-production and repetition within everyday life. In hiding the means by which nature is at once produced as distinct, originary – undifferentiated and available towards us, 'for us' not 'in itself' – the spectacle constructs the ground upon which its own conditions appear as self-evident and without origin. It has produced, then, a city in which water is not only barred and excluded from the constitutive processes of the commons, be they political or architectural or otherwise, but is structurally cloistered in a position from which it cannot, on its own, emerge. Insofar as the spectacle isolates and regulates the visual exclusion of water networks it denies them one of the primary requisites that the spectacle itself posits as necessary for recognition within the cosmological whole, i.e. mediated phenomenal appearance. As Kaika writes:

“High modernity with its crusade towards rationalization and clarity created a city of rhizomatic underground networks, which ceaselessly transform nature into city. The burial of networks was so successful that many of them are today undecipherable. The ideal city, the new utopia, was clean and sanitized, both in visual and literary terms. Water, for example, as Latour and Le Bourhis note, has become truly invisible, or has been turned systematically into something self-evident, an apparent triviality, located simply at the mouth of the tap. This 'silencing' of water and other networked relations rendered it into what it is not – H<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>67</sup>

The production of a systematic analog for water itself, the commodified substance that appears to us from within the geometry of the spectacle itself 'as' water, allows the thoroughgoing ontological denial of water even when we have it in our very hands. The politics and architecture that the spectacle gives rise to therefore has a means of reinserting itself in the relation, producing its mediation of our

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 48.

relation to water even in the moments of our most intimate being-with water, that is, the substitution of H<sub>2</sub>O as such with its spectacular analog, metabolized and commodified 'water,' 'good' water as opposed to 'bad' as Kaika writes. As Deleuze writes, "heat is movement, water is composed of H<sub>2</sub>O, but movement as object of thought is only constituted by negating that which it explains – heat qua system of sensible qualities. Equally, when we arrive at H<sub>2</sub>O, there is water no longer."<sup>68</sup> This is what the situationist Constant means when he writes that "the present condition. . . has lost touch with reality" to the extent that it is not simply the visual exclusion of water that bars it from being ontologically recognized and allowed to contribute to the collective composition of everyday life, but rather it is the other way around, the ontological banalization of water is such that we do not see water itself even when – today, though more commonly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – right in front of our eyes. As the authors of the Situationist International wrote:

"Today at a time when, despite certain appearances, more than ever (after a century of struggles and the liquidation between the two world wars of the whole classical workers movement, which represented the force of the general contestation, by ruling sectors whether traditional or of a new type) the dominant world passes itself off as definitive, on the basis of an enrichment and an infinite extension of an irreplaceable model, the comprehension of this world can only be based on contestation. . . this contestation has truth or realism only as the contestation of the totality."<sup>69</sup>

In other words we have to stop fighting amongst ourselves, the nascent actors who are to populate the proposed demos, and start challenging the situation which holds currently in which we have been brought together but brought together only under the auspices of our ultimately being nevertheless not 'with' each other in any substantive or recognitional sense. The appeal to realism or materialism here serves as a will towards the overturn of that banalized and denied ontological determinancy of 'objects,' the "contrast between their subterranean reality and the series of phenomenal surfaces they generate in our encounter with them,"<sup>70</sup> the former having been distanced from the later by the conscious and purposeful arrangement of, and striation within, the politics and architectures of the contemporary cityscape.

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68 Gilles Deleuze, "Mathesis, Science and Philosophy" in *Collapse III* Ed. Robyn MacKay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2007), 147.

69 Situationist International "Geopolitics of Hibernation" in *The Situationists and the City*, 207.

70 Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 55.

## Of Spectacular or Situationist Cities and their Waters

It is therefore not enough to merely construct an alternative politics or an alternative architecture from within *the terms and specifications of the already existent topology of the spectacular city*, its social relations having evolved with not only the means but indeed the presumption of its reinscription as the basis of any contingent or ancillary rearticulation. As Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe notes, “in order to grasp these levels of social reality, especially practices and behaviours. . . we must define a simultaneously ecological and cultural space, without effecting a dissociation between the two orders of phenomena.”<sup>71</sup> In other words it is imperative that, in the pursuit of any new politics or architecture, we understand and begin from the premise that the ontological horizon of the cosmological whole is not itself distinct and irreconcilable with the realm of ‘human’ concerns, but that it is instead the case that erstwhile considered ‘human’ experience and the ethico-political enterprises that it produces occur essentially and fundamentally within that cosmological whole, and within the sphere of the newly conceived commons that is proper to it. To be sure, this is a premise which holds radically democratic possibilities insofar as it is fundamentally irreconcilable with the spectacle, in its mediation and separation, as it is configured today. And begin moreover from the subsequent premise that it is merely a *frequent aspect* of such productions that ‘human’ concerns and the cosmological whole are themselves produced as distinct and irreconcilable. Rather than any qualified or provisional rearticulation of existent constitutions of the collective, the aim must be, as Lefebvre writes, “the conquest of everyday life, the recreation of the everyday and the recuperation of the forces which have been alienated in aesthetics, scattered through politics, lost in abstraction, severed from what is possible and what is real.”<sup>72</sup> In attempting to reconnect water to its place within what is possible and what is real, we should like to say that we are also, with Lefebvre, interested in reconnecting ourselves with what is possible and what is real, because we ought not effect a dissociation between them either. These lines of flight are ultimately the same effort insofar as in reconstituting the assembly to account for the actors and networks that arise around water, we indeed need to also reconstitute the assembly to account for what ‘we ourselves’ are in the same terms. It will require, as McKenzie Wark writes, “a coming-into-being through the encounter with something other, an encounter which necessitates

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71 Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, “The Study of Social Space” in Tom McDunough, *The Situationists and the City* (London: Verso, 2009), 72.

72 Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959 – May 1961* Tr. John Moore (London: Verso, 1995), 94.

a moment of both transformation and reflection.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed such a reconstitution – wherein even we ourselves are reconstituted as a member of such a newly conceived commons – will be done in concert with, and on the same ontological standing as, the materiality that is to occupy its assembly. “It will have to engage in politics,” as Latour notes, “an activity to which we had finally gotten rather unaccustomed, given the extent to which confidence in Science had allowed us to postpone the day of reckoning in the belief that the common world had already been constituted, for the most part, under the auspices of nature.”<sup>74</sup> Though again it will have to engage in not only politics, as in the civil collaboration between erstwhile considered ‘human’ actors and the actors and networks that become evident through this project of Unitary Urbanism, aimed at the contours of the real within the contemporary cityscape, the assembly will be holistically built. Not built as a determined and determinate space with the intention of being in a sense ‘done,’ but rather will be itself always determinately indeterminate, not done, not complete, provisional and contingent, as the presumption of and prefiguration by a philosophical materialism or realism will necessitate that there will always be new actors and new networks that are coming into and going out of existence that will need to be accounted for by the whole. This is especially true of water, where its material, its acts and its surrounding network, tends to flow, flux, sluice and seep, to leak into new arrangements that challenge the ossification of the assemblages it pertains to.

In the recognizing the ideologically produced absence of an earnest and respectful recognition of the material that constitutes the world – not only inaugurated by the enlightenment project but itself codified as the politics and architecture of what the situationists call the spectacle – the response is a Unitary Urbanism which struggles against this totalisation by seeking philosophical and psychogeographical access to the real. But the response is moreover conditioned by the engagement with that real, in the sense of building something which stands in opposition to the ossified irreality of the spectacle, by building something outside of its capacity to appropriate and appreciating such developments on the same basis. Indeed as McKenzie Wark writes, “it is by attempting to transform everyday life that the contours of the real are encountered.”<sup>75</sup> It is the contemporary philosophical realisms which have sought to address the post-Kantian metaphysics of the real – in contrast to the post-structuralist indifference towards and/or denial of ‘the real’ – but it was the situationists, long

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73 Wark, *Beach Beneath the Street*, 97.

74 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 83.

75 Wark, *Beach Beneath the Street*, 94.

before, who set their course towards it and lived and acted in a manner as though it was actually there. The situationists, rather than presuming themselves to *be ecstatic*, lived ecstatically – they correctly identified life and the real as stemming from ultimately the same *being-beholden to the cosmological whole* – and, through their having lived ecstatically, their having separated themselves from the world of separation, through their attempt to build something that would speak to an ‘outside’ the margins of the spectacle, they provided a model. They gave us a positive program commensurable with the philosophical affirmation of and speculative grasping towards the contours of the real itself. Together with the speculative materialists, then, it is in their terms that we should like to talk about water, how it exists with us in the urban environment, and why neither a merely architectural architecture nor a merely political politics is proper to it.

## Chapter Two

### Against Architecture: Ontological Urbanism I

Recently, in Potsdamerplatz, the largest construction site in Berlin, the co-ordinated movement of dozens of gigantic cranes was staged as an art performance – doubtless perceived by many uninformed passers-by as part of an intense construction activity. . . I myself made the opposite blunder during a trip to Berlin: I noticed along and above all the main streets numerous large blue tubes and pipes, as if the intricate cobweb of water, phone, electricity, and so on, was no longer hidden beneath the earth, but displayed in public. My reaction was, of course, that this was probably another of those postmodern art performances whose aim was, this time, to reveal the intestines of the town, its hidden inner machinery, in a kind of equivalent to displaying on video the palpitation of our stomach or lungs – I was soon proved wrong, however, when friends pointed out to me that what I saw was merely part of the standard maintenance and repair of the city's underground service network.

– Slavoj Žižek

The problem with considering architecture as a distinct and autonomous discipline unto itself, as far as the Situationist International was concerned, was that doing so played into the basic and inalienable logic of the spectacle, i.e. that which brings us all together but brings us together as nonetheless separate. The spectacle as the machinic 'technology of separation,' inscribed in and indeed forever *reinscribing* itself into not only the extant environments of everyday life but moreover into the fundamental categories and partitions – divisions of labor whether material or intellectual – applied to the development of those environments. To be an architect, or to identify this way, was to have already acquiesced to countless procedural and paradigmatic positions that allowed for then, and allow for now, the continued and continuing function of spectacular society. Andrew Karvonen parses the distinction out in his study on urban stormwater flows, *The Politics of Urban Runoff: Nature, Technology and the Sustainable City*, as being between 'urban ecologist' and 'engineer,' but the principle remains very much the same, the former seeks to create a space in which extant environments contribute meaningfully, albeit under the auspices of a reconfigured and, for our purposes, *revolutionary* kind of commons, whereas the latter merely seeks to impose form upon those environments in such a

manner as to perpetually recreate the conditions of the prevailing and, for our purposes, *conservative* social and political arena. To ‘do’ architecture, then – to be an ‘engineer’ in all the term’s most impositional conservative resonances – would be to merely reproduce the existing and wantonly insufficient determinations of urbanism that had characterized it as a discipline in which people were literally qualified as ‘architects’ in contradistinction to their inherent capacity to be, as the situationists held, holistic constructors of novel situations and creative formations of everyday life, of which the terrain would be only a particular, distil and rarified aspect thereof. They identified the practice of architecture with spectacular society, then, to the extent that the practice of architecture implied certain constructs to which architects could or could not legitimately speak.

One such construction that we ought to be breaking down, then, in our otherwise situationist resistance to, and incredulity towards, a hermetic determination of the architect – that is, in our abandonment of the term and derision towards the ‘architect’ as he who acquiesces to the spectacular ‘architecture’ as such – is a rigid distinction between inside and outside. This construct is spectacular in that it denies the otherwise undeniable, that architectural constructs do not, in actual fact, function with any clean and delineable break – beyond one or another spectacular articulation – between their being sourced by materials from, and their returning materials to, the colloquially and conveniently termed ‘outside’ world. That is, these boundaries ought to be collapsed into the more honest and earnest determinations of liminality that actually characterize the alternately termed ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of metropolitan architectural constructs. Which is why, as Debord writes, “the most reduced element of Unitary Urbanism is not the house but the architectural complex, which is the union of all the factors conditioning an environment, or a sequence of environments colliding at the scale of the constructed situation.”<sup>76</sup> It is not that the colloquially considered ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of an architectural form do not exist, they do, obviously, but rather that the boundaries that such colloquial deployment of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ rely on, like the wall, for example, are convenient and lazy, but actually speak very little to where the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ begin and end, if they really begin and end at all. “There is always the excess of a third space which gets lost in the division into outside and inside,” as Žižek writes, “an intermediate space which is disavowed: we all know it exists, but we do not really accept its existence – it remains ignored and (mostly) unsayable.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed one would be hard-pressed to deny wholly the realities of infrastructure rote large, but this space, to the extent that it is acknowl-

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76 Guy Debord, “Towards a Situationist International” in Tom McDonough, *The Situationists and the City*, 95.

77 Žižek, *Living in End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 259 – 260.

edged in the popular consciousness – the ‘we all know it exists’ in the limited sense that people more or less say ‘yes, there are things like pipes and conduits behind these walls’ – is misunderstood, and is precisely ideologically developed, socially and historically, in such a way as to mitigate any real appreciation for the productive relations that bring material ‘in’ and ‘out’ of otherwise ‘architectural’ constructs, and hence in such a way as to de-emphasize any real appreciation for the particular reality or ontological autonomy of this space.

That is, precisely as Žižek says, ‘we do not really accept its existence,’ but rather capitulate only to its ideological echo, its formal necessity, the ossification of a kind of generalized Piaget object permanence to such an extent that when one says ‘there are pipes behind these walls’ they really mean either ‘I saw pipes behind these walls once so I assume they are still there,’ or ‘I saw pipes behind a wall once, so I assume they are present here as well’ or merely ‘I have been told that pipes are the things that are behind walls, so I assume there are pipes behind these walls,’ rather than for a second really contemplating what it is like there with the pipes, in and amongst the pipes, rather than for a second really contemplating the space in and of itself, as a space, and not simply the most salient edifice of a metabolized and commodified nature in our service.

Indeed this limited determination of the understanding that ‘there are pipes in these walls’ is developed in what Simondon would call a hylomorphic fashion, wherein the masterful ‘architect’ imposes his totalizing vision upon inert and infinitely malleable matter, rather than in Protevi, taking from Simondon, has called a ‘transductive’ fashion, wherein there would be something of an appreciation for the impossibility of this kind of masterful and totalizing imposition of form onto matter. As John Protevi writes, “hylomorphic conceptions of production are based in the social conditions of slave society: all production is credited to the direction provided by the eidetic vision and ordering command of the architect/master/ruler.”<sup>78</sup> That is, in the ontological reduction of material to its possible ontological mode of ‘for us’ rather than its possible ontological mode ‘in itself’ we tacitly condone the development of architectural forms – though the extent to which this is understood or acknowledged is negligible at best, to be sure. Paradoxically it is such that this ideological blind is developed hylomorphically to engender the perception that hylomorphic determinations of architectural forms are themselves at all possible. They are not, or not completely at any rate. The only construction that the developmental mode of hylomorphism is capable of producing is construction of its own illusion,

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<sup>78</sup> John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida, and the Body Politic* (London: Continuum, 2001), 123.



that is, the illusion of its own efficacy when projected upon the material realm.

Because the logic of appropriative spectacular capital acts upon the terrain of everyday life in a totalized and totalizing way, any delimited practice of 'reform,' like an architecture with pretensions of working against such totalisation could only do so, at least in any real sense, outside the auspices of such systems, outside of what Deleuze and Guattari have otherwise referred to as "transcendent paranoiac law." Paradoxically, then, it is only under the conditions of the wholesale overturn or evacuation of the spectacle that piecemeal approaches to urban water infrastructure like architecture would hold any meaning, while, importantly, under such conditions no such piecemeal approaches would occur, replaced as they would be by a holistic practice of the construction of everyday life which respects and accounts for the ontological autonomy of its constituent practitioners, whether erstwhile considered human or non-human, namely the practice of Unitary Urbanism. As it is in the Situationist International:

For the method of experimental utopia, if it is truly to correspond to its project, must obviously embrace the totality, i.e. carrying it out would lead not to a 'new urbanism' but to a new use of life, a new revolutionary praxis. It is also the lack of a connection between the project for a passionate reordering of architecture and other forms of conditioning, and its rejection in terms of the whole society, that constitutes the weakness of Gunther Feuerstein's theses, published in the same issue of the journal of the German section of the S.I., despite the interest of several points, in particular his notion of the unpredictable mass, 'representing chance and also the smallest organization of objects comprised by an event.' Feuerstein's ideas on an 'unpremeditated architecture,' which follow the S.I. line, can only be understood in all their consequences, and carried out, precisely by overcoming the separate problem of architecture and the solutions that would be reserved for it in the abstract.<sup>79</sup>

That is, again, the visual exclusion of productive relations, their contrived aesthetic absence, contributes to an epistemological atrophy – that is, a withering necessity for people to at all know or understand the means by which architectural constructs are in actuality connected, networked, and contingent upon each other and upon systems and assemblages of circulation. And this epistemic atrophy itself gives rise to an ontological agnosticism towards the autonomous being of the materials, like water, that make up those systems and assemblages of circulation. The determination of the architect as the one who oversees that which has been classically interpreted as 'architectural,' is here understood to be he who builds up the false perception of their own constructs as self-contained,

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<sup>79</sup> Debord, "Critique of Urbanism" in Tom McDonough, *The Situationists and the City* (London: Verso, 2009), 153.

isolate and consummate, rather than extensions of, and dependent upon, the material reality of everyday life. As Lewis Mumford writes, the modern city has classically implied “a tendency to loosen the bonds that connect its inhabitants with nature and to transform, eliminate, or replace its earth-bound aspects, covering the natural site with an artificial environment that enhances the dominance of man and encourages an illusion of complete independence from nature.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed it is precisely because we develop – or more accurately that we have allowed others to develop – environments which represent us as distinct and hermetically separate from the cosmological whole that we then, unsurprisingly, believe ourselves to be exactly that, and produce the kind of social and political forms that are premised upon that belief. As Karvonen writes:

Beyond the entrenched modes of thinking about human/nonhuman relations as well as the social structures that reify these modern dichotomies, one of the most formidable barriers to realizing new relations between humans and nonhumans is the material obduracy of the built environment. The perennial and seemingly permanent infrastructure of the nineteenth century slowly crumbles under the feet of urban residents but the logic of these networks persists in physical form and can only be removed or reoriented at high cost. As such, there is a tendency in urban development processes to perpetuate the nature/culture relations that were instituted over a century ago because of the physical resistance to widespread change.<sup>81</sup>

By material obduracy he means the scripting of self-perpetuation within the construction of architectural forms, which are premised upon a dialectic of capitulation to a delimited field, architecture, on the one hand, and unfettered fascistic totalisation within that field, the architect, on the other. In acquiescing to the particular purview of architecture, and the particular practices and procedures of ‘the architect,’ we guarantee ourselves the penance of future urban environments in which it will be yet harder and harder to conceive or imagine otherwise.

Architecture – itself delimited and sequestered by spectacular ideology to a series of regional ontologies, epistemes or modes of knowing of what the architect can and cannot speak to – sets itself upon the task of reproducing in material environments the same sense of control that underpins spectacular ideology. The homeowner or proprietor of one or another architectural construct feels ‘ownership’ of not only their architectural construct but of the contrived ‘construct’ of distinction

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80 Lewis Mumford, “The Natural History of Urbanization” in *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* Ed. William Thomas Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 386.

81 Andrew Karvonen, *Politics of Urban Runoff: Nature, Technology, and the Sustainable City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 193.

between its ideologically constituted inside and its ideologically constituted outside, as though they themselves were the arbiter of the visual exclusion of the third space (and as such the arbiter of their own ignorance thereof, 'the infinite sunshine of the spotless mind').

This is not to say they lay claim to the third space itself, of course, but rather specifically to its aesthetic and subsequently epistemic abolition – 'out of sight, out of mind,' the homeowner or proprietor might say, were they in a position to consider it, in spite of it being nevertheless there, mediating, as it necessarily must, between what is to their minds understood only in the strict binary of inside and outside, it having been ideologically provided to them constituted and commodified as such. As Kaika writes, "it is precisely this visual exclusion of production networks, of metabolized nature and of social power relations, that contributes greatly to the production of a sense of the familiar inside one's home. In a deceitful way, remaining unfamiliar with the above socio-natural networks is a prerequisite for feeling familiar within one's own home."<sup>82</sup> And by acquiescing to the spectacular ideological banishment of material reality – aesthetically and, in turn, epistemically – architecture, most especially of the modernist variety, creates the conditions under which the subject proper to that ideology will continue to acquiesce and material reality will remain interred and considered only in its being ontologically 'for us' rather than 'in itself' thusly. As Chtcheglov wrote in the situationist *Formulary for a New Urbanism*, "darkness and obscurity are banished by artificial lighting, and the seasons by air conditioning; night and summer are losing their charm and dawn is disappearing. The man of the cities thinks he has escaped from cosmic reality, but there is no corresponding expansion of his dream life. The reason is clear: dreams spring from reality and are realized in it."<sup>83</sup> Hence it is only by a thoroughgoing engagement with, and holistic reclaim of, the third space that a ontologically grounded urban politics might be worked through; it is only through a radical reconfiguration of our comportment towards not only the ontologically autonomous actors, assemblages, and networks, but moreover that third space, as that which corrodes the ideologically constituted binary of a 'natural' inside and outside, that we might come to speak about novel arrangements of erstwhile considered human and nonhumans that would comprise what would exceed the otherwise *merely* architectural.

That is, the third space, by necessity, operates on two registers – on the one hand it is the literal space of household circulation and exchange, its veins and arteries: plumbing, sewers, and the

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<sup>82</sup> Kaika, *City of Flows*, 65.

<sup>83</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, "Sire, I am From the Other Country: Formulary for a New Urbanism" in *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni: Die Situationist International (1957 – 1972)* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), 210.

multifarious and libidinal wired connections of electricity, phone, internet, etc., but, on another level, it is the 'architectural' or built figuration and locus of the in-between of the Kantian phenomenal and noumenal. As Žižek writes, this third space mediates the relation between the phenomenal and that which exceeds it: "it is as if the waste disappears into some netherworld, beyond our sight and out of our world. . . We rely on this space, but ignore it – no wonder then that, in science-fiction, horror films, and techno-thrillers, this dark space between walls is where horrible threats lurk (for spying machines to monsters or animals like cockroaches and rats). Recall also, in science-fiction architecture, the topos of a building with an extra floor or room not included in the building's plan (and where, of course, terrifying things dwell)."<sup>84</sup> But it is in his admirable articulation of the 'no wonder then,' that Žižek betrays the very mode and method by which spectacular ideology recoups and mollifies constructs which might otherwise involve and engage with the third space in an open and aesthetic manner. Or rather, he articulates this mediation of the phenomenal to the noumenal in only one direction, that of evacuation, which is characteristic of, and uncritically acceptant of, the spectacular division of inside as 'good,' 'safe,' 'hermetic,' 'self-contained,' and the outside as 'wild,' 'pollute,' 'unknown,' 'uncontrolled,' and the like. If one only considers the mediation in terms of the merely 'excremental' and upon threat of the 'return of the repressed' then its 'no wonder then' that spectacular architecture has been so successful in proliferating and reproducing those forms which promise to not only rid you of the former, the excremental, and guard against the latter, the return of the repressed, the abject, but moreover divest you of such concerns entirely.

The issue, however, is that this one-directional understanding of our relation to the third space – our having acquiesced to the ideological construction of inside as 'good,' 'safe,' and outside as 'dark,' 'foreboding,' and 'unknown' – merely opposes what would otherwise be the first space to what would otherwise be the second and both reifies and evacuates the third, replicating and reinscribing the division and duality of inside/outside into two nonetheless firmly demarcated places: beyond the inside but not quite outside, and arriving from outside but not quite inside. But this is the problem with Žižek's conception, that is, this is simply not how the third space functions. Not only is there not a philosophically legitimate architectural 'inside' that ought to be functionally distinguished and distinct from its concomitant architectural 'outside,' but in much the same respect as Adrian MacKenzie's articulation of 'the mesh problem,' that is, the transductive or directional indeterminacy at the epicenter of a nuclear blast, the third space is itself neither delineable from what would oth-

84 Žižek, *Living in End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 260.

erwise be that inside nor from what would otherwise be that outside, but is rather only articulable in the context of, and as an index for, the flows and circulations that constitute the relations between one ideologically sectioned space and the other. It represents the relations as the basis of the separation, in spite of the ideological separation being undermined by those very relations. Our spatial compartmentalizations are simply not reflected in the circulations of the material flows which allow for their phenomenal survival and reproduction.

Or more specifically our discursive compartmentalizations, our propensity to condescend from one ideologically instantiated discipline to another, is mirrored in the ideologically contoured built environment of the city. The discursive and semantic compartmentalizations are reified into corresponding material compartmentalizations, and both serve to inhibit an appreciation for the social and compositional processes that bring materials like water to us. “The analysis of tools is concerned only incidentally with the human use of tools. Its real subject matter is the stance of entities themselves in the midst of reality,”<sup>85</sup> as Graham Harman writes, indeed, as he is wont to note, “the tool isn’t ‘used;’ it is.”<sup>86</sup> And to be sure, in spite of our having otherwise given rise to it – when conceiving of the contrivances of urban engineers as the Aristotelian efficient cause of ‘the third space’ – it nevertheless is only engaged with phenomenally (in spite of its capacity to either engender or mollify a respect for the ontological autonomy of materials like water that emerge into and disappear away into what is otherwise ideologically constituted as ‘outside’ from what is otherwise ideologically constituted to be ‘inside’). As Wark notes, “materialism is a kind of turning outward, not directly to the material, because it’s not quite that easy, but to practices that encounter it in ways that can be patterned and that point towards further ordering of whatever the material might be, but where that ordering is always understood to be kind of temporary, that whatever ordering we arrive at doesn’t actually have all that much ontological substance. It’s that from which the rug can always be pulled out from under it by further discovery, to have not thought you’ve always got it, ‘it’s this, it’s this,’ there’s always upon further inquiry a reason why it’s not.”<sup>87</sup> Or rather, even the most benevolent and enlightened formations of otherwise ‘architectural’ space – even under the auspices of a Unitary Urbanism – cannot make manifest the noumenal (though in our terms it is already there, comprising any such environment, whatever its makeup) but rather specific forms of architectural constructs can only serve to open up

85 Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 46.

86 Ibid, 7.

87 Wark quoted in Dock Currie “Situationist Materialism: Beach Beneath the Street, an Interview with McKenzie Wark” in *Theory & Criticism Prosthesis* (forthcoming).

or close off the possibility of a materialist understanding of what comprises those forms, i.e. the material content of urban environments. The alternate composition of urban ecological whole is not then aimed at actually presenting the noumenal, as this is not possible, but rather at –among other things – the kind of aesthetic composition of the urban ecological whole that would encourage a respect for its being nonetheless there as well as an aesthetic composition of the urban ecological whole that is itself premised upon and reflects a respect for its being nonetheless there, present amongst the newly conceived commons, not sequestered by normative necessity out of the most salient parts of ‘our’ experience in the built environment, as it is equally well ‘theirs,’ insofar as, like Feurstein (though perhaps less idiosyncratically), we ought not to effect a dissociation between the two.

The specific ideological forms which are made manifest in the contemporary urban landscape by the authorial/authoritarian edict of that tin-pot despotic figure of ‘the architect’ are not arbitrary, however. Foucault writes that “in the classical period, the melancholy of the English was easily explained by the instability of the weather; all those fine droplets of water that penetrated the channels and fibers of the human body and made it lose its firmness, predisposed it to madness. Finally, neglecting an immense literature that stretches from Ophelia to the Lorelei, let us note only the great half-anthropological, half-cosmological analyses of Heinroth, which interpret madness as the manifestation in man of an obscure and aquatic element, a dark disorder, a moving chaos, the seed and death of all things, which opposes the mind’s luminous and adult stability.”<sup>88</sup> That is, he implicitly but strategically opposes one form of madness to another, the first, aquatic, schizic, connective and yet sprawling in a manner that is ostensibly terrifying, or at least ideologically constituted to be so, and anathema to the second madness, that is, terrestrial madness, paranoiac, striating, structuring, amenable to a dependence upon and deployment of ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ by a masterful and, one might venture to say, Kantian subject. The topology of urban water distribution networks is the point at which these competing madnesses meet; the point “where the sea becomes land, the land sea, where the city is designated only by ‘marine terms’ and the water by ‘urban terms.’”<sup>89</sup> And it will neither do, therefore, to conceive of delineations like the wall before the third space as the hyper-organized spectacular screen that merely obscures ‘the real’ from us, nor will it do to conceive of the third space as part of our daily phenomenal life, because it isn’t. A properly liminal understanding of the third space, one that understands and interprets it as inseparable from the intractably networked

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88 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* Tr. Richard Howard (Oxon: Routledge, 1989), 10.

89 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* Tr. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 48.

arrangements which characterize the urban landscape as a whole, would need to resist such a one-dimensional interpretation of the mediation between the phenomenal and the noumenal – or more accurately between the phenomenal and the possibility of the noumenal. As Kaika writes:

“Natural elements are not in fact kept altogether outside the modern home; but rather are selectively allowed to enter after having undergone significant material and social transformations, through being produced, purified, and commodified. Polluted air and recycled water, for example, have to undergo a complex chemical and social process of purification before they are allowed to enter the domestic sphere of consumption. In fact, the more human activities transform nature, the more the intervention of technology (water purifiers, air conditioning, ionizers, etc.) becomes necessary in order to cancel the effects of this transformation and render nature ‘good’ again before it is allowed to enter the private home in the form of a commodity. Thus, although excluded ideologically, natural processes (just like social processes) remain connected materially to the inside of the home, constituting an integral part of its material production and smooth function.”<sup>90</sup>

Or rather, it is not only that the third space mediates our ideologically prescribed phenomenal construction of inside/outside in the manner of that which draws the otherwise abject away from our sight into some indeterminate netherworld, but mediates it also in the manner of what which produces from that indeterminate netherworld, as though by magic, all the material creature comforts that are today expected of even the most basic of architectural constructs. It is not that the ideological constructs of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ obstructs us from the noumenal, but rather that it obstructs us from the possibility of appreciating that the noumenal exists, autonomously, out there. Acquiescence to the spectacular fiction of a ‘purely inside space’ or a ‘purely outside space’ obstructs us from an appreciation that things really exist, that they aren’t simply the playthings of a kind of diffuse human solipsism. After all, as Žižek writes, “it is Kant who, insofar as he conceives the gap as merely epistemological, continues to presuppose a fully constituted noumenal realm existing out there”<sup>91</sup> so it’s not that architectural constructs, conceived as and built from the conception of discreet and self-contained units of an environment, actually connect to an indeterminate netherworld, the realm of the otherwise disavowed noumenal, so much as they engender this perception, they engender an agnosticism towards the ontological autonomy of the means by which materials like water nonetheless appear when we turn the tap in our bathrooms, our kitchens, our public pools – in spite of their having been figured as unavailable to us in anything other than a phenomenal way. As Jacques

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90 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 64.

91 Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 27.



Ellul writes, “we are incapable of knowing that this miracle is a long social process of production,”<sup>92</sup> though we are equally well incapable of knowing that this ‘incapable of knowing’ is itself a long social process of production. That is, the perceived intransience of the kinds of architectural forms which obscure ‘the third space’ – implying the sets of relations that undermine the separation between the first space and the second – bespeaks the very ontological quagmire which produces it, a kind of acquired xenophobia towards the real.

The aesthetic construction of the third space as absent functions in such a manner as to deny the connectedness of architectural constructs to the environments that they otherwise exist within and which otherwise sustain them, it ideologically denies what Katherine Hayles calls ‘interactivity’ and ‘positionality’ which are necessary, she argues, if one aims to surpass such agnosticism. “Interactivity points towards our connection with the world: everything we know about the world we know because we interact with it. Positionality refers to our locations as humans living in certain times, cultures, and historical traditions: we interact with the world not from a disembodied, generalized framework but from positions marked by the peculiarities of our circumstances as embodied human creatures,” Hayles writes, “together, interactivity and positionality pose a strong challenge to objectivity, which for our purposes can be defined as the belief that we know reality because we are separated from it. What happens if we begin from the opposite premise, that we know the world because we are connected to it?”<sup>93</sup> Truly, if we were to comport ourselves towards the third space – as the kind of space which subverts the delineation of the spaces – in such a way as to appreciate the extent to which we are deprived of an experiential and coenesthetic engagement with it by the ‘nature’ of contemporary urban architectural constructs, would we begin to see some of the more egregious abuses of the ecological whole, whether to erstwhile considered humans or nonhumans, as symptomatic thereof?

Žižek calls the relation of interactivity and positionality – our condemnation of ‘architecture’ notwithstanding – the architectural parallax, that is, “the building, in its very material existence, bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives.”<sup>94</sup> True, though the fact remains that the preponderance of architectural parallax are ideologically constituted in such a manner as to leave

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92 Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System* Tr. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Continuum, 1980), 16.

93 Katherine Hayles, “Searching for Common Ground” in *Reinventing Nature?* Ed. Michael Soule and Gary Lease (Washington: Island Press, 1995), 48.

94 Žižek, *Living in End Times*, 244 – 245.



one believing those irreconcilable orientations to be amenable to one another – simply in virtue of their having been conceived of architecturally, that is, by a discipline which is itself ideologically constituted as isolate and distinct – leaving the indelible mark of the uncanny on the environs they pertain to insofar as this is merely a mask upon the real heterogenous makeup of the environment's relations to its multifarious inhabitants.

That said, the converse, it must be said, is equally true – that is, it's hard to deny the ontological autonomy of the material, and the social and productive relations that bring water to one's tap, if you can light the water that emerges on fire. This is indeed the case for the residents depicted in Josh Fox's documentary *Gasland* – about the unintended toxic consequences of the hydraulic extraction of natural gas, otherwise known as Fracking – but the specific architectural constitution of our relations in the urban environment, by contrast, is more often than not particularly suited to the de-emphasis and denial of any such material, any such social and productive relations, and any such ideological constitution, and as a result more often than not suited to the denial of, or at least psychological abstraction from, any such problematic or unsustainable formations within the urban ecological whole. As Harman writes:

“Inspecting a length of unbroken pipeline, we do not merge into mystic union with its secluded function: we already rise above the contexture and see it as a pipeline rather than as something else. . . the broken tool counts as the first way in which the entity is freed from its contexture, released from the dimension of reference. Here, the tool is encountered as a tool rather than only quietly functioning as one. Fractured equipment emerges as a determinate entity, torn loose from the totality; to this extent, it attains a kind of presence in spite of the system that tries to consume it.”<sup>95</sup>

That is, it is unfortunately, more often than not, only when the provisional and contingent ‘nature’ of architectural constructs assert themselves, in the form of accident and breakdown, that one is forced to appreciate the extant reality of the third space, the relations that mediate and allow for the spectacular separation of first space, ‘inside,’ from second, ‘outside.’ Wanton abuses to ‘outside’ are therefore sanctioned by a spectacular logic, one which commodifies all things as proper to the implicit figuration of ‘inside,’ in spite of their having been ideologically constructed as distinct in the first place.

Indeed all current political platitudes to the ‘unsustainable’ biases of the metropolis with respect to environmental or ecological degradation are contoured in such a manner as to alleviate

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<sup>95</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002), 46 – 47; 49.

calls for fundamental reform or overhauls to the function of the urban totality. They are structured and intended to placate or mollify any conceptual ecology, like Unitary Urbanism, that would demand as much, while nevertheless giving the appearance of earnest care and concern therein. One can plainly perceive the sleight if only one takes the time to compare the spectacular public-relations campaigns wrought by, variously, political parties, oil and gas corporations, agricultural concerns and the like to the near unanimous but often muffled and suppressed articulations of their impact by the scientific community. As Debord writes:

The masters of society are now obliged to speak of pollution and to combat it (because, after all, they live on the same planet as we do, and this is the only sense in which one can allow that capitalism's development has actually realized a certain fusion of the classes) so as to dissimulate it: because the simple truth of the 'harmful effects' and current risks suffice to constitute an immense factor in revolt, a materialist demand of the exploited, as vital as the struggle of the proletarians of the 19th Century for the possibility of eating.<sup>96</sup>

This dissimulation, for our purposes, takes the form of the hermetic discipline of architecture, which composes structures which will engender in their inhabitants a continued, and continuing, amenability to such dissimulation, a perpetual cognitive dissonance to "these two [mutually] antagonistic movements – the supreme stage of commodity production and the project of its total negation, equally rich in internal contradictions. . . the two sides through which a single historical moment (long-awaited and often foreseen in inadequate partial figures) manifests itself: the impossibility of the continuation of the functioning of capitalism."<sup>97</sup> Point source metropolitan pollution is important in its own right but is ultimately systematic of what Rancière has recently called one 'distribution of the sensible' in which the epistemic parameters of the built environment "causes reality to appear as [either] transformable or inalterable."<sup>98</sup> Why do we not aesthetically involve and engage with the interminable symbiosis of the third space? Is this space the purview and purchase of the schizic-aquatic modality of madness in and of itself, with the hermetic enclosed architectural construct the purview and purchase of the paranoiac-terrestrial modality of madness in and of itself, or are these connections and allegiances themselves merely ideological edicts to fear one and rely upon the other? "The denunciation of mere appearance effortlessly moves within mere appearance, because it has no other way of designating what is proper – that is, nonappearance – except as the obscure opposite of the spectacle," as

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96 Debord, *A Sick Planet* Tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2008).

97 Ibid.

98 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* Tr. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 49.

Nancy writes, “since the spectacle occupies all of space, its opposite can only make itself known as the inappropriable secret of an originary property hidden beneath appearances.”<sup>99</sup> The construction of the third space as absent passes as implicit, originary, intransient – just ‘the way it is’ – while nonetheless serving definitive and easily articulated ideological ends of spectacular society. The spectacular fiction of an ontological privilege of ‘the human’ as separate from, above and beyond the inert environment we otherwise inhabit, is mirrored in the spectacular fiction of the architectural construct as separate from, above and beyond the inert ‘nature’ that we have otherwise opposed it to.

The locus of concern is not the ideological resonance of wall or floor, however – ideologically resonant as they might be – as to inter these forms as themselves coextensive with, qua material, the constructive aesthetic banishment of logistical water networks from the contemporary metropolis would reduce what, in a more pressing sense, pervades the entirety of the third space, which is itself – as already stated – interminable. Just as there is no philosophically legitimate basis for demarcating a pure architectural ‘inside’ from its concomitant pure architectural ‘outside’ there is equally well no philosophically legitimate basis for demarcating the point at which one particular architectural construct ceases to be networked at distance or coterminous with another, whether by degree or by kind. Even the delimitation of the urban or the metropolitan is merely a convenient shorthand for a more or less intensive density of connections within a meshwork of social and productive relations that comprise what we colloquially call ‘the city.’ That is, “continually drawing near the wall, while at the same time pushing the wall further away,”<sup>100</sup> we are beholden to the belief that our environs are self-contained and self-sustaining units of discreet living or work space, while at the same time we are beholden to the belief that – again, to the limited degree they are acknowledged whatsoever – the productive relations that operate within ‘the third space’ are themselves self-contained and discreet units, as in the case of Žižek’s articulation. Neither is true. As Kaika writes:

The social construction of the Western (bourgeois) home as an autonomous, independent, private space is predicated upon a process of visual and discursive exclusion of undesired social (anomie, homelessness, social conflict, etc.) and natural (cold, dirt, pollution, etc.) elements,”

<sup>101</sup> “high modernity with its crusade towards rationalization and clarity created a city of rhizomatic underground networks, which ceaselessly transform nature into city. The burial of networks was so successful that

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99 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* Tr. Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 51 – 52.

100 Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* Tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 176.

101 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 7.

many of them are today undecipherable. The ideal city, the new utopia, was clean and sanitized, both in visual and literary terms. Water, for example, as Latour and Le Bourhis note, has become truly invisible, or has been turned systematically into something self-evident, an apparent triviality, located simply at the mouth of the tap. This 'silencing' of water and other networked relations rendered it into what it is not – H<sub>2</sub>O. The new urban fetish, then, lay, amongst others, in the apparent aesthetic disconnection from all old, dirty, unsafe, and ugly networks. . . The mess, the dirt, the underbelly of the city became invisible both socially and environmentally, banned from everyday consciousness.<sup>102</sup>

To be sure 'silencing' is an appropriate turn of phrase, and is not deployed here arbitrarily – it is rather only when we realise that materials like water have been architecturally stymied and left as what Rancière terms 'the part which has no part' that we might begin to challenge the systematic reduction of station and place conferred onto successive disciplines, like architecture, in the construction of the urban world and everyday life. How else would one challenge the pervasive and essentially unchallenged illusion that one's home or place of work is autonomous and distinct from both other 'autonomous and distinct' homes and places of work, as well as the contrived delineation of 'nature' from 'social,' other than by "the extension of the collective [that] makes possible a presentation of humans and nonhumans that is completely different from the one required by the cold war between objects and subjects. . . The collective is indeed composed of entities sharing enough essential features to participate in a Political Ecology that will never again oblige them to become, without debate, either objects belonging to nature or subjects belonging to society."<sup>103</sup> Indeed as Nancy writes:

Both the theory and praxis of critique demonstrate that, from now on, critique absolutely needs to rest on some principle other than that of the ontology of the Other and the Same: it needs an ontology of being-with-one-another, and this ontology must support both the sphere of 'nature' and sphere of 'history,' as well as both the 'human' and the 'nonhuman'; it must be an ontology for the world, for everyone – and if I can be so bold, it has to be an ontology for each and everyone and for the world 'as a totality,' and nothing short of the whole world, since this is all there is (but, in this way, there is all).<sup>104</sup>

Or rather, it is not enough to simply produce spaces which intuit the demands of a future collective, but rather it is the case that one must work actively to bring about that future commons and then develop spaces appropriate to such a commons to accommodate. This is not possible under the spectacular regime of isolate and hermetic disciplines like architecture and politics with their delimit-

102 Ibid, 48.

103 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 76; 90.

104 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 53 – 54.

ited and particular purview, but is possible under the regime of Unitary Urbanism insofar as it neither subscribes to nor is beholden to any such delimited or particular purview; the concerns of building the city for the situationist practice of Unitary Urbanism are the concerns of creative and holistic composition, whether of the commons itself or the experience of everyday life.

## Chapter Three

### Against Politics: Ontological Urbanism II

The urban ecology of the contemporary city remains in a state of flux and awaits a new kind of environmental politics that can respond to the co-evolutionary dynamics of social and bio-physical systems without resorting to the reactionary discourses of the past. By moving away from the idea of the city as the antithesis of an imagined bucolic ideal we can begin to explore the production of urban space as a synthesis between nature and culture in which long-standing ideological antinomies lose their analytical utility and political resonance.

– Matthew Gandy

Rivers were the primal highways of life. From the crack of time, they had borne men's dreams, and in their lovely rush to elsewhere, fed our wanderlust, mimicked our arteries, and charmed our imaginations in a way the static pond or vast and savage ocean never could. Rivers had transported entire cultures, absorbed the tears of vanquished races, and propelled those foams that would impregnate future realms. Everywhere dammed and defiled, they cast modern man's witless reflection back at him - and went on singing the world's inexhaustible song.

– Tom Robbins

Our working hypotheses will be reconsidered at each future upheaval, wherever it may come from.

– Guy Debord

Hydro-social distributional networks do not develop in isolation but are both conceived of and constructed in concert with a myriad of different elements in and around the urban assemblage contributing to their particular form and function. In what follows we would like to show how such hydro-social arrangements and figurations are inherently political and that whether or not materials like water are conceived of as ontologically autonomous, existent outside of a correlationist epistemology, determines both the purchase and commensurability of extant political forms as well as our relative capacity to conceive of alternatives. It is not enough to show that any political act or gesture inherent to Unitary Urbanism must be opposed to an ontological privileging of the human. Rather,

any such act or gesture must be opposed to politics itself in the form it takes on under the sign and aegis of spectacular global capital. That is, Unitary Urbanism ought to be opposed to politics when conceived as a hermetic endeavour unto itself, when isolated from the material realities of everyday life in the cityscape – and opposed also to the specific political forms which represent both such an ontological privileging and such spectacular sequestration, the most dominant of which today is the political form of neoliberalism.

Certainly fascism represents such a point of convergence, wherein an ontological debasement of ‘the other’ meets a delimited politics that legislates over other discourses rather than includes them in its constitutive whole, but neoliberalism is so particularly dangerous because when taken at face value, it otherwise appears to be – and certainly purports to be – an ideology of emancipation and freedom, but the basis of this purported emancipation and these purported freedoms is nonetheless a more clandestine and obscurant kind of totalisation, rooted in a wholesale subservience to the means and measures of neoliberalism itself. As Harvey writes, “neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic. . . it has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, as Michael Gardiner writes, it represents “not simply a neutral belief system; [but rather] is inscribed within the matrix of social activities that structure our relationship to the world and helps to generate a particular knowledge of it.”<sup>106</sup> Neoliberalism is therefore at once the dominant ideology that obtains today and also the particular epistemic condition that allows for its continued existence as ideology through alienated commodity relations. Though, in what follows, we will call the former ‘neoliberal ideology’ and the latter ‘spectacular global capital.’ Neoliberalism today is an ideology that insists upon and constructs the edifices of not only the particular form of the means of production but the particular form of the means of consumption. Or rather, commodity relation that obtains amongst the universally alienated constituents of the urban environment is the spectacular form of consumption sanctioned by neoliberal ideology – as though you’d selected your means of knowing the world from the choiceless choices of a supermarket aisle. The way that water is today appropriated by and run through the metropolitan assemblage by neoliberal ideology is, by design, conveniently interpretable by the episteme of spectacular global capital and at the same time serves to produce not the condition of well-being for those who constitute that metropolitan

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105 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 ), 3.

106 Michael Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), 188.

assemblage but the condition of their docile unquestioning ignorance, in the case of the neoliberal subject, and their political and aesthetic disenfranchisement, in the case of those actors and assemblages irreconcilable to the ends of neoliberal ideology; actors and assemblages those surrounding water and water distribution networks, whose recognition and demands do not accord with the smooth façade of spectacular global capital.

As such, for the same reasons by which we cannot accept ‘architecture’ and ‘the architecture of urban landscapes’ as it is most frequently conceptualized – that is, as hermetic disciplines abstracted from the connective tissue of everyday life in cities – we can neither accept politics when it takes on a similarly rigid, structural, compartmentalized and segmented form. A merely architectural architecture is hylomorphic in that it misses or obscures the artistic and poetic aspects of the technical and social assemblages of urban water distribution. A merely political politics is hylomorphic in that it misses or actively negates the political resonances of everyday life. So in the same way that ‘Unitary Urbanism’ ought to supplant the idealist and hylomorphic pretensions of the practitioners of a merely architectural architecture, it equally well ought to supplant the idealist and hylomorphic pretensions of a merely political politics – and do so in the same gesture – as an alternative in which the technical and social assemblages of urban water distribution actually have a profoundly vested stake, in spite of their ideological and, in turn, epistemic suppression.

In much the same way that Unitary Urbanism anticipates the questioning of the ontological station of the arrangements of all the things that constitute the landscape of the city – a questioning inherent to Speculative Realism, New Materialisms, Object Oriented Ontology, Onticology and the like – it also anticipates the need to question the systems by which these ‘things,’ of which we are one, and merely one kind among many, are governed. To be sure, the revolutionary spirit of the situationists is not lost upon the political figurations of a renewed compartment towards the ontological station of water as is imbricated within the fabric of the contemporary western metropolis. It is in this sense, then, that there are indeed deep sympathies between Unitary Urbanism and Political Ecology, insofar as the inclination to include erstwhile excluded components of the technical and social assemblages of the city ought not be reconciled into the political order that obtains today. Indeed such adaptation would be, and is inevitably, recuperated into the logics of the spectacular edifices of global capital, the perestroika of material reality – but rather ought to express itself as a radically critical position towards such extant political orders, with an eye to their being wholly supplanted by



political forms which acknowledge and respect the rhizomatically networked and irreducible composite of the cities they transpire within.

The problem is at once political and ontological, which is to say that – while erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans interact within networks of their own co-determination and composition in deeply asymmetrical ways – there are nonetheless stakes for extant and contemporary political forms in whether or not the materials of everyday life are metabolised in an aesthetic form which speaks to their earnest ontological standing. To be sure, the Left, in spite of its manifold ossified forms, ought to be interested in holistic compositional gestures which account for techno-social assemblages specifically in their composition of both erstwhile considered human and nonhuman actors. Indeed the Left ought to be interested and invested in such gestures and practices because the neoliberal figurations held by the arbiters of spectacular global capital are, most assuredly, interested and invested in a merely political politics which ontologically accounts for only a very select set – not even ‘humans’ but at best ‘citizens,’ neoliberal subjects in the base determination of their fiscal registration and administration in the workings of the state, if even that. As Neil Smith writes:

The ideology of separate and distinct social and natural spheres therefore begs the question: for what purpose? What social work does this dualism do? There are many layers to an answer, but most simply, the positing of an external nature rationalizes and justifies the unprecedented exploitation of nature (humans cum non-humans), the ‘massive racket’ that capitalism, historically and geographically, represents.<sup>107</sup>

In other words, then, the inauguration of a revolutionary politics of ontological inclusiveness doesn’t simply necessitate convincing the people who have never considered our ontological station in any depth. No, rather it implies this, but moreover, and unfortunately so, dealing with those who actually have considered ontological station – that is, dealing with ardent humanists, legion within the contemporary neoliberal discourse – those to whom the ontological privilege of the human is axiomatic; those who not only aren’t interested in novel political arrangements, ones which would accommodate the non-human, but are indeed militantly opposed to them.

The extent to which water is ‘privatized’ is an important area of research, though ‘privatization’ as such is neither coextensive with water as it exists, or ‘serves,’ within contemporary political and aesthetic arrangements (in both cases as absent), nor is it the primary focus of the current work. And

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107 Neil Smith, “Foreword” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), Xiv.

while some cities may be particularly egregious in their exclusionary political practices regarding water use/distribution/conservation – Mumbai<sup>108</sup>, Durban<sup>109</sup>, Ghana<sup>110</sup> and the like – and others may be lauded for their commitment to normative conceptions of ‘sustainability,’ that is, lauded for their in relative terms ‘better’ prospects for the maintenance of those forms that obtain – Seattle<sup>111</sup>, Toronto<sup>112</sup>, Austin<sup>113</sup> – no municipal politics is today conducted under the preconditions of the kind of ontological respect that is being described here. What is at issue, then, is not so much whether water is provided equitably to the members of an existing commons, a goal that in and of itself is far from realized in a great many instances with over one billion people lacking access to clean potable water at last UN estimation – but rather how water is interred within such extant political and aesthetic arrangements. That is, even liberal democratic arrangements of metropolitan water distribution, by and large, posit the water that is being distributed as an ostensibly apriori ‘service’ or ‘resource’ while nonetheless obscuring the development of these ‘services’ and ‘resources’ as such, recasting them as intransient and without origin. That is, “the urban environment becomes naturalized, as if it were created smoothly and miraculously, as if it had been there, distinct and separate from natural and social processes”<sup>114</sup> all along, as Kaika writes. Indeed as she describes the distribution arrangement of Athens in the early 1990s, “the scarce character of water and the increase in its exchange value was attributed to the ‘natural’ character of the resource, rather than to the actual institutional, economic and social organization of a produced commodity. While the ‘natural = scarce’ equation was invoked in order to create public consensus around increasing water prices, the very process that actually makes water a commodity—that is, its *production process*—was suppressed.”<sup>115</sup> Indeed the same is true of cities with more ostensibly equitable political relations, which is to say that even when ‘water resources’ are not ideologically

108 Dipesh Karmarkar, “Impact of Water Privatisation on the Urban Poor: A Case of Mumbai” *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (2012).

109 Alex Loftus, “The Metabolic Processes of Capital Accumulation in Durban’s Waterscape” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006).

110 Ian Yeboah, “Subaltern Strategies and Development Practice: Urban Water Privatization in Ghana” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 172 No. 2 2006.

111 Roger Willsie and Harry Ratt, “Water Use Relationships and Projection Corresponding with Regional Growth, Seattle Region” *Journal of the American Water Resources Association*, Vol. 10 No. 2 1974.

112 Roger Keil and Julie-Anne Boudreau “Metropolitica and Metabolics: Rolling out Environmentalism in Toronto” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006).

113 Karvonen, *Politics of Urban Runoff*.

114 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 32.

115 Kaika, “The Political Ecology of Water Scarcity: The 1989 – 1991 Athenian Drought” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 155.

contoured and presented as 'scarce' they are nevertheless, and almost ubiquitously so, ideologically contoured and presented as 'service' or 'resource.' In other words, while some metropolitan arrangements may be more functionally neoliberal than others, their politics must be nonetheless subjected to critique insofar as they all conform to the implicitly neoliberal axiom of water as instrumentally 'for us' rather than 'in itself.' And while it should be noted that treating water itself with such blatant disrespect for its ontological autonomy does little disservice to it in isolation, the consequences to other unrecognized assemblages that depend on that water have been oftentimes harrowing.

This essentially characterizes the spectacular nature of urban water distribution, in that the existent social assemblage responsible for the 'management' of water mirrors the existent social assemblage responsible for the 'management' of the society of the spectacle. As Swyngedouw put it:

To the extent that there is indeed a close relationship between hydro-social ordering and political economic configurations or, in other words, between the 'nature of society' and the 'nature of its water flows,' every hydro-social project reflects a particular type of socio-environmental organization. Imagining different, more inclusive, sustainable and equitable forms of hydro-social organization implies imagining different and more effective, assumingly democratic, forms of social organization."<sup>116</sup>

Water itself, and the networks of human and nonhuman actors that comprise the techno-social assemblages of water distribution in cities, are therefore politically absent and lacking representation, to the effect that they are excluded on the basis that they do not participate in the same way that discernably 'rational' human actors participate. And moreover all the ways that such techno-social assemblages do participate are essentially ignored or knowingly suppressed, insofar as they challenge the fundamentally undemocratic basis of spectacular global capital and neoliberal political forms (in spite of their shallow and contingent claim to the western, merely humanist, cosmopolitan determination of democratic). As Levi Bryant writes, "for the neoliberal, the only units that compose social assemblages are individual persons and the mechanism by which social assemblages are formed arises through them pursuing their own rational self-interest. If a person fails to find success in the world, then this is because they are lazy, lacking in initiative, or because they have failed to properly exercise their will."<sup>117</sup> In other words, we ought not be surprised that the hydro-social projects particular to neoliberal politics are ontologically exclusionary, and more often than not ontically exclusionary,

<sup>116</sup> Erik Swyngedouw, "The Political Economy and Political Ecology of the Hydro-Social Cycle" *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education*, Vol. 142 No. 1 2009, 59.

<sup>117</sup> Levi Bryant, "Musings on Onticology and Politics II" *larvalsubjects.wordpress.com*. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/01/05/musings-on-onticology-and-politics-ii/> (accessed May 20, 2012).

they are indeed, to a more or less degree, consciously designed to be just so.

Indeed when Roger Keil and Julie-Anne Boudreau write that “the tremendous successes of more progressive environmental policies are now running up against the material and discursive limits of reform”<sup>118</sup> – this is precisely what is meant, that in the absence of an alternative conception of our ontological standing with respect to the erstwhile considered human and nonhuman actors which populate the assemblages of the city, any efforts to curb the more virulent inclinations of global capital have taken on, and will continue to take on, a form which is reconcilable with and available to recuperation by neoliberal ideology. As Neil Smith writes, “even environmentalist insiders now admit what socialists, radicals and anarchists have long concluded, namely that the mainstream environmental movement is dead, co-opted by the very capitalist power it once tried to fight, reincarnated as little more than green capitalism.”<sup>119</sup> This is because the contemporary environmental movement is either premised upon the still inherently humanist conception of ‘sustainability’ – that is, sustainable ‘for us’ – or a deep ecology model of a delineable ‘nature’ which must be maintained in some austere/puritanical form. The former is faulty in its adherence to an ontological commitment which excludes delineable actors from participating in the commons – i.e. nonhumans and networks of erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans – and the latter is untenable in its own ontological commitment which excludes delineable actors from participating in various arrangement of what is otherwise called nature, of which they are most certainly a part, i.e. us, the functional category or set of what have been otherwise defined in various ways as human actors. Both, in their own way, reinscribe the illegitimate dualisms of nature on the one side and society on the other as proffered by the spectacular ideological form and composition of global neoliberal politics.

We ought to resist this first because we should aspire to a politics of inclusion which accounts for all the actors which comprise the material reality of everyday life in the urban ecological whole, which is why Levi-Bryant notes that “things that are often seen as apolitical are, in fact, sites of the political: information technologies, water resources, oceans and their fisheries, algae blooms, how we raise animals, ecosystems, the presence and absence of roads, plumbing, etc[. . .] these things exert power over us, contributing to oppressive relations in particular ways[. . .] they are issues for all

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<sup>118</sup> Keil and Boudreau “Metropoliticism and Metabolism: Rolling out Environmentalism in Toronto” in *In the Nature of Cities*, 42.

<sup>119</sup> Neil Smith, “Foreword” in *In the Nature of Cities*, Xiii.

of us.”<sup>120</sup> Though second, and equally well, because a stable determinative category or set of human actors is actually itself, by and large, an essentialist construct of the enlightenment pretensions neo-liberal ideology. As Dimitris Papadopolous writes:

We have indeed never been human; but we have never been human not because we have never been modern but because ‘we’ have never been we and ‘they’ (the nonhumans) have never been they. The post-anthropocentric dimension of posthumanist left politics is neither about developing an ecological egalitarianism that considers the value of all nonhuman beings as equal, nor about creating the grounds for the articulation of constantly novel connections and concerns between us and them. . . it is about making alliances and engaging in practices that restore justice in the immediate ecologies which certain humans and certain nonhumans are inhabiting in deeply asymmetrical ways.<sup>121</sup>

So it is not simply that we ought to, in a saliently political though not merely political respect, recognize the ontological autonomy of the material that comprises everyday material life in the metropolis, like water distribution networks, and oppose their politics to ours in the same but nonetheless bicameral legislative house, but rather realise that, asymmetrical as we might be, the politics of urban composition is in fact a politics proper to us all in the same sense.

This is to say that a politics contoured by an alternative conception of ontology, one which affirms “the existence and dignity of a reality independent of our own,”<sup>122</sup> as Karl Schroeder writes, must not simply challenge our objectification of the world around us, but must moreover challenge our allegiance to a normative understanding of the subject, and must imply a radical requestioning of how such a determination and naming, or interpolation, of the human subject is itself produced by the edifices of spectacular neoliberal ideology. As Robyn Ekersley writes:

Whatever faculty we choose to underscore our own uniqueness or specialness as the basis of our moral superiority (e.g. rationality, language, or our tool making capability) we will inevitably find that either there are some humans who do not possess such a faculty or that there are some non-humans who do. Nonanthropocentric ethical theorists have used this absence of any rigid, absolute dividing line between humans and nonhumans to point out the logical inconsistency of conventional anthropocentric ethical and political theory that purports to justify the

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120 Bryant, response to Alexander Galloway’s “A Response to Graham Harman’s ‘Marginalia on Radical Thinking’” *itself.wordpress.com*. <http://itself.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/a-response-to-graham-harmans-marginalia-on-radical-thinking/> (Accessed May 19, 2012).

121 Dimitris Papadopolous, “Insurgent Posthumanism” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, Vol. 10 No. 2 (2010), 148.

122 Karl Schroeder, “The Dignity of the Real” *Kschroeder.com*. <http://www.kschroeder.com/weblog/archive/2012/06/06/the-dignity-of-the-real> (Accessed May 16, 2012).

exclusive moral considerability of humans on the basis of our separateness from, say, the rest of the animal world.”<sup>123</sup>

The examples of delineable actors in the world not meeting the neoliberally determined threshold for inclusion within neoliberalist politics’ own legislative frameworks ‘as human,’ and therefore being excluded from their account within these frameworks, are legion – wherein even cosmopolitan humanism has therefore failed repeatedly check and reign in its neoliberal origins and to even be otherwise humanist in its predilection for definite and systematic categorization, for inclusion and exclusion. As Žižek writes in the Parallax View:

It is precisely when a human being is deprived of his particular socio-political identity, the basis of his specific citizenship, that he, in one and the same move, is no longer recognized and/or treated as human. In short, the paradox is that one is deprived of human rights precisely when one is in effect, in one’s social reality, reduced to a human being ‘in general,’ without citizenship, profession, and so on – that is to say, precisely when one in effect becomes the ideal bearer of ‘universal human rights’ (which belong to me ‘independently of’ my profession, sex, citizenship, religion, ethnic identity. . .)”<sup>124</sup>

Though when one is indeed the ‘ideal bearer of universal human rights’ is precisely when one is lost to account by neoliberal ideology, included only as “the count of the uncounted – or the part of those who have no part”<sup>125</sup> in Rancière’s terms. In a move akin to Donna Haraway’s articulations of cyborg ontology, then, we may be well served to foster political forms which neither exclude others based on their lacking some particular constitution, nor delimit ourselves to political forms which include us only on the basis of ours. This inclination, however, is not shared by all new materialists and political ecologists, and there are those who have voiced concerns, and justifiably so, with the implications of a politics derived from what has become known in these conceptual circles as ‘flat ontology.’

While the exclusion of nonhuman actors and networks is de rigueur for neoliberal ideology – insofar as, again, there is a vested interest in the particular composition of things like hydro-social distribution networks being derived from a totalizing ontological hierarchy, the politics of which account for merely the neoliberal subject and the plutocrats who they more or less obey, considered mostly in an enlightened false consciousness way, if at all – there also those on the left who do

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123 Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Towards an Ecocentric Approach* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 49 – 50.

124 Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 340.

125 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 70.



not subscribe to such a totalizing ontological divestment of the nonhuman but nonetheless want to maintain some sort of humanistic primacy. Speculative realist Graham Harman, for as useful as he may be in his philosophical defense of the ontological autonomy of the erstwhile considered ‘objects’ which populate everyday life, is otherwise useless in terms formulating ways of composing the social commons, having thoroughly divorced himself from such considerations. Indeed, Nick Srnicek, co-editor of the *Speculative Turn* volume is decidedly no better, egregiously concluding that because the cosmos seems indifferent to ‘politics’ that normative positions cannot be derived themselves from a materialist ontology. Digital ecologist Alexander Galloway, moreover, writes of such new materialisms and political ecologies that they fall prey to “a kind of ‘Citizens United fallacy’” wherein “everything is an object, and thus Monsanto and Exxon Mobil are objects on equal footing just like the rest. Like other (human) objects, Monsanto is free to make unlimited campaign donations, contribute to the degradation of the environment, etc.”<sup>126</sup> He continues:

Despite their protestations OOO [Object Oriented Ontology] still doesn’t have a reliable way to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects. In other words OOO doesn’t make much room for a theory of judgment, since it’s busy kneecapping the human. And this is why we’ve seen that OOO can’t seem to produce the two things that philosophy has always grounded in a theory of judgment: an aesthetics and a politics.<sup>127</sup>

Here, then, he concludes that flat ontologies are not necessarily wrong, by his account, but are in and of themselves dangerous, insofar as “they can be so easily co-opted by power” and that “the most successful flat ontologies are the ones that fortify their flatness with some newfound political dynamic.”<sup>128</sup> To be sure I couldn’t agree more! But what Galloway has failed to realise – and what Harman and Srnicek have, in essence, foreclosed upon entirely – is that such new political dynamics are simply not possible in the absence of such alternative ontologies, flat ontology being one such conception, and that, in their absence, political forms will inevitably tend towards the neoliberal ideal of spectacular society, i.e. the political and aesthetic exclusion functionally of all those actors who do not or cannot conform to the specific relations of domination which obtain within the pedantic stratifications of a purportedly humanist cosmopolitan politics. Water, can’t live with it, can’t live without it, so they bury it beneath the pavement and only haul it out like a circus geek to show how needlessly

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126 Alexander Galloway “A Response to Graham Harman’s ‘Marginalia on Radical Thinking’” *itself.wordpress.com*. <http://itself.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/a-response-to-graham-harmans-marginalia-on-radical-thinking/> (Accessed May 19, 2012).

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

and grotesquely rich they are or to clean up their figurative and literal shit.

That said, again, ontology does not dictate any one political form, it cannot and indeed ought not to, insofar as there points, most especially in the urban environment, where erstwhile considered ‘inert’ materials like water enter and are engaged in the political and infrastructural assemblages with other delineable actors (erstwhile considered humans and other non-humans, to use such strategic essentialisms) more, and points where they engage in such political and infrastructural assemblages less, where their engagement is latent, registered only in the scientific sense of their being ‘out there’ circulating in the broader ecological commons – though in both cases remaining essentially indifferent to what particular forms such political and infrastructural assemblages might take. As Levi Bryant points out, an ontology cannot posit one or another political form but can rather “exclude certain political claims based on the thesis that they are simply mistaken ontologically,”<sup>129</sup> and such claims – that is, ontologically incorrect ones – most assuredly saturate spectacular neoliberal capital. As David Rylance writes:

Political agnosticism is nice and, again, this is not to say ontological fact is predicated on political truths—that I accept—but, beyond that, SR’s [Speculative Realism’s] contention that not only should we ‘probably maybe ought to’ but rather must be interested in the autonomy of ontological fact is certainly an ethical and political matter. The break with anti-realism—the urgency of this—is not based on whatever really composes ontology—which has done fine and will do fine without our sudden fascination with it. Such fascination then is grounded in an ethical edict—with political consequences.<sup>130</sup>

In other words, it does not behove us ontologically to rework and reconsider our politics but rather it behoves us politically to revolutionize our ontology. As Ian Bogost writes, “the consequence of realism is that the world isn’t particularly concerned with us. As such, it’s wrong to construe realism as an imperative in the first place. Rather, it must be cast as an invitation: if things exist in multitudes, then perhaps it might be interesting and productive to consider them.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed the question of what political forms are most commensurable with new materialism, speculative realism, onticology, object oriented ontology and the like is not merely one aimed at the inclusion of those actors who have been excluded by the auspices of global neoliberal capital, but moreover aimed at the new political

129 Bryant, “Musings on Onticology and Politics II” *Larvalsubjects.wordpress.com*.

130 David Rylance, quoted in Ian Bogost “Letting Go: The Realist Intervention and the Correlationist Imperative” [www.bogost.com](http://www.bogost.com). [http://www.bogost.com/blog/letting\\_go.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/letting_go.shtml) (accessed May 20 2012).

131 Ian Bogost quoted in Bryant, “We Don’t Know the Boundaries of the Political” *Larvalsubjects.wordpress.com*. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/07/06/we-dont-know-the-boundaries-of-the-political/> (accessed June 05 2012).



forms and dynamics that are made available to us by such radically democratic inclusion.

This is not the same as saying we ought to respect the ontological autonomy of water because it is ultimately in our interests to do so – because it entails exploring political arrangements which happen to be and produce arrangements that are more socially equitable – but rather that we ought to respect the ontological autonomy of water because the ontological exclusion of materials whether organic or inorganic is philosophically untenable, and also – that is, in addition – that we would be better off than we are now; that in doing so we avail ourselves of new political dynamics for, as per Galloway's concern, the practices and procedures of judgement. Indeed the material forms of Monsanto and Haliburton are as real as you or I – as is water and the techno-social assemblages and distribution networks that surround it – but this doesn't mean that these components of the cosmological whole are somehow excused from the communitarian munus or obligation towards the commons, nor from the expectation that they contribute meaningfully to the collective well-being of that commons, nor from the imperative that they not unilaterally harm other actors and assemblages in the full ecological commons.

“Measurements taken above the Antarctic are not good this year. Rare species that naturalists would like to protect are being carried off in smoke,” as Bruno Latour writes, “the innocent chlorofluorocarbons of Monsanto's assembly lines turned out to be a crime against the ecosphere.”<sup>132</sup> To be sure, while the crimes of human assemblages of the commons are all too, well, common, so too are the crimes of non-human actors and their assemblages. With it noted that many of these crimes are demonstrably provoked by the development and maintenance of human society, things like tsunamis or the forests of British Columbia's having been infested with pine beetles, do little to advance just and equitable relations between erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans. Such commons must be able to arbitrate between these assemblages and networks and mitigate what, at least in effect, amounts to vigilante justice. In addition to having rejected it on the grounds that it maintains a false dichotomy, of essentialized nature on the one hand and essentialized humanity on the other, this then is another reason why one ought not subscribe to deep ecological or environmentalist ontological commitments – altruistic though they may be – insofar as such a commons, in the practice and processes of such arbitration, will nonetheless be often called upon to intervene in and continuously rework the assemblages and relations between assemblages that exist and transpire. As Swynge-

132 Bruno Latour, “Monsters in the Network” *indecentbazaar.wordpress.com*. <http://indecentbazaar.wordpress.com/2010/08/19/monsters-in-the-network/> (Accessed May 15 2012).

douw writes, “interventions in the organization of the hydrological cycle are always political in character and therefore contested and contestable.”<sup>133</sup> Mute though it may be, it nonetheless costs and taxes water itself nothing to be brought into metropolitan social assemblages, though the manner in which this transpires today costs and taxes upon other assemblages of erstwhile considered human and nonhuman actors, whether inside or outside the delineated purview of ‘the city,’ greatly – and in this sense simply scaling down such interventions is neither the point nor particularly desirable. Félix Guattari writes that:

. . . increasingly reliant upon human intervention, and a time will come when vast programmes will need to be set up in order to regulate the relationship between oxygen, ozone and carbon dioxide in the Earth’s atmosphere. . . . In the future, much more than simple defense of nature will be required; we will have to launch an initiative if we are to repair the Amazonian ‘lung,’ for example.<sup>134</sup>

And he is indeed all too correct, which is why a retreat into dogmatic luddism under the pretense of a respect for some ossified determination of ‘nature’ is not only untenable but indeed counterproductive to the aims of those would otherwise advocate for it. As Biro writes, “a denaturalized ecological politics might be facilitated by extending this distinction to the realm of human ecology, distinguishing between the relations with, and transformations of, nature that are necessary for human survival, and those that serve only to reproduce relations of domination. Positing a distinction between forms of asserting human separateness from the natural world – between those that are ‘basic’ to human survival and flourishing, and those that are ‘surplus,’ serving only to facilitate unnecessary aggression – might thus be a first step towards a simultaneously progressive and ecological politics.”<sup>135</sup>

That is, it is not that chemical companies such as Monsanto and Dow, or water regulators like eThekweni Water Services of Durban or Thames Water of the UK, are merely performing interventions or ‘meddling’ in a pre-existent and sacrosanct ‘nature,’ but rather that they are performing the wrong interventions, ones informed solely by the edicts of neoliberal ideology and employed whether their effects be beneficial to the commons as a whole or, as is far more often the case, detrimental. As Laila Smith and Greg Ruiters write, “once water is commodified” the systems responsible for its deployment lack “a political, social and administrative salience,”<sup>136</sup> so it is incumbent upon us not

133 Swyngedouw, “The Political Economy and Political Ecology of the Hydro-Social Cycle” 57.

134 Félix Guattari, The Three Ecologies Tr. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Continuum, 2000), 66.

135 Andrew Biro, “Towards a Denatured Ecological Politics” *Polity*, Vol. 35 No.2 (2002), 212.

136 Laila Smith and Greg Ruiters, “The Public/Private Conundrum of Urban Water: A View From South Africa” in In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik

only to resist such shortsighted and exclusionary political forms, but to resist such a retreat, and to appropriate the means of production towards more inclusionary and beneficial aims. As Jane Bennett writes, “if I live not as a human subject who confronts natural and cultural objects but as one of many conative actants swarming and competing with each other, then frugality is too simple a maxim. Sometimes ecohealth will require individuals and collectives to back off or ramp down their activeness, and sometimes it will call for grander, more dramatic and violent expenditures of human energy.”<sup>137</sup> That is, in and under a politic inherent to Unitary Urbanism, in which all things are both accounted for in their capacities and needs, the relations between erstwhile considered humans and nonhumans ought to be a well-considered give and take, with the abandonment or radical reconfiguration of techno-social assemblages which irreparably harm other members of the commons with little diffuse and egalitarian benefit (Haliburton, Monsanto, Archers-Daniel Midland, the coal and natural gas industries, etc.), and the expansion and radical reconfiguration of techno-social assemblages which promote the most amicable and commensal well-being of all of its constituent members.

This politics of Unitary Urbanism when conceived of as an edict to recomport ourselves to the ontological standing of other members of the commons therefore aspires to the same altruistic ends of environmentalism and deep ecology but in fact surpasses them and transcends their ‘material and discursive limits of reform’ by being in and of itself revolutionary to even leftist political arrangements and environmental politics as a discipline unto itself, by standing in opposition to the ontological presuppositions of almost all extant political forms, and certainly the ones practiced within the delimited sphere of urban water distribution. As Bryant writes, “some see this as a horrible hobbling of humans that would propose that we should prefer the bubonic plague to humans and that we should prefer the appetite of lions to children. But that was never the point. The point is to recognize how we are dependent for our agency and existence on broader networks of entities, that we aren’t little gods legislating everything in our image, and that if we wish to do well we better attend to these things. The stakes are not to defend science over culture, but to reconceptualize the very nature of ourselves, nature, our duties and obligations.”<sup>138</sup> It is on this distinction on which rests the practical difference between, on the one hand, the hydro-social projects inaugurated by spec-

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Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 194.

137 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122

138 Bryant, “The Stakes of SR/NFM/OOO/Ontology: Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolves?” *Larvalsubjects.wordpress.com*. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/06/05/the-stakes-of-srnfmooontology-whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-wolves/> (Accessed June 5, 2012).

tacular neoliberal ideology – and the hydro social projects inaugurated by fascism (cf. Swyngedouw on ‘The Scalar Politics of Franco’s Hydro-Social Dream’<sup>139</sup>) – and the hypothetical hydro-social politics of Unitary Urbanism on the other. Both the totalizing and reductive politics of neoliberalism and fascism have engage in – and the radically democratic politics of Unitary Urbanism would, in form, engage in – at times, large scale interventions into the hydro-social cycle, in their composing arrangements and in their maintenance of them, but whereas the former, neoliberalism and fascism, have done so with purely the goods of the neoliberal subject or the monological ‘people’ of fascism, and ultimately the neoliberal arbiters and fascist ‘great leader,’ in mind, the latter would do so with the goods of all actors, assemblages, and their networked relations in mind. As Papadopolous asks, “how can we populate this space, fill it with acts of justice before and independent of the law of the state? I am not talking here of clichés such as taking justice in our hands, nor of blank apologies of violence, but of possibilities for creating spaces of polite engagements and respect that are not dominated by an anthropocentric humanistic view that continuously restores a new coercive form of law after the other.”<sup>140</sup>

Indeed reorienting ourselves towards the ontological standing of ‘others’ is equally well a reorientation towards the ontological standing of ourselves, insofar as – again – neoliberalism is by nature treacherous, and the arbiters of spectacular global capital are far more likely to section off populations and excommunicate them from their figuration within the neoliberal political assemblages as ‘less than human’ to remain in keeping with their shallow cosmopolitan pretensions than they are to progressively, and one should note profitlessly, amend the manifold mechanisms that produce such disparity, most centrally its edict to first and foremost produce wealth. “The local waters of the city constitute a sphere in which a commercialized state entity has attempted to ensure its profitability, through fencing in something formerly considered to reside outside of capital’s orbit,”<sup>141</sup> as Alex Loftus explains it – and indeed as Robert Kennedy, Jr. once so eloquently put it, “we are witnessing something unprecedented: water no longer flows downhill – it flows towards money.”<sup>142</sup> That is, it is

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139 Swyngedouw, “Technonatural Revolutions: The Scalar Politics of Franco’s Hydro-Social Dream for Spain, 1939 – 1975” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 32 No. 2 (2007).

140 Papadopolous, “Insurgent Posthumanism” 146.

141 Alex Loftus, “The Metabolic Processes of Capital Accumulation in Durban’s Waterscape” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 179.

142 Robert Kennedy, Jr., quoted in Anita Roddick’s *Troubled Water: Saints, Sinners, Truth and Lies about the Global Water Crisis* (London: Anita Roddick Books, 2004).

not only in the interests of spectacular global capital to debase and marginalize the ontological standing of materials in everyday life, in addition to aesthetically obscuring them to maintain their debasement and marginalization, but it is in the interests of spectacular global capital to debase and marginalize those who cannot avail themselves of the only language that neoliberalism speaks, money. As Swyngedouw writes, “true scarcity does not reside in the physical absence of water in most cases, but in the lack of monetary resources and political and economic clout. Poverty and governance that marginalizes makes people die of thirst, not absence of water.”<sup>143</sup> In other words, in most instances it is not some originary fault of ‘nature’ that deprives us, or other networked assemblages of actors, with the requisite water, but rather the specific character of neoliberal ideology and the aesthetic composition of spectacular global capital, and indeed the general perception that this is otherwise, that a rote absence of water is what determines the parameters of water scarcity, is itself a spectacular aesthetic and political construct.

In a roundabout way, then, one must concede there to be a nonetheless ethical humanist component of the politics inherent to the kind of commons commensurable with such alternative ontological orientation, in spite of such a politics’ commitment to ‘the human’ being only one entity amongst many that must be numbered amongst the commons (if it can even be deployed as a useful functional category outside of its contemporary neoliberal articulation at all), in that such a commons would stand in opposition to the commodification of water, not simply for the nonhuman assemblages that rely on that water to remain more or less unmolested by techno-social assemblages, but moreover for the impoverished erstwhile considered ‘human’ populations that neoliberal political forms would seek to divest themselves of. As Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw write, “this commodity relation veils and hides the multiple socio-ecological processes of domination/ subordination and exploitation/repression that feed the capitalist urbanization process and turn the city into a metabolic socio-environmental process that stretches from the immediate environment to the remotest corners of the globe.”<sup>144</sup> The dissolution of spectacular politics under conditions of revolution would then entail not only a liberation for uncouneted nonhuman actors and the techno-social networks that develop around them, but moreover for uncouneted erstwhile considered human actors, in that the dissolution of the ontological heirarchy between them would be equally well the dissolution of the divisionary

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143 Swyngedouw, “The Political Economy and Political Ecology of the Hydro-Social Cycle” 58.

144 Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw “Urban Political Ecology: Politicizing the Production of Urban Natures” in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* Ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

politics of who does or does not merit the 'human rights' that would otherwise afford them access to water, a division that under conditions of neoliberalism tends to see many erstwhile considered 'humans,' fall helplessly on the wrong side as 'less than human' or not subjects proper to neoliberal ideology. Disastrous implementations of water privatization in Africa and South America – notably Durban, South Africa and Cochabamba, Bolivia – should give us pause on making profitability the terms under which different assemblages which functionally need water either do or do not merit their being provided with water, but the ecological damage wrought by poorly conceived appropriations of water by metropolitan spaces closer to home should equally well give us pause, also, on making convenience and efficiency for the neoliberal subject the terms under which we judge the merit of such appropriations. As Marc de Villiers writes:

Europeans are still using their rivers as convenient sewers, and there is hardly a meter of European coastline without some level of pollution. The worst is the Mediterranean coast from Barcelona around to the toe of Italy, but there are many other areas almost as bad: from Venice to Trieste, around the city of Athens, the Danube Delta, the Volga Delta, the east coast of the Gulf of Bosnia, all of the Gulf of Finland, all of the Gulf of Riga, the coast on the southern Baltic from Gdansk to the Sound at Denmark, the whole area around Copenhagen, Goteborg, Oslo, the mouth of the Elbe and all Friesland, the coast from Amsterdam to Le Havre, the Thames Estuary and the Strait of Dover, the eastern British Isles from the Wash to Edinburgh, and the Bristol Channel. Less polluted, but still causing concern, are the Aegean, the Dardanelles, the eastern Black Sea, and parts of the Caspian. In 1998, of the 472 British beaches designated by the European Union as bathing beaches, only forty-five were found free of pollution, and the commissioner's report was full of horror stories – raw sewage lapping at the sands, children gaily topping sand castles with used condoms, and swimmers catching gastrointestinal illnesses and, on a few occasions, viral hepatitis. . . . The Great Lakes are cleaner than they used to be – there is fishing in Lake Erie again – but there are still reservoirs of agricultural and chemical runoff, and heavy metals in the health-hazardous concentrations. Among the worst polluted places are Lake Michigan, southern Lake Huron, southern Georgian Bay, Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, the lower St. Lawrence River, the northern coast of Maine, the coast of Georgia to Boston, Puget Sound, San Francisco Bay, and Los Angeles to Ensenada, Mexico. . . . Dozens of cities are still pouring raw sewage into waterways. Sewage outfall pipes still dump stormwater mixed with sewage into New York's Hudson River. . . . In China, 80 per cent of the country's 50,000 kilometers of major rivers are so degraded they no longer support any fish. Seventy per cent of China's catch once came from the Yangt'ze, but it has declined by more than half since the 1960s. The rapid industrialization has made the idea of pollution control moot. In the Yellow River, discharge from paper mills, tanneries, oil-refineries, and chemical plants has poured into the water, which is now laced with heavy



metals and other toxins that make it unfit even for irrigation. Traces of lead, chromium, and cadmium have been found in vegetables sold in city markets, and so have concentrations of arsenic. Farm chemicals washing into the sea are being blamed for massive blooms of algae. Shanghai recently spent some \$300 million dollars moving its intake of water further away from the city because nearby river water was too polluted.<sup>145</sup>

So when Bryant writes, as was noted in the introduction, that Kant's specific epistemology is less at issue than is the Copernican spirit that it therefore inaugurated, this is at least one aspect of what is meant by that transmutation, that the congealed ideological edifice of an epistemology premised upon an ontological agnosticism towards other actors and networks than constitute everyday life – and the architecture and politics that such an agnosticism gives rise to – inevitably creates the conditions under which a fundamental disrespect or lack of care for that existent world takes place. It's not simply that we ought to not be wantonly savaging the ecosystems – defined by Roy Rappaport as “the total of ecological populations and nonliving substances bound together in material exchanges in a demarcated portion of the biosphere”<sup>146</sup> – that we live within and partially constitute, but rather that in the absence of understanding our place and station within such ecosystems we have no means with which to reorient our specific projects and actions. As Bryant writes:

Once we include nonhumans in our social and political thought we both arrive at more nuanced understandings of why social assemblages are as they are (cartography), but also broaden our means of political intervention. . . recognizing that people might be entangled in ‘sticky material networks’ or regimes of attraction gives us the opportunity to set about undoing these networks (deconstruction) and providing other material alternatives (composition).<sup>147</sup>

The techno-social assemblages of the contemporary western metropolis, especially in its ‘liberal democratic’ incarnation, therefore represents a kind of Aristotelian political model, which operates as a pseudo-democracy, that is – like Aristotelian democracy – it is ‘democratic’ for only those who have been implicitly prefigured as democratic actors, but undemocratic for those who have been implicitly prefigured as materials and mechanisms in the service of those actors, i.e. “that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient. . . Such a duality exists in living creatures, but not in them only; it originates in the constitution of the universe; even in things

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145 de Villiers, Marq, Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource (New York: First Mariner, 2001), 58-59; 60; 113.

146 Roy Rappaport, “Ecosystems, Populations and People” in The Ecosystem Approach in Anthropology: From Concept to Practice Ed. Emilio Moran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 55.

147 Bryant, “Musings on Onticology and Politics II.”

which have no life there is a ruling principle, as in a musical mode”<sup>148</sup> (and hence Aristotle excluded from participation in democracy not only mariners, the young, and, most notably, women, but moreover inaugurated the democratically sanctioned subservience of an objectified nature to the subject of his delimited pseudo-democracy that survives in the form of liberal democracy today). In other words, in the case of the contemporary liberal democracy, the exclusion of actors is premised upon a universalizing objectification of ‘nature’ in such a way as to obscure its having been socially produced as such – that is, ‘liberal democracy,’ like Aristotle’s ‘democracy,’ produces its own margins but produces them in such a way as to appear otherwise both inclusive and originary, and thus represents merely the spectacular image of democracy. Again, as Kaika writes:

The dialectic of the environment and urbanization consolidates a particular set of social relations through ‘an ecological transformation which requires the reproduction of those relations in order to sustain it.’ The commodity relation veils and hides the multiple socio-ecological processes of domination/subordination and exploitation/repression that feed the capitalist urbanization process and turn the city into a polymorphous metabolic socio-environmental process that stretches from the immediate environment to the remotest corners of the globe. Indeed, the apparently self-evident commodification of nature that fundamentally underpins a market-based society not only obscures the social relations of power inscribed therein, but also permits the disconnection of the perpetual flows of transformed and commodified nature from its inevitable foundation, i.e., the transformation of nature.<sup>149</sup>

Or rather, the ideological constitution of our relation to the rest of the cosmological whole as a totalized and objectified ‘nature,’ of which we in these terms do not constitute a part, becomes congealed in the reproduction of those relations as epistemology – not Kant’s conception of epistemology, per se, but one which similarly maintains its ‘spirit of Copernicanism,’ i.e. a steadfast disregard for the question of *das ding an sich*, the thing in itself, of entities like water and associated entities in the reproduction of neoliberal politics.

The ontological binary that the neoliberalism both produces and assumes to fuel its continued promulgation and proliferation does not therefore represent an actual ontological arrangement (or even propose one, as was Kant’s otherwise altruistic intent) but merely represents the most amenable spectacular image of an ontology to the most virulent flows and functions of global capital. The division and constitution of neoliberal subject from a sequestered and objectified nature allows

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148 Aristotle, *Politics* Tr. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Cosmio, 2008), 33.

149 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 49.



for an ostensible dumping ground of things that are either inconvenient for neoliberalism to address or irreconcilable to neoliberalism's cosmopolitan pretensions. Again, As Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe writes, "it is precisely in order to grasp these levels of social reality, especially practices and behaviours, that we must define a simultaneously ecological and cultural space, without effecting a dissociation between the two orders of phenomena."<sup>150</sup> It is only by seeing past this ossified spectacular image of our relative ontological standing that we can hope to develop practices of judging 'good' actors and networks in the commons from 'bad,' and this reorientation is inherently revolutionary because the only such judgements we can make from within the discursive limits of a politics that implicitly denies such ontological respect to other actors and networks is that this is simply wrong – not morally but philosophically, as Bryant points out – and that what supersedes it will be not only different but indeed premised upon the respect of difference itself. That is, as Bryant writes:

One way of distinguishing the revolutionary from the reactionary is that the latter always argues that there is 1) a necessary order to the social world and that therefore 2) the social world can be organized in no other way. In other words, the reactionary always argues that the social world is either naturally or divinely decreed. By contrast, the revolutionary always argues that the social world is contingent or that things are capable of being otherwise. . .<sup>151</sup>

To be sure, a commons which respects the ontological continuum of actors and networks, each accounted for as a member of the democratic and cosmological whole, would entail a politics, though not merely a politics, of contingency. An indeed the understanding of such arrangements would themselves need to be itself democratically available, and therefore "the complicity of science and capitalism [which] provides capitalism with a speculative weapon capable of imposing capitalism as the universal horizon of politico-economic problems"<sup>152</sup> would need to be itself overturned. As the authors of the Situationist International write:

The raw facts, known by all specialists, repudiate the current organization of reality. . . making an implacable and immediate critique of it. Hired specialists have for too long congratulated themselves on the fact that nobody represents these truths that all of reality proffers. How they tremble! Their good times are over. We will knock them down, along with all the hierarchies they shelter.<sup>153</sup>

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150 Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, "The Study of Social Space" 72.

151 Bryant, "Onticology and Politics" *Larvalsubjects.wordpress.com*. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/12/01/onticology-and-politics/> (Accessed May 5, 2012).

152 Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman," 185.

153 *Internationale Situationiste*, No. 7 (1962), 17.

This is the basis of a politics inherent to Unitary Urbanism, the complete refashioning of the urban sphere so as to be distinct and separate from all that which is distinct and separate, including politics. That is, Unitary Urbanism is in this respect distinct from not only an architecture that is merely architectural and a politics that is merely political, but distinct moreover from an ontology which is merely ontological, when it does not speak to and progressively and equitably codetermine the arrangement of the ecological whole in its entirety. Again, the spectacle of the metropolis today brings all things together but brings them together as nonetheless separate, and this must be evacuated through the development of not only a thoroughgoing ontological reorientation to the materials which constitute everyday life (ourselves amongst them), but moreover the development of otherwise political arrangements premised on contingency, which continuously evaluate and adapt to the evolutions and transmutations of the actors and networks who comprise its commons.

This is why an understanding of the role that water and its concomitant networks and assemblages play in the constitution of the urban environment, and the ways that they have been included within the spectacle but included as nonetheless politically and aesthetically excluded from the spectacle's most salient expression in everyday life, the visual constitution of the city, is necessary for the development of alternative holistic arrangements. Water can be understood, then, as one vanguard of a kind of ontological insurgency. "There is a great story to be told about the unmapped and untraceable water supply and sewerage networks that dwell underneath the city, hidden most of the time, but revealing their existence in unpredictable ways and moments (recently in the form of problematic water quality in some areas, high leakage rates, bursting pipes, internationalization of water companies, and 'fat cat' water company directors),"<sup>154</sup> as Kaika writes, "a leakage or burst pipe reveals a hidden and intricate system of pipes and water mains; a dry tap due to water shortages or maintenance works refers to the complex network of production and distribution of water."<sup>155</sup> Water networks are therefore sites of ontological contestation, where non-human assemblages are suppressed – literally buried in the urban assemblage – and yet frequently reveal themselves and insist upon their ontological account, that is, insist upon their registration in the political whole in spite of their visual exclusion or shallow fetishized inclusion (the "architectonic prostitution" of public fountains for example). As Deleuze writes of so-called 'smooth' space:

. . .desert, sky, or sea, the Ocean, the Unlimited, first plays the role of

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154 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 50.

155 *Ibid*, 67 – 68.

an encompassing element, and tends to become a horizon: the earth is thus surrounded, globalized, 'grounded' by this element, which holds it in immobile equilibrium and makes Form possible. Then to the extent that the encompassing element itself appears at the center of the earth, it assumes a second role, that of casting into the loathesome deep, the abode of the dead, anything smooth or nonmeasured that may have remained.<sup>156</sup>

In other words, while dependent upon its appropriation, contemporary political forms which obtain within the western urban landscape require a constantly manufactured quietude surrounding the ontological station of water and its networks and assemblages in order to maintain itself. As Kaika writes, such insurgencies "remain stubborn reminders of the materiality of the networked city and undermine its smooth façade."<sup>157</sup> As Bryant writes, "recognizing that people might be entangled in 'sticky material networks' or regimes of attraction gives us the opportunity to set about undoing these networks (deconstruction) and providing other material alternatives (composition)."<sup>158</sup> In addition to their mutual insistence that the technologies of separation that operate under the flag of spectacular global capital be dismantled, then, this too is a site of essential agreement between the situationist articulation of a Unitary Urbanism and the nascent political implications of new materialism, speculative realism, ontology, object oriented ontology and the like: that the means by which this dismantling and recomposition will take place will be an insurgent and iconoclastic celebration of both collective endeavour and the possibilities opened up by the radically democratic inclusion of all things within the cosmological whole. As Latour writes:

Actors are defined above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective. To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appear first of all as troublemakers. The notion of recalcitrance offers the most appropriate approach to defining their action.<sup>159</sup>

That is, when given purchase by an ontological comportment which recognizes them as such, as Bennett writes, "the demos more or less spontaneously constructs 'a polemical scene' within which what was formerly heard as noise by powerful persons begins to sound to them like 'argumentative utterances.'"<sup>160</sup> To be sure, at the height of his own preposterous self-parody during the 2008

156 Deleuze & Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*, 495.

157 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 49.

158 Bryant, "Musings on Ontology and Politics II."

159 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 81.

160 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 105.

US presidential campaign, John McCain implored the otherwise favourable crowd to which he was speaking to ignore a protesting Iraq war veteran; to 'not be diverted by the ground noise and static,' as he phrased it. Such instances represent the butting heads of assemblages with a neoliberal politics that neither has interest in representing them nor the capacity to account for their various semantic or non-semantic interjections. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to develop more inclusive political forms that can, ones which not only do not ignore 'the ground noise and static' but explicitly seek to make the many competing demands of various networks and assemblages interpretable to one another and produce arrangements which respect each in their own particular mode.

The means by which the reigning neoliberal mode of spectacular society produces the particular mode of its ontological privileging, codified in the terms of its political arrangement and reified into delimited architectural forms, is not only represented and reflected in the organization of its constituent actors and networks as instrumentally 'for us,' but moreover deployed as itself a means of sustaining such privilege. As Loftus and Lumsden write, "the hydraulic architecture of a state is always bound up in choreographies of power and in the reproduction of specific ideologies."<sup>161</sup> In other words, in the aesthetic and political inclusion of water and its concomitant networks and assemblages 'as excluded' from aesthetic and political participation within the composition of the urban whole – their ontological objectification, banalization and visual exclusion – the techno-social assemblage of spectacular global capital, under the functional rubric of neoliberal ideology, crafts and contours such inclusion-as-exclusion in such a manner as to carry out the work of such ontological objectification – banalization and visual exclusion itself – reproducing the conditions under which such actors, networks and assemblages will inevitably fail to grasp the contours of their own subservience. "A revolutionary organization must constitute an integral critique of society, that is, it must make a comprehensive critique of all aspects of alienated social life while refusing to compromise with any form of separate power anywhere in the world,"<sup>162</sup> as Debord writes, "and they cannot set themselves any lesser task if they wish to be recognised and to recognize themselves in a world of their own making."<sup>163</sup> Subjecting spectacular political forms like neoliberalism – which depend upon the ontological debasement of actors in the contemporary urban sphere like water and its assemblages – to radically democratic critique cognisant of such ontological stakes is therefore, as Bryant notes, "not

161 Alex Loftus and Fiona Lumsden, "Reworking Hegemony in the Urban Waterscape" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 33 No. 1 (2008), 110.

162 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 70.

163 Ibid, 99.

to reject the methodologies of the humanists and their concerns (laws, norms, beliefs, ideology, signifiers, contracts, etc.) but to broaden the field of political engagement, intervention, and analysis,”<sup>164</sup> and to look to, as Loftus and Lumsden write, “the ways in which the struggle over ideas in the everyday production of the waterscape might open up new democratic possibilities.”<sup>165</sup> Neoliberalism and spectacular global capital represent the most virulent form of ontological debasement because they tirelessly produce aesthetic arrangements in such a manner as to make them seem nonetheless not-produced, as though there were something ‘natural’ about the relations of domination that they give rise to. It is not that neoliberalism simply takes advantage of the ontological agnosticism of the Copernican spirit, but moreso that it actively produces it, ideologically congealing it to the general epistemic horizon of what is or is not possible.

Unitary Urbanism – when cast as a rejection of spectacular separation in the practice of everyday life in the city and the ontological debasement of others that such spectacular separation both represents and produces – would therefore have neither delimited politics nor delineable politicians, but rather civic participation by various beings in various asymmetrical ways, and would entail a multiplication of possibilities for the ways in which these beings might participate together. A hydro-social assemblage of Unitary Urbanism may very well be less ‘efficient’ by the standards set forth by neoliberal political and the aesthetic forms of spectacular global capital for their own measure – as “the present debate over water resources often sacrifices democratic governance on the altar of technological or economic efficiency, while safeguarding existing power relations”<sup>166</sup> – but it would be nonetheless more amenable to and able to employ novel, provisional, contingent arrangements which would base hydro-social intervention on the needs of the holistically conceived commons rather than the needs of spectacular global capital itself towards the ends of its own hollow reproduction. In the same way that Unitary Urbanism would supplant the hermetic discipline of architecture in the construction of otherwise architectural forms – insofar as they would be simultaneously poetic forms, mathematical forms, cultural forms, logistical forms, technological forms, among others, conceived of simultaneously, in concert with the construction of all other forms of such a commons in the urban environmental whole – Unitary Urbanism supplants the hermetic discipline of politics in the construction of otherwise political forms for precisely the same reason. The hydro-social composition of

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164 Bryant, “Musings on Onticology and Politics II.”

165 Loftus and Lumsden, “Reworking Hegemony in the Urban Waterscape,” 110.

166 Swyngedouw, “The Political Economy and Political Ecology of the Hydro-Social Cycle” 59.

distributional arrangements of a Unitary Urbanism would be political, as they would be architectural, but only in virtue of its having evacuated these disciplines in their autonomous and isolated forms.

## Conclusion

### The Real and the False of the Total

The concept of totality has as many disadvantages as it has advantages. Without it, theoretical thought would be impossible. With it, theoretical thought risks losing itself in dogmatism. The idea of totality (or even totalisation) brings with it certain imperatives. Once put into place, it is in command. It demands all thought, all knowledge, all action. It directs knowledge; it orients investigations and plans them. It tends towards immanent structure. It desires power. How can we conceive of totality if we do not share its point of view?

– Henri Lefebvre

The stars are indifferent to astronomy

And all that we think we know

Mars will salute your autonomy

But he doesn't need to know

– Matthew Caws

In the past three chapters it has been proposed that the way urban water distribution networks are constituted is neither neutral nor arbitrary, but rather very much intentional and produce, and are produced in turn, by a neoliberal ideology and a technology of separation called 'the spectacle.' The spectacle adapts itself to the conditions of history, which falls under the rubric of the spectacle itself, and hence the most recent manifestation of the spectacle has been global capital and neoliberal ideology, for which history 'ended.' Spectacular global capital – the holistic and hegemonic image broadcast over everyday life by neoliberal ideology – deploys two things in its own endless reproduction: first, it deploys a spectacular disciplinarity, sectioning the studies of the urban into hermetic endeavors – endeavors which by their constitution cannot speak to one another productively about their object of study, the urban – allowing the spectacle to subsist in and totalize from the liminal space at the margin of one discipline's meeting another; and second, by marshalling these spectacularly sectioned disciplines into the construction of forms of organization and built environments that are

amenable to the spectacle's own endless reinscription, primarily politics and architecture. It has been suggested that politics and architecture are typical of the spectacular disciplinarity that pervades neoliberal ideology, and inhibit us from a unified study and rearticulation of the urban commons, and inhibits us, moreover, from an appreciation of the ontological resonances that such a unified praxis of composition would imply. It is indeed within the interests of specific neoliberal states, as the servants of spectacular global capital, to operate under the presupposition of materials like water being merely 'the playthings of a kind of diffuse human solipsism' (Chapter two).

In asking the question of an ontological urbanism we have seen how the aesthetic banishment of hydro-technical assemblages is not simply the result of a loss of faith in the promise of modernity, as it is for Maria Kaika, but rather a tool in the service of an ideology towards its own continuation. Ideology supplants the possibility of an engagement with the real with its own discursive irreality and both constructs the urban environment to suit, and constructs the constructors of the urban environment to suit (architects, politicians, etc.) by inaugurating a spectacular disciplinarity that is proper to the spectacle's propensity for separation. In structuring water as a hermetic commodity in such a way as to seem, itself, part of the built environment, neoliberal ideology veils water's connection with the broader ecological commons, and veils the virulent consequences of this structuration to that broader ecological commons. This structuration operates in and through the two of the primary modes of spectacular disciplinarity, politics and architecture, wherein architecture serves to institute and maintain the illusion of a pure break between inside and outside, and politics serves to codify and preserve its own dualisms of inside and outside – that is, to be inside or outside the count; to be inside or outside the purview of a care or solicitude; to be inside or outside of a 'democratic' inclusion that, by its origins, really ought to have no outside.

The spectacle is a system of totalisation that brings all things together but brings them together as nonetheless separate, and therefore mollified and benign. To this spectacle, then, what has been proposed is an alternative system of totalisation, but one that brings the denizens of the urban commons together as fundamentally present to one another. Lefebvre is quoted above cautioning that totality is not self-same with 'our' concerns, and this can be intimidating, but it is indeed no more intimidating than realising that the concerns of a broader unit are not self-same with the concerns of its constituent smaller unit, like any two social membranes meeting and mixing, and that relating fairly and ethically demands that we not be dissuaded by the selfish ontological privileging of the human



inherent to neoliberal ideology. Indeed this rejection is what totalisation ought to imply when deployed as a revolutionary concept, as a totalisation that silences cannot, by definition, really totalize. As McKenzie Wark notes:

MW: To what extent can particular actions and the conceptual armatures they create nevertheless touch the question of the totality? It strikes me as a really relevant question to put back on the agenda. And totality was kind of the forbidden concept when I was coming up, as they say, 'you aren't allowed to talk about that! It's evil and Stalinist!' and metaphysical, and of those the last claim is, in a sense, the accurate one. . .

DC: And in some circles the most damning. . .

MW: Yeah, but on the other hand, in the twenty-first century you can retranslate totality as *biosphere* – as an open system that we actually inhabit with more or less measurable parameters, and that to me is what totality now means. And Debord in the late work is tentatively grasping – you know, there isn't a language for it, no one quite knows what or how one is increasingly bumping up against totality as a real material presence.<sup>167</sup>

Political Ecology is the language of illumination of such a totality, revealing how the urban landscape is composed and how it has been instrumentally obscured by neoliberal ideology, and indeed revealing how we are ourselves mired and implicated in its spectacular separations. Unitary Urbanism is the program of compositional gestures and acts that would compose a city premised upon this alternative totality; upon an ontological respect and inclusion for all delineable actors, networks and assemblages. Indeed the program is simple, recognize the ontological autonomy of each constituent aspect of the ecological, and indeed cosmological, whole, and then determine the function of the commons that results together, new and old members of the collective alike, without privileging some members over others (as in the case of the liberal humanism that often accompanies neoliberal ideology). As Nancy writes, "it has to be an ontology for each and everyone and for the world 'as a totality,' and nothing short of the whole world, since this is all there is (but, in this way, there is all)."<sup>168</sup> In other words, Political Ecology provides the topology of inclusion and exclusion that obtains within the contemporary urban ecological whole, and Unitary Urbanism provides the corrective to this in the form of holistic compositional acts aimed at the redress of such exclusions. In the case of water distribution networks,

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<sup>167</sup> Wark quoted in Dock Currie "Situationist Materialism: Beach Beneath the Street, an Interview with McKenzie Wark" in *Theory & Criticism Prosthesis* (forthcoming).

<sup>168</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 53 – 54.

then, this would on the one hand mean freeing them from the kind of fetishization that Maria Kaika says characterizes their aesthetic and visual salience (or lack thereof), and on the other hand it would mean allowing those networks, the relevant assemblages, and water itself to contribute to the composition of the urban commons in a manner not dependent upon such fetishization.

This work has made the case that such radical inclusion, and the compositional acts that such radical inclusion entails, is not predicated upon a merely humanist ethics, but is predicated on an ethics which recognizes the spuriousness inherent to determinations of 'the human,' and hence seeks to be an ethics for all – akin, therefore, to the ontology upon which it would by necessity be premised, that is, an ontology for all. In the absence of firm delimitation between human / non-human, subject / object, man / nature, we have only recourse to the ethical purview of an ecological commons without such striation and segmentation. The aim, therefore, is to recognize that our fates are profoundly imbricated with the fates of material networks and assemblages like those surrounding water, and to compose a commons capable of addressing the consequences of such imbrication. Such a commons cannot be built on the back of a spectacular disciplinarity, such a commons can only be conceived of and realized by the recognition of all modes of relation as equally valid and equally able to speak to its composition. In bringing together situationist praxis and Speculative Materialist ontology it is hoped that we might break down the breaks between poetry and politics, between art and architecture, and build cities that reflect their being utilized together in the reified edifices of everyday life.

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St. Giles, Brighton UK, CELTA (Cambridge English Language Teaching for Adults), 2010  
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## Research Strengths

Post-structuralism; Ontology; Speculative Materialisms and Realisms; Political Ecology; Ethics; Radical Politics; Environmental Sustainability; Critical/Frankfurt School; Critical Theories of Technology; Globalization Studies; Popular Culture & the Media; Modernity Studies; Philosophy of Aesthetics

## Recent Scholarly Works

Dock Currie. 2011. "War Theory Reified: Simondon, Deleuze, Virilio." presented at University of Waterloo – Pharmakon 2011 – Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (SLSA) Conference.

Currie. 2011. "Self and Margin: Modalities of Self-preservation at the (bio)Political Border" presented at York University – The Everyday: Experiences, Concepts, Narratives – Graduate Student Conference.

Currie. 2011. "Geomorphological Warfare: From Clausewitz to Simondon" presented at University of Western Ontario – Enter the Fray – Graduate Student Conference.

Currie. 2009. "Crash Heideggerian Sociology: An Anarchic Ontology of the Crash" submitted as University of Victoria Honours Thesis, supervised by Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh (Assistant Professor, Sociology, UVic) and Dr. Simon Glezos (Post Doctoral Fellow, Pacific Center for Technology and Culture, UVic).

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2010. Teaching Assistant for 'Modern Sociological Theory,' UWO Sociology

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## Academic Awards

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York Bennett Doctoral Scholarship for the Liberal Arts  
2012 – \$20000

Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2011 – \$15000

UWO Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism  
Fellowship for Academic Distinction  
2010 – \$4000

UWO Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism  
Funding Package  
2010 – \$15000

UVic Faculty of Social Sciences  
UVic Academic Distinction – top bracket (“Rising Stars 2009”)  
2009

Golden Key Honours Society  
Academic Distinction  
2008 (Accepted)

UVic Faculty of Social Sciences  
President’s Scholar  
2008 – \$1000

Golden Key Honours Society  
Academic Distinction  
2007 (Declined)