

Fragment



All to Nah: Patterns of Fragments

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Abstract

This text begins on the *Altonaer Balkon* overlooking the river Elbe and the busy container terminals that have taken over Hamburg's lower network of islands. The standardisation of shipping containers in maritime transportation in the 1960s, 'made the world smaller' and increased global interconnectedness across the orb. Watching the world come to your door remains mysterious; containers are small units that belong to a larger entity, cells within a great piece of machinery. They are also opaque. Amongst the enforcers, emblems, and symptoms of planetary globalization, containers are partly rational logistics, partly inscrutable pits. To secure one's footing on this '*terra mobile*' requires site-specific excavations. Beneath the curtain of measurable grids, turning on the light in pitch dark corridors reveals particular topographies, a '*theatre of fragments*' in the puzzle of exponential connectivity. To reflect on this pattern of fragments, this text takes as a starting point a series of artistic research projects co-developed by TETI group in recent years. TETI (Textures and Experiences of Trans-Industriality) aims to bring artists and researchers from different disciplines together, to engage with the transformations of the present in the context of accelerated globalisation and to consider the modes through which diversification can be imprinted in the machinery of homogenisation. The discussion evokes in turn the figures of the *lighthouse*, *chantiers*, *transportements*, and *arrière-cuisines*.



In 1536, two counsellors of the city of Hamburg were walking by the riverside when they noticed a new settlement, right across the border, in the land of the count of Pinneberg. A fisherman, Joachim von Lohe, had opened an inn, which was attracting a bustling trade. Looking at this newcomer, right on their doorstep, the Hamburg citizens commented that it was ‘All to nah’, a little too close for comfort. So goes one of the foundational legends of the wall-less city of Altona, whose preferable tax laws favoured growth and fostered a rivalry with its older Hanseatic neighbour.¹ Today, when looking over the Elbe from the Altonaer Balkon above the ancient fish market, one sees the busy container terminals that have taken over Hamburg’s lower network of islands. The standardisation of shipping containers — the introduction of modular rectangles — in maritime transportation in the 1960s, ‘made the world smaller’² and increased global interconnectedness across the orb. Whereas spheres may be unfolded like onions, containers evoke the layering of bricks. On the terraced *Altonaer Balkon*, watching the world come to your door remains mysterious; containers are small units that belong to a larger entity, cells within a great piece of machinery. They are also opaque. Amongst the enforcers, emblems, and symptoms of planetary globalization, containers are

1 Holmer Stahncke, *Altona: Geschichte einer Stadt* (Hamburg: Ellert & Richter Verlag, 2014), 13–16.

2 Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

partly rational logistics, partly inscrutable pits. In the caves of the late Paleolithic, hunter-gatherers adorned the walls with incisions, imprints, depictions of animals, such as horses, bulls, and mammoths, in a swirling matrix of signs.³ Behind the doors of planetary globalisation, conductors explode in infinitesimal routes: a fragmented cosmos of circulation and intentions. To secure one's footing on this *terra mobile* requires site-specific excavations.⁴ Beneath the curtain of measurable grids, turning on the light in pitch dark corridors reveals particular topographies, a *theatre of fragments* in the puzzle of exponential connectivity.⁵ To reflect on this pattern of fragments, this text takes as a starting point a series of artistic research projects co-developed by TETI group in recent years. TETI (Textures and Experiences of Trans-Industriality) aims to bring artists and researchers from different disciplines together, to engage with the transformations of the present in the context of accelerated globalisation and to consider the modes through which diversification can be imprinted in the machinery of homogenisation. It begins with peering once more into the shadows.

Lighthouses

A familiar scene: turning on the light in a pit will reveal a stage in which the visible is balanced by *tangible* shadows. As part of the *All So Near* exhibition at Faktor Künstlerhaus in Altona (April 2018), Amélie Brisson-Darveau produced clothes based on historical maps of the city (*Wearing Altona*, 2018).⁶ Hanging over metal bars reminiscent of both industrial infrastructure and textile archives, these urban-patterned fabrics could be activated by visitors, who were invited to try them

3 Alain Testart, *Art et religion de Chauvet à Lascaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

4 Paolo Perulli, ed., *Terra Mobile: Atlante della società globale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).

5 Anton Bierl, Gerald Siegmund, Christoph Meneghetti, and Clemens Schuster, eds., *Theater des Fragments: Performative Strategien in Theater zwischen Antike und Postmoderne* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).

6 *All So Near: Textile Bodies, Chinagirls & Archi-Finance*: works by Amélie Brisson Darveau, Cora Piantoni, Johanna Bruckner, curated by Gabriel N. Gee, Faktor Künstlerhaus 20–22 April 2018. Such mapping strategies echo the 'multifaceted mapping' explored in Hamburg by the Kunstverein and the Galerie für Landschaftkunst in their project *Mapping a city* (Krause 2004).

on. The patterns incarnated *textile bodies*, and fierce projectors cast their shadows on the floor. In earlier pieces such as *Pars mais prends bien soin de revenir* (2012), Brisson-Darveau explored the textures of shadows, materializing the elusive traces of a collective corporality in fabric. *Pars* was shown in a former jail, peering into the *tenebrae* at the heart of surveillance systems. The walls were not homely, the clothes took a sinister uniformed appearance.⁷ In revisiting the ancestral gesture of the potter's daughter, leading to both the representation of the departed lover and the 'vertical erection' of his shadow in Butadès sculptural addition⁸, the textiles bodies fused spectral presences with fleeting tangibility in foldable fabric.

For, in response to the question in incarnation of 'what is lost', the fragmentation at play in the light and shadows is paralleled by the proactive search for invisibility: not everyone wants to be seen in *the Eyes of the Lighthouse*, the subtitle of an exhibition held at Corner College in 2018.⁹ The attention shifts to the projectors, to the point of seeing — the perspective — as well as to that which remains unseen, unlit by the beaming rays. In the show, Cliona Harmey offered visitors the opportunity to go inside the Poolbeg lighthouse, located at the end of the Great South Wall in Dublin Bay. The repetitive alternating light system of the lighthouse was originally accessible through an earlier on-site intervention, in which the artist settled on the pier and offered to connect passers-by to the upper chamber of the tower.¹⁰ Ancient lighthouse technology improved considerably in the nineteenth century with the adoption of the Fresnel lens¹¹, increasing the security of vessels and sailors at sea and accompanying the acceleration of

7 The work was shown at "Sinopale 4: Wisdom of shadow, art in the era of corrupted information," Sinop, Turkey. It was inspired by the work of German literary romantics such as E.T.A Hoffmann, De Chamisso and Hugo von Hoffmanstahl. In the context of Altona, it makes a subtle allusion to the film *The Condemned of Altona* (1962), directed by Vittorio De Sica, based on a 1959 play by Jean-Paul Sartre.

8 Victor I. Stoichita, *Brève histoire de l'ombre*, 2nd edition (Geneva: Droz, 2019), 11–20.

9 *Hinterland Part 1, The eyes of the lighthouse*: works by Cliona Harmey, Monica Ursina Jäger, Salvatore Vitale, Jürgen Baumann, curated by Gabriel N. Gee & Anne-Laure Franchette, Corner College, Zurich, May 2018.

10 Alice Butler, Daniel Fitzpatrick, and Cliona Harmey, *Port, River, City* (Dublin, 2017). Exhibition.

11 Theresa Levitt, *A Short Bright Flash: Augustin Fresnel and the Birth of the Modern Lighthouse* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).

globalisation that bound distant lands closer through trade. Furthermore, Harmey noted that the principles of the Fresnel lens migrated into a range of media devices, including barcodes.¹² The sculptural piece *Inside his master's voice* (2010) by Conor McFeely captures the dilemma of the lighthouse: it takes the form of a plastic Elizabethan collar, which is used to prevent dogs from scratching wounds as they heal but, by doing so also limit vision. McFeely first became interested in the object because it separated head and body¹³; the ruptured acephalic evoked a disembodied self. The title of the piece evoked both the name and logo of the old music label, as well as a science-fiction novel by Stanislaw Lem, *His Master's Voice*, in which a scientific team unsuccessfully tries to decode a message from outer space.¹⁴ In the global age, the world converges, yet options to invest in *partial objects* remain.¹⁵

Chantiers

In nineteenth century port cities, a caesura developed between residential areas and new infrastructure dedicated to the handling of goods.¹⁶ The development of

12 Harmey expanded on the work in a text entitled *From lighthouses to barcodes*, which was first presented in a TETI research workshop organized by the author with the support of Franklin University and the Swiss Research Foundation in May 2017, which led to a co-edited publication: *Maritime poetics: From coast to hinterland*. See Cliona Harmey, "From lighthouse to barcodes," in *Maritime poetics: From coast to hinterland*, edited by Gabriel N. Gee and Caroline Wiedmer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021).

13 Conor McFeely and Gabriel N. Gee, "Partial Objects: A conversation between artist Conor McFeely and Art historian Gabriel Gee," *Intervalla 2* (2014–2015): 98–107, <https://www.fus.edu/intervalla/volume-2-trauma-abstraction-and-creativity/conor-mcfeely-partial-objects-a-conversation-between-artist-conor-mcfeely-and-art-historian-gabriel-gee>. accessed 22 November 2021.

14 Stanislaw Lem, *His Master's Voice*, translated by Michael Kandel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). First published in 1968.

15 Conor McFeely responded to queries regarding the partiality of objects and motifs in his works; he refers in particular to the post-Atomic condition, undercurrent plotting and impossible narratives. The terms also have a specific meaning in computing which brings the separation from the whole to the fore: "A partial object is an object whose state is not fully initialized after being reconstituted from the database and that is disconnected from the rest of its data." (doctrine-projects)

16 Brian Hoyle, "Development dynamics at the port-city interface," in *Revitalising the Waterfront: International Dimensions of Dockland Redevelopment*, edited by Brian Hoyle, David Pinder, and M. S. Husain (London: Belhaven Press, 1988).

the *Speicherstadt* in early twentieth century Hamburg provided warehouses to store coffee, tea, tobacco and spices in the free port of the city.¹⁷ These were serviced by smaller barges, which were made redundant in the 1960s by the standardization of shipping containers. The elegant city of spices was abandoned until redevelopment in the late 20th century following a global trend. *All so near* also featured in the work of Johanna Bruckner's *Total algorithms of Partiality* (2018), which combines readings, conversations, drawings, sculpture and dance in a filmed investigation of “finance-driven deregulation of space”¹⁸. In particular, the piece considers the exploitive working conditions and the façade of socially diverse housing policies in the city's architectural redevelopment; algorithms mathematically bind the set of probabilities on which the living are to be housed.¹⁹ Alluding to the pioneer dance groups of the 1930s which Bruckner explored in *Rebel Bodies* (2016–2018), the script articulates the intrusion of unforeseen and incontrollable externalities into the planned realm of capital architectonics.²⁰ A break into the pattern.

The performative gestures in *Total algorithms of partiality* take place on a construction site, which looks akin to a wasteland. In a TETI group collective project on *Mobile Soils*, painter and gardener Errol Reuben Fernandes reminisced on his childhood adventures on disused land in West London, where broken porcelain, glasses and burnt tires could be found; this former Victorian refuse tip became a source of inspiration to the artist and botanist.²¹ This is ‘modern

17 Gert Kähler, *Von der Speicherstadt bis zur Elbphilharmonie: Hundert Jahre Stadtgeschichte Hamburg* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 2009), 17.

18 Johanna Bruckner, “The future of work: scaffolds and agencies,” in *Maritime poetics: From coast to hinterland*, edited by Gabriel N. Gee and Caroline Wiedmer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021).

19 The architectonic role of algorithms is explained in the film's voiceover: “Algorithms can be identified as the structure of the scaffold, the vertical and horizontal lines of the scaffold are found on construction sites, which essentially support the building process, correlating to the form and structure of an algorithmic instruction; what is the algorithmic probability of social mix, the probability of accountability, what factors does it derive from?”

20 Marius Henderson, “Embodied enquiry and insurgent research creation in Johanna Bruckner's Total Algorithm of Partiality.” 10 June 2021. <https://johannbruckner.com/research/embodied-inquiry-and-insurgent-research-creation-in-johanna-bruckners-total-algorithms-of-partiality/>. accessed 22 November 2021.

21 Errol Reuben Fernandes, “An unearthed identity,” in *Mobile Soils*, edited by Anne-Laure Franchette, Jose Cáceres Mardones & Gabriel N. Gee (Zurich: TETI press, 2021, 103–110).

nature’, to refer to Derek Jarman’s journal and garden²², as well as to curator Elise Lammer’s investigation of artists’ roles in such fragmented landscapes.²³ Building sites more generally appear to be *interstitial* spaces, where interrogation as to past and future arrangements of the present are suspended. Akin to the artist’s studio, the building site is a laboratory where the architect comes wearing protective gear.²⁴ In the novel *Les Jardins Statuaires*, Jacques Abeille tells the story of a visitor to imaginary sculpture domains, where gardeners cultivate statues that cyclically emerge from the ground.²⁵ While order seems to prevail, it requires constant dedication. Offshoots of the sculptural plants are broken down and thrown back into the earth to feed the next generation. Should the gardeners become distracted, or fail, the sculptures will grow into monstrous creatures. Anne-Laure Franchette explored this state of possibility in *Grands Travaux Urbains* (2021), foraging ‘*mauvaises herbes*’ from selected construction sites, which were then dried and fixed in resin on temporary signal structures used on such working grounds. In the blind spots of the city, an unwanted species might find a home in a celebration that queries the categories through which socio-natures are historically processed. The temporary structures evoke a remark by Michel Serres, who, having underlined that in the past preference for enclosure the contemporary age favors apertures, wonders if it is possible “to think, to draw a garden of wandering?”²⁶

‘*Transportements*’

The third artist participating in *All So Near*, Cora Piantoni, researched the history of the Hamburg cinematographic company Atlantik Film. In looking at

22 Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1994).

23 Elise Lammer and Anne-Laure Franchette, “Derek Jarman’s garden. Anne-Laure Franchette and Elise Lammer on the queering of nature.” *Nero*, 8 September 2020. *Modern Nature: an homage to Derek Jarman* is a three-year project (2019–2021) curated by Elise Lammer in collaboration with La Becque Artist Residency, Switzerland.

24 *L’art du chantier: construire et démolir du XVIIe au XXIe siècle*, Paris, Gand: Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine (Snoeck, 2018).

25 Jacques Abeille, *Les Jardins Statuaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982).

26 “Peut-on penser, dessiner un jardin de l’errance ?” See Michel Serres, *Statues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989).

materials held by former employees, she wasn't interested in the films produced by the company, but rather in images of the 'China Girls'. In the analogue era, film labs checked the color tones of photographs by combining color panels with figureheads of women, whose skin served as reference for a 'natural' rendering.²⁷ These images disappeared from the final cut, though archival repositories today hold these silent witnesses from another era. For the 'China Girls' were, in many ways, screen-like, a pure reflection of a technical requisite informed by normative standards. Thus, little is known of the actual persons who lent themselves to the tonal operation. Piantoni, however, was able to get in touch with one such *accidental* model, who had been working for Atlantik Film at the time and was living in Altona. The conversation led to an interview, which was shown along with the series of photographs. In effect, the encounter opened the image to the experience beneath it. The silent repetitive cinematographic fragment gained a voice of its own, a unique story unfolding in the script of history.

The shipping container, at first glance, appears to be a ubiquitous channel of homogenization. Colors might vary, blue, red, or green, the name of the company on the side, perhaps, but otherwise its success stems from its capacity to simplify transportation on sea and on land through its normative bland regularity. The art of folding goods of all shapes, textures and sizes disappeared alongside the docker communities who practiced it. Nevertheless, one may be cautious when assessing the universal fortunes of this conductor and symbol of totality: Huang Yong Ping's monumental installation *Empires* at the Grand Palais in Paris (2016) was composed of an architecture of containers interspaced by the skeletons of long-lost creatures, and a bicorne Napoleonic hat, an evocation of the transient nature of power.²⁸ Additionally, shipping containers have been re-appropriated in various contexts beyond their maritime vocation, including semi-permanent shops and houses and as receptacles for artistic displays, such as at the Kaohsiung Container

27 Sarah Laskow, "The Forgotten 'China Girls' Hidden at the Beginning of Old Films," *Atlas Obscura*, 30 January 2017.

The term might have alluded to the porcelain chinaware.

28 Huang Yong Ping, *Empires* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2016).

Festival in Taiwan. The 2017 BIG biennial of independent arts spaces from Geneva also used maritime containers but sought to resist their inherent standardisation by using them to house non-prefabricated cultural practices (BIG 2017). Visitors could look at independent films in Spoutnik’s ‘movie-in-suspension’ (the screening was projected on the ceiling of the container), take part in ‘seed-bomb’ workshops organized by the Picto association with compost from the studio’s garden, climb the wooden supra-structure designed by Ripopée to present its independent publications, all, along with other sixty exhibitors, under the silent gaze of artist Abraham Poincheval, who remained for three days atop a mast above the grounds under a scorching sun.

In the installation *La Bibliothèque à déplacer des Presses éditables*, visitors entered a book, passing into the container through a very large panel styled like a book cover, to discover a library where four constellations of twenty-four books were arranged on the walls, a selection of bookish references responding to the four LPE publications.²⁹ These ranged from crime stories to philosophical essays and hiking guides; visitors were thus confronted with a diversity of affinities, to which they were invited to contribute, by displacing the book they had picked up to create new associations and new readings. The *Sitterwerk* library in St. Gallen is another example of such creative reordering. Books can be rearranged on the shelves as readers see fit, a Warburgian approach that encourages novel and constantly evolving connections.³⁰ Such strategies point to the possibility of ‘destabilizing the parameters of a library’, of embracing mis-shelving, in an effort to reflect on “how we travel from one book to another”³¹. The LPE installation, with its four concentric yet constantly reshaped book constellations, echoed

29 *La bibliothèque des Presses éditables* was designed by Vincent Fradet and the author, curated by Volumes, a platform for independent publishing in Zurich.

30 Ariane Roth and Marina Schütz, *The Dynamic Library: Organizing Knowledge at the Sitterwerk — Precedents and Possibilities* (Chicago: SoberSCOPE Press, 2015). An electronic system enables books in the catalogue to be located on particular shelves.

31 Heide Hinrichs, Jo-ey Tang, Elizabeth Haines, eds., *Shelf documents: Art library as Practice* (Berlin: b_books Verlag, 2020), 15.

the modern Stonehenge orientation of the BIG Biennial, forming “a circle of fragments”³² in which the heterogenous mixes of writings/readings bodies/objects embraced the traditions of cut-up, montage and bricolage frequently espoused by artists in the 20th century.³³ One crossed the thresholds of the containers through “a half-opened door, [...] leading to *experience*, opened onto an exterior. A door akin to a harbor”³⁴. One crossed the thresholds to another story, other stories, a multiplicity hidden behind the neutral doors. I called this movement a ‘transportement’; the term from the old French conveys a dual process of movement in both physical and affective space: to be carried away.³⁵

Arrière-cuisine

In the last of his ‘American lessons’ dedicated to the future of literature, Italo Calvino, focusing on *molteplicità*, refers to the writings of Carlo Emiliano Gadda, to a text revolving around a recipe for *risotto alla Milanese*. The profusion of details encapsulates, for Calvino, the writer’s capacity to locate and embrace the network of relations that stem from a singular object, as well as to get lost in its infinite web.³⁶ Artistic research, in its early twenty-first century form, is not dissimilar to this way of being-in-the-world, in which every ‘object’ offers an opportunity to unfold multi-faceted histories, materials and topographies in a lively ‘disciplinary cannibalism’ that knows few taboos.³⁷ The particular focus on risotto is telling, in its evocation of Smithsonian entropic inevitability, that

32 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

33 Jean-Pierre Mourey, “Le fragmentaire dans l’art du XXe siècle,” in *Del Frammento*, edited by Rosa Maria Losito (Naples: Univ. Orientale, 2000), 59–78.

34 Michel Serres, *Statues*, 91. The words by Michel Serres derived from a discussion of Auguste Rodin La Porte de l’Enfer (1880).

35 Transportement is also the title of a forthcoming publication from TETI press (2022). The post-production of the LPE installation involved a collaboration between six authors (three artists, three writers) in which four mixed genre stories describe the improbable displacement of four ‘objects’.

36 Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 1993), 106–107.

37 Thierry Dufrière and Anne-Christine Taylor, eds., *Cannibalismes disciplinaires: quand l’histoire de l’art et l’anthropologie se rencontrent* (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, INHA, 2009).

balances the poetic fragmented oscillation between wholeness and partiality.³⁸ In a fragmented narratology, accidents complexify the smooth account of the world. Ahmad Fuad Osman calls Enrique de Malacca an *accidental* navigator: enslaved on Fernand de Magellan's ship, he ended up circumnavigating the globe, part of a momentous event in the history of globalisation, and survived.³⁹ In his *Memorial to Enrique de Malacca* (2016), Osman includes interviews with contemporary historians who provide informative but conflicting accounts of a historical figure who remains elusive to this day. Ignored by Western historiographical narratives, the surviving navigator is a rallying point for modern national identity building in Southeast Asia; yet, precisely because of the dearth of details on background and fortune once he became a freeman following the death of Magellan on the Mactan islands, Osman can enter an uncertain space and highlight the fleeting nature of history. This is a fragmented narratology, where clear-cut descriptions of the real dissolve into a rich humus of vivid and haunted socio-scapes. In a similar vein, Wu Mali brings together residents for communal dinners at Cijin kitchen, a former military barrack in Kaohsiung harbor, in an effort to document the stories of a migrating and ever-changing community.⁴⁰ Singular stories tell a polyphonic tale of interconnected narratives at maritime crossroads in East and Southeast Asia, where the global forces of history meet the uncertain trajectories of collective and individual destinies. Such artistic engagement with the pot-au-feu of the present is inspiring to an art history in dialogue with the grains of rooted differentiation. The aim is not to provide the absolute recipe of world history, but to recognize both the industrial and artisan parties involved in it, both of whom are containers capable of revealing an infinite pattern of fragmented histories: a proactive embrace of re-diversification.

38 Pierre Garrigues, *Poétiques du fragment* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995).

39 Ahmad Fuad Osman in conversation with the author, 2 May 2019.

40 Wu Mali in conversation with the author, August 2018

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