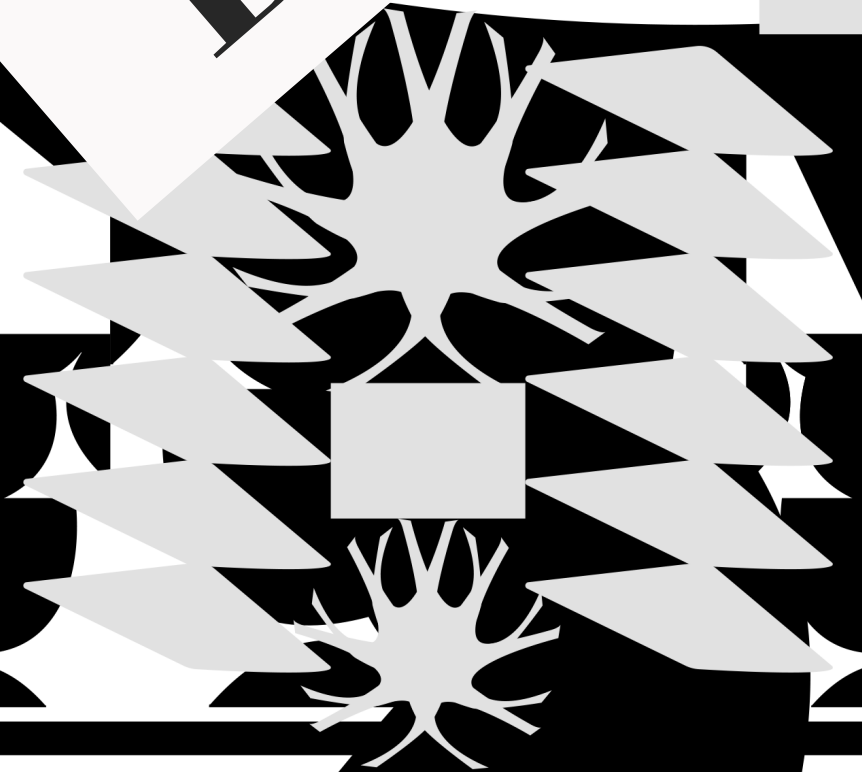


TERMINAL PROJECT REPORT

Platform
Bazaar



PLATFORM BAZAAR
Terminal Project Report

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2019

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Figure 1. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Platform Bazaar, 2019.
Multi-channel HD Computer Animation, Variable lengths.

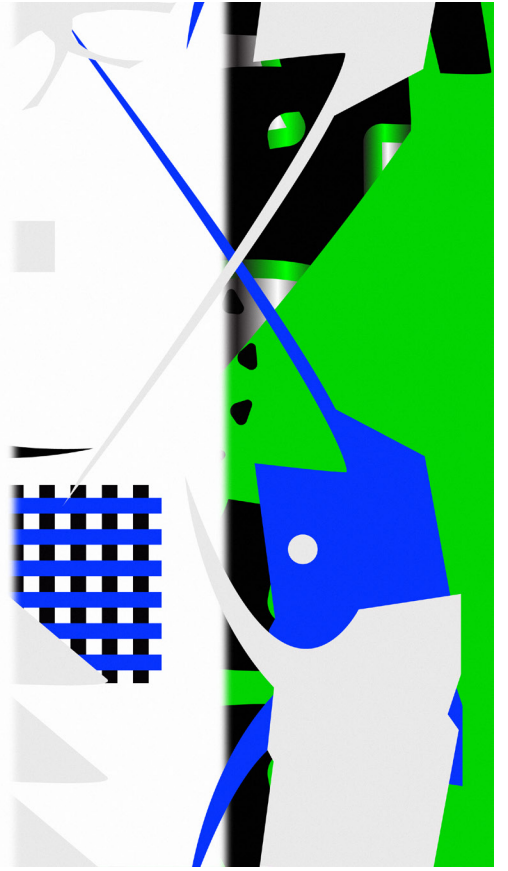


Figure 2. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Platform Bazaar, 2019.
Multi-channel HD Computer Animation, Variable lengths.

“Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement... culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement—now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of ‘global’ media technologies—make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue.”

—HOMI K. BHABHA⁰



Figure 3. Aaron Whitner, Bjork, Platform-Bazaar, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

In the first century, Romans gathered in open-air marketplaces known now by the word *bazaar*, a variant of the Persian word *bazar*. As hubs for converging trade routes, these marketplaces served not only as sites for commerce, but mixing pots for cultural diffusion, social interaction, and ideological discourse. It was also a convenient place for the Roman government to collect taxes and keep a watchful eye on trade. With the ubiquitous American shopping mall in mind, this model of exchange has not changed very much through the millennia. Computing has allowed each interaction, whether it be surveillance or trade, to be more convenient. The ancient bazaars functioned similarly to what is now considered a platform, or an entity that moderates the relationship of two or more actors. Digital platforms have become omnipresent, and their implicit power structures have become problematic. I will use this document to observe some problems that have come to my attention with the entanglement of a global society and its devices.

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Figure 4. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Ideation collage. 2019.

MOVEMENT

A swipe of the finger ignites the smooth scroll of the endless internet feed. The browsing experience is a backlit free fall where there is no fixed ground plane. The algorithms embedded in the corporatized-web have been designed to constantly serve the user information, keeping their gaze locked on the screen while simultaneously gathering tracking data. Hito Steyerl writes “as you are falling, your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries.”¹ Time and place begin to dissolve into fragments of disillusionment and the hyper-now of the contemporary gaze. The tremendous amount of hours logged each day is laborious. It is akin to the Fordist assembly line, where the factory worker was married to a machine. Though now, the contemporary internet user is connected to the machine in perpetuity, sleeping, bathing, and fucking with it. All the while, they are pawns to corporate surveillance, which leverages habits into advertising revenue. Early on in the development of the web, the goal was to automate information about the user. Now the goal is to automate the user to eliminate any possibility of self-determination.² Through this lens, the computer desk functions as a useful site of observing both production and capture of such automation. From the desk, a literal platform, the creative class produces a never-ending feed of content designed to capture attention; and simultaneously consumes it while tethered to the computer during 12-hour workdays. Each movement, gesture, or click becomes a target for the prying eyes in the cloud to deliver product placement. Platforms serve as intermediaries, connecting actors, digital or not. They mobilize and make possible movements of information, commodities, and bodies. Also used as a noun to declare political party positions, platforms are never agnostic. Platforms construct networks, energize powers, and produce subjects. These infrastructures have funneled internet cultures into silos of homogeneity, re-articulating the commons as sites of surveillance-based capitalism.



Figure 5. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Handsman Home Center employee, Oita, Japan. 8/2019.

1. Hito Steyerl and Franco Berardi, *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: E-flux Journal, Sternberg Press, 2012), 13.

2. John Naughton “The Goal Is to Automate Us’: Welcome to the Age of Surveillance Capitalism.” *The Guardian*. January 20, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook>.

When the workday concludes, the mobile device equipped with all sorts of platform-based apps, allows us to follow the subjects as they step away from their desks and into their automobiles. The relationship between the internet and the auto are synonymous. Some of the contributions the car has brought to the internet include *Google Street View*, ridesharing platforms, and same-day delivery. Not to mention the subsequent affordances the internet has gifted to the car such as full-blown autonomy. Colloquial references such as the Information Superhighway coined by video artist Nam June Paik prove a long connection between the comparative value of cars and the net,³ as does the vernacular relating to traffic on either subject. We can trace historically how economies and cultural diffusion played out along the edges of such networks. Trail systems of hunter-gatherers, the flow of commerce on highways, and much later, the developments of the neoliberal web that lay beneath cities. Though a glut of automobiles leads to significant congestion and slowdown, a glut of information encouraged by profit-based internet platforms leads to endless feeds of information begging for attention. In the essay, *The Post as Medium*, American graphic designer and internet critic Paul Soulellis likens feeds of information to the telegram, a format that does not have a designated size. A piece of paper, for instance, has an end, as does a scroll. Telegraphs and webpages are as long or as short as their message. In the age of platform capitalism, the amount of data far surpasses any human mind's ability to conceptualize it. Soulellis describes the overload of information as merely becoming texture.⁴ The flicker of the screen in this sense reminds me of the looping, non-narrative films like *Seasons*⁵ by Stan Brakhage and Phil Solomon. The removal of all indices of time, space, and narrative, forces the viewer to become a critic to realize the profundity of the work of art.⁶ Reading the browsing experiences as if it were a non-narrative film requires the viewer to become an observer of the entirety of the apparatus. In this shift in perspective, one becomes observant of the connections, implications, histories connected to a given artifact. In this shift in perspective one becomes observant of the connections, implications, and histories connected to a given artifact.

Being that computing technology is founded on military developments such as the auto-aiming gun of World War 2, the Cold War's Arpanet, and Global Positioning System (GPS) of today. The internet and adjacent technologies were designed as weapons to assert power, control, and violence

3. Patricia Mellencamp, "The Old and the New: Nam June Paik." *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (1995): 41-47.

4. Paul Soulellis, "The Post as Medium." *ART HAPPENS HERE: Net Art Anthology*, ed. Michael Connor (New York: Rhizome, 2019), 424-430.

5. Stan Brakhage and Phil Solomon. *Seasons*. 16mm. Directed by Stan Brakhage and Phil Solomon. USA: 2002.

6. Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text*. (London: Fontana Communications Series, 1977), 155-164.



Figure 6. Brakhage, Stan and Phil Solomon. *Seasons*. 16mm. Directed by Stan Brakhage and Phil Solomon. USA: 2002.

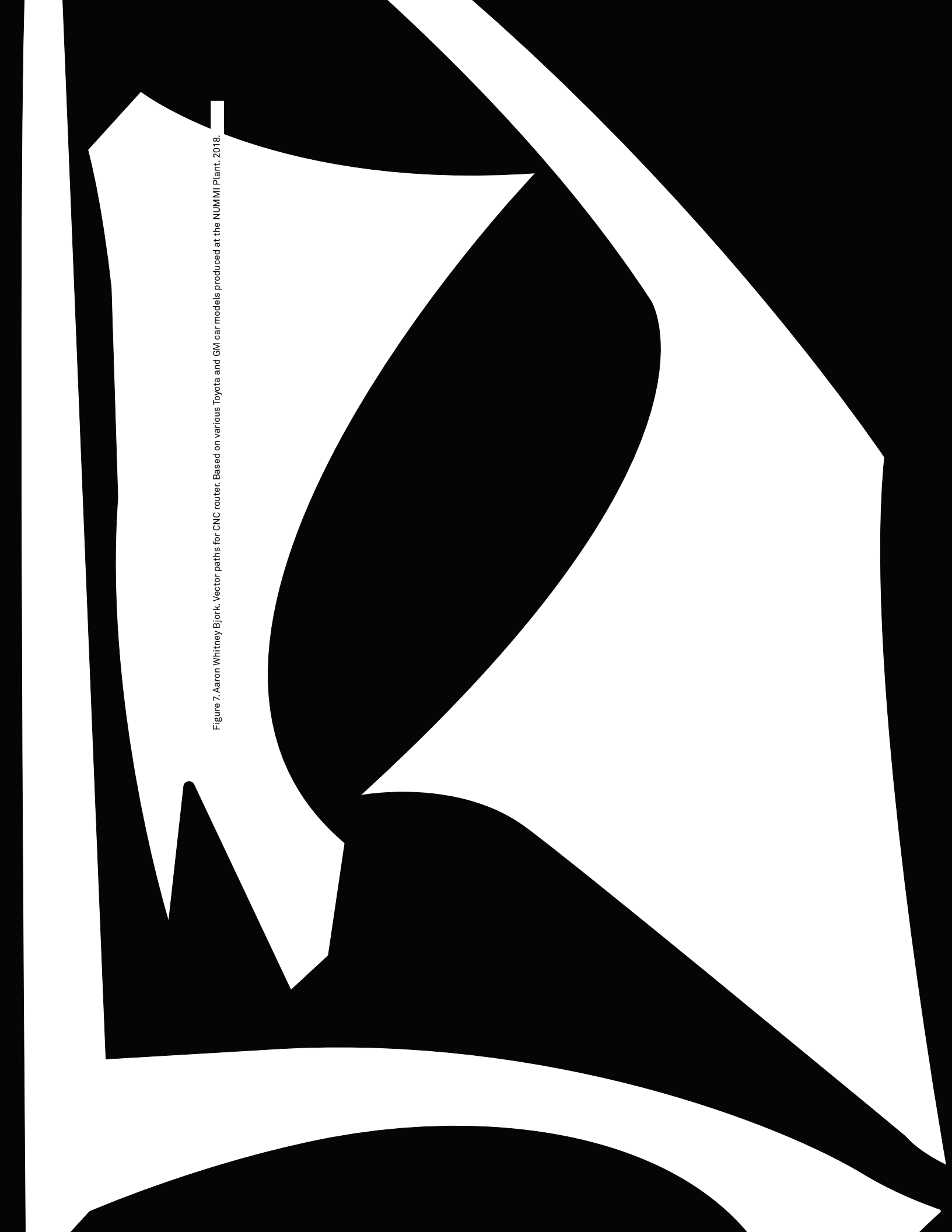
more efficiently. It is no surprise that market-driven developers have embedded behavior-modifying tactics to keep users engaged and implicitly controlled through corporatized versions of the same technologies. As Tung-Hui Hu articulates at length in *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, the sensationalized idea of the cloud is a mechanism for enforcing soft control over the user's bodies.⁷ Such examples of this are addictive by design elements embedded in applications and technologies. A large number of these are produced by developers, without fully understanding the societal effect of their product. Their problem-solving approach comes from a myopic point of view, solving problems not for what is best for society, but rather, improving the level of user engagement, ad performance, and so forth, dictated by interested in profits. We may draw connections with the power of governance and subjectivity on the developments of technology, the transfer of such power to neoliberal corporate tech giants. Power, control, and greed are the sedimentary layers of the military industrial complex. As military forces pave the way for tech advancements, so follows free-market capitalism in the wake to capitalize on these breakthroughs. Such is the case of Toyoda Automatic Loom Works, a textile company that landed a contract to produce cars for the Japanese military in 1933.⁸

7. Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

8. TOYOTA MOTOR CORPORATION GLOBAL WEBSITE | 75 Years of TOYOTA | Part1 Chapter1 Section1 | Item 1. Sakichi Toyoda. Accessed June 10, 2019. https://www.toyota-global.com/company/history_of_toyota/75years/text/taking_on_the_automotive_business/chapter1/section1/item1.html.



Figure 7. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Vector paths for CNC router. Based on various Toyota and GM car models produced at the NUMMI Plant. 2018.



TO HEGEMONY

2

RESISTANCE

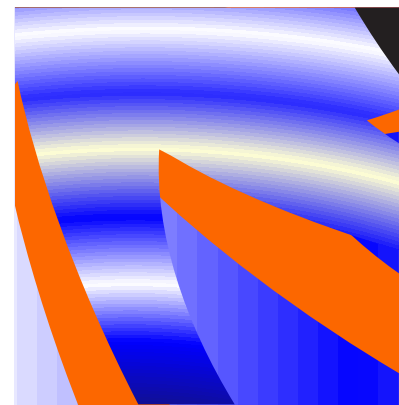
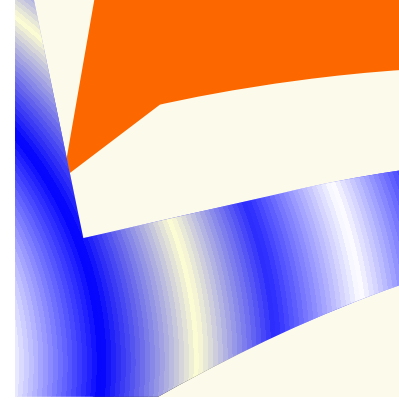


Figure 8. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Digital process collage, 2018.

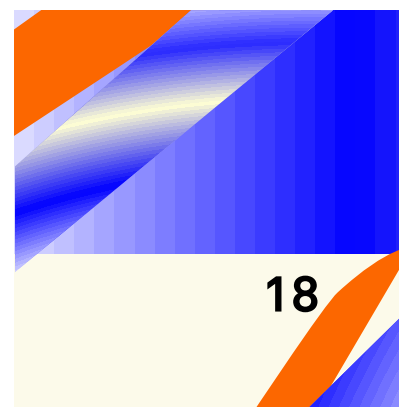


Figure 9. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Digital process collage utilizing snapshots from personal archive, digital renderings, digital renderings, and found images. 2018.

It is imperative to question the clarity of messages from dominant cultures. A never waning optimism is always at the helm of corporate messaging, and I take this optimism skeptically. Choosing to work with mass-media production tools such as computer animation, graphic design, and large format digital printing are ways of confronting dominant culture's vernacular. While engaging in contemporary design aesthetics is intoxicating, my work confronts the cultural propaganda that supports the propping-up of prevailing ideologies. Often tiptoeing around contemporary visual languages, in a way that both acknowledges the existence of a hegemonic vernacular and rejects it. A rather fitting metaphor, imagine finding yourself at the bottom of a deep pit, having been left only a shovel. The only way to climb out is by digging with the very tool which puts you there. In this manner, my work acts as resistance from the inside. The intrinsic adverse outcomes that mainstream design has produced provides a situation that begs to be trolled, as Benjamin H. Bratton discusses. "Design is among other things, some sort of magic way of thinking that involves sticky notes and Sharpies and colored bean bags. It's also a means by which pathological relationships to material culture are made more efficient and more delightful, and we are worse off for it."⁹ Alan Warburton's 2016 video *Sprites I - IV* depicts four 3D-scanned creative workers napping at their desks, purportedly while waiting for feedback from their overseas directors. The 40-second looping video calls attention to the global visual effects apparatus that is designed to work best when invisible to the viewer. This mediological apparatus is essential to the construction of dominant ideologies. Baudry and Williams articulate this very well in their canonical essay *Ideo-*



9. Karen Archey and Metahaven, *Metahaven: PSYOP: An Anthology* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2019), 67.



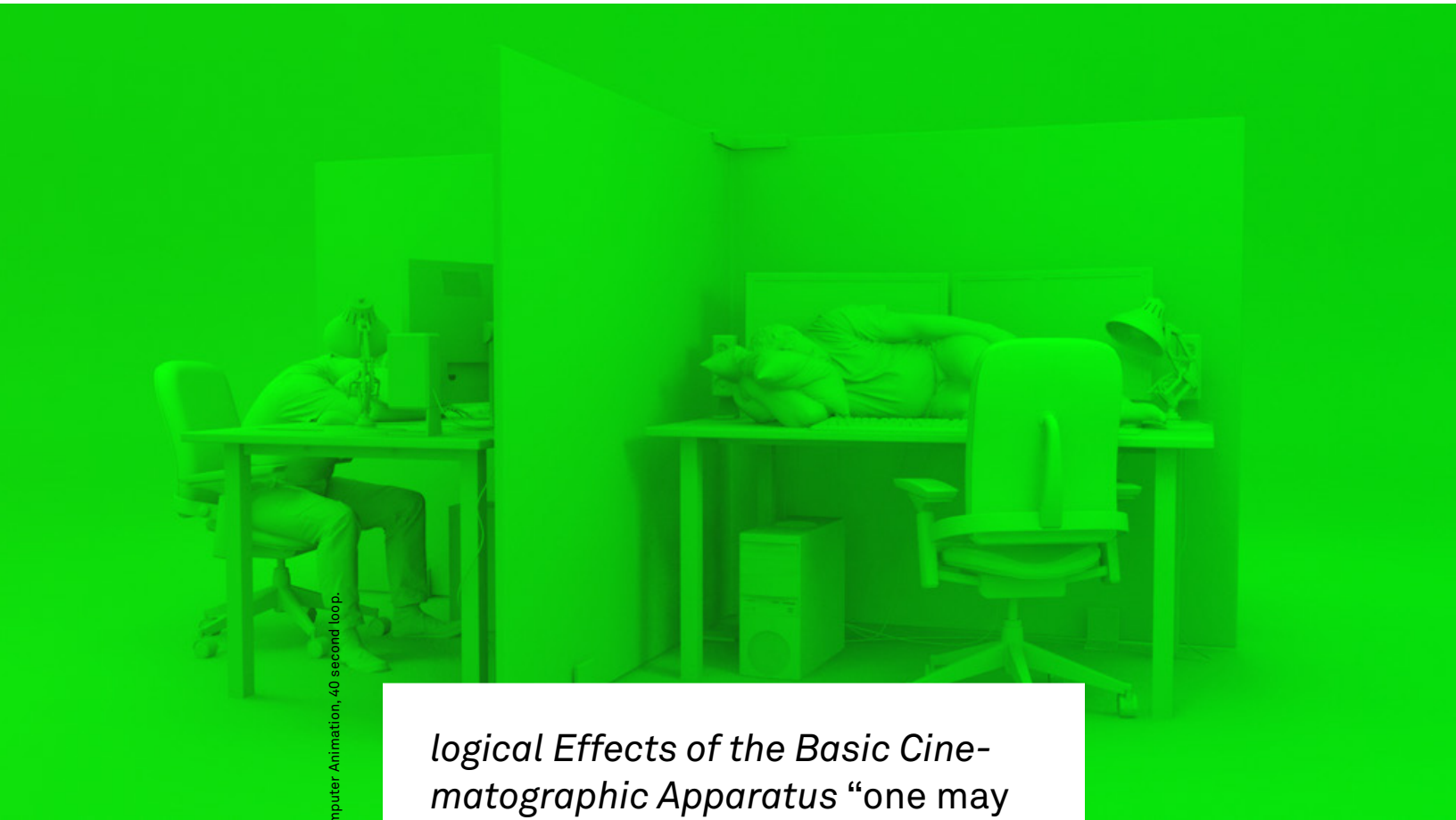


Figure 10. Alan Warburton. Sprites | - IV, 2016. Digital prints, variable dimensions + HD Computer Animation, 40 second loop.

logical Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus “one may ask, do the instruments produce specific ideological effects, and are these effects themselves determined by the dominant ideology? In which case, concealment of the technical base will also bring about a specific ideological effect.”¹⁰ This is a very relevant stance to consider when looking at animated videos in the form of art or as a form of mainstream entertainment. The latter position does not reference the apparatus of its making, and furthermore, the casual viewer is not trained to read the content in the entirety of the contextual placement. Whereas in an art context, the apparatus is considered.

10. Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): 39-47.

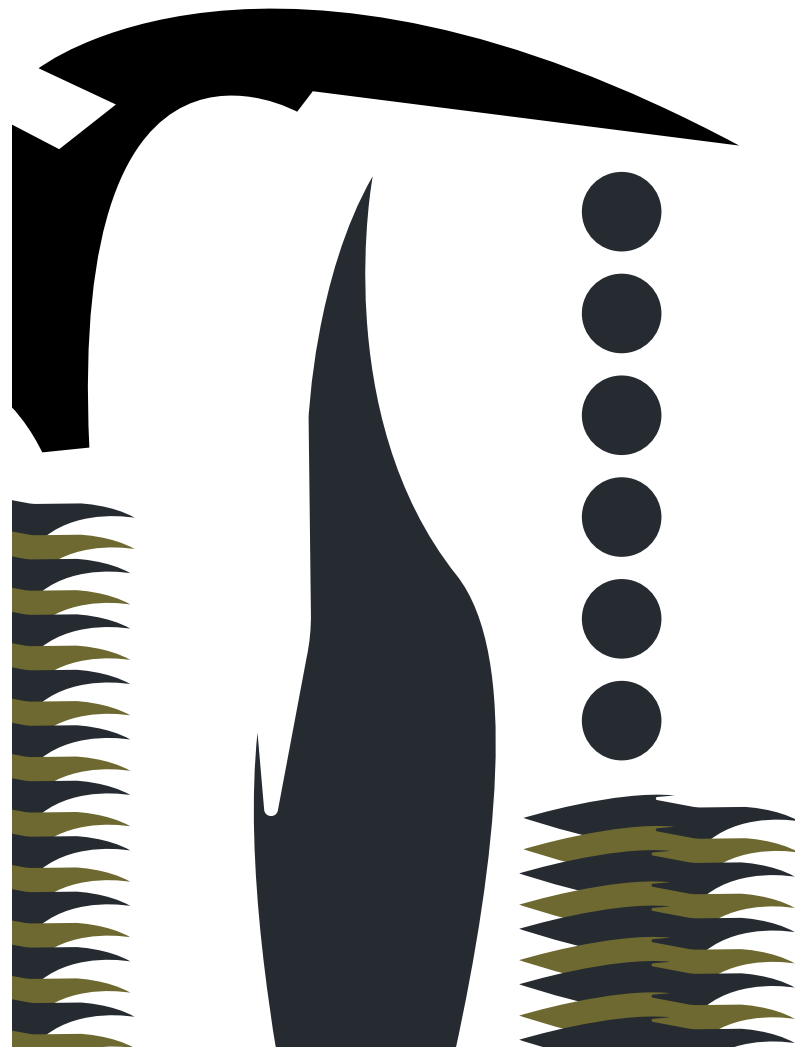


3

THE
AUTOMOBILE AS
AN AFFECTIVE
MEDIUM

Reading an automobile the same way as a work of art, in terms of the entirety of the apparatus which has produced it, shows how intertwined the car is in first-world societies. As a case study, we can use an image of a Chevy Nova (figure 11) found online during my research into the defunct *New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.* (NUMMI) factory. This site, now home to Tesla, was home to a collaboration between General Motors and Toyota Motor Corporation over a span of 26 years. Looking back at the successive indices needed for the production of this image, we can begin at inception. From the boardroom, then to the transportation designers, the factory assembly line, and the marketing department. Next, distributed through various means, such as sales brochures and commercials, where the marketing lore disseminates through the population. They are then found on roadways, driveways, and junkyards. Decades later, an image from a brochure was scanned and posted online by a car fanatic and finally accessed by me. The trip of this Nova is then further synthesized in my 2019 work *Platform Bazaar*, where translated and reassembled NUMMI models auto parts found their way into various objects (like a desk) and experiences (videos). These translations act as indexical markers where we can view layers of the industrial mechanisms sequentially, tracing the ever-transforming shape as it is copied, translated and misinterpreted through time and space, arriving at a mutated and flattened facsimile of a family sedan.

We can then think through the geology of the automobile as new media theorist Jussi Parikka thinks through media as geological. Acknowledging that geology is not just the layers of crust, rock, and soil, but connected to the climate which is also connected to politics and governance.¹¹ Similarly, the automobile is an affective medium comprised of not just steel, foam, and plastics, but as an amalgamation of rare-earth minerals, social imaginaries, fetishes, postcolonial lust, desire to be American, desire for the exotic other, evolution of the wheel, becoming faster than the prey, political upheavals, liquified dinosaurs, middle-class ideology, labor, class warfare, and so on. Parts are manufactured and shipped from continent to continent, assembled into successively larger objects until, ultimately, their



11. Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media. Electronic Mediations* ; v. 46. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 4.

Figure 11. 1988 Chevrolet Nova Twin Cam.

departure from the assembly line where they are badged and stored for the market they will inhabit. The consolidation of parts and lore are shipped across land and sea to join their cousins on the roadways—a feedback loop that returns rippling effects of culture which are altered and transplanted. Cultural heritage has been closely associated with cars—think German brands—and become objects that define their homeland. The cultural object that signifies importance in its respective culture loses significance when its origins are cloudy and taken out of context. When the NUMMI plant produced identical cars for international markets, a global language of automobiles emerged out of the partnership between the two automakers. An American *Pontiac Matrix* and Japanese *Toyota Voltz* were built using the same platform—identical cars, except for cosmetic changes. Both American and Japanese consumers were forced to recognize a homogenized version of the vehicle. The homogenized global automobiles brought a whittling away of cultural specificity. Similarly, digital platforms problematize origins such that cultural enunciations become mediated by the technology, and thus, co-opted, translated, and then re-distributed instantaneously.

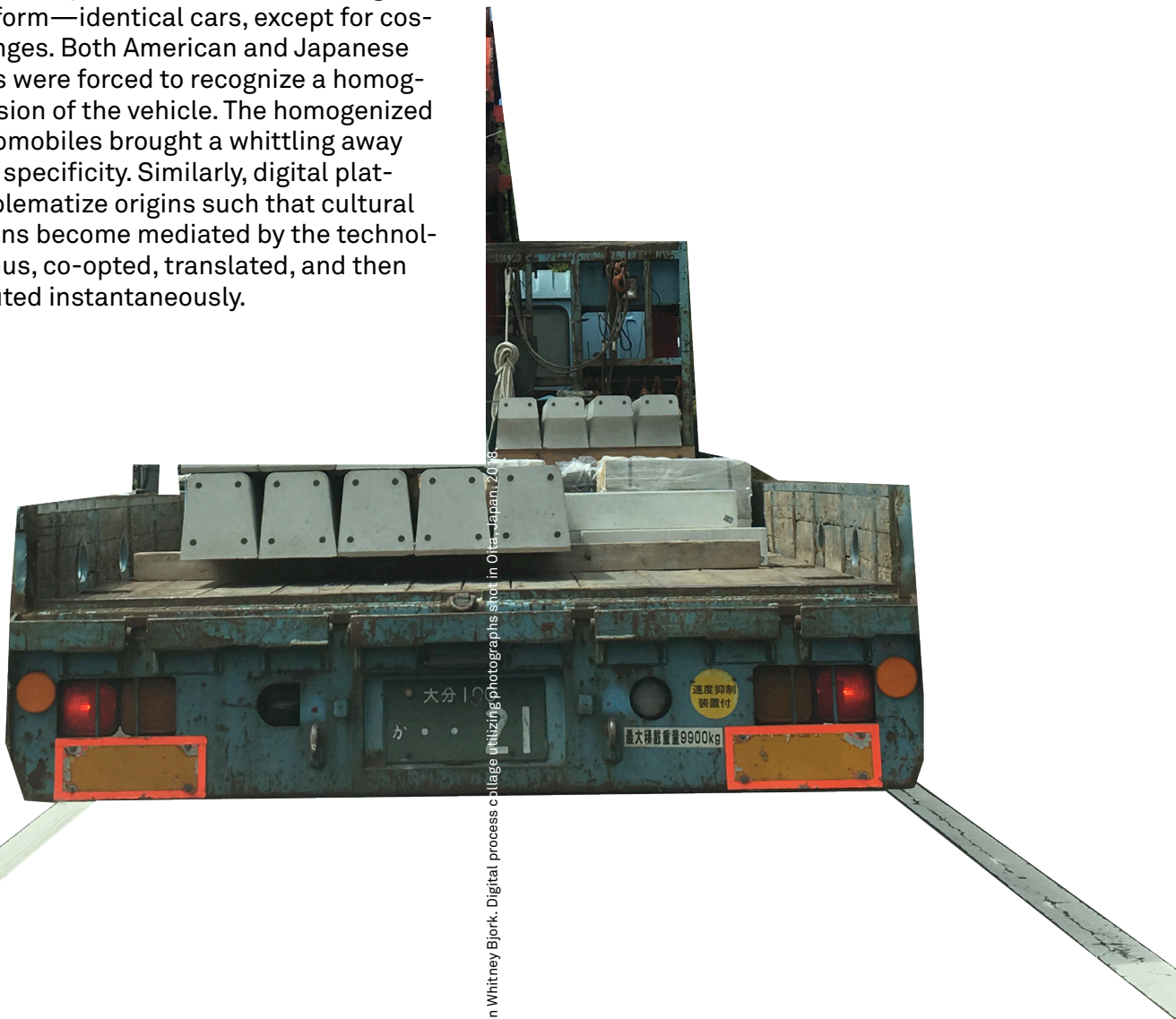


Figure 12. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Digital process collage utilizing photographs shot in Oita, Japan, 2018.

IN CLOSING

I wish to draw attention to the entanglements of infrastructures developed to control the flow of information, bodies, commodities, minerals, genetics, shapes, and patterns. The illumination of pixels suggesting movement on screens produces subjects, alters behaviors, and props up a factory-like labor force producing and consuming content at the same time. Such hours spent tethered to the internet has spawned subversive subcultures, global hegemonies, and allowed for the spread of propaganda through government entities. With the proliferation of governments pushing neo-liberal economics, there is a handoff of power from government to corporation. Such is visible in the surveillance-based platforms dominating the web. When thinking through platforms as intermediaries connecting actors, it is helpful to observe analogs to the internet to help articulate the phenomenon. For my purposes, using the automobile for its use of roadway networks, contribution to economies through the distribution of goods, services, and reciprocal relationship to the internet proves worthy of introspection.



Figure 13. Aaron Whitney Bjork. Platform Bazaar Installation. Multi-channel video installation, russian birch, steel, electronics. Disjecta Gallery, Portland Oregon. 2019.

I want to offer a sincere *thank you* to my family, friends, and mentors.

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**SPECIAL
THANKS**

