

Monument to Capital: Notes on Secular Religiosity

Jonas Staal

Jonas Staal is an artist and founder of the artistic and political organisation New World Summit (2012-ongoing) and the campaign New Unions (2016-ongoing). Staal's work includes interventions in public space, exhibitions, theatre plays, publications and lectures, focusing on the relationship between art, democracy and propaganda. Recent solo exhibitions include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *New World Academy* (Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2015) and *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016). His projects have been exhibited widely, including at the 7th Berlin Biennial (2012), the 31st São Paulo Bienal (2014) and the Oslo Architecture Triennial (2016). Recent books by Staal include *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Jap Sam Books, 2014) and *Stateless Democracy* (BAK, 2015), and he is a regular contributor to *e-flux Journal*. Currently, Staal is finalising a commission for the design and construction of a new public parliament assigned by the autonomous Rojava government (Northern Syria), part of his long term PhD research *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* at the PhDArts program of the University of Leiden.

Abstract

Using his ongoing research project *Monument to Capital* as a starting point, here Staal argues that capitalism's alienation has bred an "authorless world" to which we can only respond religiously. *The Monument to Capital* project represents through video and installation the artist's ongoing research into the structural relationship between economic crisis and the construction of the highest buildings of the world. It departs from the so-called Barclay's Skyscraper Index, which the company uses to advise its clients in which countries to invest into real estate.



Monument to Capital (lightbox, 2013)

I would like to share some introductory notes on my research project *Monument to Capital* (2013–ongoing) in the context of Nav Haq’s curatorial proposition for the ninth edition of Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, entitled *Wheredolendandyoubegin—On Secularity*.

My friend, theologian and activist Ernst van den Hemel, argues the secular should be understood threefold. First, as *the secular*, a term that defines the formal separation between religious institutions on the one hand, and governmental as well as administrative institutions on the other. Second, as *secularism*, which relates to an ideological doctrine of which the French notion of “laïcité” is exemplary: in this case, the notion of secularism becomes inherently tied to the idea of Western progress and superiority versus the so-called “sealed time” of Islam.¹ Third and final, as *secularisation*, a term that describes a process in which all societies will eventually naturally embrace secularism as a part of the project of modernity, leaving behind supposed “backward” religious beliefs. Secularisation is thus the ultimate consequence of the institutionalisation of secularism. Nav Haq’s use of the notion of *secularity* on the other hand, seems

1 The concept of sealed time is borrowed from Sven Lütticken, with which he aims to describe the caricature made of Islamic civilisation living in a state fundamentally counter-posed to progress. See Lütticken, Sven. *Icons of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009. p. 65.

2 An example could be the stateless democracy of the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava (Northern Syria), in which secularism forms one of the foundational pillars of their project of autonomous self-governance. In a region with a majority of Muslim citizens, as well as Christians, Yazidis and others, secularism in this case represents the capacity of emancipatory governance to recognise and protect different religious spheres and practices in the public domain. Such multi-religious co-existence enacted through the notion of secularism could be understood as “secularity”.

3 Walter Benjamin famously went so far as to argue that capitalism is to be considered a “pure religious cult” despite the fact that “it knows no special dogma, no theology”. See Benjamin, Walter. “Capitalism as Religion”. In Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1 1913–1926*. Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press, 2002. p. 288.

to indicate yet another engagement with the notion of the secular: namely as a proposition that could operate as a political paradigm of cultural and religious diversity, or even liberation.²

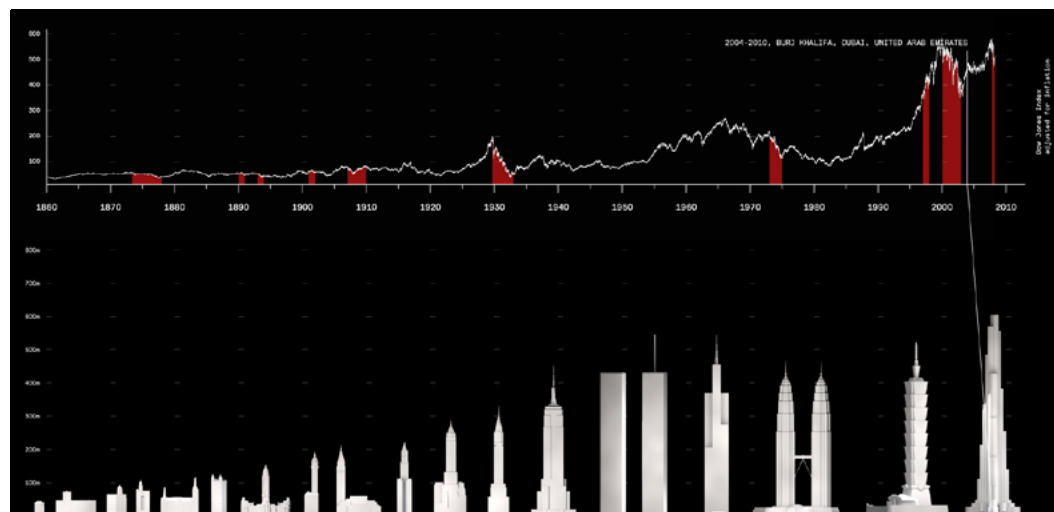
The *Monument to Capital* project is an ongoing research into the structural relationship between economic crisis and the construction of the highest buildings of the world. It departs from the so-called Barclay’s Skyscraper Index, which the company uses to advise its clients in which countries to invest into real estate. Barclay’s argument is that when the construction of a new highest building of the world is announced, this indicates an excess of speculation on the housing market and an impending economic crisis. Although Barclay’s analysis is primarily informed by finance, it is a highly relevant document as a form of critical cultural theory. It is as if the highest buildings of the world are unconscious societal responses to the trauma of crisis, attempting to capture capital in these buildings—these gigantic ghost banks—at the very moment that capital is melting into air. As such, the highest buildings are not a symbol of economic capability, but rather monumental witnesses to its loss: a global monument to capital, continuously in the making. No longer should we consider them as separate buildings, but as one ongoing construction that essentially performs the power—and losses—of high finance capitalism.

But *Monument to Capital* is relevant for possibly less apparent reasons as well, namely as a case study of *secular religiosity*. The skyscrapers that form the *Monument to Capital* are intended to be symbols of power of a system of rational speculation, profit engineering and calculative control over the spheres of human life and exchange. And indeed, few would declare capitalism as their “religion”, except in an ironic way. But the rituals that we engage in regarding capitalism’s performance are most certainly religious in nature.³ Rather than believing in capitalism as religion, we act religiously in relation to capitalism. Crises are the most telling in that regard. The trillions of Euros and Dollars invested to “save” the economy saw corporations and governments around the world pray at the opening of the Dow Jones Index, as if the relation between their acts (investing money) and the result (saving the economy) were completely beyond their control. In the capitalist cultural revolution the world is not what we make, but what is made for us, through powers beyond our compre-

hension.⁴ While mockery of ancient traditions of sacrifice are norm, it is hard to not see an equivalent of offering fruits and meats to calm some evil spirit in the “rational” operations of contemporary liberal governments. Capitalism’s alienation has bred an “authorless world” to which we can only respond to religiously.

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Lütticken, Sven. *Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. p. 7.

In this light, *Monument to Capital* is not just a research project into the monumentalisation of crisis; it is equally a case study of an architecture of secular religiosity.



Monument to Capital (video, 2013)

Monument to Capital (video, 2013)

Selected Script

The British multinational bank Barclays, which provides financial services worldwide, annually publishes its Skyscraper Index. First developed in 1999, it shows—according to the 2012 edition—the “unhealthy correlation between construction of the next world’s tallest building and an impending financial crisis: New York 1930; Chicago 1974; Kuala Lumpur 1997; and Dubai 2010.”

From the 142-foot high Equitable Life Building in New York built in 1873 at the beginning of what became known as the Long Depression, to the 2,717 foot Burj Khalifa built in 2007 at the onset of our own

contemporary Great Recession, Barclays’s research shows that when markets go down, skyscrapers rise up. Or, conversely, whenever the world’s highest buildings pop up, the Dow Jones plunges. The Skyscraper Index thus shows a direct correlation between the world’s highest buildings and its deepest crises and may therefore be considered a unique form of capitalist self-critique.

The skyscraper is a monumentalisation of capital, a desperate attempt to invoke a certain materiality of contemporary capital that has long been lost, ever since the gold standard was abolished in 1971. The skyscraper-phallus is the obscene symbol of capital, intimidating its subjects through an excessive culmination of concrete and steel, as if this absurd totem could restore the relationship between power and concrete, material wealth.

Capitalism’s complete loss of control over its own dynamics, its complete reliance on an excess of surplus value, results in a reinstitutionalisation of some form of material understanding of value and possession. The building of the skyscraper is a form of exorcism, a shock therapy to recover from capitalism’s continuous self-alienation. But instead of implementing any kind of new stable material standard, the tallest buildings of the world herald precisely the opposite: they only inflate capitalist anxiety. By the time its buildings reach the top, capital is lost. And back on the ground, society falls into poverty. Thus, the anxiety resulting from the loss of capital is accompanied by a total schizophrenia: to make capital radically present, it should be permanently out of reach.

In cities like Johannesburg, where Barclays itself inhabits one of the most prominent skyscrapers, social deprivation is at its highest. Its skyscrapers function as a screen preventing one from ever realising how bad the situation really is. Even though capital has evidently been lost, the towers that remain still project some form of symbolic prosperity, preventing us from confronting the actual levels of poverty and inequality. They have stored parts of capital’s “ghost” as it fled our societies, effectively suppressing our actual trauma of the loss we experience: our money is supposedly still in the bank, it will just never come out. We adore our skyscrapers, landmarks waiting for prosperity and growth to return, as magically as it came before. These skyscrapers,

this collection of the tallest buildings in the world, form our very own “Monument to Capital”. It makes “solid” what would otherwise melt into air, yet air is all that remains once we are faced with the fact that these impenetrable ghost banks hold nothing but our traumas as asset.

The Barclays Skyscraper Index thus provides us with insight into the conditions underlying this global Monument to Capital. Today, we tend to understand the history of the tallest buildings in the world as an architectural history, focusing on the aesthetic specificities of each of their visual manifestations and the specific social and political conditions of the country in which they arose. But now that our economies have lost all autonomy in a global exchange of capital, this approach, taking as its departure point the unique aesthetic character of each of these buildings, is clearly delusional.

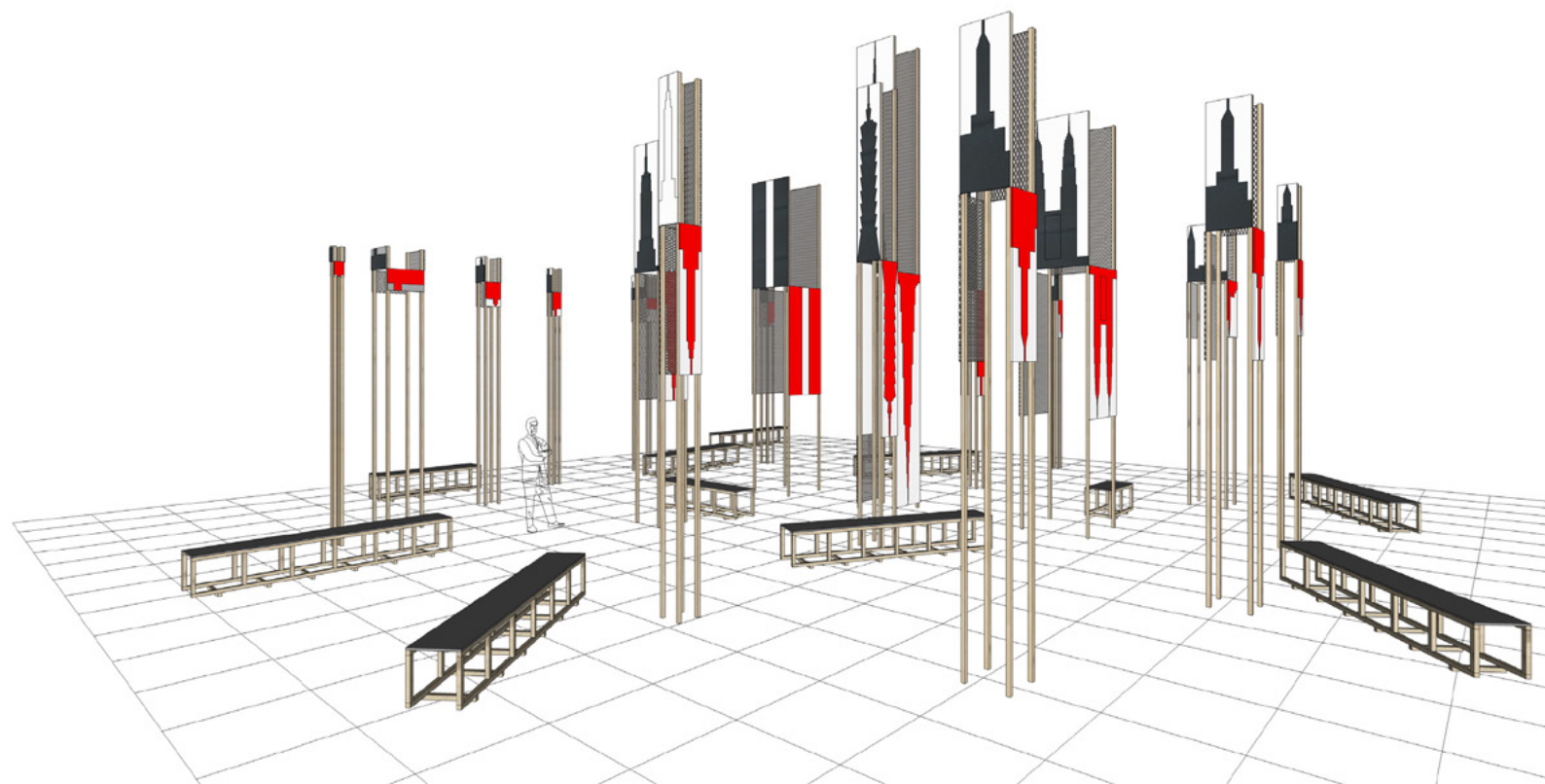
The French sociologist and philosopher Jacques Ellul argued in his 1964 book, *The Technological Society* (published in French as *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* in 1954), that the end of the second Industrial Revolution had resulted in an increasingly global technological society. He went on to propose in a later book, *Propaganda—The Formation Of Men's Attitudes* (1965; published in French as *Propagandes* in 1962), the analysis of the technological construct of our contemporary cities as a form of sociological propaganda. This meant that instead of focusing on the publicly proclaimed intentions behind the construction of the highest buildings in the world, we should focus on their actual morphology. The question is not what the buildings are supposed to mean, but how they perform their meaning. Following Ellul's line of thought, we should consider the city as ideology in action. This is the real meaning of Barclays' Skyscraper Index. As such, their research into the highest buildings of the world is strangely Ellulian in nature; by merely looking at the correlation between the highest buildings in the world and financial crises, their collective morphology is that of an assemblage of seemingly decontextualised architectural units, each part of one and the same Monument to Capital.

By approaching Barclays's Skyscraper Index through Ellul, we are able to map out the global pulse formed by the correlation between collapsing stock indices and the rise of the highest skyscrapers. It reveals the organism of our cities, the way they contain and display

our hopes and anxieties. Hold the Dow Jones Index upside down, and you would be able to distinguish each of the highest buildings in the world based in the chart's peaks. Each peak, an inverted meltdown, representing its accompanying tower.

Now the fundamental question arises concerning the Monument to Capital is: who is the author? If the reversed Dow Jones Index shows the perfect global blueprint of the Monument to Capital, then what is the architect more than an illustrator of an already defined economic model? The pulse of today's world. Asking about its authorship would be like asking who decides about our heart beat.

When we allow ourselves to visualise the Monument to Capital, we are staring at a worldwide design for a global monumental commemoration of capital that has moved out of our reach. The Monument to Capital memorialises a world without author, a capital without capital.



Monument to Capital (installation study, 2017)