

Ports and Platforms: Aesthetics of Collective Organising against Structures of Logistical Control

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Benjamin Gerdes

We heard that logistics was the operation that smooths over a network of precarious labour sites, constructs a flattened and unified fiction on the backs of many small-scale and unseen workers, a weightless fiction of an appealing and commercially viable future powered by heavy industry running offsite. We talked: if this is the case then the advertised notion of the smart city, with its app-enabled play spaces for influencers and creatives, glided over by electric scooters (I am tempted to write “gilded over”), drone delivery, and the swiftness of cash-free living, amplifies the production of this smoothness and the casting out of visible labour and infrastructural machinery to the peripheries and dark hours. It is the coming into the real world of centuries of navigation and entertainment, we read, from the ship to the dolly shot to the first-person shooter, motion always becoming more fluid and smooth.^[1]

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

[Four Meetings, One Shift \(excerpt\)](#) from [Benj Gerdes](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Video clip 1: Benjamin Gerdes, *Four Meetings, One Shift*, 2020, members debating the national vote to strike on 24 October 2018

On the way to constructing a story about unified technologies and systems of circulation, an assemblage of small tasks and daily operations passes through many human hands. Geographers borrow the term “choke point”

from military and maritime studies. Where once this meant a narrower physical geographic feature through which an army or a ship, for example, would encounter a blockage or obstruction, now it describes the ports, warehouses, logistics centres and digital nodes where the links of the global supply chain can easily break down. These spots become contested sites of control and competition between governments and corporations, and therefore introduce intense labour conflicts over speed, normalisation, maximisation and the human costs of these accelerating demands including physical safety and mental health. In all instances, the network is both digital and physical, here and elsewhere simultaneously, which means it is only through the aggregation of many sites, contexts, symptoms and subjective accounts that we may be able to assemble through montage a vision for strategies of a transnational counter-logistics.

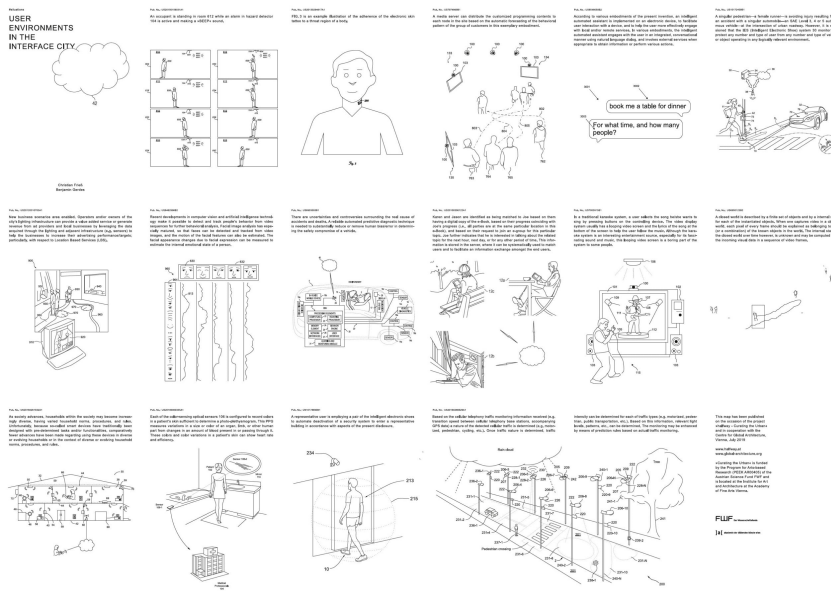


Figure 1: Christian Freis and Benjamin Gerdes, User Environments in the Interface City, side A[2]

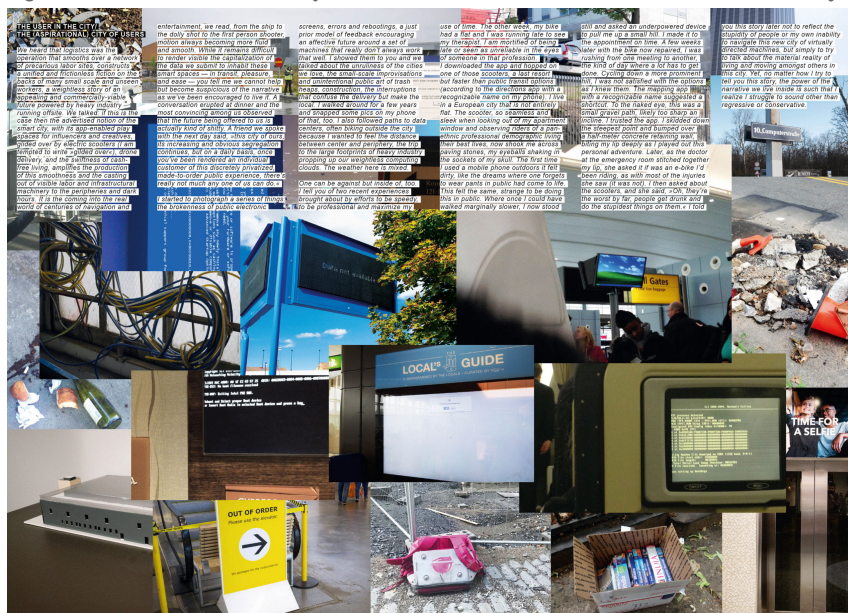


Figure 2: Christian Freis and Benjamin Gerdes, User Environments in the Interface City, side B

By paying attention to the frictions and stoppages that are part and parcel of logistical processes, critical scholars have noted that even as logistics is taken up as a tool of imperial dispossession and capitalist power, it also produces new sites of vulnerability and potential emancipation. To this end, logistics has become a growing force not only among states, corporations, military forces, and aid organizations but also within social movements and activist organizations that aim to challenge their practice.^[3]

Words like logistics, infrastructure and supply chain fall everywhere and nowhere. They are somehow so ubiquitous as to be boring seen on trucks and trains, warehouses, utilities and stock charts, essential and yet never questioned. They feel necessary to the organisation of the world, but attract little attention as they remain inhuman and abstract. These systems offer a backbone for the financialised circulation and protection of material goods and data, delivering the means for governments and corporations to guarantee mobility and information access, generating profits and the aspirational appearance of systemic stability. Moreover, the same mechanisms that promote speed, access, organisation or mobility always already carry the capacity for forceful control: containment, detention or technologically mediated spatial and social segregations. In her discussion of the concept of “mobility justice”, Mimi Sheller considers networked urbanism as “the production of spaces of uneven livability that enroll differentiated bodies into unequal modes of locational control and racialized, gendered mobility regimes.”^[4]

What do we mean by a logistical gaze? In brief, it can be summarised as a picture of logistics as ars combinatoria, that is, first of all, a capacity for articulation and governance. A logistical gaze thus looks to flows, mobility regimes, points of condensation and different distributions of power and roles to analyse phenomena. At the same time, it focuses on knots, bottlenecks, resistances and the production of a counter-logistic. To achieve this, it has to integrate and modify the “traditional” categories of critical theory with new concepts such as assemblages, hubs, corridors, connections, infrastructures, interruptions, resilience, and strategies that could be useful for breaking the opacity of black boxes and penetrating their logic. In other words, a logistical gaze considers logistics not only as a mere matter of circulation, a neutral technique of management or a simple device to organise mobility in the most efficient way but rather as a more all-encompassing bio-political apparatus that produces spaces as well as subjectivities, norms and relations.^[5]

My research and artist practice in recent years, conducted in dialogue with organisers, academics and activists, have sought to connect the promotion and rhetoric of contemporary smart-city paradigms or platform urbanism initiatives, including their infrastructural underpinnings, with the specific labour struggles and shifting legal frameworks unfolding across sites of logistical importance and intensity. In the former, the human as urban user produces, consumes and navigates across virtual and physical environments, often as a free source of labour, serving as almost the most basic constitutive element: a raw material to be mined for physical and affective interactions. In the latter, human labour, particularly when collectivised, poses the biggest threat and therefore incurs the most forceful multinational corporate response. Notably, many of these responses do not serve short-term economic interests, but surround efforts to re-establish control and domination. A principle connection, then, among the contexts I’ve engaged with concerns the “becoming militant” of organisations and practices committed to once-mainstream ethical demands around labour or human rights in the face of shifting currents of political economy.

A specific focus in several projects has been the Swedish context, where a long-burnished international reputation for Social Democratic social welfare programmes, including urban infrastructure initiatives and worker protections, stands in contrast to the manner and direction in which these dynamics are being forcefully reshaped today. For example, a labour union that relies on democratic member processes for decision-making is rendered intolerable and unreliable to the point of mandating changes to Swedish labour law. Similarly, racial and social justice community organisations challenging “smart city” narratives of urban futures fall outside the prevailing norms for what can be demanded of urban governance and social organisation today. In the words of Hedvig Wiezell, executive director of the suburban Stockholm community house Folkets Husby, “manoeuvring in a racist segregated city, claiming human rights becomes radical.”^[6] While both democracy and human rights deserve further interrogation in terms of concepts and implementation, the fact remains that seemingly base-level demands around labour and human rights are only tolerated when they do not challenge the networks of control enacted upon new structures of urban mobility and/or logistical circulation more broadly.

To redraw attention to the word “manoeuvring”, one articulation of a contemporary urban speculative project zones literally difficult to manoeuvre against in their slippery pro-offering of an inclusive, tech-positive future leans aesthetically on the convergence of information technology infrastructure and the shipping container as visible symbol. Zones of urban growth and possibility remain in flux, with containers dotting a landscape as evidence of construction projects, gentrification-flavoured restaurant pop-ups and temporary or refugee housing. The perpetually unfinished “in progress” character of the parked container suggests an adjacency to data and financial flows, invokes supply-chain narratives of the smooth movement of commuters and goods aligning with more frictionless transactions. As my research examines the “off-sitedness” and public invisibility of the technological infrastructures underpinning contemporary communication, mobility and overall urban social life, it is interesting to examine this visual narrative compared to exceptions to this tendency. For example, rather than placing it on the outskirts of the city and/or in less visible industrial zones, the thirteen-storey-tall Amsterdam Data Tower (2016), highly visible within the grounds of the University of Amsterdam’s Science Park, calls attention to the centrality of data in research and science. At the same time, the relationship between data and material mobility and that this is a place where things move freely in the digital and physical realms is forced by a long line of stacked shipping containers that follow the road to the tower and ultimately intersect with it. It is important to note that this container “tail” appended to the data tower bears no connection to any legitimate shipping facility; it is completely decorative (see Fig. 3).^[7] Similar are the containers that have lived another, repurposed life, but are then returned to port facility areas to resume their pedestrian duties (see Fig. 4).



Figure 3: Amsterdam Data Tower, note the containers at lower right, photo: Benj Gerdes

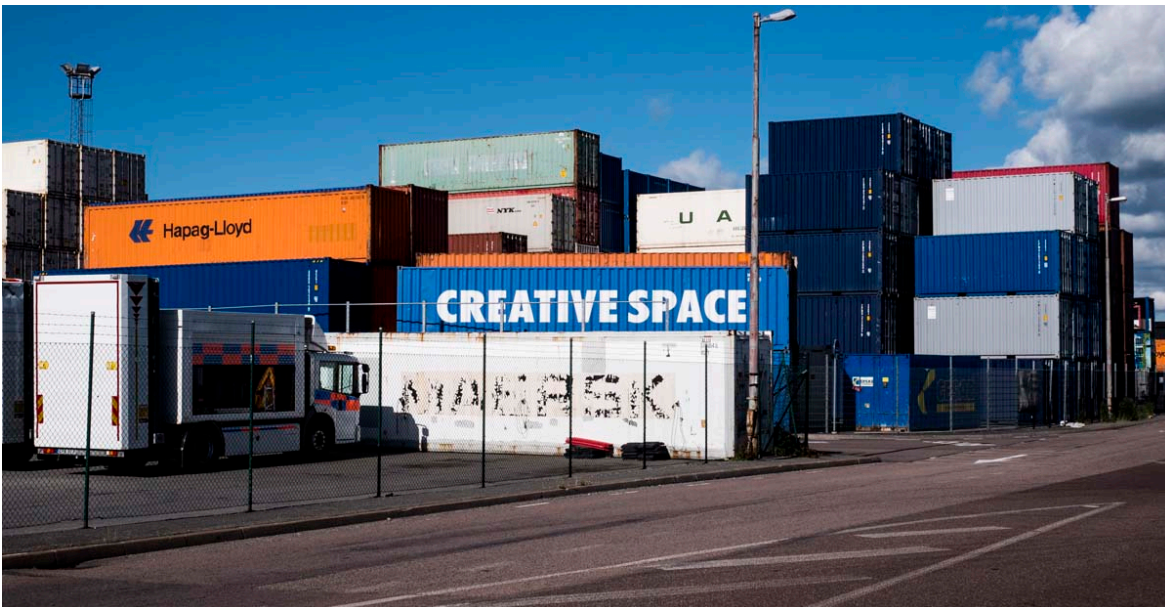


Figure 4: Container marked "Creative Space" at the Port of Gothenburg after some urban adventure, photo: Benj Gerdes

The film *Four Meetings, One Shift* (2020) emerges from an ongoing working relationship with the Swedish Dockworkers' Union (SDU), focusing on the Port of Gothenburg, Scandinavia's largest port, and the union's transnational organising and solidarity networks. The project's initial interest concerned this relatively small union's labour conflict with port operator APM Terminals (a Maersk subsidiary) in Gothenburg and, in particular, the union's role as a scapegoat for now implemented changes to Swedish labour law, limiting the right to industrial action colloquially called "the right to strike". I have been filming and meeting with Hamn4an, the Gothenburg arm of SDU, since October 2018. As Sweden's last significant independent union, with approximately 1,300 members, the capacity to inflict rapid economic damage through port closures has led to the union's labelling as troublesome in many mainstream media outlets. In fact, union actions taken to address safety concerns and APM's denial of related contractually agreed measures have led to extremely aggressive tactics

from the port operator, including a lockout of six weeks in response to a half-day work stoppage in 2017. Rather than scrutinising these articulations of domination and managerial control, media accounts favour explanations in which a labour organisation's commitment to member democracy and self-articulation of struggle for collective rights since the early 1970s poses a threat to the continuous circulatory needs of the present.

This film, then, which is the first of several projects to emerge from co-research and cooperation with the union, focuses on the specifics of the union's operations inside a port labour conflict. Utilising an embedded practice of filming the decision-making process during member meetings, with four meetings captured before, during, and (anti-climactically) after a successful strike in 2019. The working process has been clarified over time, with the manner and method of filming focusing less on traditional documentary video elements and more on three specific aspects: first, the psychological effects of work in high time-pressure logistics hubs during labour conflicts with management; second, the group decision-making process in a uniquely member-driven democratic organisation; third, a production process with individuals and a collaborating organisation, sharing and discussing the work-in-progress, and them also receiving training and support towards their own self-produced media. The production model for the project remains uncommon in the sense that it was planned from the start to be a two-way flow of footage and information between the project and the union, with informal meetings, feedback and training sessions happening outside of filming proper towards the union's internal production of communication media and oral history videos.

The context for such a project points to the paradox of today: the technical means for producing and sharing images have never been more easily accessible, but important logistical labour sites such as data centres, warehouses and ports have become increasingly obscured from public view. The distribution of images has become monopolised by a small set of state and corporate actors within very tight aesthetic regimes. It is, in a sense, a very difficult logistical problem to represent logistics. Filming sites of interest can threaten the safety of the filmer and the filmed, but at the same time can appear so mundane as to not hold a viewer's interest since, after all, the inside of a port and of a data centre, what Martin Danyluk calls "fungible space", can look the same all over the world.^[8] The task is to translate the psychological experience of working within these sites and contexts into a film, and to draw on the subjective perspective of those on the frontlines to generate unique and specific image fragments of that experience. In doing so, the project motivates a set of aesthetic decisions in relationship to broader questions around art practices within or alongside existing social movements and related struggles. For example, what does it mean to film within a group that is already self-producing its own media social media, short videos, web archives without the help of outside media professionals? What are the temporal or serial approaches a politically engaged film or art project can take in relationship to the acceleration and fragmentation of social media and news cycles? Finally, how can local sites and labour and political struggles be contextualised, particularly vis-à-vis a wide range of existing labour practices and political trajectories across Northern Europe and the Global South?

In this case, the SDU's formalised relationship via the International Dockworkers' Council (IDC) as part of a transnational network of related labour sites may offer a provisional model. At the same time that international solidarity configures the union's options more than labour solidarity within Sweden, suggesting perhaps a more transversal approach, the temporal approach of this film in particular is durational, limited to meeting rooms and the gaps, pauses and quotidian details constituting the necessary, but less seductive side of an organisation actively struggling for collective representation. This durational aspect, coupled with the ongoing nature of the project to remain in dialogue long after the strike was won constitute a terrain for artistic research projects that is distinct from traditional documentary production models that are also supplementary to internally produced media.

The frequency of labour struggles among dockworkers can be read not as a pattern of repetition, a continuum of struggles for the same manner of rights and recognition against familiar foes, but as moments that signal shifts in labour policy, safety, mechanisation, privatisation, precarisation, etc. This project understands ports as holding important, yet shifting functions historically, under different economic and social regimes. As zones of intensity, subject to both extreme demands for control and dependent on human labour, they expose tendencies that can be tied to other spaces and forms of labour. Therefore, looking closely at ports can help us witness historical shifts with much broader implications. The exploration of logistics labour's subjective consequences offers a basis for connecting the contemporary experience of a dockworker to that of a worker in a care home or an app-based food delivery person.

Footnotes

1. From Freis, Cristian and Gerdes, Benjamin, *User Environments in the Interface City*, A3 folded map, published on the occasion of the project "halfway—Curating the Urban" and in cooperation with the Centre for Global Architecture, Vienna, 2019.
2. For further information and high-res images, see <https://cargocollective.com/christianfriess/User-Environments-in-the-Interface-City> (accessed 2020-11-10).
3. Chua, Charmaine, Danyluk, Martin, Cowen, Deborah and Khalili, Laleh. "Introduction. Turbulent Circulation: Towards a Critical Logistics Studies". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Vol. 36. No. 4. 2018. pp. 617-629.
4. Sheller, Mimi. *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. London: Verso. 2018. p. 109.
5. Benvegnù, Carlotta, Cuppini, Niccolò, Frapporti, Mattia, Milesi, Floriano and Prione, Maurilio. "Introduction Logistical Gazes: spaces, labour and struggles in global capitalism". *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*. Vol. 13. No. 1. Spring 2019. pp.
6. Wiezell, Hedvig. Executive Director Folkets Husby, Stockholm. Powerpoint presentation 22 October 2020.
7. For an extended analysis on logistics and neoliberal architecture, see Bolt, Mikkel. "Advertising Architecture and Containers: The Hidden World of Logistics and Spectacular Architecture". *Architecture and Control*. Edited by Annie Ring, Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel. Leiden: Brill. 2018. pp. 209-227.
8. Danyluk, Martin. "Fungible Space: Competition and Volatility in the Global Logistics Network". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Vol. 43. No. 1. pp. 94-111.