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The Industrial Object as Fugitive: Abstraction, Infrastructure, and the Illicit Drift of Materials

The sacralised condition of the 'environment'—our industrial home—takes form in infrastructure draped in practicality, stability and functionality: essential obedience. In slow mutation, the regime has become environment, dispersed across the terrain. The real hierarchy lies in the abstract, industrial and material configuration of the world.

Pipes must stay hidden. Channels must direct. Containers must contain.

It is typically at the apex of complexity that civilisations begin to disintegrate. Industrial objects reveal their agency not as active intention (or suppression in this case), but as an unruly material condition. When set to work beyond their initial vital function, they can be transposed and sublimated onto a plane of transference.

The Fugitive Object

This is not a metaphor for liberation but a materially produced condition. Susan Leigh Star describes the invisibility and reliability that define infrastructural systems.¹ A fugitive object is one that slips from circuits of function, revealing not intention but a form of emergent agency generated by material composition and infrastructural neglect. When systems pursue new extractions, the old is given reprieve and accumulates dust. Rerouting the highways back to this sediment opens a potential to hijack via undercover operations. Here lies a potential for a total hostile takeover, disguised as assimilation in the host society.

To call the industrial object a fugitive is to recognise that objects flee even before we notice they have moved. They drift laterally. They occupy edges. They are caught in what Fred Moten describes as 'the surround,' spaces adjacent to the main stage of activity that are deeply generative.² The fugitive object inhabits the surround of infrastructure: the maintenance corridor, the scrap heap, the unfinished room, the leak. These are spaces where matter acts without instruction.

These objects peel out on the run, fleeing the regimes that once monitored them and the custodians who maintained them. Here lies a state of suspended utility: vessels arranged around a table, void of ritual, stage-set traps for involvement, snow-blasted blind in teal. The industrial identity flickers and wanes.

Not a unit of production nor a tool of infrastructure, but a fugitive form—an organ—that slips, drifts, and escapes onto a horizontal plane. Its capacity for flight, or rerouting, becomes visible only when relieved of its intended circuits of control: an excision of vital function. Removed from networks and sinews, taken away from their labour in a system, gas canisters freely roam, removed and replaced to conduit disparate sources of energy. Pigments detach from their initial sites of production. Operating outside governance, design, and the spatial and temporal regimes that infrastructure depends upon, vital function disperses: the severance of a nexus from the circuitry of production. A pipe that leaks is not failing; it is exceeding.

The flow is governed; the aim is to interrupt it, or redirect it elsewhere.

Industrial Abstraction and De-Function

Can we witness the removal of a node from structures of power and its placement upon a plane of transference? This is not to induce mere malfunction, nor to flatten it into a purified room of aestheticisation, but to sever it from instruction. It becomes opaque and directionless, a mute loss of specificity: hollow channelling. Abstraction enters the frame; there is work only when production stops, when malfunction interrupts function.

A pipe displayed horizontally in a gallery, a telecommunications logo slightly altered, a cartographic emblem displaced from its administrative surface. Each enters an abstract state not because it becomes refined or purified, but because it becomes functionally indeterminate.

Infrastructure itself is a coercive diagram—a mapping of flow, control and containment. This mapping is most visible in global symbols of governance. Material disobedience extends onto images of power.

¹ Susan Leigh Star 'The Ethnography of Infrastructure', American Behavioral Scientist 43, no. 3 (1999), p. 377–391.

² Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 17.

*Consider the U.N. emblem
A cartographic projection that attempts to freeze the world into a legible geometry.
Here in this room, wrapped around a tabletop,
Ductile iron protruding from its stomach,
Encircled by two crossed olive branches,
The organ of industry,
Hollowed out in plump teal.*

This emblem becomes a fugitive image and, when treated in excess, mutates into what might be called an infinite image—proliferating, distorting, leaking, producing excess rather than clarity. In their drift, these images proliferate not to elucidate but to exceed the logistics that attempt to fix them in place. They become fugitives alongside the objects they inhabit. The fugitive produces a particular mode of abstraction. Industrial abstraction emerges through de-specificity when an object's function no longer structures its legibility. Industrial abstraction does not aestheticise the object; it subtracts its logistical purpose.

Illicit Drift and Counter-Geographies

The drift parallels the behaviour of the industrial materials that surround and run through infrastructure. For those obsessed with order—technological dependence, process industries, 'flux' industries—the language must shift from factory to site, from enclosure to dispersed production.

'Moreover, one should not talk about factories any longer, but about sites, production sites.'

Industrial materials do not remain where they are placed; they linger, seep and accumulate. As Heather Davis notes, petrocultures read through plastic foreground intimate, molecular saturations of bodies and environments.³ This unwanted intimacy forms part of illicit drift: the movement of materials along paths they are not meant to take. Keller Easterling, in *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (2014), names the 'disposition' of infrastructure as the latent behaviours and unintended movements encoded into material arrangements.⁴ The fugitive object is one expression of this disposition—a drift generated not by human intention but by infrastructural excess, by slack.

Illicit drift becomes a counter-geographic reading of space: a horizontal politics of matter, with the figurehead dismembered and evacuated. Where traditional cartography relies on stable reference points, drift generates alternative geographies by contingency. A soft membrane of material logic replaces the industrial organ of intention—a processual motion somewhere between fluid dynamics, oozing geology, and industrial discharge.

Petrochemical vinyl wraps itself around this stage-set trap: a one-metre-high platform held above subsumption, infrastructure without clear purpose, its offspring forming an ungovernable membrane of unruly behaviour.

*Manifested here is the logic of black gold.
It is said that 'if you want to get rid of someone, you go after his infrastructure'.⁵*

It is difficult to conceive of power as infrastructure. How do we contest a regime that operates beyond language, assembled incrementally and without speech? A regime embedded in the lived terrain? What happens when we make these objects refuse compliance and counter-intuit them into disobedience?

The fugitive object becomes opaque, as described by Glissant; it turns mute and unreadable, at least before its backlog of energy is channelled horizontally.⁶ Opacity is not withdrawal or the prostitution of ambiguity, but a different form of presence tied to refusal.

All groups are terrified by their potential for violence and would rather remain guilty.

Alexandra Peters, 2026

³ Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), p.11.

⁴ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, (London: Verso, 2014).

⁵ The Invisible Committee, 'To Our Friends,' trans. Robert Hurley, Los Angeles: *Semiotext(e)*, 2015, p.98.

⁶ Glissant, Édouard, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).