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AbdouMaliq Simone

The conundrums of postcolonial cities

What is the work of being in the city today for those whose lives in dense, underserviced, and often dilapidated districts face frequent turbulence, making it difficult to hang on to a sense of stability or predict a reliable future? Continuity is less a matter of anchorage or 'digging in', and more a matter of being prepared to find a way into scenarios for which one is seldom equipped or eligible. Mobility is not so much a practice through which a well-formulated agenda or notion of self seeks information and opportunity, but a series of discontinuous events whereby assumptions, histories, and everyday enactments are dislocated and rearranged. In this essay, I want to say a few things about how various inner city districts in Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Kinshasa, Douala, and Johannesburg act as platforms for the exterior movements of their residents and how these same districts act as both generous and reluctant hosts for the movements of residents from other districts. For in this process of simultaneous accommodation, several critical points about contemporary social research can be highlighted.

Popular understandings of how residents navigate complex urban worlds often centre on sequences of successive states of belonging that mediate relationships to the city. Households belong to neighbourhoods, neighbourhoods to districts, districts to municipalities and so forth. Relationships deliberated at a specific scale thus embody the key logics and practices necessary for residents to map out how to approach a larger field of operations. Yet, the presence of such hierarchical ordering, when it does exist, is only partial, only the result of establishing a specific vantage point from which limited trajectories of extension, transaction, and circulation take place.

While specific geometries are empowered by states and other apparatuses to sediment practices, materials and designs, everything that assumes a discernible location in cities according to specific maps and other locational devices simultaneously occupies multiple positions in other networks that are not readily locatable (Brenner and Elden, 2009). Multiplicity here is not simply the relative and differing weight of components, but a force field that shapes intensity, attentiveness, and resistance – as bodies and materials are

enrolled in various projects not simply as counted items, but degrees of participation, affect, and reliability.

Cities are varied distributions of people, infrastructure, services, materials, and information reflecting specific practices of association – i.e. the way places are associated to others; how the experiences of the near or the far are brought into and kept removed from any location's present; how transmissions and circulations are speeded up and slowed down; how engagement and attentiveness is intensified or attenuated. Every place is the manifestation of multiple folds in which various potentialities of action, recognition and assemblage are differentially accessible to those affiliated to that place. The 'management' of a single position, identity, narrative, or trajectory of movement is in large part contingent upon the oscillating activations of other positions that are assumed and 'played with' (Hillier and Vaughn, 2007). People in cities thus step in and out of various 'shells' of operation – i.e. various enfolded identities, ways of moving, networks of circulation and contact, cultural assumptions, and densities of interaction to cite a few.

As Stephen Read (2006) emphasizes, places are always on their way somewhere, always points of relay and transmission, as they are always sites of criss-crossing movements. Given this architecture of urban life, even when specific mediations persist that facilitate the mapping of movement in and out of changing places, circumstances, fields, and times, the switching – i.e. the stepping in and out of different shells or tracks – requires 'research'. It requires a way of experimenting with different ways of seeing and acting. In situations where the re-territorializing forces of government create the effects of hierarchy and stabilized vectors of power, do tangents and disjunctions exist in the networking practices that generate such capacity through which those captured in or captivated by these apparent 'structural effects' can step out of their totalizing circumventions? Likewise, in situations where residents feel that they are unable to consolidate anything, where every provisional actions leads to an endless string of random encounters and diffused impacts, is it possible to mobilize boundaries that make it possible for an assemblage of actors to feel strongly implicated and thus attentive to coming up with mechanisms of coordination and coherence? Here scale and assemblage, flat and vertical ecologies continuously intersect as the multiplex realities of any particular instantiation of urban life posit changing implications and potentials for different actors – and where actors have to continuously 'switch gears' (Legg, 2009). How do residents then perform this research; and if such research is a critical dimension of urban life, how is the research itself 'researched'?

One entry point is the way in which residents in the inner city districts mentioned above undertake hundreds of small efforts to maintain a foothold in one urban district while also becoming involved in places away from home. This may take the form of a collective investment in a trading place in or near a particular market, the construction of a small informal house in an available backyard in a district that is seen as 'up and coming'. It may entail taking over a food-selling operation near the parking lot of a new shopping mall,

appropriating abandoned space for storage, inserting small trades in the fringes along busy thoroughfares. Sometimes small social fractures and conflicts or divergences in residential conditions among contiguous micro-territories create underutilized 'no-man's-land' within districts that 'outsiders' take advantage off through using these spaces as platforms from which to offer, for example, repair or protection services, or to set up gambling games.

These movements point to the conundrum of the postcolonial urban situation for many residents. On the one hand, many of the once relied upon forms of mediation that mapped out a range of implications for one's actions and that provided an interpretive framework for deciding how to operate in the city have dissipated. Narratives and institutions that once secured a workable sorting out of bodies, agendas, and practices seem to no longer work, as conflict over entitlements, the use of space, and access to opportunities intensifies. The relationship of residents to the city thus becomes more direct and visceral as if clear categorizations of forces and options are no longer viable and efficacy requires an ability to simply move with diffuse flows no longer held or shaped by intelligible discourses or belief systems. Here, then, the need is for a sense of consolidation, the capacity to be held in place, even momentarily in order to construct a workable vantage point on the city from which one can proceed to make decisions about how to use available resources of all kinds. On the other hand, there is also concern about the ways in which people feel they are stuck in positions from which they are simply the recipients and pawns of the arbitrary games and decisions of others whose power lacks any legitimacy and thus negotiability.

The intensity of concern for many residents of the urban South to circumvent the ways in which their lives can be hemmed in by forces seemingly beyond their control is bleakly depicted in Brilliante Mendoza's film, *Kinatay* – one the most brutal 'postcolonial' films ever made. In this film a freshly married policy-academy student, Peping, helps a drug-gang acquaintance collect outstanding payments from local street hawkers – a banal, low-level job that supplements his meagre income. The film initially captures the vibrancy of Manila as Peping and the mother of his child repeatedly change modes of transportation as they make their way from their home at the periphery to the city hall where they join hundreds of others for a brief marriage ceremony. In the initial part of the film, the importance of extended family ties and friendships are reiterated as critical to the capacity of the young, particularly, to envision normal lives for themselves. Shortly after, as Peping is finishing his rounds, the gang acquaintance requests that he joins in on another quick task from which he could make a little extra money. The quick task turns out to be a seemingly endless ride in a van with high-ranking police officers, moonlighting in their 'real' jobs as a notorious drug gang, on various freeways that seem to be going nowhere but eventually lead to a periphery beyond the periphery. On the floor of the van is a semi-comatose prostitute drug dealer that they had picked up earlier and brutally beaten for supposedly avoiding her debts. The ride to the periphery takes place in almost 'real time' and focuses

on Peping's increasing awareness of how the night is going to turn out and his inevitable capture. There is a moment before the film depicts the gruesome details of the way the woman pleads for her life, the affectless and methodical manner in which she is dismembered and the body parts disposed, that Peping has one brief opportunity to escape, but it falls through. Instead, the boss gives him a gun as a sign of his initiation. In the early morning hours as Peping excuses himself from a roadside meal with the gang and is allowed to take a taxi home, he takes out the gun and is startled by the blowout of the cab's tires. Standing on the verge of a downtown freeway in the early morning rush hour traffic, Peping has become the Gregor Samsa of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* – something totally transformed against his will and anticipation, and something completely dislocated.

The prosaic manner in which these events unfold, and the way in which Peping is incorporated into the event in a manner which effectively acts as inescapable coercion but with the discursive flatness of a crew of men performing the most menial of bureaucratic tasks is what indeed frightening about Peping's position. It is frightening to perhaps many others as well caught in the ordinariness of the way that violence is distributed and the complete absence of ethical anxiety in which police, public officials, and local authorities deploy it. The film implicitly points to the exigencies of not being stuck and of having some way out of being implicated in such arbitrary rule.

A range of devices, simultaneously conceptual, cognitive and affective, are important to this aspiration of mobility. For individuals are compelled to simultaneously retain, dispense, and move in and out of their various administrative, familial, and socio-cultural designations – i.e. the way they are 'framed', including both the ways they are interpreted by others and 'set up' to incur certain assumptions about what it is possible for them to do and their concomitant responsibilities. The trajectories of such remembering and forgetting are not volitional or anticipated in advance. So individuals need devices that steer the flows of action towards or away from them as they incessantly change positions, either stealing away from or confronting head-on the projections, anticipations, compulsions and indifference placed on them. Here, I will explore one such device: screen.

The fragile boundaries of urban cognition and space

Research is largely about location – the location of things in cells, curves, correlations, indicators, regressions and context specificities. Even in a world of complexity, it remains a process of locating causes and effects. The possibilities of location assume that any entity can be sufficiently held in a particular place long enough to assign it a location in relation to others or a mechanism, such as global positioning systems, capable of tracking an entity as it moves in real time. In the latter, the larger environment of possible positionalities is largely immaterial as the stability of the entity in movement is a product of algorithmic calculation.

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If the proposal here is that research is a critical quotidian process for residents to work out the critical conundrum of how to locate themselves in complex urban environments as a prelude to exerting action, then some overall assessment of where these urban environments are located in the larger scheme of things also is important. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the dilemmas of intensive territorialization and deterritorialization described earlier are incumbent in all cities and that it is a matter of residents finding out how their 'compatriots' in the most 'advanced' versions of urbanity deal with their historical dilemmas with enough sufficiency to keep the 'wheels turning'.

So, stepping out of the specificities of the urban South for a moment, in a first instance we could understand screens as the construct of cognitive mapping – i.e. a neurasthenic surface of the interplay of various sensations – visual, auditory, olfactory, gestural, and haptic – applicable to all cities. Such mapping then is the intersection of singular sensate experiences projected outward and into the individual's spaces of operation. It is a kind of probe involving various instances and forms of activation of which the individual is either an explicit or implicit target (Liddament, 2000). Here, the screen acts as a membrane, a mediation of interchange that is not important for the arrangements of 'bits' that it displays, but rather as a tissue that relays, switches, speeds up and slows down the 'traffic of semiosis.'

But as many urbanists note, given the profusion of digital production and media saturation, mapping becomes increasingly difficult. Even as a process of regulating intensities, absorption, or attention, mapping may no longer be desirable or possible as discernible anchorage points, trajectories and orientations are incessantly recalibrated in proliferating stochastic modelling systems (Coates, 2000). As Wael Fahmi points out:

> Architecture of cities needs no longer be generated through the static conventions of plan, section and elevation. Instead, buildings can now be fully formed in three-dimensional modelling, profiling, proto-tying and manufacturing software, interfaces and hardware, thus collapsing the stages between conceptualisation and fabrication, production and construc-tion. Iconographic assemblies are absorbed, reworked, and distributed globally in various forms and embodiments. The icons that comprise this new landscape of difference are essentially mediated reflexes of similarity and diversification (constructs that are mirrored endlessly over computer networks, home pages, televised imagery, advertising campaigns).
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> (Fahmi, 2008: 43)

Whereas scales, hierarchy or habitus could be mobilized as a means of situating the body into a series of discernible and interlocking positions – thus shaping how individuals thought about and represented the urban environment – at the neurasthenic dimension, mapping now verges on the extensionality of the territory itself. Interpretive orders can be displaced or condensed; the interrelationships of built, media and social environments entangle themselves

in dream-like webs of affective meaning. Individuals are emplaced in a doubled manoeuvre where, on the one hand, everything remains to be figured out and, on the other hand, there no longer is a need for interpretation. Here, the individual no longer has access to the distance attained by representations but is in one sense always in the 'midst of things' – a direct participant in the flows of events and signs that incessantly recombine to elide distinctions between near and far, here and there, reality and simulation as a criteria for response.

Power is not addressed to a 'social body', but to microphages and synapses, as well as to cognitive phase spaces. In the increasing disjunction of the surface from function and semantic depth, the surface becomes a scene with its own autonomous operations, and thus the promoter of relations among a wider range of actants. In a literal sense, the surface no longer 'screens' anything, but registers the body as immersed in the immediacy of experience (Krupar and Al, 2010). Yet, as Terranova (2004) notes, basins of coalescence and polarization continue to exist, as do the disparate distributions of sense, access, and opportunity. People still find themselves in tightly sealed interest groups, neighbourhoods, markets, or specializations. These fragmented and fractal urban landscapes then require new possibilities and practices of translation and articulation, new ways for people to reach each other as well as to circumvent the 'regime of fear' where the identity of any possible object, what something might be – i.e. how anything, however mundane could become an object of danger or terror – increasingly determines the affective quality of any situation.

So even though all cities may confront the dissipation of mediations in face of more direct confrontations with urban life and the intensifying segregation of access and possibility, does the location of residents within fluid demarcations of north and south, black and white, productive and marginal, centre and periphery say anything about locating what people think, what they assume is possible, or how they engage the world. What is the salience of the 'colonial difference' in terms of the specific characteristics putting together a 'social' and 'economic' life and attaining increasing degrees of autonomous action in face of arbitrary confinement? It is easy to conclude that cities in the Global South are in need of more accountable and transparent governance, economic specialization, and proficient legal and regulatory systems in order to really work. At the same time, it is also possible to conclude that these supposedly unworkable cities do indeed work by virtue of the activation of virtualities at the heart of urbanization – i.e. the unregulated thickening of relationships among things of all kinds. Such virtuality also includes the flexible use of different networks of connections – categorized in different ways – to access resources that are, in turn, distributed in quantities that acquire particular value by again flexibly using categories that point to different kinds of social relationships and responsibilities. Cities of the south are conventionally considered to need to be more formal, transparent, governable, entrepreneurial and rational; whereas they work largely by avoiding all of these things. So where then is the location of efficacy and a viable future, beyond

facile claims of hybridity? How do residents do the 'right thing' when that right thing is largely undecidable in advance, but also not meaningful if it is simply something to be discovered at the point of arrival in the sense that the decision and movement 'feels right'? While such feeling indeed is a crucial element of popular research, there must also be a way for residents to generate and uncover evidence that can be shared, translated and converted into an incentive for collective action.

Screens as objects

Here then screens cease to be a seemingly infinite refraction of images otherwise thoroughly indistinguishable if not for long histories of repression, projection, and displacement that enable 'working differentiations' of whites and blacks, citizens and subjects, rulers and the ruled, moderns, pre-moderns and post-moderns. This is not Bhabha's (1994) 'linguistic multivocality' that unsettles the colonial imposition of binaries. Unlike Genet's *The Screens* where politics is a parlour game of cross-dressing that unsettles any possible integrity of the command – the injunction to become developed, modern, in this situation of postcolonial indeterminacy – the screen here is something more visceral and intrusive.

It is commonly assumed that screens do not call attention to themselves. Rather, they subsume their materiality and status as objects to the need to reflect, enchant, engross, or incite. That they are objects of a particular kind is much less important than the images they 'carry', transmit and arrange. But research for residents taking on these postcolonial conundrums is less a process of coming up with an image of things where the constituent elements of the city find their proper place. It is less than a series of best practices and policy prescriptions that hold things in place, in part by specifying their proper 'commitment' to each other. Rather, screens act as material probes churning up events, making things happen in part because they are not supposed to do this, and that these forms of enactment and objectness can be occluded by the predominant role of the screen as either a mechanism of filtering, reflection, absorption, or transmission. Research is then not a matter of identifying locations but explicitly inventing them in a context where residents endeavour to act as if the undecidability of their location in a larger world either does not exist or does not matter.

At the same time, residents may insist that the such indeterminacy – i.e. about whether prevailing notions of doing the 'right' thing have enough persuasiveness to sufficiently turn people's attention away from things that are obviously right for the specificities of a particular place but wrong where the 'real' (big) powers of valuation lie – is crucial to their survival. Screens here intrude upon locations and the ability to locate persons and things within any categories and space definable in advance of an engagement that seems to increasingly hedge its bets. Here, reflection and projection becomes simply an excuse to do something else. The conventional functions of the screen provide a certain

amount of cover so that its status as an object can experiment with how connections can be made so as to invent locations that might provisionally resolve the anxiety and inertia possibly associated to the difficulties inherent in solving the riddles of location.

Thus, I want to consider notions of screens, not as devices of mapping but as a switchboard of connections, a mechanism of transplantation and interference, and as such, a vehicle of 'popular research'. Screens are devices that enable residents to try on different ways of being in the city 'on for size' without making definitive commitments to them – a way of acting in conditions of uncertainty but proceeding nevertheless as if the implications were clear.

Reenacting the screen

To set a screen in basketball refers to a teammate inserting their body between the shooter and a defender momentarily creating space and time for the player to get a good shot off. Always as a tactical manoeuvre, screens can be called and anticipated in advance, yet in a fast-paced mobile game, where they take place at any given instance on the floor, they are difficult to plan. With moving bodies always in close proximity, always in 'each other's face', the chances of a getting off a good shot is directly related to having a 'good look' at the basket, and so the screen is in service of such a look.

With their predominantly visual connotations, screens concern practices of looking, and often are deployed to constitute a possible differentiation between 'looking out' and 'looking out for'. Screens, such as those that supplement windows and doors filter out unwanted intrusions, like insects, while maintaining the circulation of sound and air. When constructed of metal mesh, screens also limit the extent to which other aspects of the outside can cross a divide, such as a reaching hand. Constituting a semi-permeable boundary is a minimum condition for the distinctions between these different types of looking. 'Looking out for' steers attention to the identification of targets the viewer already has in mind – a viewer geared towards moments of recognition, be it opportunity or threat, or as part of a sequence of stepping stones in a trajectory of movement – e.g. 'look out for the McDonald's next to the pink house on your right, then turn left . . .'

To eliminate the 'for' and simply 'look out' opens up potential sight lines, doesn't orient the viewer to specific features or compel particular modes of paying attention. Even if certain features of the environment may be 'screened out' and not paid attention to, this 'editing' of perception can be directed towards vitiating the power of objects otherwise and implicitly demanding preoccupation. With such preoccupation out of the way, different aspects of both familiar and unfamiliar worlds can be considered. By filtering out what potentially irritates, preoccupies or event fascinates, the larger visual field can be seen as an assemblage of impurities – i.e. objects and relations that need not have discernible classifications or uses.

From cinema, we also are familiar with the plurivalent position of the screen as an activity projected on to a surface – i.e. to screen a film; the screen as the very surface on which images are screened, and the 'screening' as the very event that incorporates both action and object. This refractory circuit of references appears, on the one hand, compatible to the virtual world of the filmic process and the play of light, surface, memory and motion that materializes it. Initially, it seems like an insular world, oneiric and apart, yet screening is also a prolific practice, capable of showing up anywhere. Any surface can be transformed into a screen, given the right technique, and not simply of high tech projection but of quotidian shadows, reflections, and even sediment, where seemingly non-reflective or illuminative surfaces still can display a range of histories.

As such, the screen is a mobile device; a device mobilized to facilitate movement, in part by facilitating the process of 'looking out.' Here, screens need not be wire or mesh; they need not be capable of showing projected images or of keeping out certain material impurities. Still, incorporating all of these aspects, more ephemeral screens act as invisible supplements to everyday scenarios. They are acts of non-deliberated collaborations that choreograph specific spacing of bodies, materials, and things; act as unspeakable frontiers, and linguistic and perceptual manoeuvres that momentarily allay vulnerability and threat so as to not foreclose ways of looking that take in many possible routes and opportunities of movement.

Screen test in the flesh

In many cities today, eligibility, preparation, status, and waiting – all elements that have conventionally been associated with the ability to attain certain positions or opportunities are frequently pushed aside. Instead, the willingness to dispense with codes and patience is seen as the criteria to become something, to go somewhere. But this is a claustrophobic game, and no one seems to go anywhere, except to an early death. There appears to be no sense of outside and inside, here and there intruding upon the other.

Yet even in this 'game' other, more ambiguous scenarios come to the fore. For example, the renowned television series *The Wire* centres on the drug trade in Baltimore. It deals with the way the trade has changed – the dissipation of codes and honour, the inevitability of betrayal, and the ease in which violence can be delivered to anyone. A minor character acts as an important 'screen' in this economy of auto-destruction, racial resistance, and neo-liberalized black entrepreneurship. Butchie is a blind bar owner, sometime dealer and banker of stolen money, and a figure resonant with centuries of African and African American 'tricksters'. He always acts blind to what he sees, but he sees anyway. He is not the repository of an archival wisdom; he is not a holdover from another generation; he does not issue cautionary tales or deliver cogent oral histories.

Rather, Butchie sees how the changes in the game, the 'passing' of the old orders are not really that at all. He sees the 'affective ties' of the city – the ways in which self-destruction simply does not mirror a past violence, nor opens up a situation to new developments or formations, but rather moves things 'sideways', where many different implications and possibilities happen all at once (Pandolfo, 2006). Butchie exemplifies inexplicable forgetfulness and memory; it is often not clear to whom he talking or what he is talking about, but he won't bend to the specificity of any request, profit or threat. No one ties him down, yet he is not unavailable to anyone; he knows what is going on. But, it is never clear just how he could possibly know, since it is not clear what he offers except the conviction that there is nothing in the long history of black life that was ever settled or clear, and constantly provides the evidence to back this up.

Butchie lends body and image in a situation where it seems impossible to invest in either the survival of the body or the coherence of any image. He provides a 'crossroads' that exceeds the claustrophobia of the 'game'. This does not tell us that in desperate urban situations there is always hope, or that things will at some point get better, or that there some kind of valiant wisdom embedded in the 'game.' Rather, it makes us responsible to look for more than the body count, more than the impossibility of negotiation, dialogue, or civility. As the game 'takes down' everything that it touches, it cannot survive if it is the only thing left.

The game may be the game, but every time it plays itself out it reminds all of those around it just why the arbitrary use of violence had to be used in the first place – i.e. the possibility that whatever one was or what one did, no matter how much you had in your 'camp', you could always be out-tricked. So in the violent manoeuvring that takes place among residents and which governments also direct toward particular residents within the city, what haunts the situation is this fear of being out-tricked – that somehow there is a way of living in cities that neither those with power nor those without can quite get a handle on, but that each suspects the other really has.

So what happens when a district shows, up front, different ways of being in and using the city? What happens when those actors which constitute the prospective threat to projects of capital accumulation and social control may be precisely those that are turned to in order to demonstrate possibilities for operating outside conventions and laws? Do they leave themselves open to getting slammed, taken apart, manipulated? How do they not leave themselves as an identifiable target?

Setting targets and imagining outcomes

Particularly in contexts where once relied upon mediations grow weak, where clear interpretations of what is taking place are difficult to make with confidence, and where individuals feel they have few opportunities to make recourse to higher authorities or arbitration, individuals 'set screens' all of the

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time. They insert themselves in the flow of events, transactions and conversations – with what they hope are efficacious words and gestures – to create space, to become that which 'comes to be looked out for' or a means of enabling a changed outlook on the part of others. On various thoroughfares and vehicles of transportation, urban residents repeatedly 'step into' situations where they don't necessarily belong and have no apparent eligibility to participate. But here the setting of the screen is not a territorial claim; it is not an instrument that attempts to secure something that someone else *possesses* nor is it an act of self-aggrandizement. Rather, it is a way of being present in a moment that one is already present in but as something or someone else. It is an act of dislocation and relocation. Seemingly full of risks, setting these screens will at times inevitably raise questions about eligibility – i.e. 'who are you, and with what claims and authority do you insert yourself into this situation?'.

For example, one striking aspects of everyday life in Kinshasa – that vast rambling almost ungovernable megacity of the Congo – is just how often strangers intervene into scenarios on the verge of getting out of hand and come up with the rights sense of things in order to steer them in another direction. In part, efficacy here has much to do with the sheer decision of the individual(s) involved to 'set the screen'. But in contexts where the legitimacy of actions of all kinds can be incessantly contested, where people are always looking out for instances of self-aggrandizement and where veracity has long disappeared as an essential component of believability, the screen must always carry with it the traces of elsewheres – i.e. something inserted that is familiar, desired or reliable. Of course, the person who 'sets the screen' – who 'screens'– cannot be expected to be aware or in control of this. In this way, the screen acts as a kind of 'graft', an image of momentary integrity and completeness that comes from the outside but is capable of acting as if it has been inside of the scenario in question the entire time. An imposition can take place – a different way of keeping things moving, a change in the anticipated story line, where individuals feel variation in the way the experience they are in matters – but with the sense that everything is taking place in the same 'neighbourhood', at the same time, in the same world (Stengers, 2008).

Still, grafts are risks in that what is supplemented in order to maintain the integrity of an image can of course be rejected. So the setting of the screen, as an implicit rejection of the apparent alignment of bodies and things in a particular moment, covers its presence as a voice from elsewhere free to say whatever it wants in the cloak of something the others present are willing to recognize as familiar or desired. If the screen is rejected, then, it is not rejected for what it attempts to do – after all, it is not interested in the integrity of identities, events or scenarios – but rather is rejected as the failure of the ruse under which it operates, so that even the process of rejection does not completely foreclose what the screen attempts to do.

Screen literacy and the littering of screens

Much of urban development has been about cleaning up screens, or only emphasizing a reified aspect of them as the filtering of impurities that enables the reproducible ordering of relations among the various materials, bodies and things which make up the city. But the mobility of urban residents with limited resources depends on such screens; depends upon a built environment littered with them. For the ability of residents to 'go out into the larger world' is largely situated in the messiness of built environments, the seemingly haphazard, incomplete and strewn out arrangements of buildings, infrastructure, and activity that continue to persist in many cities. This environment of multiple screens – temporalities, instruments, designs, insertions – provides a visible yet always contestable rendering of what things are and what people are up against dealing with them. It shows how water and power appear and disappear; it shows that people living, playing, working, eating, sleeping, moving, and interacting together have an effect on places – the land, the buildings, the air. It shows how residents crisscross, incorporate and side-step the markings and physical traces of all these different activities, movements; how everyone implicitly sets screens for each other.

When a place shows all of its wears and tears, its memories, and the impacts of what people have done it, the place then shows that it is always available to deals, small initiatives and renovation. It shows that the relationships among bodies, materials and things need not be the way they are imagined or prescribed by the prevailing policies, norms, or administrative procedures. The city is a messy environment, and people have to step through and around each other, but it is an environment that is available to be 'messed with' – that is, open to engagements of all kinds.

When residents go out into the larger city with their modest projects, they bring these experiences back home, where they face the 'imported experiences' of neighbours, co-workers and other associates, as well as those of outsiders who have come wage their own experiments. All of this propels residents back into the larger world in still different ways, and all constitute wide ranging propositions for how different districts might deal with each other over the long run, how they might put together a different kind of city.

These movements back and forth are screens; they constitute a kind of intrusion. Districts are intruding upon each other, as they in some sense always have been, and in the aftermath of each intrusion, it is difficult to sustain the very notion of intrusion. For what integrity of the district is being intruded upon when so many different realities are being grafted on to the other. Yet what is important is experiencing a game of give and take, now you are something, now you are not. So, these movements to the outside enact a form of recognition that dislodges residents from prior ways of seeing themselves, while not having to discard them completely. For, certain stabilities of self-representation and practice are maintained in order to feel, experience disruption, to trace a line or direction from which an impact arrives, as well

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as for the person to feel themselves as something instrumental, that makes its way into an external space and has an impact on it.

Taking Nancy's notion of intrusion, ruptures are always coming from two places at once (Nancy, 2002). There is the idea of self-integrity that intrudes upon unprogrammed and plural operations, as in the way conceptions of the good or normal city intrude upon multifarious, fractal urban processes. Then there is the idea of diseases and dysfunctions that intrude upon a coherent sense of self. Here, individuals or collectives discover their dependence on components that do not act on behalf of the whole – when dysfunction takes place from the inside, as when cancer spreads or an organ fails, or traffic grinds to a permanent halt. The critical components of the normal city, its identifiable pieces, built environments, and mobilities, often out of control, intrude on the city's normality. In order to 'treat' this dysfunction, the intrusion is doubled, such as when treatment interventions graft, replace, auto-immunize, or transplant – and in doing so, demonstrate a capacity, as Nancy says, to prolong life that wasn't possible before, 10 or 20 years ago. So when Nancy talks about an organ transplant – 'Life' goes on but is cut off from its 'natural' finitude. Life and death are coupled in an arrangement where life is literally out of its time. In these situations, the self or the collective is that which takes what intrudes from both the inside and outside, that comes from within and elsewhere – the strange that is familiar, and the familiar that is strange, and sutures a workable connection. It does so not with the myth of some overarching integrity or coherence. Rather, the collective is the force that intersects and joins that which otherwise could never fit or go together – makes the link where there could not possibly be one.

So, this movement of residents back and forth, this navigation of intrusions is the occasion through which residents suture together a different kind of connection with each other – one cut off from reliance on a particular way of making reference to each other's lives. This connectivity is not a defence of place, not a protection against the incursion of an outside, for residents themselves are engaged in different elsewheres. Nor it is a connectivity based on being able to take advantage of that which is being brought from the outside – to appropriate initiatives, resources, or labour. For this would then obviate the need for residents to act outside of 'their' districts. Rather, it is a way to configure possibilities for residents of a district to be in a larger world *together* – in ways that do not assume a past solidity of affiliations, a specific destination nor an ultimate collective formation to come. It is way of being together without recourse to being able to see, coordinate, or command each other. If in each individual initiative, back and forth, here and there, is a proposition for how spaces across a city could be articulated, the question is how these propositions are amassed, or rather how they have traction with and imply each other?

Let me take just one critical aspect of this question. Usually, districts rely upon concepts such as 'property', 'neighbour', 'co-religionist', 'co-worker' to help specify and regulate social distance and responsibilities among individuals. But in districts full of people coming and going, the sense of

habitation cannot correspond to plots, cadastres, and social demarcations. Rather, residents imagine security and stability as located beyond what they can see and figure out – in dense entanglements of implication, witnessing, and constant acknowledgements of other residents, whether physically present of not. Security is necessarily expansive in that it does not act as if contingency is something measurable or subject to contract in the long term. Rather, it entails efforts to instrumentalize the dissensus and uncertainties that ensue in the interaction of specificities registered as life itself.

Security instrumentalizes through a process of extending the ways in which things are implicated in each other; for example, in expanding circuits of relations that economy – especially in the financial topologies of securitization, derivation, and arbitrage – brings about. Discrepant places, things, experiences are articulated, circulate through each other, not just as matters of speculation, but as a complex architecture of accumulating and dissipating energies and attentions.

Urban security is not a matter of simply excluding unwanted and unmanageable populations, or by drawing walls – even though these processes do take place. Lines, corridors, and conjunctions cross the heterogeneous city, imparting various ways of paying attention, vantage points, blurs, clarities, simultaneities, pasts, access points, and frictions. It is about who can do what with whom under what circumstances and what can ensue from the resultant actions; who can they reach, how can they be made known; how fungible are they, and what kinds of other actions are impeded, compelled, or opened up as a result. Nothing is completely ruled out or disciplined; as not everything is possible.

In this context, then, screens produce an affective density – a thickness of people paying attention to each other, not with wary eyes, but attention to points of mutual entry and implication, where the stability of individual households are enjoined to risk-taking and speculations of other households, practices which, in turn are enjoined to the repetitive domestic rhythms of still others. This does not take place because stable and discrete households are adhering to a common set of rules. Something else in witnessed. Keeping in mind the sense of screens as a simultaneous dislocation and relocation, a concretization of the possibility of 'looking out' as opposed to 'looking out for', this is witnessing which situates that which you see right in front of you as either taking place somewhere else than the space in which it is taking place – to see it as if it is in another place *or* to see what is taking place in front of you as being enacted by someone completely different than the neighbour, kin, or stranger you have before known this person to be.

Here, mutual witnessing acts as a way to muddy the waters, to run interference for households to do different things – with their time, money, and passions It is also a 'screen' on which to project troubling images, half-formulated questions and concerns from within households to which no one can make a quick conclusion. It is to do things not easily recognizable or classified – and so it is not the witnessing of people checking up on each other,

comparing what they've and others don't, or about who is doing what to whom as a matter of prohibitive judgment.

In this way, households do not stand alone as discrete social and economic entities but are tied into various circuitries, positions and ways of being in the city. As these circuits scatter in all kinds of directions, households are not subsumed under a series of successive obligations – in relation to which they must always defend themselves from or be accountable to. This does not mean that districts are free of conflict and manipulation. Claims are made and protected. Individuals have to cultivate relationships with patrons and institutions and are paid to the extent to which they become instruments of their will. But residents with different engagements in the larger city, different paymasters, vested interests, and loyalties continue to pay attention to each other – not as a disciplinary manoeuvre – but with a real interest in what is going. Many times across North Jakarta, Kinshasa and Douala I have seen activists, gangsters, clergy, gamblers, government enforcers, marketers, municipal workers, school kids, women and men engaged in long animated discussions – in mosques, street-corners, cafes and markets – about what they see out there, their theories about what is taking place in the city, and perhaps more importantly, what it is exactly that everyone else is doing – the nuts and bolts of talk and action.

Such observations do not obviate the ways in which such practices sometimes never show up in certain districts or do so only fleetingly. It doesn't mean that conventional mobilizations and organizational politics are not necessary. They do not obviate the fact that in many districts claims to space, resources, and life are made by those who have no right, or where claims to rights simply are based on a game that only involves seizing or being seized.

But the key element again for research is how to think about the simultaneities, the co-presence of such ambiguous differentiations. For the differentiations produced by urbanization are not always clearly differences of advantage, authority and resources. What these differences mean in the intersections of labour, space, tools, time, abilities, and networks does not necessarily directly stem from the apparent visible and hierarchical distribution of capacities and privilege.

Relationships can be simultaneously exploitative and excessively generous, competitive and collaborative. There are unpredictable oscillations of accumulation and loss which potentially introduces a dynamic egalitarianism over a long run that no one individually has the power to define or measure, even if in the present glaring disparities can be documented everywhere. This can be the case in situations where hierarchies appear quite obvious. So given the simultaneities, how do both residents and researchers 'screen' the field – both in terms of screening out those facets that would seem to foreclose collaborative action yet still screen the complexity of these differences and the fact that they carry with them the possibility of contradictory futures.

As implied at the beginning of this essay, a conundrum is how to demonstrate that cities of the Global South will be both viable and worthy cities yet different

from the urban logics that subjugated them. The difference that would most clearly embody such a break lies in the relatively invisible piecing together of aspects of city life – people, things, spaces – that are not conventionally thought to be associable. But how can such a difference be demonstrated, and at what cost?

Whether cities completely mirror the purported efficiency of those of Europe or North America, exceed them in the spectacular quality of new built environments, or are full of gang wars, ethnic conflict, parochialism, patronage, and other signs of an impending implosion, none of these aspects serves as evidence that 'different' forms of collective life are being definitively ruled out.

At the same time, for cities to demonstrate 'their own way', 'their own difference' in a highly networked urban world linked through various metrologies, skewed advantages, information systems, investments, controls, and properties, risks choking them off from essential transactions.

For now, what we do have is a constant impetus of experimental research, where residents in Messina, Ikori, Penjaringan, and Klong Toey – to name some of the South's most crowded and heterogeneous districts – use what little they have, not just to put bread on their own tables, but to take small steps with other residents from districts across the city to be in a larger world *together* – in ways that do not assume a past solidity of affiliations, a specific destination nor an ultimate collective formation to come.

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