

# THE MACHINE

A YEAR-LONG SECTION  
EDITED BY ANTHONY HUBERMAN

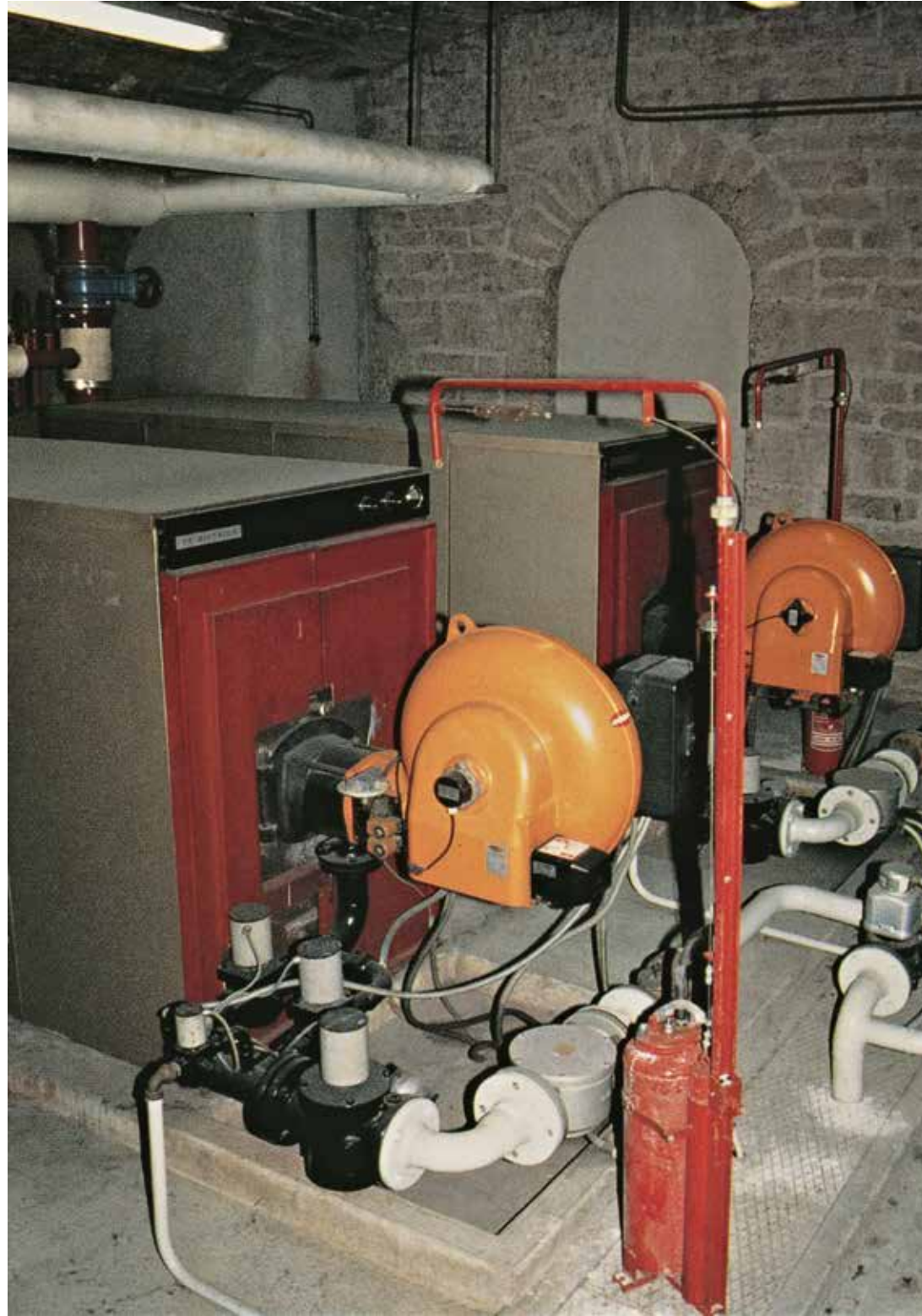
WARM FEELINGS BY SAM LEWITT  
IMAGES OF MICHAEL ASHER  
LE CONSORTIUM, DIJON, FRANCE,  
JUNE 07-JULY 27, 1991

THIS YEAR-LONG SECTION HAS TAKEN ON THE QUESTION OF THE MACHINE, AND HAS BEEN INTENDED TO SERVE AS A PUBLIC FORUM FOR IDEAS THAT HAVE INFORMED *MECHANISMS*, AN EXHIBITION THAT IS OPENING THIS OCTOBER AT CCA WATTIS INSTITUTE IN SAN FRANCISCO.

BY "MACHINE," I DON'T ONLY MEAN OBJECTS OR DEVICES, BUT ALSO THE MORE ABSTRACT SET OF MACHINERIES AND MECHANISMS THAT MAKE UP OUR TECHNOLOGICAL PRESENT: INFRASTRUCTURE, PROTOCOLS, LOGISTICS, OR STAN-

DARDS, ALL OF WHICH THE ARTIST SAM LEWITT DISCUSSES IN THIS TEXT VIA THE NOTION OF "UTILITIES." MACHINES, LIKE ALL TOOLS, ARE IDEOLOGICAL, AND CONTAIN WITHIN THEM A SPECIFIC AGENDA OR SET OF DEMANDS. THEY DON'T SIMPLY ENABLE US TO ACCOMPLISH A TASK BUT DETERMINE HOW WE BEHAVE AND WHAT WE VALUE. ONE OF THE HISTORICAL EXHIBITIONS THAT HAS HELPED GUIDE MY THINKING ABOUT THIS IS MICHAEL ASHER'S 1991 SHOW AT LE CONSORTIUM

IN DIJON, WHICH INVOLVED A SERIES OF ONE-TO-ONE SCALED DIAGRAMS, HAND PAINTED ON THE GALLERY WALLS, DEPICTING VARIOUS HEATING UNITS FROM PUBLIC MUSEUMS AROUND THE CITY OF DIJON, ALONG WITH DISTRIBUTED POSTCARDS MADE WITH PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE ACTUAL HEATING UNITS AS THEY EXIST IN THOSE BUILDINGS. SAM AND I HAVE SPOKEN ABOUT THAT SHOW A LOT OVER THE PAST YEAR, AND SO I ASKED HIM TO WRITE ABOUT IT.



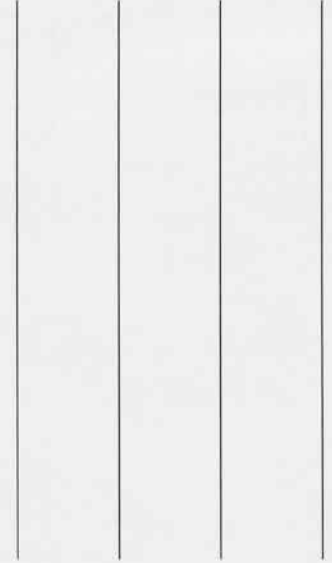
**Musée des Beaux-Arts**

Le bâtiment qui abrite aujourd'hui le Musée des Beaux-Arts, place de la Sainte-Chapelle, a ouvert ses portes au public en 1799.

Les chaudières actuelles, installées en 1973 dans le sous-sol, chauffent le Musée ainsi que les Cuisines Ducales et une partie de la Tour de Bar, soit près de 24255 m<sup>3</sup>.

Série de 16 cartes postales de Michael Asher  
Photo: Pascal Pique

*Exposition Michael Asher : 7 juin-27 juillet 91, le Consortium, 16 rue Quentin 21000 Dijon*



## SENSIBLE DESIGN

Mechanical diagrams represent hard epistemic edges within the sociology of knowledge, and therefore the division of labor. Their efficient communicative function for the technician, the engineer, the specialist, is the result of literacy won by training in the method of following their specific delineations. For those untrained, they are at best representations of a deficit of knowledge about mechanical function—markers of some subject supposed to be known. As cultural objects, they provide the fascination of perceived yet indifferently general intimations of complexity.

The aesthetic merits of such diagrams point-up the attraction of their precision and economy, while circumscribing the indeterminacy of purpose that their aesthetic enjoyment implies. The potential beauty of all parts fitting together in a concatenation of perfectly assigned functions is necessarily abrogated by the diagram's teleological unfolding of determinate mechanical purpose. Specific purposes reveal themselves to the eye trained to perceive them. This is not to say that the draftsman or engineer doesn't take pleasure in the fruit of their exacting labor. Rather it is to say that that pleasure functions on a different level of experience and understanding, which is differentiated by moving from looking at a mechanical scheme, to reading it. Here the meaning of mechanical engineering is its fundamental commensurability with its described use. Use always hovers under the phenomenology of cultural experience, and enjoins its pleasures with the functional design and maintenance of its infrastructural conditions. What is more specifically at issue here is not so much the general category of 'use', but rather the cultural legibility and place of 'utilities'.

## UTILITIES I: THEORY OF PLEASURE

For bourgeois economics, the concept of utility is embedded in an individualistic portrait of satisfaction in consumption.<sup>1</sup> As a centerpiece of Marginal Theory, the analysis of utility ostensibly helps to mathematically harden-up classical economics' focus on the satisfaction of need, relative to scarcity of resources. For although the utility of a service or physical good cannot be expressed in the form of hard numbers, economists can use price data to categorize and rank consumer preferences for alternatives on offer.<sup>2</sup>

The question for individual capitalists with regard to the habits of consumers has never been: "How useful is my product in satisfying your need?" It is rather: "How can I get consumers to spend more on additional units of a good or service?" In this picture, the crippled subject's rationality is modeled on how they rank the spiritual benefits from consuming beyond the dreary ne-



### *Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne Perrin de Pucousin*

Le bâtiment qui abrite aujourd'hui, 17 rue Sainte-Anne, le Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne Perrin de Pucousin a été construit entre 1679 et 1680.  
La chaudière actuelle installée en 1985 dans les caves, chauffe 16125 m<sup>3</sup>.

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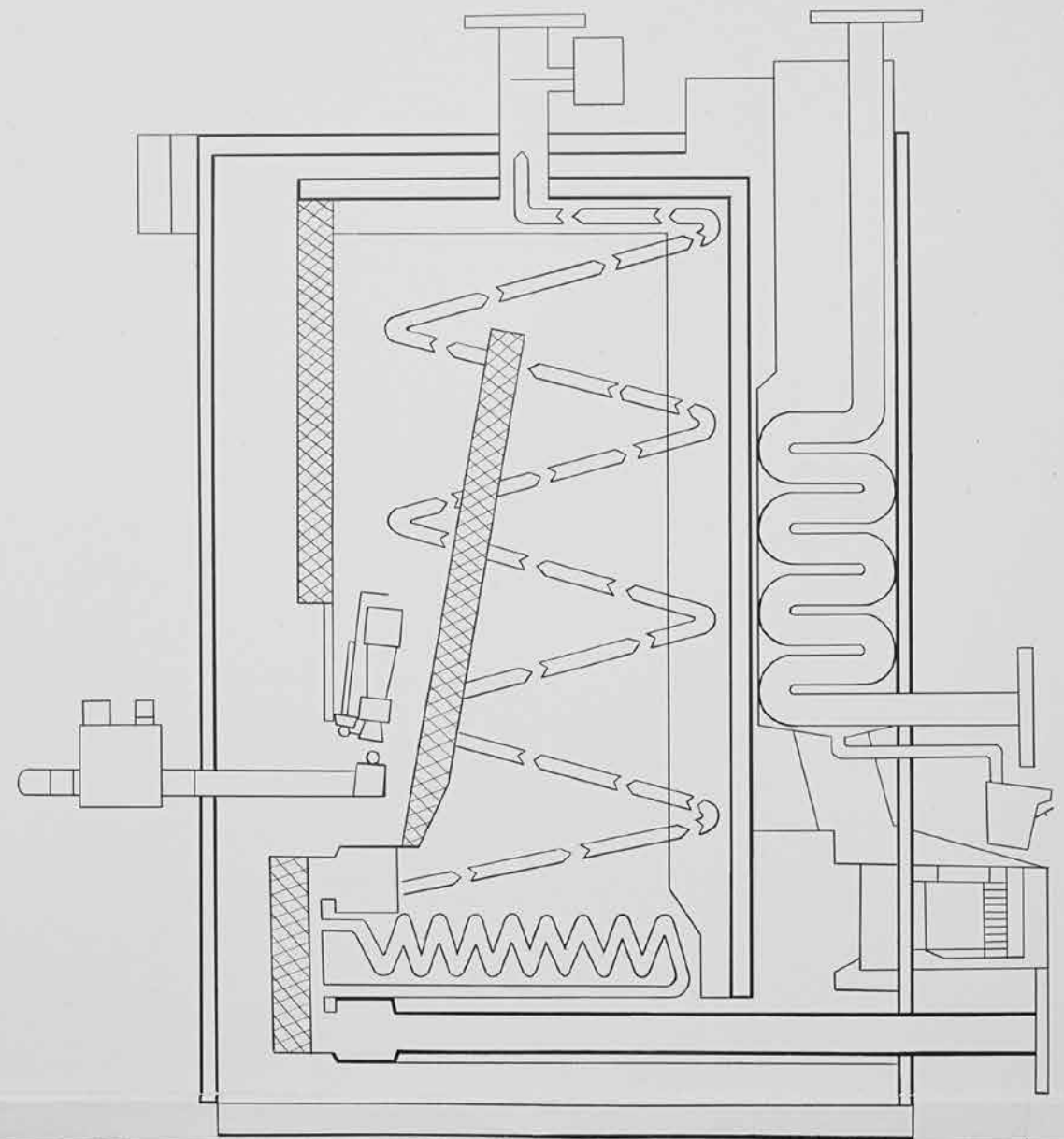
eds of self-reproduction. This extra 'marginal utility' is how pleasure and happiness are accounted for in the data derived by the behavior of consumers. The basic epistemological conditions of happiness stipulated here bulldoze the supposed non-instrumental pleasures of those who can afford it with its economic utility. No wonder it was the artwork that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a contender for the title of the absolute commodity, precisely because the pleasure gained from its experience was freed from the tyranny of use. Despite the imprecision of the exact meaning of 'commodity' here, its deeper truth can be traced to the consumption of marginal utilities as the grounds of cultural integration.

## UTILITIES II: TRAVELING FOR WORK

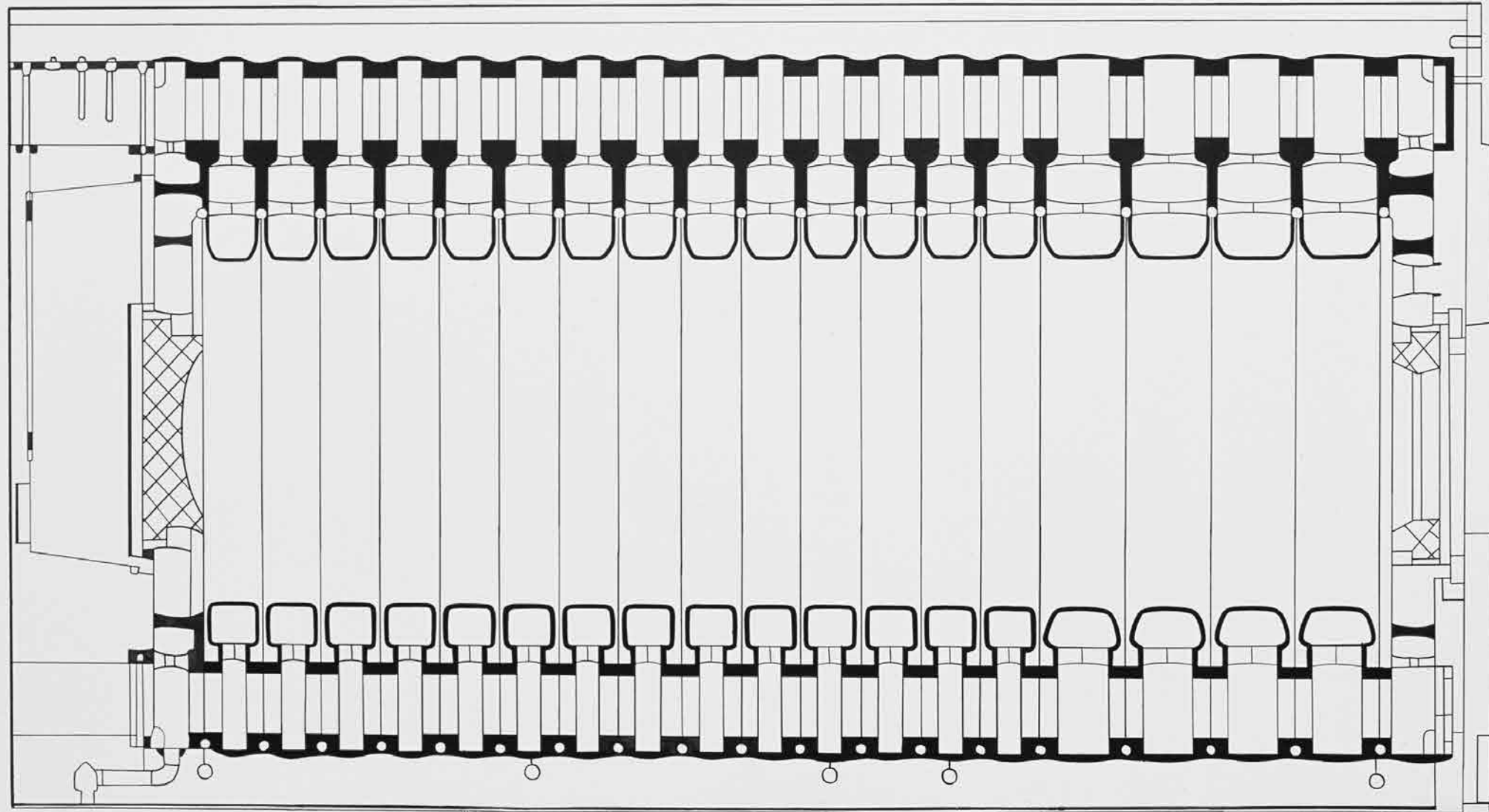
'Utilities' are however most familiar as a catch-all term for the services of corporations that own and operate mechanical infrastructure used in the generation and delivery of electricity, gas, water, cell towers, fiber-optic cable etc. to the general public.

The infrastructural meaning of 'utilities' and the Marginal Theory's conception of 'utility' collapse when the energy needed for the circulation of goods and services is identified with the circulation of consumers and their money in the marketplace. The circulation of competitive consumers, attempting to 'maximize their utility' links directly to the privatization of infrastructure: to the primary commodities of watts, water and waste management; of transportation and housing; of food provision and that other most basic need of any mammalian entity—to stay warm. For instance, 'maximizing the utility' of one's home or car, in the form of leveraging its cost as a ride or home 'sharing service' significantly impacts the portion of wealth taken by the state to be distributed to public infrastructure. *Wouldn't you be happier, dear consumer, to eat the surcharge in exchange for a speedy, cash-free exchange mediated only by a private technology corporation? Wouldn't you be happier to ceaselessly circulate as a provider of said services for said corporation?* The forces of energetic and interpersonal circulation flow through historically specific schemata of capital accumulation. One doesn't Airbnb one's home unless it has electricity, heat and water running through its various conduits. No one hires out their personal car to be driven down city roads and highways, maintained mostly by public funds, unless gas is flowing through the pump and at what cost.

The tourist industry is integrally linked to the intermediation of the marginal utility of consumption and the consumption of energy.<sup>3</sup> Satire can be in-



Michael Asher, Le Consortium, Dijon, France, June 07-July 27, 1991, one-to-one scaled schematic diagram depicting axial cut of the central heating unit of the Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne. Photograph by Andre Morin. © Michael Asher Foundation (pp. 84-85) Michael Asher, Le Consortium, Dijon, France, June 07-July 27, 1991, one-to-one scaled schematic diagram depicting axial cut of the central heating unit of the Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photograph by Andre Morin. © Michael Asher Foundation



structive here: The figure of the tourist intuitively calculating the cost/benefit ratio of consuming a second helping of Clafoutis while touring the cultural sites of Dijon—unconsciously measuring anticipation of pleasure, offset by calories + walking to the next attraction, adjusting for speed—becomes commensurable with the municipal metering of power consumption relative to the cost of purchase in the power plant that provides the energy to heat those cultural sites. The costs associated with heating the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle or the Hôtel de Ville is not simply one of practical environmental regulation, but goes also to potential revenue from making sure they remain literally warm, inviting environments for circulation.

Ultimately, the Marginal Theory and its concept of utility is as obsolete as the consumer-driven economies for which it served as an integrative system. Capital accumulation based on the traditional picture of the alienated worker/integrated consumer vanishes from center stage once the last elements of Keynesian social-buffering are destroyed by finance capital’s scheduled crises and massive state level austerity programs. As of 2016 global tourism may be valued as a 7.6 trillion dollar industry. Yet the growth of the tourist industry does not reflect a growth in employment, or wages, which are in precipitous decline, reflected in global wage stagnation and growing unemployment figures upwards of 200 million. Financialization of energy infrastructure, like the current American fascist attempt to consolidate state power with the corporate power of the fossil fuel industry, represent the squeezing of the last drops of blood out of the energy commodity that mere ownership of utilities once represented for capital.

## CONTENT

Fire reproduces and divides itself. Its magnitude can be thermally measured and geographically mapped. But fire has the tendency to consume its clear-cut calculation as a phenomenon. Adding one flame to another does not produce two flames, but simply more fire. A flame exists in an open system of indices that make it measurable: it immolates countable things, melts a range of others, licks the apex of any housing that contains it, consumes a measurable quantity of oxygen. As fire increases or subsides in magnitude, its thermal properties become subject to calculation, issuing into the measurable and mastered quanta of divisible number.

While fire reproduces and divides, modernity reproduces and divides fire, standardizes and specializes it. Modernity quantifies and divides flame from heat. Heat becomes a matter of target temperatures, pure and simple. Silent and detached, the skin and eye’s primitive fear and fascination with the flames that warm docile bodies occupies itself with mastering other, more manageable phenomena. Reporting to the hearth is something historically strange and remote, if not simply sickeningly sentimental. Over time, the hearth’s fire petrifies into glass and shatters into the fractographic veins of thermally sensitive circu-

its, traversing the buried strata of purpose designed containers. The energetic source is pushed out of memory by remote communication, facilitated by the visual muteness of an information culture for which thermal regulation is paramount. The coldness of cool devices handled for communication is enabled by thermal concealment, comporting bodies into postures frozen by optical stimulation, chasing tourists without jobs around the schematic city on the screen, or freezing them in their tracks for the brief and instantaneous stimulation provided by whatever is mechanically called-up by the diagram buried deep in the machine.

## FILLER

And yet fire returns not simply as an accident of miscalculation, but as a result of regulatory neglect. The apparent economic utility of state austerity measures includes the privatization of utilities, which goes hand in hand with their deregulation. This extends to the deregulation of all manner of social infrastructure and strategies for cost reduction in the use of cheap, mechanically unfit materials in its construction. The towering inferno of East London’s social housing block, Grenfell Tower, on June 14<sup>th</sup> 2017 resulted in eighty-seven deaths of their majority immigrant population. The highly flammable composite of aluminum and polyethylene filler used as cladding on the building’s façade was installed to reflect better the shimmering aesthetic of the luxury condos recently erected in the rapidly gentrifying London neighborhood. The utilization of this criminally negligent cladding resulted from cutting down on the supposedly ‘marginal costs’ of using a suitable material. This extended as far as cutting costs down so far that the shiny, combustible exterior concealed a lack of sprinklers on the interior of the building, linking the logic of ‘maximizing utility’ through cost cutting to a cruel view of the expendable lives concealed within. The rationality expected of the materials engineer is here murderously contradicted by the aesthetic surface of economic violence.

1. As opposed to the more historically expansive—and indeed harder to pin down—concept of use-value, which is unthinkable without recourse to social production.

2. George Caffentzis writes: “Marginal Theory, the economics we get in every introductory course, significantly appears on the scene at the very time of the explosion and slaughter of the Paris Commune. It claims that in order for individual firms to maximize profits and for the accumulation process to flow throughout capitalist society, wages and profits must be correlated with the ever increasing productivity of social labor. In other words, productivity increases achieved by new technological leaps, more ‘efficient’ organization of work in factories, mines and farms, more ‘scientific’ planning of family, school and health, had to be shared with the working class. Capital could not appropriate it all... Ford understood the other side of Marginal Theory: not only must wages be used to ‘induce’ workers to accept the discipline of the assembly line, but with higher wages the working class can become a dynamic consumer and push the system to higher levels of production (hence profitability, since a concentration of fixed capital such as River Rouge requires continuous utilization to pay off). Once wages are as dynamic as social productivity, the working class becomes a production agent integrated into the capitalist system through the consumer-goods market. Reproduction becomes a ‘dynamic force of production’ instead of merely guaranteeing the subsistence of labor power.” G. Caffentzis, *The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse*, in *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

3. As Dean MacCannell argued in the mid-seventies in his classic *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, the figure of the tourist emerges as a strong, though unknowing, candidate for representing modernity’s discontents. Tourists utilize travel to ‘get in touch’ with a supposed experience of authenticity in their free time, but remain structurally barred as the very agents of the increasingly global expansion of the culture of modernity. Today this analysis is both prescient and somewhat outdated, as the class analysis of leisure is fully subsumed into increasingly precarious labor schedules and the dismal work ethic that prides itself on having ‘no free time.’