Governance

MARISOL LEBRÓN on disaster, capital, and design in the digital age

The current political moment seems to produce horror and tragedy at an astounding rate. Listening to the radio, watching the news, scrolling through social media, or thumbing through a newspaper is enough to induce a feeling of dread or fatigue, or of being overwhelmed. The devastation of Syria, the starvation in Yemen, the unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, climate catastrophe, and the rise of authoritarian regimes around the globe now make up the reality of daily life for millions. This moment of global crisis illuminates much about how governance and the role of the state have been transformed over the past five decades in ways that have worsened conditions of inequality, vulnerability, and violence for citizens and noncitizens.

The lure of neoliberal globalization is the promise of a world free of friction, a world of constant and unimpeded movement. The reality, however, is that while capital enjoys unrestricted access to global markets and blurred territorial boundaries, workers, migrants, and dissidents find the movement of their bodies and the circulation of their ideas increasingly restricted or locked into place. We see this when we consider how US foreign policy and capital expansion in Central America destabilized the region by supporting dictatorships that were "good" for business while funding anticommunist death squads, interfering in democratic elections, and destroying the local economy through free-trade treaties. Despite the obvious role of US political and economic elites in creating the conditions that have made life for many of Central America's poor, indigenous, and politically dissident populations increasingly difficult, causing them to flee the region in search of safety and stability, the US government has responded by seeking to restrict the mobility of Central American migrants and asylum seekers. While US capital is free to move throughout the region in order to extract and dispossess, Central Americans who

attempt to escape the resulting disorder encounter a militarized US border, xenophobic rhetoric casting them as criminals and terrorists, and a deportation regime that fosters often deadly outcomes.

This has become the fundamental contradiction of neoliberal globalization: economic freedom, generally understood as the deregulation and "openness" of the market, does not lead to greater political freedom and social justice. Instead, we see that an unfettered and unregulated global economy has frequently further immiserated the economically vulnerable, diminished political freedom, and intensified new forms of imperialism in developing countries. This contradiction between the freedom of the market and the lack of freedom that individuals living under neoliberal regimes experience is something that many artists, designers, architects, and governmental agencies have responded to. Designs and provocations that explore the theme of governance help us to think through the promise and perils of digital citizenship and deterritorialization. From the practical to the absurd or the utopian, digital design and technology open up spaces for us to imagine new ways of living under the conditions of neoliberal globalization.

One way of countering the ever-expanding horizons of capitalist growth is to invest attention and resources in the local, as the community group Transition Town Brixton does. Their project, the Brixton Pound, is a form of complementary hard currency meant to circulate within local and independent businesses in South London's Brixton neighborhood. This money "sticks to Brixton," helping consumers to shop small and buy local in an effort to stimulate trade and jobs in their community. Unlike money spent on clothing or groceries from large multinational chains or online retailers, which increases our carbon footprint, money spent in Brixton stays there—an investment in place and community. The Brixton Pound refuses the fetishization of

The Brixton Pound, designed by Jeremy Deller, alongside pounds sterling, 2015

"placelessness" often associated with neoliberal global-ization and instead is part of an effort to encourage people to remain rooted in their community and among their neighbors—to literally imbue them with value.

We see a similar commitment to place in the Western Sahara tapestry project, the Swiss architect Manuel Herz's collaboration with the National Union of Sahrawi Women, a political organization based in the refugee camps of southwestern Algeria. Since 1975, Morocco's colonization of Western Sahara has forced many Sahrawi people out of their homes and into camps across the border in an effort to escape brutal repression. The large-scale tapestries, produced by a group of women weavers, depict life in the camps not as bare or suspended, but as rich and developed (see p. 191). They show us actual spaces, buildings, and activities, revealing the ways in which the administra-tion of life in the camps functions, much like a nation in exile. We can then see that although the Sahrawi have been banished from their homeland, they are asserting a powerful claim to national sovereignty beyond the occupied borders of Western Sahara. They are creating their collective future and a future of Sahrawi self-governance and autonomy without seek-ing the permission or recognition of their occupier or its accomplices.

While the Brixton Pound and the Western Sahara tapestries assert powerful claims to space in the face of economic exploitation and colonial domination, Giuditta Vendrame's Infinitecitizenship.org attempts to beat the system at its own game in order to demand a right to mobility that is often reserved only for global elites. A project like the Estonian e-Residency functions to accelerate the flow of capital goods by encouraging global elites to enjoy Estonian digital citizenship for the sake of business transactions (see p. 189), but

Vendrame treats citizenship as merely another good to be exchanged within the sharing economy, so that vulnerable bodies might enjoy the same mobility as capital. With Infinitecitizenship.org, she suggests creat-ing a peer-to-peer citizenship exchange that would allow individuals to circumvent the increasing rigidity of the contemporary nation-state. Users would be able to swap citizenship to facilitate movement or access to resources such as public assistance. This conceptual digital project recognizes that human rights and access to life-giving resources are often tied to particular national forms of citizenship, but it seeks to undermine that relationship by encouraging people to share the privileges of citizenship with others. Infinite Passports, Vendrame's collaboration with Fiona du Mesnildot, is a physical manifestation of this project (see p. 190). It extends the subversion of formal citizenship in Vendrame's previous work through its suturing together of pieces from twenty-four passports in order to create twenty-five new ones to provide holders with an expan-sive, global citizenship forged through noncommercial exchange and cooperation.

Infinitecitizenship.org and Infinite Passports in some ways epitomize exactly the stuff of nativist and conservative nightmares, in their encouragement of migrants who refuse to "wait their turn" or "do things the right way" in order to take a shot at improving their situation in the Global North. But out of that nightmare comes a powerful dream of relationality forged through a radical solidarity that recognizes the bankruptcy of citizenship under the conditions of neoliberal global-ization. This project challenges those of us in the Global North to think about how the rights and privileges associated with our citizenship come at the expense and exclusion of those in the Global South, who our governments and, increasingly, ultraconservative

nationalist groups are working to keep out through vio-lent rhetoric and practice.

The designs brought together in this exhibition explore governance in ways that push us to consider how inequality and injustice continue to manifest themselves in our increasingly interconnected world. Far from enjoying the borderless world that neoliberal globaliza-tion promised, we have experienced a hardening of formal and informal borders over the past half century. While the digital realm is no magic bullet to remedy all the contradictions and challenges of our present moment, it supplies us with provocations that subvert the existing order in order to envision what expansive mobility and a "right to place" for the dispossessed might look like. ⊞

The Brixton Pound Café, the first pay-what-you-can community café in London, inspired by the Brixton Pound, April 3, 2017. Photograph by Gemma-Rose Turnbull from Free Photo Portraits, Taking Part Residency, Photofusion, London

Manuel Herz's pavilion displaying the Sahrawi tapestries at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, the first time a "nation in exile" was invited to par-ticipate. Photograph by Iwan Baan