The Invisible Production Line:
Data Labor and Corporate Aesthetics in Sarah Meyohas' *Cloud of Petals*

The visual vocabulary that surrounds Sarah Meyohas' film *Cloud of Petals* is one of the corporation. Filmed in the derelict Bell Labs Holmdel Complex in New Jersey, the former headquarters of the American tech and communications behemoth, the film circulates around the very basic signifiers of what for a lack of a better term could be referred to as "corporate aesthetics" – an aesthetic built on glass, steel, and concrete, of endless corridors, empty reception halls, office cubicles, and bundles of cables hidden away above ubiquitous paneling. The lush and grainy cinematic 16 mm images and lengthy panoramas of the derelict spaces of the once-futuristic building produces an overwhelming aestheticized nostalgia, touching on corporate modernism's most subconscious tropes of attraction. The film effectively produces an effect of ruin lust, onto the corporation, self-reflexively mourning in a bygone era of corporate architecture, all while repeatedly returning to a distinct bird's eye view of the grand atrium, the hypnotic base of Meyohas' temporary data processing center. By placing it there, the artist juxtaposes two intersecting moments of corporate labor: the Fordist production line and the present moment of digital data labor.

"Corporate aesthetics" appears as one of the foundational objects of study of Sarah Meyohas' practice, having investigated it in several projects and from a variety of angles. In pieces such as *Business Nude* (2013) and *Stock Performance* (2015), Meyohas tries to enact the signifiers and dynamics of corporate business, however obscure or unfamiliar they may be to the everyday viewer. This includes an adaption of its "materiality" (white boards, virtual company stocks) as well as its temporalities (the time of a stock market day). The aesthetic and political abstraction inherent in these works speaks accurately to the highly *abstract* place that corporations take in our lives under neocapitalism,[1] an ungraspable power that nonetheless must be deciphered – in the field of art and elsewhere.

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[1] *The New Spirit of Capitalism*

History of the Corporation

But what is meant by corporate aesthetics? The very phenomenon of "the corporation"

traces back to the rise of industrial capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th century which

saw the idiosyncratic, family-owned, and single-unit enterprise transform into a formalized

corporation, particularly through the formation of large-scale factories and offices that

gathered many lines of work and production. Corporatism, in other work, fundamentally

entails a re-structuring of labor formats. Additionally, the formatting of "company towns"

resulted in a complete reorganization of civil life *in* and *around* the corporation.[2] As Roland

Marchand writes in *Creating the Corporate Soul*, the traditional potency of other societal

structures such as the family, the church, and the local civil community began to feel

dwarfed with the rise of corporatism.[3] The first commercial offices separate from the

factory appeared in the industrial cities of North America at the turn of the century, as the

telephone and the telegraph were introduced into the daily activities of business and trade.

This early division of industrial labor, between factory and office worker, became a key

constituent to the "scientific management" style of Taylorism, initiating a process of hyper-

hierarchization in the workplace that has come to characterize corporate capitalism ever

since. It is also at this time that we see the invention of the steel structured skyscraper

(1884), permitting a curtain wall of glass on high-rise office buildings; artificial lighting

(1870s); the electric elevator (1880); and air conditioning (1902). With these inventions

that radically transformed the modern workplace, we begin to see the formation of an

aesthetic paradigm, one dominated by steel, glass, cleanliness, and seriality; the endless

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[2] On this topic, see for example: Hardy Green, *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010)

[3] Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998), 2

rows of office cubicles, the materiality and bureaucratic immensity of "paperwork,"[4] etc. Furthermore, artificial lighting made it possible to drastically extend the working day, challenging the 8-hour norm which had been achieved by factory worker strikes earlier in the 19th century.

Bell Labs as Typology

The history of Bell Labs and its headquarters in Holmdel, New Jersey fits as a kind of typology of American corporate culture and architecture, perhaps even representing its very pinnacle. American Bell Telephone Company was founded in the 1870s when founder Alexander Graham Bell filed for a patent for the first telephone in the world; within a few years, the Bell System subsidary had established offices in every major American city, taking advantage of their scientific monopoly to equip the country with a network of phone lines. Confusingly but typically of corporations, Bell was a shifting umbrella corporation that functioned as a kind of conglomerate for several other franchises, which consisted also of American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T), Western Electric Company, and Bell Labs, the research and development arm of AT&T.

The New York headquarters, divided into several warehouses in Manhattan, quickly became unviable for the ambitious firm, and by the late 1930s, the site of Murray Hill in New Jersey was bought to be transformed into the central research facility for the corporation. The building was to relieve Bell Labs' congestion problems, and would organize its scientists in one space that could be expanded on a far grander scale in future years. The first building opened in 1942, completed in limestone and buff-colored brick and

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[4] On this topic, see Ben Kafka. *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*. (New York: Zone Books, 2012)

roofed with copper sheeting, a building which journalist and popular historian Jon Gertner, in his polemic book on the corporation from 2013, describes as being a "model of sleek and flexible utility": "Every office and every lab was divided into six-foot increments so that spaces could be expanded or shrunk depending on needs, thanks to a system of soundproofed steel partition walls that could be moved on short notice. Each six-foot space, in addition, was outfitted with pipes providing all the basic needs of an experimentalist: compressed air, distilled water, steam, gas, vacuum, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen."[5] In 1957, Bell Labs, now AT&T began planning a new and even bigger research laboratory in Holmdel, and tapped lauded Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen to conceive of an enormous, campus-like building that was to house all of the company's research, hardware, and software development. In line with the modernist ideal that pervaded his generation, the building, aptly coined Bell Works, featured grand internal pavilions linked by skywalks, centered around a magnificent cross-shaped atrium lit from above. The site itself was characterized by its elliptical master plan with a "country road-like approach", staging the building in its landscape to emerge from the forest of as a city in its own right. The actual encounter, however, was paradoxically one of partial invisibility: the building was entirely covered in mirrored glass cladding, rendering it at once magnificent and invisible, which triggered the building's nickname "the world's biggest mirror."

This form speaks only too directly to the writing of French thinker Jean Baudrillard, and his attempt, in this very time, to tackle the emergence of an "aesthetics of capitalism." In his

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5 Jon Gertner, *The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation.* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2013). E-book edition, 166.

book *The System of Objects*, he attempted to construct a 'vocabulary' for the "ever-accelerating growth of objects" witnessed in industrial and consumer society, in order to study, amongst others, its form.[6] Specifically, through an analysis of the notion of atmosphere, and its implication in design, he presents a paradigm for decoding the various signifiers of capitalism. Take, for example, his discussion of glass:[7]

> "Psychologically speaking, glass in its practical, as in its imaginary uses has many merits. It is the ideal modern recipient: it does not 'pick up the taste', it does not change over time as a function of its content … nor does it shroud that content in mystery… glass implies a symbolism of access to a secondary state of consciousness, and at the same time it is ranked symbolically at zero level on the scale of materials. And certainly, with its indestructibility, immunity to decay, colourlessness, and so on, glass exists at a sort of zero level of matter: glass is to matter as a vacuum is to air… it is at once proximity and distance, intimacy and the refusal of intimacy, communication, and non-communication… glass is the basis of a transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch… Not to mention glass's cardinal virtue, which is of a moral order: its purity, hygiene and prophylaxis which make it truly the material of the future – a future, after all, that is to be one of disavowal of the body, and of the primary and organic functions, in the name of a radiant and functional objectivity (of which hygiene is the moral version of the body)."[8]

In this reading, glass performs as the ideal laborer, stripped of subjectivity, spiritual consciousness, bodily functions, or mortality of any kind. Additionally, it characterizes the institutional power structures of corporate capitalism by visualizing the illusion of power transparency, as well as the claim of a permanent futurity for capitalism. The latter was to become a particularly crucial signifier of corporate power: as Kristin Ross has argued, modern Western capitalism operates under the sign of the even and the *eternal*, "the confused syncretism of all styles, futures, and possibilities," promising a perfect

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[6] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 1.

[7] Ibid, 42

[8] Ibid, 42-43

reconciliation of past and future in an endless world where all sedimentation of social experience has been levelled or smoothed away."[9]

As a corporation, in its time Bell Labs too seemed beyond mortality: by the 1960s, with the completion of the Holmdel complex, over 15,000 people were employed there, including some twelve hundred PhDs.[10] At Bell Works alone, researchers would come to invent the cell phone, discover background radiation (a critical step in the development of the Big Bang hypothesis), and produced a total of eight Nobel Prize-winning discoveries within digital technology innovation.[11] On a factory-like scale, Bell Labs became the primary site of production of what was to become the most powerful corporate asset of the future: data. This made it drastically different from other corporations in its time – while producing hardware, its main commodity produced there was an immaterial one. If it qualified as a kind of factory, it was one radically different from any other the world had ever seen, as the writer Arthur C. Clarke noted in the late 1950s: "At first sight, when one comes upon it in its surprisingly rural setting, the Bell Telephone Laboratories' main New Jersey site looks like a large and up-to-date factory, which in a sense it is. But it is a factory *for ideas, and so its production lines are invisible*."[12] (my italics) Clarke's observation speaks jointly to the innovative, post-Fordist "lab"-like culture of the place (the absence of any clear Fordist labor organization) as well as to the seemingly immaterial commodity being produced there – a magical, transformational site in which digital technology's material compounds

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[9] Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 11.

[10] Jon Gertner, 13

[11] Chris Matthews, "The Reincarnation of Bell Labs" on *Forbes*.com. Accessed August 2017 via http://fortune.com/2015/02/02/bell-labs-real-estate-revival/

[12] Ibid, 20

(copper cables, glass fiber) are transformed into immaterial, digital compounds (data) – "tieing together not only all of the planet's voices but its images and data, too."[13] Here, the factory-produced commodity is increasingly immaterialized —— weightless, invisible, fleet as light itself"[14] Gertner writes with an unmistakable lyricism in his book — and thus abstracted in the cultural imaginary.

So how to represent this new production line when the commodity it produces is largely invisible? The "weightless, invisible, and fleeting" immateriality of data marks a new era in corporate labor representation, as it triggers the dematerialization of matter, the "stuff" that has constituted, at least historically, any aesthetic encounter. Overall, the digital era can be understood to challenges the construction of any cohesive "aesthetic", as it operates through a fundamental process of virtualization. It is this process that produces the imaginary of a digital era beyond factories and beyond labor, that is to say *beyond corporate aesthetics*.

Material Data

Data, of course, is far from immaterial. Even the cloud, the single most popular image of today's technological revolution, scholar Tung-Hui Hu reminds us, "is both an idea and a physical and material object" consisting of "millions of hard drives, servers, routers, fiber-optic cables, and networks." Yet, we call it *the cloud*: "a single, virtual, object."[15] Hu has extensively studied the rich site that exists between the physical reality and cultural imaginary of new digital technologies. In *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, which, coincidentally,

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[13] Ibid, 14

[14] Ibid

[15] Hui Tung Hu, introduction, ix

features Bell Labs/AT&T as a central protagonist, she outlines how the very idea of an

immaterial data cloud is designed on analogous, material predecessors dating back to the

early 1920s[16] – and how it for decades has served as a symbol to "represent any

unspecifiable or unpredictable network, whether telephone network or Internet." The word

"cloud," she argues,

> "speaks to the way we imagine data in the virtual economy traveling
> instantaneously through the air or "skyway"—here in California one moment,
> there in Japan the next. Yet this idea of a virtual economy also masks the slow
> movement of electronics that power the cloud's data centers, and the workers
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> who must unload this equipment at the docks. It also covers up the Third
> World workers who invisibly moderate the websites and forums of Web 2.0,
> such as Facebook, to produce the clean, well-tended communities that
> Western consumers expect to find. By producing a seemingly instant,
> unmediated relationship between user and website, our imagination of a
> virtual "cloud" displaces the infrastructure of labor within digital networks."

The virtualization of technological innovation has resulted in an imagined virtualization of

its labor practices, a displacement of the place of labor from any traditional visuality. The

familiar labor infrastructure of the Fordist factory and Taylorist office of modernity has

withered – instead, we are left with a scattered cluster of aesthetic queues such as the

open-plan tech startup office and lots of hardware in warehouses. In the same way as

conceptual art's dematerialization resulted in a dematerialization of its labor practices and

the ideal art commodity for speculation in the market,[17] digital corporate labor has receded

from our cultural imaginary, in the process largely hiding its tracks and tactics. It is a kind

of response, then, when in *Cloud of Petals,* Meyohas cinematically returns to the literal

birthplace of this new digital labor practice, only to meticulously document the slow,

clumsy, labor-intensive process of manually scanning ten thousand rose petals and

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[16] Ibid

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translating them into a digital data set. The rose, a popular symbol of youth and the passing of time, serves as an allegory for embedded data (information) moving through time *through* and *as* material, stored in the unique genetic code of each rose. Each rose is dismanteled manually, and each of its petals is photographed, meticulously numbered, organized on pieces of paper on trays, and archived for the future. The seeming impossibility of such a task, conducted by temporarily hired workers from the Holmdel area, in fact only enacts the ungraspable amount of digitizing labor conducted every day by human workers, as they translate the knowledge and the matter of the world into information online, often in conditions that are deeply underpaid and precarious. To this day, this labor characterizes the shift from any material into data, from *commodity* to *communication* – one that indeed still feel Fordist, that is to say factory-like. By placing this kind of new corporate labor into the architecture of its precursor, Meyohas highlights the vast visual gap that remains in our aesthetic vocabulary, and calls for the urgent definition of one.

As Hito Steyerl, the exodus of the Fordist labor in the West has displaced the factory of capitalist modernity, often transforming it into a museum.[18] The glory of Bell Labs and its Holmdel Complex, too, crumbled by the late 1980s, caught in a larger corporate restructuring and break-up and faced with intense competition from other phone providers, as well as the steady rise of California's Silicon Valley. There's an irony to the faith of Bell Labs, whose demise was triggered by the very commodity they tried to invent: the pursuit for digital *transmission of information*. This quickly rendered the building obsolete and outdated. After years of abandonment, however, and shortly after Meyohas' taping, the

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[18] Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?" in e-flux Journal #7, June-August 2009.

derelict buildings was re-developed into a modern "town center" for the city of Holmdel, housing restaurants and shops, offices, the town library, a health and wellness center, a nursing facility, a hotel, and offices.[19] Corporate aesthetics is in this way spectral: extinct but always reinvented, re-appropriated and transformed. If the rise of the "digital economy" has proved anything in the last decade, it's that data, and data processing, too, is a corporate interest. Corporations ask us to "interact" as a form of marketing feedback so as to increase advertising revenue – while endeavors such as the Google Books project, for example, where tens of thousands of books are to manually be scanned digitally by participating libraries worldwide, speaks to the economic value of even the most genuine kind of information. Here, so-called "freeware capitalism,"[20] in which online participation is co-opted by market mechanisms, represents the ultimate kind of "invisible production line" in which labor is not only virtualized, but dispersed into the network and presented as *play* or other forms of recreation.

Yet the endeavor to observe, study, and critique corporate labor aesthetics must despite this digital abstraction not end, but only, in fact, be pursued more urgently than ever. For as Peter Drucker explains, the corporation is not and was never just an architectural typology, but a concept – a concept that is "at once, and from the beginning, embodied and disembodied, concrete and abstract, thingly and relational, subject and object, fixed and flowing, real and fictional, natural and artificial … It cannot be grasped, yet it must be.

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[19] See Chris Matthews, 2015

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For without establishing the precise conceptual basis of corporations, there is no way to address their power."[21]

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[21] Peter F. Drucker, *Corporation as Concept* (London: Routledge, 1993)