

Lou Mouw

Eavesdrop

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The Internet was built as a commons. Publicly funded, architecturally decentralised, no centre, no toll booth, no one collecting rent. That lasted about fifteen years. What replaced it, Yanis Varoufakis calls cloud capital: not infrastructure in any sense we'd previously recognised, but a produced means of behaviour modification. The distinction matters. We have not simply moved our economic life online. We have handed the architecture of that life to a small number of private platforms that extract rent from our presence within them, from our attention, our movement, our data, the trail we leave while believing ourselves to be sovereign consumers. The physical reality of all this, the server farms consuming water and land and electricity at a scale that would have seemed industrial a generation ago, the undersea cables, the cooling systems running day and night in data centres built all over the globe, none of it is what you encounter when you open a browser or unlock a phone. What you encounter is an interface. Weightless, responsive, frictionless. They call it the cloud. One of the more successful acts of branding in recent memory.

You wouldn't find Platform Stockholm unless you already knew it was there. The main entrance to the building on Lövholmsbrinken is not the entrance you want. You walk around the side, onto a gravel path with a construction fence on the right that runs for a while and then just stops, as if whoever put it up lost interest or ran out of material. There's a door. Nothing marks it as the entrance to anything. Inside, an old staircase. Two more doors at the top. And then without any preparation you are standing in a room that has no business being there, 180 square metres of white walls and blinding fluorescent tube lights, completely sealed, no windows, no sky. The room used to be the canteen of the colour factory that occupied this building for most of the twentieth century. Most traces of that have been painted over. The building is now owned by a real estate developer and sits under a demolition contract, waiting for capital to find a better use for the land. The artists are here in the meantime, which is more or less the permanent condition of artists in relation to the city: present until something more profitable arrives.

That entrance matters. By the time you reach the work, you have already passed through infrastructure that has been abandoned, repurposed, and is living on borrowed time. The walk from the street to the gallery is the exhibition before the exhibition.

Nicola Arthen's textile is the first thing that pulls your eye when you open the final door. It begins in the far corner of the room and runs nearly the full length of the wall, eight, maybe nine metres, suspended from the wall by thin steel cables. It moves slightly, or seems to. The surface imagery is difficult to place at first. It looks like a thermal scan of a planet no probe has visited, or the inside of a wormhole rendered in deep orange and black and a green that has no exact name. Star systems. Extraterrestrial landscapes. The aesthetic of space travel and of dreaming, which turn out to be related things. You want to stand close to it and you want to stand far back, and both positions reveal something different, and neither is wrong. Arthen designed the textile so that no reading is more correct than another, no top, no bottom, no prescribed direction of attention.

The fabric was woven on a machine that ordinarily produces mattress fabric. That fact arrives quietly and then doesn't leave.

The metal skeleton holding the textile in the air comes into focus. Raw steel bars pressed against the fabric at intervals, clamping it from both sides so that the surface holds without being pierced, thin cables running from the frame to ceiling brackets above. Rust stains have already begun forming. The screws don't match, different lengths, different heads, the whole armature assembled with a nonchalance that sits in quiet contrast to the machine-perfect textile it supports. Nobody tidied this up, or at least, someone did and decided it should not look too tidy. The seam between the flawless surface and the improvised structure holding it in the air is not something Arthen has tried to hide. It is simply not where attention was expected to go. It is not where attention usually goes.

Underneath the textile, Arthen has placed research images, street situations, colour studies, patterns found on urban walls. To see them you take the dolly sitting on the floor and lie on it. It is a plain wooden board painted white, industrial in feel, mounted on four small wheels. Built into its surface are two rechargeable lamps that activate when the board moves, and between them, positioned so that the lamps read as eyes, an Amazon logo, the smile that is also a face, looking up at you from the floor. You roll yourself under the work the way a mechanic moves under a heavy machine, the board carrying your weight, the ceiling of textile pressing in from above, travelling slowly through a space that was not designed to be traversed this way. The images are not spectacular. That is probably the point, that the research, the foundation, the thing the surface grew from, is modest and specific and requires a horizontal posture to reach, and that the platform you lie on wears a smile.

There is also a watermark in the weave. Not from colour but from thread alignment, a repeating pattern in the fabric structure itself, invisible until someone knows where to look and shows you. After that you cannot unsee it. The artist's mark embedded at a frequency automated scanning would not detect. I am still not entirely sure what to do with it, or whether it needs doing anything to. It sits there, patient.

Rodrigo Red Sandoval works in a different register, and the difference is what makes the exhibition function as a dialogue rather than a monologue. Where Arthen's practice produces atmosphere, something to move through, to be inside, Sandoval produces the persistent sensation that you just missed someone. That someone was here, doing something to the infrastructure, and left before you arrived.

The cable works are where this is most direct. Sandoval places them not at the centre of the white cube but at its edges, at the exact points where the gallery's pretence of neutral space gives up and the actual building shows through. One mass of heavy power cable, the thick grey kind stripped from building installations, is pinned to the wall in the corner where two doors are trying to disappear into the white paint, hung directly onto one of them. The other, a coil of the same cable bound with steel clamps, stands on the floor leaning against a column that a 3D rendering of the space would simply erase. Sandoval finds the seams of the fiction and marks them. The white cube performs the same operation as the cloud interface: it presents a clean, frictionless surface while the actual structure hides behind painted-over doors and columns that were never supposed to be noticed. The cables go where the concealment is.

Where the cable sheaths have been bitten through and clamped open with steel hose clamps, the interior is suddenly present, colour-coded conductors, the physical material of power transmission laid open. It looks like something living. The bite marks are still fresh, or feel that way. You find yourself looking around the room.

On the floor, a street lamp head lies on its side, separated from its pole, which extends outward across the gallery floor. The housing is covered in lichen, that particular municipal yellow-grey that accumulates on outdoor infrastructure over years of indifference, and sitting in a cup holder on its surface is a small plastic cup with old coffee still in it. The fit is not accidental and it is not found. Sandoval has fabricated the cup holder to receive this specific cup precisely, the coffee now unoriginal to its new arrangement in the way that only a made thing can be. The same fabricated logic appears in the piece nearby, but with a different charge. A Bosch surveillance camera is fixed to the wall, and between its housing and the wall, a white folding chair hangs trapped, wedged so precisely that it cannot be freed without dismounting the camera. On top of the housing, a Matryoshka doll sits in a recess made exactly for it. The lamp had a cup holder built for its cup. Here the wall has a chair built into its apparatus, and the apparatus has a doll. Everything fits. Nothing can leave.

The lamp sticks out. Not because I understood it but because I didn't, quite. The lichen is too real. The coffee is too specific. Sandoval has constructed an object that carries the full accumulated weight of outdoor public infrastructure, years of weather, of being ignored, of serving a function nobody noticed until it stopped, and inserted into it the residue of a single human afternoon. Someone was on a ladder. Someone had a coffee. That Sandoval fabricated the cup holder to receive this specific cup makes the gesture not a found coincidence but a deliberate act of placement, which should make it easier to interpret and somehow makes it harder. The infrastructure and the afternoon sit in the same object and do not explain each other. I left them there.

Something accumulates during the visit that is easier to feel than to name. Nothing in the exhibition sits fully on the floor. Everything is either wall-mounted or touches the ground at a single point while being anchored somewhere else, the cable coil leaning against a column at its lowest edge, the lamp reaching across the floor from one end, the textile floating above everything on its rusting cables. The floor is almost entirely empty. Arthen and Sandoval wrote it into their own exhibition text, plainly: "What feels grounded, begins to float." Seeing it enacted across every object in the room gives the line a different weight than it carries on the page, less proposition, more diagnosis. After a while this stops feeling like a curatorial decision and starts feeling like a condition the works share, which is of course the condition of the cloud itself, the infrastructure that has been so successfully dematerialised in its presentation that most people who use it daily could not describe what it physically is or where it physically lives.

The two practices do not always resolve into a single argument and I am not sure the exhibition needs them to. Arthen builds a world and Sandoval punctures it, or annotates it, or leaves traces in it. Whether the punctures accumulate into something as sustained as what the textile achieves is a question I kept returning to without settling. There were moments when I wanted more resistance from Sandoval's side, more weight, more of the feeling of a counter-claim. But then I returned to the lamp and the camera and thought that perhaps the point is precisely the lightness of the interruption. That the human trace inside the system is always going to be smaller than the system. That someone had a coffee and left and the infrastructure remained.

Varoufakis argues that we have crossed a threshold. Cloud capital, he writes, is not like previous forms of infrastructure. They are platforms that extract value not from what they sell you but from what you do inside them, from the data your behaviour generates, from the attention you pay, from the presence

you cannot withhold without withdrawing from economic and social life entirely. You are not the customer. You are the material. The rent is paid in a currency you didn't know you were carrying.

What Arthen and Sandoval offer in response is not a counter-argument and not a fully developed visual language. It is something more provisional than that. Snippets. Proposals. A coffee cup that fits too well. A chair that cannot leave. A smile on the floor. A watermark nobody was supposed to find. None of these resolve into a position or add up to a corresponding system. They are attempts to give form to something that was designed to have none, small acts of making-visible in the face of an infrastructure that depends on invisibility. Whether they succeed is almost beside the point. The attempt itself is the proposition: that somewhere between the fallen lamp and the bitten cable there is an aesthetic waiting to be found, one that might change how we think about where we already are.