



Worlds out of Containers

Workshop on the Power of Containerisation

Lars Denicke & Alexander Klose (Berlin, Feb. 2005)

The workshop will systematically explore containerisation – a subject generally overlooked in the polyphonic talk about globalisation, yet one of the most powerful technical systems of our time.

Exploring the process of containerisation from three separate focal points, the workshop should enable participants to visualise the fleeting lines of political, economic, and military power inherent in global logistics:

The great arsenal of democracy

In World War II, the USA set up a worldwide transport system via sea, land, and air to support its allies with goods. The combination of different transportation means along with the standardisation of loading devices and containers was a defining characteristic of this system. Military logistics subsequently forged close ties to the states of transit, developing a new organisation for the exchange and management of goods, but also of political cooperation that has endured to this day.

- *To what extent must the development and testing of standardised transport systems in World War II (and partly in World War I) be understood as the prehistory of containerization?*
- *How did the transition from military to civil use after World War II occur, and what are the connections between military logistics and economics today?*
- *What typifies the transport network set up by the USA in comparison with the infrastructures set up by precedents (such as the Roman or British Empires)? What can we learn about the different types of empires by examining categories of transportation and trade?*

Floating Trucks

With a trial run of 60 containers on a World War II cargo vessel, truck haulier Malcom McLean launched the era of civil containerisation in 1956. Truck swap-bodies were the prototypes for the sea-going container, a sea-land yoke that would become the international standard. Optimising the switch between the different means of transportation was decisive in the early build-up phase of the global container system. An increasing amount of commodities shipped corresponded with an increasing volume of data – which itself could only be processed by the newly developing computer systems. The landing of ever more container loads effected a radical reorientation of local economies in the post-colonial world.

- *How was the “Third World” integrated with international trade, and how did containerisation affect the Eastern Bloc?*

- *What is the significance of containerised land-water transport emerging from the interplay between sea and road?*
- *How can a theory of standardisation be developed from the history of containerisation?*
- *What is the connection between containerisation and computerisation? Is the container system a material counterpart of global computer networking?*

Dislocated inside the Container

With the end of the Cold War, the container transport system has been installed worldwide. At the same time, the container has become a symbol of a new world order. On television, on stage, in planning fantasies about nomadic architectures, or in headlines dealing with body trade and asylum transports, the container is used as a stage for the new struggles for distribution and separation in a globalised world. Through the continuous computer- and container-based flow of world trade, political, economical and cultural spheres converge as they dissolve. The container becomes a paradigmatic dislocated space through which everything - man or commodity - passes indiscriminately.

- *To what extent can the medial condition of the container be deduced from its medial stage management?*
- *Why do modern fantasies about mobility (such as the techno-nomad concept) so often rely on the container? Is there a contemporary myth of the container?*
- *Are headlines about fugitives in containers simply peripheral phenomena? Or should the container be considered an outlawed space typical for the modern condition (as suggested by Giorgio Agamben)?*

The Workshop:

Worlds out of Containers, an international workshop initiated by Humboldt University, will be held in Berlin on June 18th and 19th 2005 at *Volksbühne Berlin*. The conference language will be English.

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