

# The Best Burden

## Brian Kuan Wood and Metahaven

*A conversation taken from the Metahaven book PYSOP, edited by Metahaven and Karen Archey, published by Koenig books on the occasion of exhibitions at the ICA and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.*

**MH:** Like us, you use fiction in your writing. Not so long ago we discussed, in this regard, the wonderful feeling of being liberated from making truth claims and, in a sense, being a critic. But it's more complicated than simply avoiding a reality-based discourse, it seems. What is the logic of moving away from criticism? What does "fiction" liberate us from, given that we both engage less in literary fiction than in ways to use fiction to relate to reality? With too much to critique, and critique always catching up too late, has the vocabulary of criticism exhausted its relation to its subject?

**Brian Kuan Wood:** I do think that a few very large-scale systems that managed to faithfully stabilize objective truth claims are giving way to something else. Epochal sea changes are of course felt throughout history – and even as an individual person passes through different stages of life – but for some time now, we seem to be inside of a long adjustment of what can be expected from the nation-state. Suddenly that which formerly set the foundation for civic life and duty, life-enhancing infrastructure and technology, acceptable uses of force and military organization, looks like one big synthetic family among a number of others arising in less official or private domains. While this in itself can have quite dangerous consequences, it is accompanied by some kind of bursting abscess of narratives of arrival or becoming that don't play well with electrical grids and efficient tramlines. On the level of grand narratives the term to describe these may be colonialism, but on the level of the individual they can give way to a phantasmagorical redistribution of allegiances more willing to incorporate ethnicity, kinship, memories of conquest and flight, or identitarian self-exoticization. It often seems like the oldest truth-fiction is really history itself – whose power is as true and necessary as it gets, while at the same time being a sublime narrative machine, inscribing events into consciousness as much as consciousness into events.

Young people today understandably find themselves caught between taxonomic regimes organizing otherness. They are attracted to technologies for registering aberrant behavior patterns left over from Victorian ideas about gender or European eugenicist ideas of race. A term like "intersectionality" has a centripetal architecture that tends toward a center, harmonizing and neutralizing aberrant otherness into the cozy cosmopolitanism of the Western liberal metropolis. It's no surprise that with the rise of right-wing parties Europe seems increasingly less interested in issues of structural equality than in United States-style diversity politics. European countries are perhaps stuck in a state of never-ending amazement at the appearance of foreign-looking faces on its streets and imagines the US to have a much more robust model for metabolizing these differences. In fact the US has always dealt with differences by replacing notions of equality with notions of diversity, which can only mean a constant, albeit meticulously managed, race war. Many of my curatorial students – the majority of whom are not from the US – are concerned about "post-truth" and "fake news." I try to remind them that the real horror

lies in trying to find "real news" or "truth-truth" – a kind of ancient teleological mindfuck that only philosophy and religion seem capable of addressing. But I also try to point them to some of your early projects, such as *Stadtstaat* (2009) and *Brand States* (2008), which have been important for my own understanding of these dynamics. These projects consider tourism logos as having more visual currency than state flags. In *Brand States* fiction is used operatively: states see their existence entangled with their image and attractiveness as a destination, their ability to market and narrate themselves beyond being a place where people and buildings most likely exist, but may or may not be much more. The need to attract tourism and foreign investment renders the nation an image, and it must be an immersive one. But how can a nation create the depths necessary for this immersive image? Post-Borat Kazakhstan, for instance, is investing heavily in gamified tourism – a kind of Pokémon Go meets Lonely Planet.

The need for a nation to become an immersive image is a political and economic reality that has led to catastrophic or near-catastrophic conditions, particularly in countries with the wealth to have once invested heavily in public infrastructure – the dismantling of which is no whimsical speculative fiction. So in the long tail of Cool Britannia and creative-class rezoning experiments from the 1990s onward, *Stadtstaat* showed that the desperate use of design and branding to corporatize domains previously thought to be private – not only the private business sector, but also the private lifeworld – becomes so absurd that it switches us on to a much more ecstatic domain where state and corporate fictions and private fantasies together erupt into some strange wavelength of historical time. This was also around the time when a lot of critical and theoretical work was discovering what a warm nest the catastrophic or apocalyptic mode could be to write in, with the forward march of capital impossible to stem. You, on the other hand, approached the same conditions in a structural pop mode: with the weak demagoguery of a certain critical mode out of the way, the equally weak mechanisms of corporate governance could actually be approached in all their desperation as open-source and available for intervention. It's still a terrifying political prospect, but you managed to make it into (at least to my mind) an immensely inspiring artistic provocation to start trying to identify other registers to plot what was happening, both around me and within me, as these epochal shifts continued.

**MH:** What about the form to present and embody such artistic provocations? Our 2009–2010 period work, which you call "structural pop," such as *Stadtstaat*, used graphic design to give these fictions some level of credible interface. *Stadtstaat* played on a long overdue transformation from walled city to infrastructural corridor, sovereign entity to network node, and centralized power to self-surveillance hub. It suggested both a new social network, titled "TRUST," and a new brand of fast food, called "Pizza Dystopia." The latter resonates with the accumulation of more-or-less globalized tastes in European public space, fading between East and West, pizza and dystopia, Poland and Belgium, social housing and capitalism, Montepulciano and Vapiano, and so on. Keeping these sensorial impressions on the level of structural pop prevents them from freezing into dystopian theory or creative industries startup lingo. If *Stadtstaat* were to exist today, it would call itself disruptive. It would have sun-tanned executives in BMW electric cars saying things like "Ciao bella!" and "one Aperol Spritz, please!"

in smart-grid startups and pop-up gin bars. It would have solar and wind power. Its homes would have intelligent washing machines. But it still would have slums, Lidl, teenage runaways, right-wing populism, and Post-its. It would have innovated and patented its own color of Post-its. It would be at the nexus of major European drug trade routes.

Graphic design as the visual form of change by which everything stays the same is, on some level, interchangeable with a written narrative. Yet, design changes the feeling between things, and the descriptions of things. "Pizza Dystopia" can be narrated in words. It can also be typeset in stretched Futura capitals, by which it becomes a thing. To create structural pop you need to experience the "thingness" of the story: the pop-yellow RAL-color of the painted dry-port container cranes, the cracks in the mirroring foil of a hairdresser's window display, the dark-blue sans serif font of the "EURO ASIA" supermarket sign – which is actually a version of a major prepaid SIM card provider's logo.

The interoperability of visual and narrative forms resonates with your short story "The Story of Peter Green Peter Chang"<sup>1</sup> and the invention of "Bubble Rubble." It's quite imperative for our readers to know what Bubble Rubble is, because it is delightful.

**BKW:** I wrote "The Story of Peter Green Peter Chang" to organize what I was sensing was happening to me around what we might call "reverse diaspora." What happens when we are called to return to a place of origin when that call arrives through anonymous flows of global capital? Perhaps something in the logistical operations of those flows reaches out and claims you as a long-lost beneficiary of some ancestral inheritance be it a galaxy or a pile of dirt. The territorializing apparatus of the global market gains a temporal axis: coordinates on a flat map are suddenly engorged with my own history. For instance, the coordinates of a vacation to Six Flags or a holiday in Thailand, suddenly lands me in front of my great-grandparents' vacant home that no one in my family has spoken of – in front of Six Flags or on a Thai beach. Or you invent a tool and then outsource its manufacturing to China, where it turns out they've already been manufacturing it for centuries. And you had forgotten that your grandparents are from there. Glitches appear in the very possibility of a global market, first in the assumption that all places can be abstracted onto a unified plane of equal relevance and modular interchangeability, and second, in the possibility of certain places being so loaded with meaning that their economic transactions become null and void.

People whose families experienced historical ruptures are full of gaps and cracks, sensitive to places that offer clues to those missing pieces. For "The Story of Peter Green Peter Chang," I wanted to have some fun with Chinese-American amnesia. Peter is a kind of virtuosic gentrification architect attracted to new markets in China who finds himself attempting to upgrade a property in his ancestral hometown, essentially trying to extract profit from something that already belongs to him and perhaps is him. He develops his own technologically advanced building material called "Bubble Rubble."

*He nicknamed it Bubble Rubble for paradoxically combining the weightless properties of bubbles with the fragmented material properties of decayed or derelict infrastructure. The trick came in moving energetic matter through time in a way similar to a*

*financial trader, although we can never be certain, as the research remains undocumented and the technology mostly hearsay. According to the rumors, this Bubble Rubble borrowed from both the economic aspirations of historical communities of the land on which he built and the material decay of existing structures at his disposal. This combination, as the story goes, makes possible a kind of hyper-material that resolves apparently conflicting temporal axes into a single plastic substance – concretizing both the desires and disappointments at either end of a building's lifespan and cloaking them within the retro-modern vernaculars favored by gentrifying building developers. What appeared to be mostly baked together out of prefab floorplans and made-to-order ventilation systems were in fact buildings whose very existence was spectral to the point of being holographic, while at the same time absolutely materially present.*

**MH:** Perhaps something *Stadtstaat* forgot about, what with its single-minded focus on "European values," was Asia. Central Asia is becoming further integrated in economic infrastructures together with China and Russia. The One Belt, One Road Initiative is an infrastructural axis from eastern China to the United Kingdom that delivers indirect structural influence for China in Central and Eastern Europe through massive investments in these regions. For some, the initiative is the wave of a magic wand bringing the idea of Eurasia to life; for others, it unwelcomely re-centers Schmittian geopolitics on the "world island." Somehow, the New Silk Road – even if it isn't directly political – has the effect of a Sadim touch, with several countries falling into structural authoritarian rule: Turkey, Hungary, Poland, to name a few.

The "negative soft power" of authoritarianism is also a purported stability in the face of a West that has confirmed, time and again, that its future is only as good as the stock market. This power is in charge of controlling "truth" itself, if we take truth to be various flows of empirical data. What happens next is akin to something you elaborate in your 2014 essay "Is it Love?" – inspired by Haddaway's 1993 Eurodance hit "What Is Love?" – in which the liquid social fabric of affect and love bears the brunt of massive economic uncertainty, leading to a soup-like subsistence in seas of "capitalist realism" – using the term coined by the late Mark Fisher in his book of the same name.

**BKW:** One thing we have in common is a modulation of scale: if you say galactic, I say hairstyle; if I say God, you say font kerning. Not only is there creative play and fun in this dance of throwing the ridiculous against the eternal to see what sticks, and vice versa, but it is also the game one plays with and against truth, like a heuristic process or a logical test.

The question of love and Eurasia makes me think of your term from the Brand States period: "super-state abyss." The question of Eurasia could be said to be similar to that surrounding the emotional economy of our favorite super-state model: the European Union, as a kind of post-national or super-national form of belonging and exploded version of the nation-state with different ethnicities, provinces, languages, etc.<sup>2</sup> The nation-state is a rather odd and unstable protocol for containing these different groups of people. We still see this federation of federations as a promise for world peace, whose failure we lament, as we do that of the United Nations. If it's really such an abyss – the political horizon of bankrupt European-style

social democracy on the one hand, and savage US-style corporate governance on the other – it's no wonder the far-right is taking over.

We are faced now with a fascinating question: who can be invested with the moral authority to broker transactions, fundamental to money or contracts on any scale – the third party with the objectivity and power to enforce in case of any breach? This basic form of abstraction allows for an agreement to be captured and moved to a different place while carrying the same value. Money is backed by national central banks or the US military industrial complex. The blockchain model offers a new world-historical option, with software able to record transactions with minimal volatility. Between friends and family, it's trust – the history and the relationship itself – that ensures promises are kept, or compensated when they're not. My essay "Is it Love," which you used for your film *City Rising* (2014), experiments with overplaying the slide from national or state governance into the private domain. Rather than understanding the private as corporate domain, which has arguably no objective moral authority whatsoever, I wanted to consider the domain of private life: the precarious worker or entrepreneur as the exemplary hero of neoliberal economy.

As with your *Stadtstaat* "Trust" currency, I wanted to explore the nightmare of all public services operating through love between people. Love becomes a structural hegemon ruling the world. At the same time, plumbing the lower depths of Western humanism was a dead end and intellectually disingenuous.

Many of these processes led me to feel uncannily at home in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. I visited more often and discovered answers there. Part of this probably had to do with realizing that when left alone in the world – structurally, institutionally, financially, working on a laptop in some café – it is wise to address the historically constituted parts of the self that healthy institutions usually fill in one way or another, in an honest encounter with what they really are and where they are from.

Funnily enough, Xi Jinping, China's General Secretary, has spoken often of China's "civilizational" project, and the One Belt, One Road project makes no secret of China's expansionist ambitions. The "reverse diaspora" I mentioned earlier is by no means just about return – it is about a pendulum of global power swinging from the place you moved to, to the place you moved from generations before. Many are quick to point out that China is unsophisticated in dealing with cultures other than its own – yet it contains over fifty ethnic groups, while having lost millions of people to waves of emigration in the country's many upheavals throughout the modern era. I must have partially been "summoned" by a civilizational turn in China's neoliberal policy, as if it was seeking contact with its long-lost children.

Neoliberalism is volatile, with sudden reallocations or redistributions of resources. Successful state branding might entice you to move toward the place you are originally from; the terms of diaspora can suddenly become inverted. Since the nineteenth century, China has been ravaged to hell in the Opium Wars, the civil wars, famine, the Cultural Revolution, and onward and onward. Now it controls immense financial and technological power, proclaiming itself beautiful and vital. Yet it also sees itself as on the losing side of colonial history, a rare view for a country in such a strong position. China's vast power could place technology in the service of something quite different than the old deterministic Hegelian view of progress or the creepy libidinal fervor of "disruptive

tech." When major parts of the memory are missing, technology might also serve to reconstitute those parts and heal the organism.

With these movements somehow backwards and forwards into strange new forms of foundationalism, or new ways of grounding the self and sense of place in the world, I watched your latest film *Hometown* (2018) with great interest. With all of your projects, every single time I've been surprised by the way that you approach the subject. I'd be interested in knowing what you had in mind in making *Hometown*, since we never really spoke about it. In a way, I felt we didn't need to – I knew that in your family you had experienced birth as well as death, and this made me think it was an important film for you. I may have even wondered, tongue-in-cheek, whether the film wanted to move more to the "haven," and away from the "meta" side of things.

**MH:** Aside from the subject matter, the impetus for *Hometown* is to develop a vocabulary that shifts away from criticality proper, to a lyricality that embodies it. The impetus to glorify aspects of existence can then shine a more truthful light on the problems of and around it: you glorify something under circumstances that aren't so glorious, opening up a space where this gap is exposed. Two very particular examples of writing embody this, which we quoted in *Digital Tarkovsky* (2018). In March 2000, journalist Anna Politkovskaya reported from inside a tent school for refugees in the destroyed Chechen capital Grozny. The children are assigned to write a glorifying text about their country. Politkovskaya cites the writings of a young pupil, Marina Magomedkhadjieva, to expose the trauma of loss:

*My city Grozny always radiated beauty and goodness. But now all that is gone like a beautiful dream and only memories remain. The war is blind, it doesn't see the city, the school or the children. All this is the work of the armadas from Russia, and therefore not only our eyes are weeping, but also our tiny hearts.*

*Now we have nowhere to go to school, to play and enjoy ourselves. Now we run back and forth and don't know what to do. But if they asked us we would say: "That's enough bloodshed. If you do not stop this senseless war, we should never forgive you." Soldiers! Think of your children, of your own childhood! Remember the things you wanted in childhood and what your children want, and you'll understand how sad and difficult it is for us. Leave us alone! We want to go home.<sup>3</sup>*

Politkovskaya's university thesis was about poet Marina Tsvetaeva, who is understood to be one of the warmest and most lyrical twentieth-century Russian poets. When her daughter was three or four years old, Tsvetaeva wrote the following:

*There are clouds about us  
and domes about us.  
Over the whole of Moscow  
so many hands are needed!  
I lift you up like a sapling,  
my best burden:  
for to me you are weightless.<sup>4</sup>*

This idea of burden, or best burden – what you love the most – is in a sense also the obstacle that keeps you from being totally free. That's very important. Criticality

doesn't happen in a neutral space; it happens in a vulnerable space, where care for others is always on the same plane with the idea of judgment of the world. In Tsvetaeva, there's a lot of shifting between lyricality and darkness. This would amount to a description of her life.

Another influential author for *Hometown* is Svetlana Boym. Her book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), talks about a longing for something imagined that was never there. She quotes a poem about someone who returns home, finding a table there, covered with a white-and-red checkered cloth. This signifier tells them: "home." But if you think about it, it makes no sense. Was it even there? "Home" is built out of elements that are partially generic. In our film, the hometown is made out footage of Beirut and Kyiv.

**BKW:** A few days ago I went to a church in Berlin to see my old friend Hassan Khan, someone who's very important for my thinking and development. He was working with five choral singers on his new piece *tainted* (2018). I should clarify that I really hate being in any church – I grew up going to Catholic school, I had had enough of it then already. But I was surprised at how content I felt sitting in this particular church, realizing that nine or twenty blocks away in any direction, you would probably find another church. One choir member worked with or for this church, so I imagine he simply had a key to the door in his pocket. There was a complete mundanity not only in the setting, or use of the room and institution, but also the use of voice. Hassan's piece was entirely vocal. There were some printouts, and a smartphone on a desk. Beyond that, no modular synths, laptops, or musical instruments; there was no armature, no apparatus – just extremely skilled people opening their mouths, letting out sound. They were just using the room, in an embedded, existing network of buildings, which also happen to be churches. Maybe no one was religious, or maybe they all were. Like anywhere, it was simply a room in a building already there for decades, and probably will remain there for many more. You just open your chest and your mouth, and make sound; there doesn't have to be that much more to it. It was wonderful, deeply so. It made me think that there is something extremely important in working with things that already exist, that have been there and will be there later, or that you already carry around inside your body, whether you like it or not.

**MH:** The artwork you describe seems to open up the possibility of that type of connection.

**BKW:** I should add that Hassan's *tainted* is a very deliberate meditation on populism. It can't be coincidental that it opened up a channel to being serenaded by these ancient forms of applied universalism found in the family and the church.

**MH:** Your experience of *tainted* could be seen as analogous to that of someone who, after having eaten at McDonald's for a long time, suddenly discovers the taste of fresh tomatoes from rural Macedonia, or something like that. The brutally simple and emotionally captivating situation of being in a room with singers who use just their voices – no electronic mediation – is like stumbling upon something that, as you say, already existed but feels new every time. It feels like a possibility that was obvious, but forgotten. Indeed, the relationship with the past is what populism is mining – often in the form of a kind of hoax – to minutely construct the idea that some political claim or story would be natural or pre-given. This

is one of the pitfalls of the current political moment: we are having real feelings of attachment, real feelings about what is important, and these feelings aren't all that advanced or complicated. They are straightforward, and can be addressed by something as apparently trivial as singers using their voices in a church. Populism mines or aggrandizes these attachments by using a scaling-up model: the nation-state as a family, the political party as a family, an ethnic group as a family, etc., concurrent to making it seem as if the key to all this lies in some B- or A-side past – from which the target group is to simultaneously derive feelings of superiority and being scolded. The political use of love is, simply put, extremely dangerous material in all directions.

Making work today, in this heightened ideological tension, is also about navigating this reality. But what is lost, somehow, is a sense of the future. What we are left with is simply the present, in which we can feel and think, and the past, from which we can post-construct how we got to where we are now. Isn't this too limited?

**BKW:** I have very little appetite for the future at the moment, so it's hard to lament its loss when most of what I seem to want now comes from the past. This also has to do with the Bubble Rubble. Lately, relations between past and future are prone to peculiar reversals, like plays of scale: it's difficult to distinguish between super-structural operations and their symptoms or derivatives. Sometimes you reach for the past, but latch onto the future, or you reach for the future and hit a wall – you can't get there without coming to terms with the past.

#### Notes

1. Brian Kuan Wood, "The Story of Peter Green Peter Chang," *Superhumanity*, February 1, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68641/the-story-of-peter-green-peter-chang/>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.
2. See Metahaven, "Europe Sans: History, Politics, and Protocol in the EU Image," *e-flux journal* 5 (April 2009).
3. Quoted in John Pilger, *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs*, New York: Vintage Books, 2005, 423.
4. Marina Tsvetaeva, "Verses About Moscow" [1916], in *Selected Poems*, trans. Elaine Feinstein, New York: Penguin, [1971] 1994, 14.