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Forging Rules: Glass Bead in Conversation with Keller Easterling and Benedict Singleton

Benedict Singleton,

Keller Easterling

It is common to consider architects and designers as opportunistic figures consorting with the industrial, financial and political powers in place. From this standpoint, their alliance to critical voices and to potentially emancipatory ends is often seen to be rather dubious. This critical characterisation has however been increasingly challenged by authors and practitioners who argue that playing with the rules of the game, manipulating things from within, diverting and subverting various power agendas, could be more productive critical strategies than direct opposition. Informed today by the debates emerging around accelerationism and theories of the common, critical strategies may come closer to the multiple meanings of forging. At once shaping a metal object by heating it and hammering it, constructing, by extension, something that is strong, enduring or simply successful, as well as falsifying, imitating, producing a copy of something in order to turn it into something else. Keller Easterling and Benedict Singleton joined us by email to discuss how their respective work related to such ideas and strategies.

Glass Bead: Keller, as an architect who is predominantly engaged in doing research and making exhibitions, you've argued, in your last two books, that architecture has more to learn than to teach about global politics and global urbanization. Benedict, you've engaged in a massive effort to philosophically reconceptualize what design is and can do,

yet you define yourself less as a theorist than as a strategist. Could you both tell us more about how this relation between the practical and theoretical dimensions of architecture and design unfolds in your respective practices?

Keller Easterling: I am sure I have said that, with regard to global politics, architecture has more to learn than to teach. And yet, so much of my work at present is about making palpable the spatial operating system of global development. I am trying to unfocus eyes to see not only buildings with shapes and outlines but also the matrix of activities and rules in which those buildings are suspended. This operating system is largely coded with econometrics by 28-year-old McKinsey consultants, World Bank yes men and commercial orgmen. Spatial expertise—spatial variables that embody intelligence, economy and social justice—is sorely lacking in global governance. Still, the most interesting thinkers in the social and political sciences are looking for a more complex context in which to test their master narratives and the authority of their supposed science. In a book published this year, *Extrastatecraft*, I am offering global infrastructure space as a valuable testbed for these inquiries.

While unfocusing eyes, I am also trying to change a habit of mind about form making and political activism. We are very good at “knowing that”—pointing to things and calling their name. In our most primitive moments we even regard this cumulative identification as a primary form of knowledge. But, with a tip of the hat to Gilbert Ryle, “knowing how” redoubles that knowledge. It is the ability to detect the unfolding interplay between things as an information system. We are accustomed to the abstractions of information systems—languages, DNA, or codes for digital devices. But we are less attuned to the ways in which information resides in the lumpy, heavy objects of our world—not only living beings but everything from the smallest object to buildings and cities. We are more aware of their name than the repertoire they enact. It is harder to see the ways in which objects are exchanging and generating information.

I am trying to demonstrate the ways in which the urban space of the city itself is an information system and a portfolio of values more tangible than the often risky abstractions of the global financial industry. Cities don’t have to be coated with sensors to be complex networks and routers. Cities, the buildings and people in cities “compute.” And urban relationships and practices constitute a set of assets.

Extrastatecraft rehearses the ability to read this matrix space as an infinitive rather than nominative expression. In addition to the object forms that designers are trained to make, the book considers the active forms that shape complex unfolding dispositions in the city. It's a longer discussion, but, in this extra dimension or part of speech, form can be indeterminate to be both more practical and more politically vigilant.



Watchdogs, Screenshot gameplay (Ubisoft, 2014)

Benedict Singleton: For my part, I'm a designer, by trade and inclination. I spend much of my time working "in industry," as we say—interaction design, service design, platform design. Design always has a certain theoretical component: ideas arise in the course of making something that can be redeployed, even if it's just in making the next thing. But these ideas are probably made a little more explicit in my area, as it's a terrain for design that is—relatively speaking—fairly new, and therefore underspecified. We are still trying to work out the basics of what it is we're doing. And this tendency to abstraction is reinforced further because my role, over the last ten or so years, has increasingly tended towards the strategic. I find myself more often with the job of working out what might be done, and how, than delivering a finished artifact.

So I have a professional interest in ideas that unlock new ways to proceed in a given situation: understanding how things *really* work in order to produce an effect; the relations—actual and possible—that design has with outside forces that set and are unset

by its agendas; and so on. Given their proximity to practice, I tend to value these ideas more for their efficacy than by their claims to being comprehensive; I'm more interested in diversifying possible courses of action than of creating a "theory of design."

Yet, certainly, themes coalesce. Perhaps the major one for me has been a view of design as something innately subversive: design is really what you do when you can't straightforwardly impress a pattern on the world, but must rather devise a sequence of oblique and well-timed actions in order to coax effects from unpromising materials—materials that are remote, volatile, stubborn, obscure, or otherwise resistant to manipulation. I would like to think that this has some valence outside design, too, not least because, of course, situations of this type are familiar from our daily lives. Perhaps design, as a field, can help us provide a language for—or maybe I should say, *a geometry of*—such scenarios, a task with which the official canon of Western thought has not, it appears, been much concerned.

Over the past few years, a more significant fraction of my time has become dedicated to exploring these ideas *in themselves*, taking tools I use in my broader work—design, but also writing and latterly film—into spaces better suited to expeditions of this sort. Fiction, the gallery, *et cetera*. I like the idea of making art in which people whose lives are spent getting things done, be they tradespeople, board directors, busy single mothers, whoever, can see recognized and reflected the intelligence at work in what they do.

GB: It appears quite evident in what you are saying that, in order to rethink architecture and design, in order to expand their understanding beyond buildings and beyond what can be called a "solving problems" logic, it is necessary to rethink the type of spatiality in which they intervene, and the spatial logics in which they can engage. By focusing on Castalia, we similarly wanted to emphasize, in this issue, the spatial and institutional dimensions of The Glass Bead Game. Once we understand Castalia as the site where the game is played, it becomes possible to underline that the limits of the logic of the game are also related to problems and limitations that are associated with both the modern (i.e., extraterritoriality) and the postmodern (i.e., localism, particularism) understandings of the concept of site. Both of your projects deal quite extensively with this concept, or at least with related questions and problems. Could you explain how your respective projects relate to such a critical and speculative engagement with the notion of site, and how do you see the specific role that architecture and design can play in moving away from the endless dialectical play between extraterritoriality and localism?

BS: If you trace the conceptual history of ‘plot’, you find that before around 1500, the term refers solely to a marked-out site, an area of land. Over the next century or so, the term’s meanings proliferate to the point where their connections are no longer immediately obvious: drawings, narratives, and seditious plans are all called plots. The underlying logic that guided this development illuminates an alternative conception of design in a very striking way.

Plot’s initial, *spatial* meaning, the demarcation of an area, transferred into the language of the workshop. One plots out a design on paper before acting on other, more expensive materials. So a *constructive* sense of plot arises, relating to diagrams, maps and charts. And within a few decades, this graphical ‘plotting’ was adopted into the lexicon of the early modern theater, where its artisanal meaning deepened into a *narrative* sense: plotting as the arrangement of people and things over time, so as to tell a story.

Up to this point, ‘plot’ shares a substantial similarity to ‘plan’. Both words couple the idea of a spatial arrangement with a schedule of unfolding action. Plot’s connection to territory (and the politics of its division), cartography, and stories make it, perhaps, the richer word. But most interesting is that, on the back of its theatrical use, plot acquired a further, specifically *subversive*, sense, which planning does not possess: plotting as the subtle orchestrations of an unseen director, manipulating the course of events from behind the scenes.

So ‘plot’ encodes a particular form of creativity, too, which can be glossed as the production of a *plot twist*. This is the point at which one plot is subverted by another one, just as the routines of the bank, the placement of cameras, the structure of the vault and the peccadilloes of the manager become the raw material of the heist. Put another way, plotting is always *re*-plotting: discerning the contours of an unfolding situation and locating the opportunities it presents for ‘leverage’—points in space and time at which an action can generate an effect disproportionate to the physical effort put into it. A plot, we might say, is a plan invested with this kind of underdog intelligence.

In a kind of closing of the circle, ‘site’ (the original meaning of plot) remains critical to this idea of the creative twist or what we might call *the kick*—the moment where one plot is derailed by another. Rather than conjuring an image of how the world should be and then trying to force it into being, plotting takes a site’s particular structure, its fixity or at least predictability, as the platform for new and potentially unlicensed operations. Recovering the full sense of plotting, as an intervention that starts from a point of

comparative weakness and proceeds through guile and ingenuity, forges a deep conceptual link between the creation of artifacts and political intrigues, dissident stratagems, and other ruses.

KE: I am not just being churlish when I say that, if asked whether I was more nourished by Herman Hesse or an especially gifted confidence man, I would have to go with the latter. As is probably clear from both *Enduring Innocence* and *Extrastatecraft*, like Erving Goffman, I learn from discrepant characters—pirates, swindlers and others who have mastered the art of decoupling what they are saying from what they are doing. (There are sympathies with Benedict here surely, and discussions of “The Long Con,” the title of one of his essays, even appears in my writing as well.) Perhaps the only thing of note that I bring to the study of space is a training in theater where this decoupling is routine—as is the understanding that actions are primary carriers of information. (The line is “Come home, son,” but the consequential information is carried in the action played—to reject, to grovel or to smother.) It is this perhaps deceptively simple skill that is useful for designers in a world of stealthy politics.

For both designers and activists, the forthright, the direct, the sincere is often valued over the discrepant and the sly. But learning from Rosalind Williams and others, the formulas and spatial products of infrastructure space are nowhere in particular. Infrastructure space is a distributed condition organized by mixtures of state and non-state players. Some years ago, I designed “site plans” for spatial products that were something like a slide rule with the north arrow spinning. There is no place and there is no guarantee that the righteous duel of the activist or the directness of the designer address will register change.

These are networks of spaces where remote controls, switches and multipliers are better as active forms. As Gregory Bateson said, “A switch is a thing that is not.” Active forms are not finished but dispositional and unfolding in time. There is no object or master plan but something more like the identification of linkages and interdependencies that remain in place to counterbalance each other. Maybe then, there is a chance of pacing with the shifting disguises and turnabouts that every sneaky player in the world tries to get away with—design as a snaking chain of moves that can gradually get leverage in difficult political situations. That is what I meant by referring to the indeterminate as both more practical and more politically vigilant.



Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints. (Sharif Waked, 2003)

GB: You both talk about figures and strategies that seem to have a lot to do with the notion of game: the especially gifted confidence man, the pirate, as well as dissident stratagems, and other ingenuous ruses... But how do you see in relation to ethical questions? It seems that, in order to avoid some kind of cynical free play so commonly praised nowadays, we need to be able to draw a line between mastering the game and being able to transform its rules...

KE: “Mastering the game” in this context sounds a bit like “working from within”—the idea that one plays along on the inside of an organization in order to figure out how to eventually manipulate it. I don’t see the techniques that Ben and I explore as necessarily conducted “from within.” Maybe there is no possibility of working “from the outside,” but I still labor under the assumption that one can manipulate without collusion. Ethics travels along a Möbius strip of meanings sometimes on opposite sides of the same surface and approaching from different directions. For some, it describes the maintenance of consensus around stated principles. I am temperamentally uncomfortable with this hope for a steady-state and better disposed to ethics as the

maintenance of dissensus around a necessarily indeterminate struggle with circumstance and evidence. One notion of ethics operates in a declarative register and the other in an active register. Maybe the word indeterminate is a stumbling block because it signals to some equivocation, lack of conviction or the “cynical free play” to which you refer in your question. Here is a quote from *Extrastatecraft*:

...Any deviation from the proper techniques, even in an attempt to aid and broaden activism, may be interpreted as a betrayal of ethical principles. Manipulating the market is mistaken for collusion. Giving positive attention to agents of systemic change rather than negative opposition to a series of enemies is mistaken for an uncritical stance. Relinquishing the grip of resistance is mistaken for capitulation or ethical relativism. Answering duplicity with duplicity is mistaken for equivocation or lack of conviction rather than a technique to avoid disclosing a deliberate strategy.¹

But, for me, indeterminate only refers to situations that are dispositional or time-released. Also the most powerful players in the world rely on indeterminacy, so that, in the winding road of political manipulation, they can be Goliath one day and David the next. The notion that there is an ethical consensus and proper realm of political negotiation plays into the hands of this elusive behavior. It is easy to trick dissent if declaration is the only thing that counts and information. And squaring off against these powers often means that you are either escalating the tensions or violence that you want to diminish or shaking your fist at a ghost. To acknowledge an indeterminate and changing set of techniques is to stay light on your feet and exercise the same political agility that the most powerful characters enjoy. You can never congratulate yourself for being finished. You can only start a ratcheting interplay that gains advantage over the abuses of concentrations of power.

BS: If it's a type of game we're talking about—and it's an odd type of game indeed when one competes for the right to set the rules—it's premised on seduction. We're all familiar with the tale of the detective who goes too far. They pursue the criminal, trying to piece together fragments of evidence into a trajectory, so that they can intercept their prey—supposedly to enact justice, and restore order. But of course they target the criminal just as the criminal entrapped *their* victim, and in the classic cat-and-mouse set up, the criminal must think like the detective, the detective like the criminal... Their identities first synchronize and then converge as the situation escalates. From what we might call *a plot's-eye view*, these apparent adversaries are complicit in the propagation of the plot itself, which grows in sophistication with every twist. Noir, especially, is sensitive to this crossing of lines: the corrupt cop, the principled thief.

There is sometimes a blackly comic aspect to being drawn into the whirlpool in this way. In the UK, as I write this, a highly professionalized system of public politics—very slick, very cruel—is trying to reckon with the advent of Jeremy Corbyn: a figure by all accounts as straightforward, unrefined, and honest as they come. Neither his fellow politicians nor the media seem to know what to do; to their evident rage, every attack they launch seems only to bolster his popularity. Is this the start of a new game, or simply a knight's move in the old one? As ever, we will have to see. But it provides a topical example of how becoming attuned to the rules of a very complex game indeed, becoming a player of great skill, can *itself* be a set of blinkers, and, under the right circumstances, a terminal flaw. I'm very interested in how we might train ourselves to understand these *actual operations of the political* in a different light: a politics of the gyre, as it were. As Keller suggests, apparent errors in the established script can function as footholds for other forms of action. When we see our ideals flounder in practice, there's a temptation to fall back on simply affirming them anew; maybe if we refine the way we phrase them just one more time, we'll have found the correct combination for the safe that's rumored to contain a better world. Clearly that doesn't often work, and other approaches are necessary. But a more subtle temptation is to see the exploitation of these apparent discrepancies simply as opportunities to bring down The System, which can then be forgotten once we've replaced it with The Better System. As noble as the envisioned substitute might seem, it, too, will come with its side-effects, backfires, and off-label uses... We need a *gyropolitics* capable of reckoning fully with these complex reversals, escalators and complicities.

GB: Keller, although you focus on global infrastructure space and on depicting the operational formulas that shape global urbanization, you also often talk about cities. Here you even say that, once considered as an information system and a portfolio of values, the city remains a more tangible site than the abstractions of the global financial industry. Benedict, the schematic history of the notion of plot that you propose could be read in parallel to that of the city. Largely drawing on the ideas developed by Henri Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution* ([1970] 2003), several authors are arguing today that cities have been completely absorbed by at once more continuous and more heterogeneous forms of urbanization. It seems clear that cities are no longer the bound topographical entities that they once were, surrounded by walls or delimited by clear administrative and morphological boundaries. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are not topological singularities that must be reckoned with. Do you think

cities are still strategic places architecture and design should engage with? Or do you consider that we are past that? And that the city has been diluted in global processes that unfold at different levels?

KE: I used the word “city” to describe urbanity as it assumes various forms and intensities. Because I am looking at space itself as an information system, I am trying to assess when urban dispositions are information rich or information poor. Those urban dispositions might be at the scale of a huge conurbation, a rural village or a distended suburb. Beyond access to digital information systems, I am working on access to information-rich spatial technologies. Urbanity is perhaps also for me, the condition capable of introducing errors into any organization or formation—error and contradictory information that continues to grow information in ways that are irreducible.

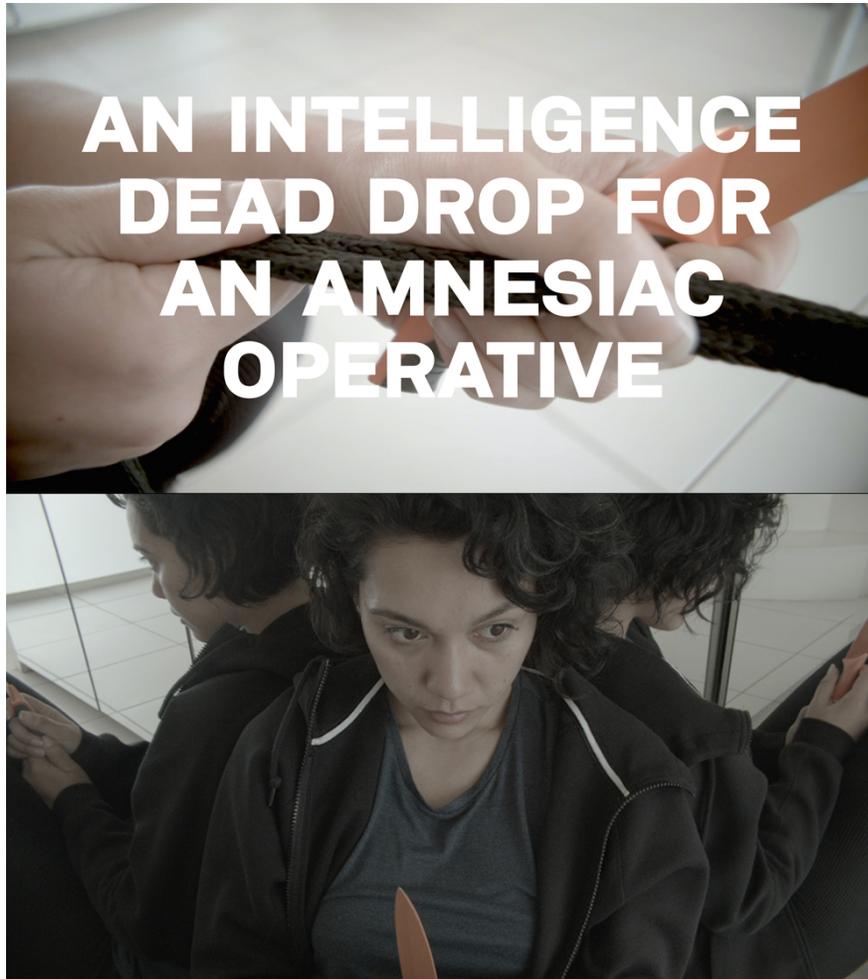
BS: Keller’s talk of McKinsey consultants and World Bank orgmen as vectors of contemporary urban forms makes me think of the city as a zone of *deals*. Discussed in the terms of the economic theories favored by such agents, the deal is framed as a matter of mutual benefit, self-interest, fair exchange; but it appears quite differently when refracted through the kinds of ideas I’ve previously outlined.

I’m reminded of the strikingly original way that the anthropologist Mary Helms, whose work has been an abiding influence on my own, describes a level at which design and trade become equivalent. Rather than assuming the former simply provides the material for the latter, the two practices become comparable when they’re seen as acts of negotiating an ambiguous environment, one traversed by complex and partially concealed forces, in order to procure an object. Put very simply, the intelligence with which the artisan approaches their materials is mirrored in the art of dealing with strangers in the marketplace. In this link we can observe how design grades into the soft power of branding and diplomacy, but we can pursue the connection further with regard to the deal, I think.

The deal is a commitment or pledge to which you will be held by exterior forces, in this case at least one other person. The agreement that finds expression in a deal, whether it is as a signatory on paper or registered in a shared glance (neither is necessarily the more binding), is an explicit alignment of multiple agendas. This fixes a degree of predictability in the articulated relationship—an alliance, however brief, which in turn can be built on by all concerned. But the full range of this pact’s ramifications is not given in advance, and the real terms of a deal might only become visible later, as its ultimate implications

begin to surface—perhaps in ways to be celebrated, perhaps not. I’m fond of the way a deal’s basic structure, and the dawning awareness of its delayed implications, are both compacted into the phrase *shaking hands*.

Cities are the psychological epicenter of this procedure, the place where deals proliferate and stakes become extravagant. They are accordingly rich with typologies of ascent and shipwreck, trouble and oasis. This quality seems inherent to the city. Its enduring richness as a model of the maximally artificial environment, compared to say the submarine or spaceship, is not just a function of its scale and heterogeneity. These latter qualities are themselves a function of the city’s generative paradox: a bounded space, but open to the outside; a stable zone, but predicated on arrivals and departures. Such an environment is configured to continually test expectations. Think of the marketplace, where deals are done with figures from afar, whose motives may be as dubious as their standards are unfamiliar, and are prone to disappear when called upon to uphold their side of the bargain. Indeed, Helms writes of the historical and geographical frequency with which this quality of urban marketplaces has been extrapolated into rumors that they are *haunted*, comprising a gateway to the unfamiliar Outside—where nothing can be relied upon to be as it seems—situated at the heart of a settlement. Although stated in very different—and far more abstract—terms, I suspect the reconceptualization of the market by the philosopher of finance Elie Ayache runs along compatible lines: the market not primarily as a zone of exchange, but the mechanism that resets our models of the world. “The medium of contingency,” as he calls this proving-ground. The city as the substrate and product of this medium has yet to be explored.



Still and Unedited production screencap from *The Last Girl Scout*, 3 min (Benedict Singleton & Brian Rogers, 2015)

GB: We would like to end this interview by moving from the city to outer space exploration. Space traveling design seems stuck in a contradictory movement: while it aims to conceive of ways to displace life in radically foreign contexts, this move tends to preserve the exact same conditions of life as those we know on Earth. In this context, outer space exploration seems caught in a logic of colonization: a logic of spatial expansion that relies on the preservation of the same. Here an obvious image comes to mind: the end sequence of the recent movie *Interstellar* and its outer space replica of the American Midwest.

Just as the growth of the city triggers discontinuous scaling phenomena which irreversibly transform its identity, truly leaving the earth would imply, in the long run, exposure to conditions which would inevitably de-nature what we are.

How can your respective conceptions of design help us in thinking of such a form of

deracination? In other words, to what extent can an engagement with such contingencies really break with the logic of continuity that you describe? Or, can we think of and construct new articulations between contingencies and continuities?

KE: I am a very poor interlocutor for questions like this. I recognize that I must be one of the few human or non-human beings who are bored with science fiction about manned space travel (as opposed to space exploration). Maybe it is because the stories often have conservative templates or formulas into which supposedly fantastic and sensational material is poured. Your question may even reflect this. Maybe it is the predictably anomic anti-heroes who are a bit of a turnoff. Maybe the whole atmosphere of newness also seems to align with or reinforce our larger cultural mistakes about the advent of new technologies—anticipation of either the dystopian crisis or the redemptive universal platform for exchange. Are these the melodramas of the teenaged or the middle-aged? I am not sure. But I have the sense that they predetermine expectations about a human mind in interplay with conditions like space travel. While I know very well that sci-fi imaginaries can be nourishing, I stubbornly find dyspeptic some affect surrounding the form. It reminds me of a toupee.

BS: A toupee—what a delightful image! And apt. I share Keller's distaste for these acts of gussying-up, in which outer space becomes the glittering backdrop for narratives that wouldn't be out of place in 19th century fiction. Of course, science fiction is a sophisticated field, and exceptions are, mercifully, easy to find. But the general tendency remains common, and colors, too—the reception of real-world initiatives.

I've written elsewhere of ditching this intrepid naval heroism in favor of something more interesting. Space exploration renders in hyperbolic form a circuit of frontier exploration, technological invention, and the stretching of intelligence in the face of the new—a loop present in other narratives concerned with the breach of apparently insurmountable obstacles, in defiance of a received view of the odds: the prison break, the heist, the con job, and so on. Maybe more of conceptual sustenance can be recovered from investigating this connection than yet another clumsily retrofit of advanced tech onto the frame of a *Boy's Own* adventure.

My most recent self-directed work has followed this hunch, especially in a collection of stories called *Character Set*, serialized in the magazine *After Us*. *CS* is an experiment in actively developing popular cultural archetypes fit for the 21st century: a kind of “platform fiction”—the production of a sourcebook or manual that gives more distinct form to figures around us which are, as yet, only dimly sketched.

The first few stories develop a concept that initially emerged in a film piece I directed with the artist Brian Rogers for the Tate earlier this year. We wanted to make a cinematic portrait of a *final girl* figure (sole survivor of so many B-movies) focused on how she so often fashions her escape by building an improvised machine, a trope that gives the piece its title, *The Last Girl Scout*. We were interested in how she represents a kind of alternative origin story of technology: the figure engaged in the million moments of invention that are elided at the start of *2001* in the famous smash-cut from club-wielding protohuman to spaceship.

The first *CS* story developed this figure further; the second explicitly takes up Kubrick and Clarke's enigmatic monolith, rewriting it as a fugitive, mobile and distributed structure, bootstrapping itself into existence. Its contours only ever glimpsed in certain kinds of thought, talk and action, *this* monolith is ultimately pitched as a speculative megastructure that comprises every crime ever committed. The common element in every transgression of the status quo, it constitutes a kind of network of secret passageways through time: as such, any scenario that witnesses a visitation by the monolith is rendered at once incredibly ancient and entirely futuristic. The third story will be about "the straw astronaut," extending this line of thinking into the question of "what is the thing in the spacesuit." Its protagonist is a scientist commissioning the heist of a disputed archaeological find, believed to be the bones of the first tool-using hominids, from a bank vault (making the story a kind of cross between *Quatermass and the Pit* and *Heat*); in the process, he has cause to reflect on how millions of years of just this kind of guileful operation have transformed our anatomy and cognition—because insofar as we are redesigning things around us, they are also, subtly but on an accelerating timetable, redesigning us.

Interview conducted for Glass Bead by Fabien Giraud and Jeremy Lecomte.

Footnotes

1. Keller Easterling. *Extrastatecraft*, New York, Verso, 2014. Print.

Benedict Singleton is a strategist with a background in design and philosophy based and working in London.

Keller Easterling is an architect, writer and professor at Yale University.