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DAVID RUETER

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UNTITLED (CONDENSATION BOTTLE)

2018 – present



Beginning in 2018, Benedict, with the assistance of Rueter, reverse-engineered the industrial process of blow-molding PET water bottles as part of a sculptural work addressing the complex infrastructure politics of collecting, storing, and managing water that Benedict produced for *Unthought Environments* (an exhibition curated by Karsten Lund for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago).

Ordering preforms from China, the artists use a custom built collar and oven to heat the molded plastic forms to their ideal blowing temperature. Instead of inflating the plastic into steel molds, the “bottles” are forcefully injected with 120 psi of air pressure and then manipulated by the artists, allowing for variation and irregularities that render the object strangely hybrid: at once specific bodies and mass-produced vessels.

After the bottles are molded, they are filled with water collected from the exhibition site. The water is introduced into the bottle in such a way as to initiate a continuous condensation loop, reminiscent of Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* series from the 1960s.

The exhibition catalog for *Unthought Environments* included an essay by Benedict on the process.

Installation images in this pdf were taken at the Jan van Eyck Academie in 2018 and are of bottles produced while in residence, with the assistance of Jonas van de Vosse.





**INSTALLATION VIEWS AT THE JAN VAN EYCK ACADEMIE;  
BLOWN 3-GALLON PET WATERBOTTLES, HOSE CLAMPS, WATER (COLLECTED  
FROM A TAP AT THE SITE OF EXHIBITION)**



and fracked oil fields. Under pressure, the gas becomes a liquid that will, perhaps, eventually, turn back into rock. "Geo-bottling," they call it, "except we never want to pop the cap."<sup>1</sup>

Back at the Earth's surface, here at sea level, one standard atmosphere is roughly equivalent to 14.7 pounds per square inch (psi) of air pressure. I imagine 14.7 pound weights, each an inch by an inch, covering my skin. I feel nothing from this imagined pressure because my body automatically responds—meat and fluid and gas pushing back through semi-porous skin. My nose and throat and lungs monitor this 14.7 pounds of pressure, routinely change shape to create a differential with the atmospheric surround. Draw air in, force it out.

PhooOMP

On the factory floor a semi-transparent, ultramarine blue, three-gallon water bottle inflates in under a second—rapidly stretched open by the instantaneous application of 400 psi of compacted air pressure. Leading up to this split-second of extreme impact, true blue pellets of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) undergo a series of meltings and stretchings to take the form of a long narrow tube of thick plastic, called a "preform." Slick and shiny, injection-molded by the million, these preforms slide down rollers, gliding from Chinese factories into the global supply chain aboard trucks and in containers stacked up in towering ships' open holds. Arriving at water bottling plants worldwide, the preforms are mounted and incrementally reheated to an approximate 80° C. Too much heat and the plastic will irreversibly cloud and crystallize; too little and the PET will turn pearlescent, risking exponential shrinkage and collapse. Sailing along in procession through an arcade of open-air ovens, the line of preforms whirl, turn and disappear into the jaws of an enormous steel mold where they explode into the desired water bottle shape, violently expanding to three to five times their original volume.

I seriously consider trying to acquire a machine that will deploy 400 psi of air, but D\_\_\_\_\_ shows me a video of a Chinese driver being hit by a high-pressure blast from an exploding truck tire and I wake up in a sweat. I end up molding my own bottles with 100 psi from a household air compressor. 100 psi is still enough to dangerously bend the armored steel mold I have built—in what

<sup>1</sup> Eric Roston and Bill Chamides, "CO<sub>2</sub>: They Should Bottle That Stuff," *Time*, April 17, 2008, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/0007/article/0,28804,1730759\\_1731383\\_1731989\\_00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/0007/article/0,28804,1730759_1731383_1731989_00.html) (accessed June 25, 2008).

The artist's customized pressure system for producing water bottles from PET plastic preforms



Benedict

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Excerpt from Benedict's essay in the *Unthought Environments*, featuring an image documentation the original process developed to blow the waterbottles.



# Water Pressures

## Internal Improvements

*ppppppppppppbbbbbbssssssssssttttttttttttttttttttttt*

A few days ago I was in a grocery store in Amsterdam looking for a bottle of water. Thirstily, the shelves are emptied. Nothing but tall bottles of \_\_\_\_ brand water left. Unable to decipher the labels, I touch the taut membrane of thin plastic. I can feel the water and air hardened by pressure, the plastic skin engineered to *just* hold against the tension of dissolved gas awaiting its inevitable escape.

I crack the lid and bubbles rise in a frenetic maelstrom. Carbon dioxide hisses free into the atmosphere. Unlike Robert Barry's noble helium, neon, argon, krypton, and xenon, which have floated somewhere in the troposphere ever since their release in 1969, the tiny amount of carbon dioxide escaping my bottle will most likely seek out chemical recombination. Somewhere, someone or something desires to sequester it. Elemental building blocks incite desire in their perceived scarcity or abundance, desire edged by the anxiety of contemplating conditions of "not-enoughness" or "too-muchness." I picture engineers dreaming of capturing carbon dioxide through mile-long straws, pumping the gas deep under the Earth's crust, down into empty salt mines, dry aquifers,

and fracked oil fields. Under pressure, the gas becomes a liquid that will, perhaps, eventually, turn back into rock. "Geobottling," they call it, "—except we never want to pop the cap."<sup>1</sup>

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### *PhooOMP*

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will be a failed attempt to force my cylindrical preforms into the shape of squares. After a 12-hour day I push too far and learn 140 psi is all it takes to rupture the 3D-printed polylactide (PLA) collar that we engineered to couple air-hose and bottle. My gloved hands blow back with a deafening

### POHTP

and the impact of steel.

My hand surrounded by a cushion of air, 140 psi is not enough to fracture bone; it is, however, enough to cause instantaneous swelling that warrants a visit to the local emergency room. Contusions of this kind occur when muscle fibers and connective tissues and capillary veins rupture, leaking blood into the area of the injury without tearing the outer skin. Looking at a magnified image of a blood cell squeezing out from the ripped walls of a capillary, I sense that most things in the world are forms permanently swollen: things bounded in shape and form that are expanded, effectively and affectively, by the symptomatic leaking of something else(where).

A membrane that exhibits elastic properties is less likely to break, and more likely to bend and pop back into place. The trauma evidenced by a cut in the epidermis is foreign to the forensics of things leaking under the surface. To quote Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), as repeated in Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), "a shadow... is no less ominous because it is formless and obscure." I find Nixon's term "slow violence" aptly describes the emerging, cloudy shapes of new infrastructural technologies of containment.<sup>2</sup> "By slow violence," he writes, "I mean a violence that occurs gradually... a violence of delayed destruction that is dispensed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>3</sup>

Increasing numbers of capsules of potable water flow through the arteries of global logistics, often air-dropped to those with the greatest need. Under their translucent skin, these innocuous hollow plastic bottles shield dark projections of a collective futurity of scarcity and crises. Projections that rationalize—with held breath—private investment in infrastructures of security and management, calling forth a neocolonial necessity for those with the amassed resources to guide the

2 Quoted in Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

logistical helm of strategic risk management. Breathing through the collective words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney: "The hard materiality of the unreal convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, connect ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons."<sup>4</sup> In this spiraling ouroboros of taking for the needs of the taken, the elements leaking between "the commons" and "the surround" (water, air) appear not so latent at all.

### Against The Fence

The inner membrane of my nostrils tingles with the familiar cool of air-conditioning. Just last night I re-watched *Chinatown* (1974), sitting alone in a furnished apartment in the Jaffa neighborhood of Tel Aviv. The soft sting of the air mutely echoes the slicing pressure of a switchblade. In my mind's eye, Roman Polanski again, phantasmagorically, holds the quick-draw blade. He plays a character referred to in *Chinatown's* script only as "SMALLER MAN."<sup>5</sup> The camera faces Polanski before cutting to the alarmed visage of fictional neo-noir detective JJ "Jake" Gittes as he struggles in front of the Oak Pass Reservoir fence. For six seconds (an eternity of anticipation) the knife in Polanski's hand enters the detective's nose, hovering an inch and a half up his left nostril ("huh? no?... wanna guess?... huh, no?"). Six seconds, held on camera, to overlay the metaphor of "a nosey fellow" onto the flesh of this particular nose. Six seconds in which the director of the film poses as a hired man, a mercenary of the mysterious force illegally releasing water from Los Angeles reservoirs in the middle of the night. Lost water that we, the audience, subsequently learn is the cause of a regional drought engineered to drive down the price of agricultural land, forcing farmers to sell and thereby improving the potential profits of private investors and real estate developers. In the world of *Chinatown*, capital accumulation is as ruthlessly simple as a slow trickle of water scaled to fill a channel.

CUT.

POV — CHAIN-LINK FENCE over the road, bolted.

It says OAK PASS RESERVOIR. KEEP OUT. NO TRESPASSING.

4 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 18.

5 Robert Towne, "CHINATOWN Screenplay by Robert Towne," 3rd draft, October 9 1973, <http://www.public.asu.edu/~srbeatty/394/Chinatown.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2018).