

ESSEX STREET

Jason Loeb

Private Matters

February 26 – April 2 2017

Opening Reception Sunday February 26 6-8PM

“We went to the public hospital but it was private, but we went through the door marked ‘private’ to the nurses’ coffee room, and it was public. We went to the public university but it was private, but we went to the barber shop on campus and it was public. We went into the hospital, into the university, into the library, into the park.” —*The Undercommons*(2013), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

“As long as education remains a closed system, we will never see the education equivalents of Google, Facebook, Amazon, PayPal, Wikipedia, or Uber.” —Betsy DeVos (2015)

Privatization and the public funding of private development have, over the last several decades, instigated a profound reversal within social-welfare institutions: As the gains of the social-democratic struggles of the early 20th century are slowly eroded, and as we fall prey to the dismantling of the social safety net, we are faced with an increasingly needy welfare recipient—private business. The tendency for businesses to lobby successfully for government aid to evade the consequences of their failures has led to “privatizing profits and socializing losses”. *Private Matters* assumes this dire contradiction as an abstracted, impalpable set of relations and presents an experience of the distortions hidden in these processes.

Conventional left-versus-right political affiliations seem inadequate and outmoded in the era of CitiBike and LinkNYC, large-scale public projects funded by private capital and publicized with quasi-socialist exhortations (e.g. “Unlock a bike, unlock New York”; “The Wi-Fi that works for you”). Both projects were realized through the seizure of public real estate that was ostensibly restored to the public (in the form of a subscription service and limited-use utility, respectively). They are based on a kind of dependency in which the state protects private enterprise from crisis by diverting public funds, prompting a feedback-loop sequence of dispossession.

This exhibition combines a digital-feedback system and video footage of three urban sites seized through eminent domain (that is, private land expropriated for public use): Fort Trumbull, Essex Crossing, and Hudson Yards. In the case of Fort Trumbull, whose fate was decided by the landmark 2005 Supreme Court ruling *Kelo v. City of New London*, the city of New London used its eminent-domain authority to seize private property from an individual and transferred it to private developers with the aim of rescuing the city’s stagnating economy. The plaintiff Susette Kelo was ordered to give up her family residence and land to make way for an office park that was deemed to be a “public benefit.” The verdict held that a community’s economic growth justified reclassifying a private-development plan as a “public-use venture”—in effect, a gutting of the historical legal precedent of “the public” in and of itself. When private property becomes a barrier to economic development, the system cannibalizes itself—undermining ownership, its foundational principle.

Consequently, the *Kelo* ruling became an effective tool for the Bloomberg administration’s rezoning of New York City: Hudson Yards and Essex Crossing are mega-projects currently under construction and made possible through eminent domain. The yards are built over a rail yard north of Chelsea, and the crossing over a Lower East Side trolley terminal in an immigrant community that was evicted and displaced for an urban-renewal project in the late 1960s; the site sat vacant for nearly half a century. Video footage of each site is played on a smartphone while a second smartphone records the playback in real time; this recording is then fed to a projector whose light stream interferes with recording camera’s ability to calibrate on a fixed subject, producing a tenuous feedback loop. The reproduction is highly inconsistent: The camera’s image-processing flow can only capture linear fragments of its digital origin, leading to the contingent, abstracted glint and color banding visible in the projection.

Also on view is a replica of a Paleolithic phallus cast from dirt and clay gathered in New York. The function of the original object is unknown, though it is presumed to have been carved for ritualistic use by the earliest nomadic Europeans. As migratory peoples, they had no loyalty to territory or land. If property is dirt in a differentiated state, the symbolic phallus is by the same token an effect of differentiation—an imaginary copula. The work presents the mutability of the dirt, dust, and mud on which buildings are erected in the symbolic form (which, as Lacan argues, no one can actually possess).

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