

Borders&Territories
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This paper aims to establish a theoretical framework for a research and design inquiry into the notion of the Zone in its various meanings and manifestations. The Zone as a concept of a demarcated spatial entity where a set of rules, laws, norms or codes has been altered vis-a-vis its exterior has been instrumentalised by a wide variety of actors throughout different contexts for multiple reasons. While having its roots at the very origins of sovereignty, in recent years and decades, more than ever, the Zone anew became a central tool at the disposal of state- and extra-statecraft especially in connection to developments along the New Silk Road – the overarching area of academic investigation conducted in the 'Borders&Territories' group.

Working in the Panamanian isthmus and focusing on the former US Panama Canal Zone as well as a variety of currently existing '*Zonas Francas*'¹ – Free Trade Zones (FTZ), this work provides different points of entry into the investigation of the Zone. Turning to cinema and literature for less descriptive and more generative ways of reading, to notions of otherness and the sublime for its materialisations, to paradigm through exception and desiring-production for its roots, this work aims to propose a way to operationalise the Zone and its landscapes for a critical spatial practice.

[1] Spanish – "Free Zones"

Keywords

zone, zonefact, territory, spatial software, absolute otherness, exception, paradigm, desiring-production

"...What was it? Did a meteor fall down?
Was it a visit by citizens of the vast space?
So or otherwise in our little country appeared
the greatest miracle of miracles – the ZONE."
(Tarkovsky, 1979)

This part of the opening sequence of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, in a surprising and intriguing way, is arguably applicable to the context of Panama. The Panama Canal Zone, the Colon Free Zone or the numerous '*Zonas Francas*' – the territory of the Panamanian isthmus has seen a disproportionately high, and thus intriguing number of Zones appearing in its most recent history.

The Panama Canal Zone, or simply Canal Zone, was an unincorporated organised territory of the United States of America, which between 1903 and 1979 divided the Republic of Panama in two, following the navigational line of the Panama Canal with an offset of 8 kilometres on both sides. Established with the signing of the Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty² (1903) which simultaneously made legal provisions for the construction of the Panama Canal, the Canal Zone was granted to the US "in perpetuity" (Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty, 1903). This territorial and legal entity produced a multitude of contested and idiosyncratic conditions, unfolding issues of sovereignty, military control, race, cultural and local identity as well as giving rise to the unique *Zonian*³ community. Officially dissolved through the Torrijos–Carter Treaties in 1979, it has remained present and operational in parts and enclaves up until 1997, significantly shaping the isthmian territory up to this day.

[2] The Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty was signed shortly after the US-backed Panamanian independence from the Republic of Colombia. Philippe-Jean Bunau-Varilla, one of the two signatories, was a French engineer previously employed at the construction of the Panama Canal by the French, who at the moment of the signing of the treaty has been Panama's ambassador to the United States, has at the moment of signing, not been to Panama for seventeen years and later never returned. Despite the Treaty later ratified by the Panamanian parliament, there was no Panamanian signing it.

[3] Zonian – is a demonym used to designate people, mostly US citizens, living in the Panama Canal Zone.

Since 1948, the establishment of the Colon Free Zone, and especially in the last decade, the Panamanian isthmus has witnessed the appearance of a wide variety of '*Zonas Francas*' or Free Trade Zones. Those Zones exhibit various characteristics, but at their core, contain some forms of incentives provided by the government of Panama (either through taxation, customs or labour regulation) that aim to stimulate and attract the conduct of commercial business activity.

While an etymological inquiry traces the Zone to the Latin '*zōna*' and eventually the Greek '*ζώνη*' for "girdle" (Merriam-Webster, 2023) its general meaning can be defined as a "definite region or area of the earth, or of any place or space, distinguished from adjacent regions by some special quality or condition" (Dictionary, 2023). Thus there are two essential aspects that define a Zone, its operation and demarcation.

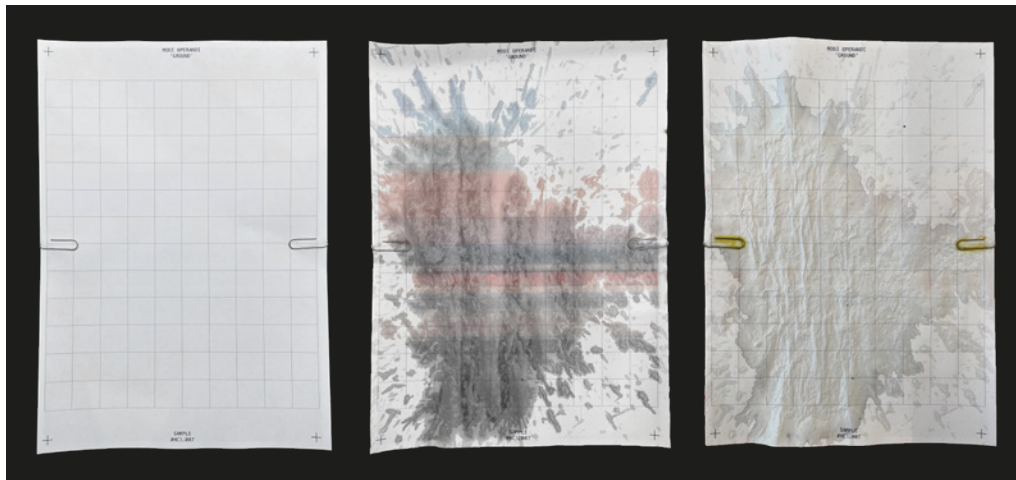
Its operations can be understood as an alteration to the code, or to borrow from Keller Easterling (2014), the spatial software, which defines the *modi operandi* of a territory. Thus the zone then becomes a software in itself, the employment of which usually follows a specific purpose-specific doctrine, be it consolidation of control or accumulation of resources; or both. Its demarcations then territorialise the idiosyncratic products of those processes and solidifies these spatial arrangements as well as the Zone as a perceived entity through a practice of othering.

To illustrate this, it helps to take a look at things on the ground. In the Canal Zone, the operations were defined through a set of spatial software components, ie. the Canal Treaty itself, the Canal Zone Laws, its legal status as an unincorporated organised territory of the US, direct executive command by the military through the Panama Canal Company and the Gold/Silver roll system to name a few. Demarcated within a territory as designated through the Canal Treaty, this set of code alterations produced a landscape within which one would find, extraconstitutional interpretations

of US law, issuance of citizenship outside formally US soil, overseas extension of the 5th US Court of Appeals⁴, wide-ranging military infrastructure and reservations, sanitation zones, infrastructure adhering to US building codes, no political representation of the population, a state-run economic system with allocation of goods and housing, codified racially segregated towns, housing and facilities among many others. As for the *Zonas Francas*, the operations and demarcations are established through a series of laws for specific FTZs, all referring to an executive order describing the Free Zone regime, which generate landscapes of warehouses, duty free stores, international asset storage vaults for precious metals and valuables, repackaging facilities, call centres, factories, data centres, educational facilities, housing and many more.

Thus, the Zone in its operation and demarcation produces a whole new territorial and spatial logic, which can be read, problematised and operationalised to become generative of novelty if one is to engage with its material-agential becomings.

[4] The judicial system was organised in the 'United States District Court of the Canal Zone', a District Court hierarchically comparable to the ones on the US mainland, appeals from which were taken to the US Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit, covering the US states of Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Recently, the 5th Circuit has gained prominence for its strongly conservative interpretations of the US constitution, overruling many of the current (Democratic) government's policies.



[01]

Modi Operandi Workshop
'Ground'

Roadside Picnic

While the reading of theoretical works can give insight on basic principles of operations and structures of the Zone as a concept, a far more profound, attentive and generative understanding of the issue can be drawn from art and literature. For this, this inquiry turns to the work of both Andrei Tarkovksy and the Strugatsky brothers and their instrumentalisation of the Zone.

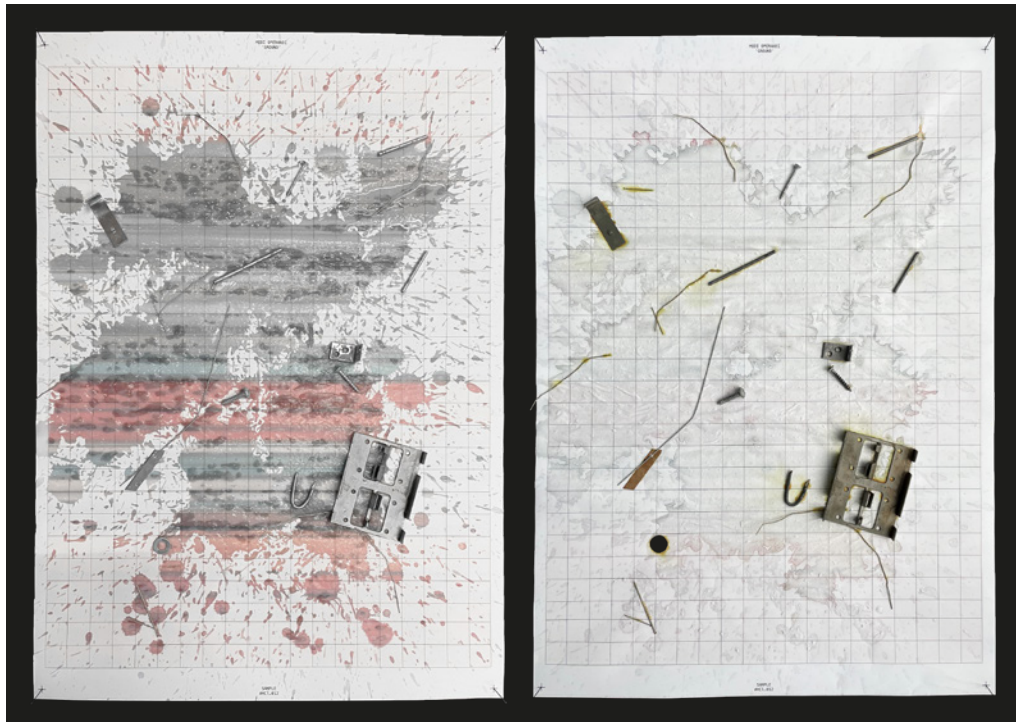
Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979) has been loosely adapted from the 1972 science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (1977). Both works are set in and around a 'Zone' – a site (in a fictitious country) of a supposedly alien 'visitation', the origins and purpose of which have not been understood so far. While the nature of the visitation remains unclear, and mostly irrelevant, the focus is centred around its residue and the engagement with it. In both works the Zone is a place which defies our common understanding of the world, laws of physics, space, time, causality and logic. It exhibits a number of anomalous formations in its territory, which pose potential lethal danger to anyone trespassing it. The Zone attains its own logic of spatiality and temporality and thus renders conventional scientific or rational engagement with it futile and potentially dangerous.

The central characters of both the film and the book are *Stalkers* – persons who found their vocation in entering and navigating the dangerous and mysterious Zone for different purposes. These Stalkers work mostly illegally – as the Zone is guarded and off-limits to the general public – and have attained special skills and ways of traversing the little understood and dangerous

anomalous terrain. In the novel specifically, both scientists and Stalkers are venturing into the Zone to collect artefacts – objects with anomalous physical properties which have been left as residue from the alien visitation. As those objects exhibit physical properties that exceed contemporary human comprehension, they are very sought for to be either studied in the case of the former, or sold on the black market in the case of the latter.

While those notions of course come from an exercise in science fiction and have little to do with reality, they nevertheless offer an intriguing and generative line of investigation that can be employed to make sense of the impact that the Zone has on the territory it carves out from the previously 'conventional' space. First, the metaphor of the 'Roadside Picnic' used by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, draws interesting parallels to the context at hand. The Strugatsky brothers use 'Roadside Picnic' for their Zone as an analogy to a how a group of humans on a road trip briefly stops on the side of the road, introduces some anomalous (to the local biosphere) processes and leaves a number of traces which are then explored by the animals and insects with awe and fascination, as alien objects incompatible with any logical explanation that could come from the realm of the local biosphere.

"A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. Cars drive off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around... Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind... And of course, the usual mess—apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow."
(Strugatsky & Strugatsky, 1977)



[02]

Modi Operandi Workshop
'Ground'

While this analogy finds its origins in science fiction, its application to the Panamanian context becomes surprisingly generative. If one was to consider the Zones found throughout the isthmus on similar terms to those described by the Strugatskys, one could employ a reading of them whereby, just as in the novel or the film, an alien entity – whether the US state apparatus or the governmentality of international capital flows – lands on the territory, introduces a set of anomalous laws and logics and through its operation leaves certain traces – things – that can be found.



[03]

Modi Operandi Workshop
'Assemblage'

If in archeology the notion of artefacts designates things produced through human craft or skill (Lat. 'arte' – 'by skill'; 'factum' – made', (Wiktionary, 2023)), the proposition here would be to speak of *zonefacts* – things brought into existence through the laws, logics, operations and anomalies of a Zone. These things cannot just be reduced to their materiality or their physical impact on the territory. Instead, much like the roadside picnic candy wrap studied by the curious forest animal or Strugatsky's artefacts by the scientists, they can be instrumentalised to gain a deeper, more profound, systemic understanding of processes and forces that have brought them into existence as well as to become generative themselves.

Certainly no thing just exists in a vacuum, devoid of any relations; anything can be studied through a systemic, topological mapping to gain insight into its becomings. What makes the zonefacts of special interest however, is that through their conception in a system of laws and logics which are not otherwise found in the given context, *what* they "land" and materialise in the territory is, what Žižek describes as "the Real of an absolute Otherness incompatible with the rules and laws of our universe." (Žižek, 2000) While *otherness* functions as a central tool for ontological differentiation and is ever-present in any form of existence, radical otherness in this case can be read as a transgression of the very ontological system itself, exceeding a certain critical limit beyond which its understanding as an "other" to something else is breaks down due to the incompatibility and incomparability of those things. This sudden exposure to something one cannot comprehend or encompass with one's common knowledge – objects with *all agency, no history* – then becomes strikingly productive on its own. One could make the point that this quality is also something that plays a central role in the notion of the sublime.

A connection can be drawn to Kant's discussion of the sublime: "The feeling of the sublime, is at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason, and a simultaneous awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of sense of being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law." (Morley, n.d.) Thus the zonefact, producing a condition of otherness which hints at a subliminal dimension, through its 'absolute otherness' becomes a generative entry point for a systemic investigation of larger processes at hand.

Paradigm and Exception

Now, with the zonefact at hand, delving into a topological, systemic exploration of its becoming, the question arises – what is one to see? Certainly, an intricate network of things, actors, processes will emerge, yet how can one make sense of it in relation to the operations of the Zone? To understand how a Zone operates, it is insightful to read the work of Giorgio Agamben. In his works *Homo Sacer* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005), he elaborates on the concept and act of exception, which for him constitutes a foundational element of sovereignty, the judicial order and the Western State. For once, the suspension of laws, in Schmittian terms (Agamben, 2005) becomes constitutive to the concept of the sovereign, as someone who wields power beyond the common law. Furthermore, the sovereign exception is bringing about the judicial order in the first place: "the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule." (Agamben, 2005)

He then goes on to point out that the state of exception is not some archaic mechanism, but much rather is very intensively used by modern states, both authoritarian and democratic, whereby it produces an ambiguous space where a suspension of laws, through being codified, becomes part of the judicial system itself. Ultimately, he describes the camp as "the biopolitical paradigm of the West" (Agamben, 1998). Drawing from Agamben's discussion of the state of exception as an ambiguous element that defies the "normal" state of things and introduces a bifurcation through a codified alteration of the law itself, one is tempted to understand the Zone in similar terms. Yet while aspects concerning exception as an exercise of sovereignty still apply, Neilson, in his investigation of Asian special economic zones puts forward an interesting, more profound reading of this question.

For Neilson (2014), the Zone, despite concerning the same issues at stake as the camp for Schmitt and Agamben – governmentality, sovereignty and biopolitics – functions differently; in fact, in reverse to it. Far from exhibiting a suspension of norms, as it does in the camp, the Zone for Neilson, operates through a perpetuation and over-saturation of them. It is not paradoxical, but paradigmatic, rendering visible and legitimising arrangements that are otherwise often obscured, informal or emergent in wider economic and social domains. He supports this proposition with the example of the infringement on labour rights – a practice intrinsic to many of the Special Economic Zones or Free Trade Zones – which far from being an exception or radical opposition to conditions in the zone's exterior is rather abundantly found there, yet in less obvious, legitimate or codified forms (Neilson, 2014). The Zone thus functions as some sort of crystallising tool that solidifies processes which outside of it exist in only a dispersed, distributed, gaseous state.

In the discussion of Zones in the context of Panama, namely the Panama Canal Zone and the various Free Trade Zones, it is

important to consider their topological framework. The notion of the Zone as a paradigm does not refer to the relationship of the Zone to its immediate surrounding, but rather to the politico-economical apparatus that is employed in its establishment, as this is where the specific arrangements and processes are being crystallised and rendered visible from. Thus the Panama Canal Zone and the various Free Trade Zones, should be investigated as a paradigm for processes which are obscured, distributed and dispersed against the backdrop of their politico-economical origin – the governmentality of the United States of America, and the inter- and transnational capital flows respectively.

Desiring-production

Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, slightly changing the focus of the plot in relation to the novel, brings forward and pursues a very essential theme – that of desire. Revolving around *the Room* – a place at the centre of the Zone which supposedly fulfils the deepest, innermost desires, the film problematises desire in a multitude of ways. Yet it is not just Strugatskys and Tarkovsky who by speaking of a desire-fulfilling machines⁵, link desire to the notion of the Zone; Žižek in his commentary on the Tarkovsky goes as far as speaking of the Zone as nothing but "the void which sustains desire" and points out the generative limit of the Zone – "the Zone is not prohibited because it has certain properties which are „too strong“ for our everyday sense of reality, it displays these properties because it is posited as prohibited." (Žižek, 2000) Thus, when discussing the notion of the Zone, one cannot ignore its meddling with the issue of desire. While the psychoanalytical understanding of desire ascribes to lack the production of desire in the oedipalised subject, Deleuze and Guattari in their idiosyncratically titled *Anti-Oedipus*, propose a less obvious yet more productive reading of the issue. For them desire is first and foremost productive and primary to lack:

[5] The novel describes the 'Golden Sphere' and the film 'The Room', both objects that supposedly work as machines fulfilling deepest desires of people who interact with them.

"Lack (manque) is created, planned, and organized in and through social production. It is counter produced as a result of the pressure of antiproduction; the latter falls back on (se rabat sur) the forces of production and appropriates them. It is never primary; production is never organized on the basis of a pre-existing need or lack (manque). It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organization of an already existing organization of production."
(Deleuze & Guattari, 2003)

At the same time, for them, desire "does not express a molar lack within the subject; rather, the molar organization deprives desire of its objective being." (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003) which means to say that social production limits and suppresses desire in its essential operation. The reason for that, they explain, lies in the following: "If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial; on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors." (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003)

Furthermore, if "desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality." (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003). Yet taking up this line of inquiry, it is essential to understand the nature and mechanisms of social production in the instrumentalisation of desire: "The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (manque) amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the

great fear of not having one's needs satisfied" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003). The conclusion from this is that, if conducting research through the lens of desiring-production, the constructed objects of desire give an opportunity to read, uncover and problematise operations of the dominant political economy.

Operationalising Otherness

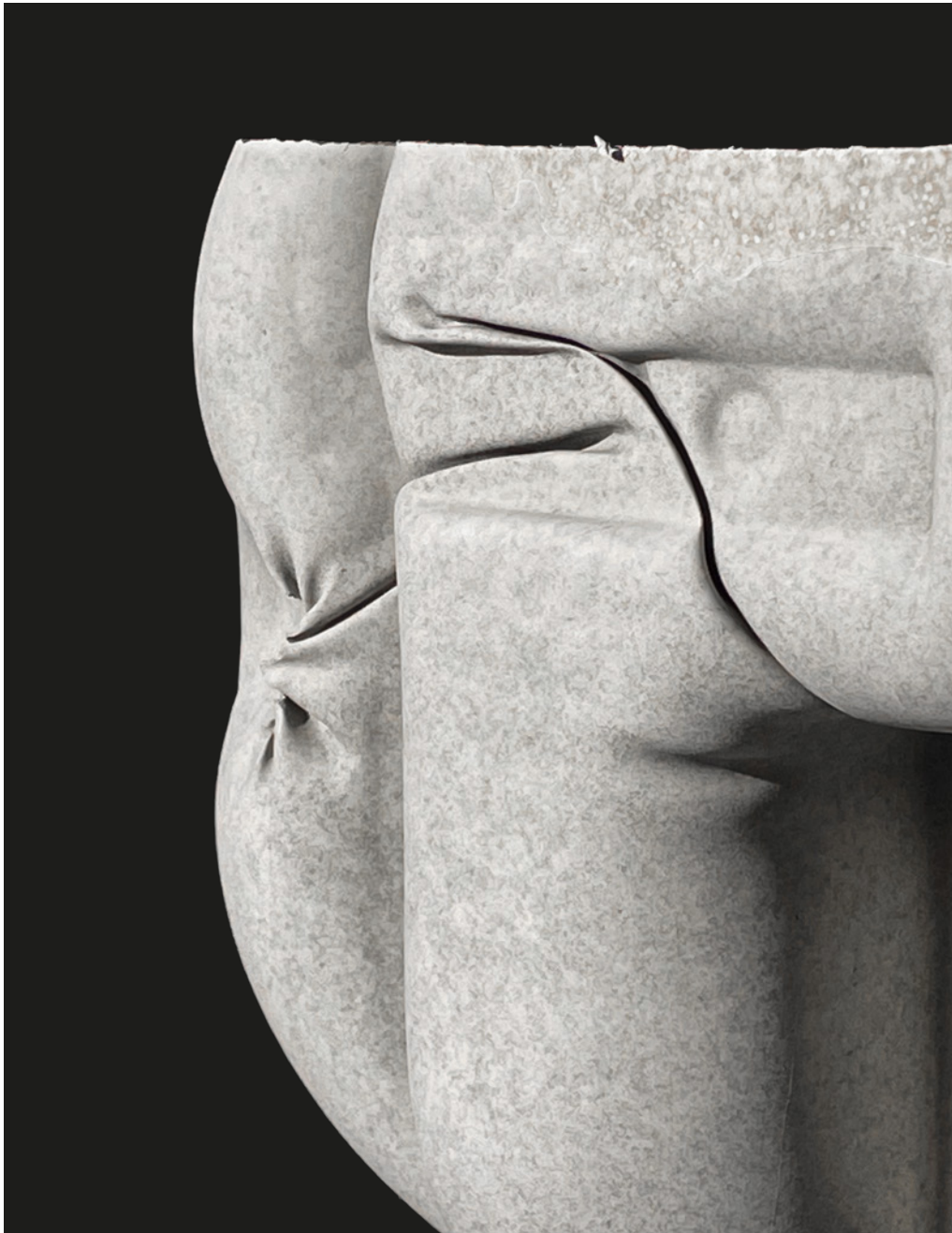
The proposition is to understand the Zone as a paradigmatic eruption of absolute otherness.

To use a geological metaphor, the operation of the Zone can be elaborated as follows: The workings of plate tectonics [desiring-production] shape and organise the surface while remaining unnoticable in immediate observation. Fault lines [Zones] then constitute critical points which inhibit or bring about conditions, under which those forces, that have otherwise remained underground [dispersed], suddenly and violently erupt, collapsing the division between surface [territory] and sub-surface [external political economy] and bring to light rocks [zonefacts], which introduce an absolute otherness while being paradigmatic of the processes below ground. These new objects then establish a new territorial logic, re-organising pre-existing space around their existence.



[04]

Modi Operandi Workshop
'Spatial Situation'



Regarding the question which inevitably arises from this discussion – how does one conduct practice within this context? – the proposition here is to operationalise otherness. Just as scientists in Strugatsky's novel were trying to instrumentalise alien objects for the development of novel technology, the proposal is to make use, to graft oneself onto the landscape of otherness produced through the operation of the Zone. First, simply by operating with the otherness of zonefacts, one is able to problematise the paradigm of desiring-production that they inhibit, to uncover the workings of the constitutive political economy. Consequently, then, by introducing a strategic programme – a virus to the software of the Zone – that makes use of its apparatus, yet through its difference to its initially intended outcome defies its logic one is able to open up the formerly deterministic operation of the Zone. If before the software of the Zone had been scrupulously written to ensure the proliferation of specific conditions as desired by the political economy shaping it, one could, instead of diving into an utopian ideological holy war with the aim to take down the system itself, practice critique with and within the system. Instead of wasting resources on a delusional all-out revolution to bring down the leviathan of the political-economic order, the proposition is instead to make use of the spatial software, its resources and infrastructures to operate the system pharmacologically – not just poison but remedy, not just control but emancipation, not just accumulation but redistribution.

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