

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 03 – Choice and Suffering

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Editorial

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Static is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate.

Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc. Static will welcome feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

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This issue of *Static* takes its inspiration from the German adage die Qual der Wahl (“the suffering of choice”). It seems to us that it is time to revive the scepticism concerning the nature of choice expressed in that phrase and to question whether choice is necessarily a good thing. We have invited contributions that examine the high value placed on choice, especially in the west, as a fundamental right of free individuals / consumers / citizens. In so doing, these contributions consider choice’s darker side: the ways that it can prove to be illusory; how the process of choosing can sometimes be agonising; how making a choice can close off future choices; the fact that we are frequently *forced* to make choices.

While *Static* Issue 03 on “Choice and Suffering” has as its goal to examine various aspects of the concept of choice (and we are confident that each of our contributors has done this in a useful and insightful way), our broader aim has been to examine how a given concept infiltrates our culture and passes for something positive, even to the point that it seems controversial, if not polemical, to suggest that something as highly-valued and desirable as choice could be associated with suffering. Taken together, then, the contributions to this issue constitute an assault on assumptions about what is valuable. The effect is, we hope, that the extremely wide range of material in this issue offers the reader ways of thinking beyond some of the more constrictive boundaries of the postmodern debate, where key concepts such as contingency, alterity and undecideability often serve as Trojan horses that enable the idea that choice is inherently liberatory to occupy the heart of radical thought.

Very briefly, the following is an overview of what is in this issue:

LeisureArts opens Issue 03 of *Static* with a complex mapping project. Entitled “... is the new ...,” it is a diagram/map of all the instances registered by LeisureArts in 2005 of that favourite phrase of journalism and marketing. Thus, for example, the graphic “gin → vodka” represents the phrase “gin is the new vodka.”

In “The Misery of Choice: Two Ancient Perspectives,” **John Sellars** looks at the relationship between choice and suffering in two aspects of ancient philosophy. Looking first at the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, and then at the Pyrrhonian scepticism that is to be found in the works of Sextus Empiricus, he finds evidence in these strains of ancient philosophy for the thought that the way to avoid suffering is to avoid making choices.

Ania Dabrowska’s photographs of women forced into working in the sex industry on the streets of London were taken on behalf of the U Turn Project, which offers support and advice for women for whom the range of choices that most Londoners enjoy is a chimera. The project will open its first Women’s Centre in September 2006.

“Happiness, Death and the Meaning of Life” by **Claire Colebrook** ranges across the works of Derrida, Aristotle and Henry James, among others. At the heart of this long article is a questioning of “western philosophy’s normative definition of happiness, where happiness has always been aligned with a specific image of autopoietic life and meaning.” Colebrook’s examination of the self’s potential for self-definition aligns it with other contributions in this issue that address autonomy, independence and choice.

Richard Mosse’s series of photographs/texts “Beirut Pictures” is a new work based on his recent visit to Lebanon. What is unusual here is how he locates aspects of life that are recognisably western, such as consumerist car culture, in a country that we rarely recognise as having western characteristics. The series is accompanied by a perceptive commentary by **Noam Leshem**, who relates the history of the production of images of Beirut to the history of the city itself.

“Freedom, Choice and Well-Being” is a modified version of a lecture delivered by **Barry Schwartz** at the April 2006 ENCORE annual conference in The Hague on the theme of *Consumers and Competition*, while “Choice and Suffering in San Francisco” is a new piece of writing by **Alana Conner Snibbe** and **Hazel Rose Markus**. These two contributions are evidence of a refreshing scepticism in American marketing academia that choice is a feature, or even a guarantor, of freedom. We are especially pleased to expose this kind of social scientific research to the *Static* readership, which is typically well-versed in the arts and humanities but not in more positivist appraisals of cultural phenomena such as these two articles provide.

Björn Franke’s “Traces of an Imaginary Affair” is an exhibition of his work in Product Design at the Royal College of Art in London. The project consists of a series of photographs that illustrate a kit of devices designed to create the traces of an imaginary affair, such as bites, bruises and carpet-burns. As **Sandra Plummer** suggests in her commentary, these pictures display a coolness of approach and such a concern for the instrument of self-harm that they may be read as a parody of real instances of self-harm and suffering.

Tom McCarthy’s “Agamemnon: A Play in Two Acts” is perhaps the black sheep of *Static* 03, and the issue is all the better for the point of contrast that he provides. It consists of a short, provocative, dialogue-free version of *Agamemnon*, in which the minimal action of the first act is replayed on a screen in extreme slow motion in the second act. The inevitability of the play’s action, its exposition of the suffering that comes from the foreknowledge of suffering and the apparent lack of autonomy of the character on stage make this contribution the obvious talking point to wrap up the issue.

Finally, the editors would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those, contributors and non-contributors alike, who helped us in any way. Foremost among the latter category are Vlad Strukov, Martine Rouleau, Irini Marinaki, Konstantinos Stefanis, Melanie Rimmer, Lianne Rooney, Steve Connor, Matt Taunton and Costas Douzinas. Thanks also to Norah Campbell, who provided us with a reading list to accompany the article by Barry Schwartz. And thank you to all of our colleagues, friends and families for their suggestions and support over the last few months. We hope you enjoy “Choice and Suffering.”