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The Zone is a Hoax.

*The Zone is a hoax.* I believe that's how you put it. I think you said it more as an add-on to our discussion of our mutual fascination of the Zone as concept, but I somehow haven't been able to shake it ever since. *The Zone is a hoax.* Well of course it is! It makes a lot of sense. There are huffs and puffs in there and you never know what it'll do or even worse make you do. So you are not to enter - you could get harmed. But in it, is the thing you desire the most. The one thing, that you cannot get anywhere else, is there - in its center. You must desire the thing that is off-limits. And you must always at least imagine venturing in there, picking it up - no matter the warnings. That it is allegedly to be found in there, in the Zone, keeps us from really looking for it out here, I guess. So, I am trying to re-read *Roadside Picnic*. I want to re-enter Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's Zone and re-cap what actually happened in that last room in the very center of the Zone, where desires are fulfilled and the dancing winking ball blows your mind, because you are not really fit to know what you desire and because desire - In a Lacanian surface-scraper, ultimately is the *desire* to merely *desire*. I can't get around to read it right now, though. There are circumstances not really allowing my entering into the Zone. I browse the pages and do meet many little contraptions that I immediately recall. *The Empties* hold a significant resonance to me. It is in the very beginning of the book: "*They're just two copper discs the size of a saucer, about a quarter inch thick, with a space of a foot and a half between them. There's nothing else. I mean absolutely nothing, just empty space. You can stick your hand in them, or even your head, if you're so knocked out by the whole thing - just emptiness and more emptiness, thin air. And for all that, of course, there is some force between them, as I understand it, because you can't press them together, and no one's been able to pull them apart, either.*"<sup>1</sup> The complete ordinariness of the copper saucers creates a force field that is impossible to wrap ones head around. The energy that the copper discs contain and which defines their relation and animated state - their pull and push - is beyond description. The pages pick up the conundrum of describing what is not there, but still is the very thing: "*No, friends, it's hard to describe them to someone who hasn't seen them. They're too simple, especially when you look close and believe your eyes. It's like trying to describe a glass to someone: You end up wriggling your fingers and cursing in frustration.*"<sup>2</sup> There's quite a semiotic bay here to swim ashore. The quality of *The Empties* seems to be their complicated relationship to language - it seems actually to be the major crisis of dealing with and within the Zone. Language won't suffice; it's all about intangible bumps in the road and occurring events that stays outside of language.

The Zone is a hoax. I have Tarkovsky's version of the Strugatsky's protagonist *Red* on my mind, namely *Stalker*. I imagine the invitation to venture into your work and create some sort of gritty comment on it, as saddling up for a guided tour into the Zone. In Tarkovsky's version, this makes

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1Strugatsky, Arkady & Boris: *Roadside Picnic*, (London: Gollancz, 1994), P. 7-8

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me the professor or the writer (I really don't want to be any of 'em) - a mere tourist, so occupied with getting to the center, and ultimately to my own fulfilling of a dormant desire, that I am bound to miss all the equally slapstick and mind-bendingly complicated booby traps and undetected alterations in the layout of the path. Completely aware of how far fetched this idea is, I still can't leave the notion that entering your imagination and depiction of the Zone (your Zone, a Zone, some place Zone-like) in at least a remotely successful manner, requires your navigation skills and experience with traveling in this psycho-landscape. So I suit up in a somewhat brownish and immensely heavy Russian jacket, put on an itchy woolen hat and respectfully jump aboard the train cart transporting us in there. (I imagine this text very much as a series of insertions to a conversation, taking place between us on this train-cart tracking us through the landscape of the Zone.)

The Zone is a hoax. An open pdf document with the latest of your works - the new spreads for this book, I gather - has been floating open on my desktop for quite a while. And the first page is taunting me, I must admit. In this image the Zone is revealed as a stage. I am somewhere in the audience. A stage curtain hangs sloppily covering a solid concrete wall. The invitation to enter this magical theater (entrusted to those who are deranged enough) comes with a catch. There isn't really any entry point. The theater play promises nothing really - it actually reminds us that this is no theater at all. It is solid ground we are in the presence of. And yet this is the entry point and in an effort to cross the threshold language seems to come short. I frequently scroll the pdf to find a way in. The second image is a black field of reflective plastic. Opaque and solid. Perhaps it is in the curves (and disturbances of the water surface) that an idea of the solid having a more complex twin quality is hinted at. But a place to enter? And then the third image. There it is - the entry point. It is incised into the image, eerily noticeable. Immediately I think; is this a trap?

The Zone is a hoax. In a frantic window sweep on my laptop interface I finally dig out a folder named STALKER. It contains a series of eleven frame-grabs, with rough imbedded English subtitles highlighting its smashed download quality, from Tarkovsky's cinematic masterpiece: 1) Facing away from the camera Stalker speaks slowly. *"The Zone is a very complicated system of traps, and they're all deadly."* He is slowly turning towards the camera. The collar of his leather jacket clutching his thick chapped neck, his lips cracked and fixed around his words. 2) *"I don't know what's going on here in the absence of people, but the moment someone shows up, everything comes into motion."* His gaze has crossed the camera now, looking beyond it (at the professor and the writer). 3) It swiftly pans back, this nervous glance, and looses itself into the dark bottle green of the thicket. *"Old traps disappear and new ones emerge. Safe spots become impassable."* 4) It's all neck now. A shoulder strap from a military messenger bag, dusted leather and a dirty cloth tightly wrapped around his hairline. He is trimmed short, rough-like. *"Now your path is easy, now it's hopelessly involved."* 5) His face is back there in the dark on the other side of his head. Now he turns - present. *"That's the Zone. It may even seem capricious. But it is what we've made it with our condition."* 6) He's off again - speaking to himself, no, to nobody, perhaps only the audience - a soliloquy. *"It happened that people had to stop halfway and go back. Some of them even died on the very threshold of the room."* 7) He has turned again and is looking almost genuine. Honest as a storytelling child. *"But everything that's going on here depends not*

*on the Zone, but on us!”* (There is an exclamation mark here - left there by a subtitle engine or a lonely worker in a darkened room.) 8) *“I don’t know.”* He’s deep in thoughts. 9) Eyes opaque and cast down. *“I think it lets those pass who have lost all hope. Not good or bad, but wretched people.”* 10) He brings his hand to his forehead, rubbing the dryness of his skin, screening his gaze. *“But even the most wretched will die if they don’t know how to behave.”* 11) We are behind him now looking past him. We have moved out of the point of view of the professor and the writer and now see them as blurred statuettes in the wasteland of wild plants. They are wearing heavy dark jackets, making them solid figures in the shallow depth of field. *“You have been lucky, it just warned you.”*<sup>3</sup>

The Zone is a hoax. I’m reminded of retired sci-fi policeman and current Blade Runner Rick Deckard’s photograph enhancement machine and how it bends a corner as a response to a series of simple commands. The plausibility of this machine actually developing pixels that can never have existed in the moment of exposure, simply because the user commands it (and perhaps desires an answer so deeply that his mind exposes any blind angles), totally exists - as long as one is willing to believe that even emptiness has a push and a pull and that glass do exist, even if we have no intelligible language for it. So there is an entry point - one simply has to adjust to the new qualities of an architecture of desire. I’m reminded of the young architect in the Hollywood blockbuster *Inception* and how one design Möbius architectural structures that only exists from a certain perceptual sweet spot - architecture that only occur in the trick of the eye. The Zone, as architectural crisis, is a major set design made to dazzle and confuse in order to hide its wires, stands and dummy doors and windows. The Zone is a kind of collective illusion - a magic trick that everybody knows how works but never seizes to amaze. The illusion of non-transparency creates the faith of impenetrable surfaces and conceals any entry point into the actual madness of its architecture.

The Zone is a hoax. The city is a hoax. There is something about cutting into concrete stone, twisted metal wiring, petrified dirt and glass, with a penknife or a box-cutter. In your works I feel as if you are attempting to do real physical incisions into the pavement, into the concrete, into the very surface of the city that envelop us, that is towering up around us. The operating knife cuts into these hardened surfaces in a somewhat naive suggestion of actually coming to an acknowledgement of the thing within the thing. I use naive in the most positive sense of the word, because what else to do in a city than to believe in it and search for an answer to the question it proposes? In the center of the Zone, there is a room that will answer your deepest desire. You must venture to the core of this maze of booby traps and precarious shifting grounds. The answer of the city is perhaps to be found in this room - in this site. But what is an answer when one doesn’t know the question? (if the answer to the meaning of life is 42, then it will take at least one thousand years to come up with the question that’ll make the answer make sense.) If the answer is in the site perhaps the right question is a to be found off the site. A possible off-site is just below

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<sup>3</sup>All quotations in this section are from Andrei Tarkovsky’s, *Stalker*, Kinostudiya “Mosfilm”, (1979)

my feet in one image. I'm on that sort of temporary wooden path that only exists as a minor obstacle in my passage through a city. A sloppy construction-site wooden bridge that bridges nothing but a gap. A whole in the infrastructure, a small wound that is being patched up. (Read this one thing about the importance of Vitamin C in relation to the human healing process. Wounds inflicted on the body heal, alright, but the healing tissue is actually temporary tissue being replaced continually with the help of collagen produced by Vitamin C in the bodily system. Without Vitamin C the healing will gradually reverse and old wounds will spring back open. So no wounds actually ever heal - this also seems to be the case with all these patched up wounds in the city.) As wound, the off-site reveals itself as a gaping opening into the body. Tubes and wires spill from the inside, it drips and spurts, it is cut deep and pried open by levers, it is dug into, displaced, refitted, drained. After surgery it is cleaned up, reconnected, stitched, glued. The city is a scarification process and the experienced traveler knows the latent possibility of wounds to spring back open at any time.

The Zone is a hoax. Following the logic of incision, your works must obviously be layered constructions. Collages and assemblages. Cut in paper and cut in landscapes. The rearranging of dirt, bricks and construction materials mirrors the intercutting of images and double exposure of different resolutions and layers of printed ink. From existing images, mashed together, new ones are produced. Rather than oversaturated accumulations of information, these new images promise something quite similar to the initial images standing alone. The new images are also images of buildings. The Zone has a way of doing this - the more you dig in, the harder you look, the more you seem to see the same thing. (Because it's a glass, right?) Somehow your works contain the same form of psychology as the buildings that stood before them - the same emptied out cyborg eyes and dismembered body parts. They are buildings/images/works/Zones to live in no doubt, but to live what lives? The abstractness and impossibilities of Möbius-like winding stairs, openings blocked by crosscutting building blocks, rubble reinserted into the city grid, the trick to the eye of close ups and landscape formats, the time slip between architectural epochs and the liquid shared space of monument and ruin, does not differ essentially from the uncanniness and un-inhabitability of the modernist architectural landscape. To live in the Zone is an unceasing feeling of something unheimlich. (So I step into the toilet of my apartment - the same apartment that I have lived in for some 10 years - it is in the middle of the night and I instinctively reach out to switch on the light. And the light switch is not there. My hand has unconsciously aimed for a switch located on the left side of the door, but the switch is on the right - where it has always been. Instantly I feel not at home in my own apartment. Is this the uncanny?)

The Zone is a hoax. I'm taking the liberty to read into this side remark of yours that I have somehow made primary. There is no Zone. It's very Baudrillardian. The Zone is there to make the city around it appear real. The idea of the sealed off area, where an alien encounter has created a space that diverts the physical laws of the real world, and hence must be kept as a restricted Zone by a governmental entity, enforces the idea that the normal city (outside the Zone) is solid. The grid structure, and the power-relations that come with this, of the city is perceived as natural next to this unnatural restricted Zone. The system is safe - the Zone is dangerous in its complete defiance of systems. There is no Zone. It is actually the city itself that has a Zone-like nature and

the hoax of the Zone is only there to conceal any entry points into the actual Zone of the urban situation. But as you realize this (which I have no doubt that you have and are repeatedly inviting us to realize with you) your involvement with the city - and an inescapable need to believe in its reality - is a venture into this Zone. Into the hoax.

The Zone is a hoax. Why the effort to archive it? It is an archive isn't it? The compiled images, the excavations, the examinations of the quality of its solidity (its actuality), the ordering of its structural components and the placing of it in history. There is persistence in the nature of your works (your stalking), a persistence to capture it - not really the materiality of it but, as I experience it, the very nature of the push and pull of its emptiness, its thin air. There is the same sort of persistence about these modernist buildings - even as rubble they insist on being the same. That is the essence of their materiality. The more you deconstruct, re-contextualize, smash or destroy them, they always seem to resist a full transformation, their architecture stays the same, like a broken body that clings on to the last thread of personality. Perhaps it has to do with a certain being-already-pastness of architecture. The moment a building is built it is imagined as future rubble. Or preserved dinosaurs without organs. Even on the construction site, one gets the feeling of something coming to disappear again. (A print may also be printed to be erased soon again by another print, a reprint, a printed smear.) And then there are buildings that were conceived as everlasting raised dots on the surface of our world, as in the cells of a larger script written in braille. Temples and tombs, often. Your splendid action of intercutting these historical birthmarks with the immortality of the already-dead concrete typeface of modern architecture, points at an always modernity of the present and the resistance of traces to vanish with time - and scars to heal. If it is an archive it makes sense. I imagine that you try to collect your travels as memories and thereby experience your time spent in the Zone as exactly *time*. And suddenly the push and pull of empty space is not completely unimaginable. All the solid surfaces (of the architecture and the images) dissolve with the passing of time, with repetition, with re-visitation, rearranging and recollection and with tracing, compiling and composing - all these actions that have to do with time. The archival approach calls the bluff of the hoax and perhaps situates the hoax as the only real thing.

The Zone is a hoax. Images are piling up. The archive is no longer physically present as paper and slides. This disappearance of physical archival material along with the massive accumulation of digital archive creates a weird paradox of abundance and disappearance. Tried to wrap my head around the time trajectory of Philip K. Dick's *Counter-Clock World*. The time reversal of *Counter-Clock World* began somewhere back in 1986, still in the then-future of the 1966 novel. It is now (in the novel) 1998, time has reversed and people are returning from their graves, being dug up by *Vitariums* (professional unearthers of the reversed). They go backwards through age, rejuvenate, become children, then babies to nurse for, then relocated in wombs and lastly eggs, sperm and copulation. This reversal of time, called the Hobart Phase, has naturally changed several other actions of everyday life as well. People consume *Sogum* rectally and *Plop* out food in private. Cigarettes clear the air. People say "hello" when they leave and "goodbye" when they pick up the phone. The Hobart Phase have given an excessive power to The Library whom are responsible for erasing books which have passed beyond the initial date of which they were

written. The archivists are in charge of keeping order in the library. And in the reversal of historical progression this means to un-archive thoughts that have not yet been conceived. History books and memoirs must hence be unremembered. What better job for an archivist. *Counter Clock-World* is the vision of a future, that has become past-future, in which all futures will return to the past and in time retrace the time of its own vision entirely and thus pass beyond its own conception. The Library will of course, in time, erase this novel as well and hence also all memories of themselves, as fictional characters. Or something like that.

The Zone is a hoax. The immense accumulation of archival material and the technique of instant archival, nullifies the archivist. The act of archiving becomes a hopeless endeavor, a surplus occupation. But perhaps the persistent archivist resurfaces in time, to again serve a critical function. The relentless form of archiving, that I somehow believe you are engaged with, perhaps leads to an anti-archive. I think of anti-archive as a therapeutic reworking of a compulsive universal archival torrent of instantaneity, towards a more penetrative and spirited relationship to the image. Or maybe better; a clogging up, a re-bundling compression of the images of the infinitesimal into profound and fiery reflections. The anti-archivist perhaps writes out the zeroes and ones into short and solid sentences to work as keys to entry points (as well as keys for melodies). And perhaps time will reverse and the archive will un-archive itself. And perhaps the Zone will be revealed as the hoax it is and hence become a real place. Until then I'm personally happy that I have a guide to take me through the Zone, here or there, and I hope that we can discuss this unstable rant of mine further when we meet again on the train cart - and I hope it transports us in a grainy black and white tracking shot that last for hours on end.