

Choose Control Lose Control

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Anyone who has seen a ship being loaded with piece goods—who has seen how every single item is touched, how every orange, every cow, every scrap heap is lifted, guided, or shouldered with bare hands, balanced over the jetty and put down again for several days—will start to think about the efficiency of transport crates. Crates and containers can be stacked and well fastened. They are meant to be filled from floor to ceiling, to full capacity, and with as many of these units stacked together for their respective vehicle of transport (often a box itself) as possible. Efficiency then comes at the expense of visibility. What was once a process of laying out all goods into piles and fenced-in areas on a ship is no longer visible within the realm of crated or containerized transport. Here, those piles of oranges, that rusty scrap pile, the brown and white cowhide patterns are withdrawn from view. The crated objects are simply meant to move forward.

Hiding the crate's content makes its handling effortless. In social and technological settings, one would refer to this as a "black box," a process of hiding the innards of well-rehearsed or automated processes. The name "black box" refers to precisely this—even if black boxes no longer require the shape of a box. In pragmatic terms, the black box utilizes proven processes that can be outsourced in the form of third-party code, formulas, or machine parts, without detailed knowledge of how they work, and then reincorporated back into workflows.

For her video installation *Physical Twin* (2022/23), Janne Höltermann chose an object of reference that meets the requirements of the black box par excellence: a logistics center for shipping goods. It's a highly efficient, giant box made of white corrugated sheet metal placed in the middle of a landscape. The exterior of the building reveals that everything is purposely designed to ensure a smooth and fast supply of goods by storing and transporting a wide variety of products while hiding the buildings' interior. The logistics center is a flat building without windows; on one side, it contains a long row of loading ramps for a number of transportation trucks.

The videos portray the way the black box wants us to (not) look at it—denying any insight into its operations,

or the chains of action between humans, things, and machines—in two ways. First, two slow, simple tracking shots are played back on two separate video channels emphasizing the inaccessibility of the building: one camera moves further and further away from the building, while another scans its facade from bottom to top. Thus, the video images only show the exterior of the box, one from close-up and one further away. Noticeably, as the video progresses, the building gradually begins to grow. It pushes and stretches, very slowly, higher and higher, as if one floor were piling on top of the next. In this way, the outer surfaces of the box gradually take over the picture, completely concealing what is being moved, by whom, and where.

Metaphorically, black boxes are often reduced to places from which humans have been excluded. In this case, they describe spaces, or rather the fear of spaces, in which people have surrendered control over their actions and unleash technology to make decisions about themselves and other humans. Within this context, the term "black box" is booming in the current discourse on artificial intelligence, for example when self-learning computer systems become an area of knowledge production that humans can no longer comprehend.

The growing building in *Physical Twin* also addresses this dimension of the black box. The way in which the architecture increasingly takes over the pictorial space gives the impression of proliferation—albeit a controlled, modular proliferation. The building seems to spread out more and more, all by itself. We don't get to know what makes it grow, or how long it will continue to grow. In fact, the artist has determined the growth factor of the building according to the historical and projected annual increase in the online German retail turnover of consumer goods, whereby each floor in the video represents a year since the building was constructed. Since the floors increase in volume, the idea that the white box could gradually obstruct the horizon in the future is not so far-fetched. Even though, in keeping with its functionality, the building would probably tend to expand in width.

This relationship between digital activity and propagation of mass or box-like building units in space is also implied in the work's title. *Physical Twin* refers to "digital twin"—a method in engineering sciences used for modeling and real-time analysis of the business value of products. While the digital twin usually copies a real setting, Höltermann's *Physical Twin* visualizes the physical counterpart of a possible future development of human behavior in virtual space. It materializes the dynamics of digitization, or rather visualizes the substructure or superstructure of the Internet. In this respect, it is also an image of how, the more we move in it, unlimited virtual space will increasingly fill physical space with boxes.

The irony of the piece is that the physical twin was almost entirely digitally recreated for the video. In order to find the right box, Höltermann conducted extensive on-site research in Berlin's environs, which she documented in the photo series *Boxes* (2022–present). She even used a drone to execute the camera's movement. But in order to be able to make the box grow in the video, it had to be recreated as a 3D model. Hence, the imaginary space opened up by the building's modular growth has, in essence, a virtual anchoring. That the black box in *Physical Twin* will not open is already obvious, but the 3D model emphasizes human exclusion from the space by creating a void. Because behind the façade of the 3D model there is simply nothing at all. There are no inscrutable processes that need to be shielded or that would be disrupted by human presence. Strictly speaking, the "behind-the-facade" no longer exists. What remains is a flat exterior of trapezoidal sheet metal or, figuratively speaking, a projection surface or white sheet of paper with its connotations of unlimited possibilities. This is also emphasized by the camera, which meticulously scans

the surface of the building and follows the twists and turns of a spiral staircase before finally drifting off into the infinite blue of the sky.

Another video work by Janne Höltermann follows a very similar dramaturgy as *Physical Twin*. Here, too, a pragmatic black box gradually dissolves into a metaphorical black space. Here, too, a crate for shipping goods is focused on and transformed into a pictorial element that serves as projection surface. In this instance, the view is not obstructed by a growing logistics center but by container ships that block the horizon and in the course of the video slowly dissolve into pixels.

TEU, the title of the work, is a term from logistics and stands for *twenty-foot equivalent unit*: a standard measurement for shipping containers that sets things in motion and leaves nothing to chance. The content of the containers, their movement off the ship into the harbor and back onto the ship, and finally where they are placed and restacked, is all precisely calculated. There's a chance that chaos will rule on the inside of the crates. In all likelihood, however, they are so tightly packed that there's no room for randomness.

Just as the black box remains closed in *Physical Twin*, the contents of the containers are not revealed and the question as to whether chaos will ultimately prevail remains unanswered by the video. Instead, the containers proliferate like the physical twin, they multiply and shrink to an incalculable amount until the whole picture is completely filled with container pixels. With the result that at the end of the video, the twenty-foot equivalent units have turned from a logistic means of control into an empty space or rather an empty image that is open for any kind of content and free of attributes.

All images are video stills from *Physical Twin*, 2022/23, two-channel video projection, 5:30 min.



Channel 1



Channel 2

Colophon

Janne Höltermann: *Physical Twin*

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