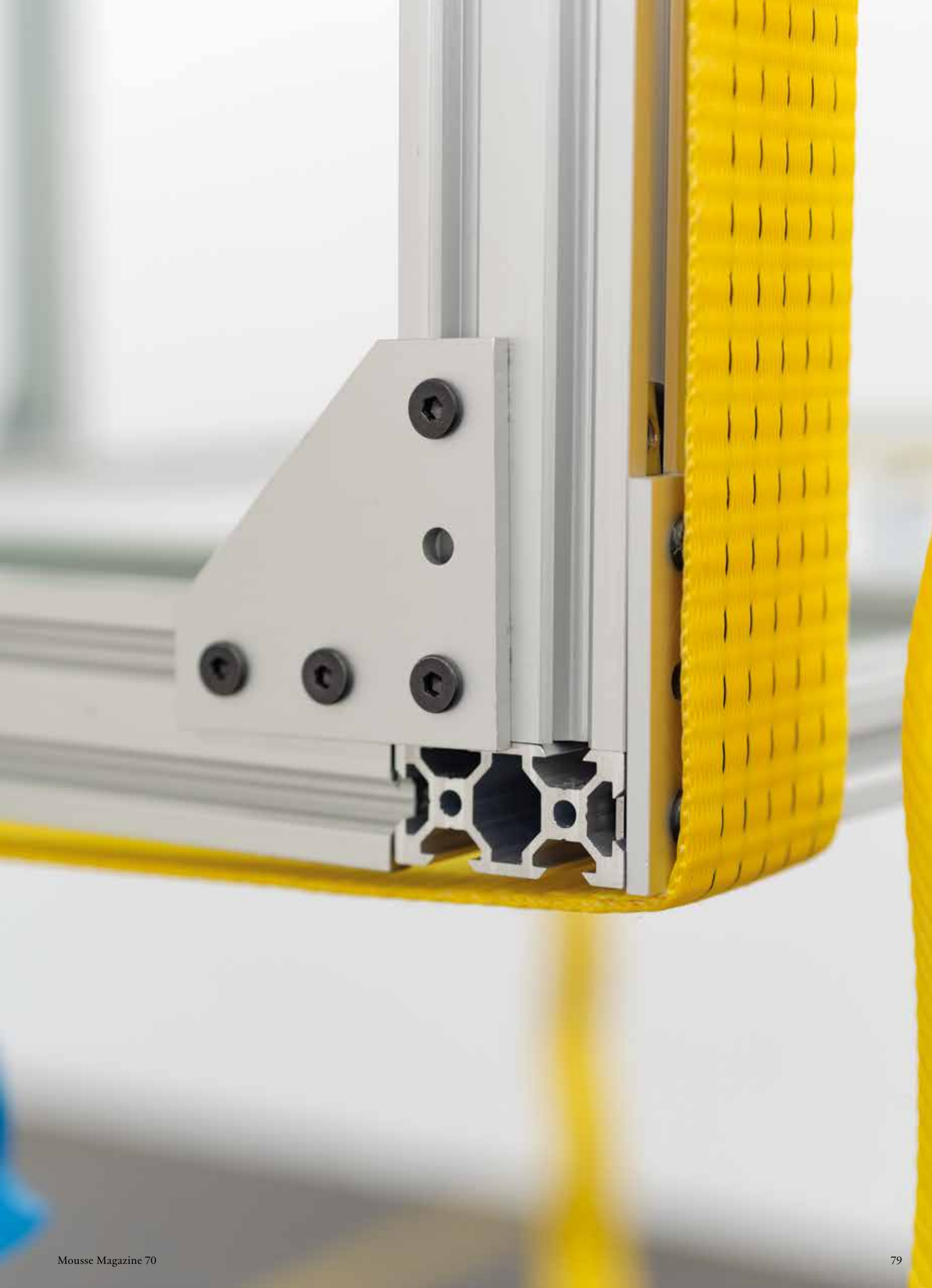




# Opportunity Zones: AARON FLINT JAMISON

BY  
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Across the courtyard facing AARON FLINT JAMISON's exhibition at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen is a hand scanner used by the municipal police to grant access to their building. This camera happens to face a window, an aperture, in which a single work by Jamison is visible. One cannot help but regard the scanner as a serendipitous simile for the exhibition, and perhaps for much of Jamison's work, given their mutual concern with matters of inside, outside, and the liminal surfaces that separate and provide access between them.









The surface, the place of fetish, is where viewers with no prior knowledge arrive, making it the most egalitarian part of a work of art. What has become less discernible, at least since the 1960s, is exactly where the work begins and ends, and since this exhibition coincides with the publishing of the new edition of Jamison's magazine *Veneer*, we're invited to think about the relationship between what we might call the para-artistic work that runs adjacent to and functions with what we more readily recognize as works of art. The particular work facing the hand scanner across the courtyard is titled *Opportunity Zone* (2019) and takes the form of a fire door rendered in cedar with zinc-plated hardware, scaled down to one-third normal size. This form is horizontally mirrored (rendering the door useless; it cannot fall shut) and hung on the wall (again, useless in contrast to its usual purpose—not to mention the sheer fact of it being constructed from a flammable material). And although it is a sculpture, to my mind—almost to my own embarrassment—mounted on the wall like this, it evokes the shaped canvases of Frank Stella. But it equally signals industrial design, or even the writings of William Morris (more on this in a moment).

It has an aperture, a small hole that passes through the work, showing the wall on the other side. This hole is in the shape of the architectural footprint of Yale Union in Portland, Oregon, an institution cofounded by Jamison; he remains chair of its board. I have worked with Yale Union for many years, first as a researcher, then as a curatorial assistant. It was also where I got my first opportunity to organize a substantial exhibition. Since 2009 Yale Union has contributed to the rise of a kind of new institutionalism in the United States that looks to the European Kunsthalle as a model while maintaining a particularly American voice in its programming—a voice that I would call smart yet consciously awry. These models encourage artists' critique of institutions, leading to a heightened focus on the figure of the artist and their rights in the context of the institution.<sup>1</sup>

This is one of two works titled *Opportunity Zone*, a phrase whose plural also names the exhibition as a whole and references schemes in U.S. civic politics describing areas slated for urban renewal. Introduced by the U.S. Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, this new incentive spurs economic development and job creation by encouraging long-term investment in low-income communities. Investors who participate (and benefit in the form of tax relief) do not need to live in the zone in which they are investing, nor do they even need to hold U.S. citizenship. Ultimately, the program leverages tax cuts to encourage financial speculation in property markets that were previously deemed too risky to invest in.

Yale Union is sited within such a zone, and *Opportunity Zones* suggests ways that art, its institutions, and their social relations are directly implicated within property and financial speculation. We can surmise that the title evidences an area of keen interest to Jamison: namely the purposes of art, and more specifically this niche part of the culture industry. I might add that these purposes are contingent on their users.

This was central to Jamison's 2017 exhibition at Galerie Max Mayer in Düsseldorf, which presented *YU Contemporary vs. Dept. of Revenue Oregon & Mult. Co. Assessor* (2017), a published edition reproducing the transcript of a 2016 court case whereby the county in which Yale Union resides attempted to contest its nonprofit status. The verbatim transcript records something unusual for Jamison:

the artist speaking plainly about the intentions of Yale Union, which has always been part of the support structure of his own work (recall, the *para-artistic*). In a text that accompanied the show, Richard Birkett succinctly stated how Jamison's relationship with Yale Union is itself contingent on a set of property relations:

"The value within a non-profit art institution, both that held by artworks and that which is formed through the circulation of ideas and knowledge, is put to work and possessed in many ways. If rights to physical or intellectual property determine who can use, alter, sell or capture the payoffs accruing to it, then the non-profit art institution constitutes a plethora of banked and uncontested rights claims—from artists, directors, curators, and board members."<sup>2</sup>

This attests to the diffusive economy of cultural capital that both Jamison and I have profited from in various ways, which is completely contingent on a form of property relations that is non-egalitarian by definition and in conflict with our own political positions. This cuts a through-line to what Jamison states for this show: "The underbelly, the apparatus that presents the work, is also the work. Forgetting this can be easy depending on the situations and structures that construct the frames around the work."<sup>3</sup>

The forms present in *Opportunity Zones* also point to this constitutive outside—what frames the context in which art is produced, distributed, consumed. This should lead us to consider the indexical strategies of the artists who since Conceptual art have brought the viewer to ask how a piece of art can adequately speak to the contradiction between an artist's intention for the work to effectively analyze its social conditions and the work's capacity to do so when it is complicit with/in these very systems. The tendency to deploy a reductionist ethos toward establishing the clearest possible way of communicating these criticisms led many artists to formal dead ends, or in the case of some works of institutional critique, criticism that was completely recuperated into the institution—potentially contradicting the original aims of the work, or conversely, reforming the institution. Regardless, this legacy proves that the old questions regarding art's relative autonomy from society are far from exhausted.

Jamison's work is different in that it is just as allegorical, which is to say representational, as it is indexical. It is not preoccupied with establishing the clearest mode of communication between work and viewer, but rather relies on the evocative. The long exhibition text that accompanies the show might be read by some as an exhaustive description of the work, but I am reminded of the form of the soliloquy in theater, whereby the fourth wall is broken by a monologue of the character's inner thoughts, putting the mechanisms of their unconscious on display. This is the underside, the subterranean, of the work. In this poetically informational text Jamison proposes that the audience think of the circumstances of the exhibition as another form of opportunity zone: the work, the space, the relationship between artist and curator, the position of the viewer, etc. Thus it produces some questions: What is being leveraged? For whom and by who? Who benefits? What counts as capital? These questions center not only on the productive role of the artist, but also on that of the viewer.

*Opportunity Zones* includes only eight works. The first, which one could easily miss upon entering, is the first of two fire doors rendered in cedar. This material naturally harbors conservational properties (it repels vermin) and has featured in a number of Jamison's exhibitions, including a series of storage racks at the Whitney Biennial in 2017. Unlike the other door, this is scaled at actual size and is installed at the entrance to the gallery space, looking almost functional. But like its smaller twin, it does not work. Set within its cedar surface is a hole in the shape of the Ghost Ship, an Oakland warehouse occupied by artists' studios and ad-hoc living spaces that also

served as an occasional performance venue—in other words, a space like many places in which artists work and sometimes live—that made national news when a fire started during a music show in December 2016, resulting in the deaths of thirty-six people. Jamison knew some of them, suggesting that its intention is partially memorial. Before Yale Union was established, Jamison was involved in running Department of Safety in Anacortes, Washington, a space not dissimilar to the Ghost Ship.

What I have as yet failed to mention about these works is the zinc hardware of the doors, which, as Jamison points out in his exhibition text, is the primary component of sacrificial anodes. Like the conceptual form of the opportunity zone, Jamison extends the idea of the sacrificial anode to the work of art itself:

“What are sacrificial anodes? Sacrificial anodes are highly active metals that are used to prevent a less active material surface from corroding. Sacrificial anodes are created from a metal alloy with negative electrochemical potential that is greater than that of the other metal it will be used to protect. The sacrificial anode will be consumed in place of the metal it is protecting. They are made from a metal alloy with a more active voltage, in this case, zinc. The difference in potential between the two metals means that the galvanic anode corrodes so that the anode material is consumed in preference to the structure.

With sacrificial anodes, the protected metal is affixed on the cathode side, and then a more reactive metal or alloy is chosen and connected to the protected metal as an anode. The reaction will proceed spontaneously. An oxidation reaction occurs at the anode, which means that the sacrificial metal will be consumed. At the same time, the reduction reaction occurs on the cathodic side, protecting the primary material from erosion. Thus, corrosion on the protected metal is successfully shifted to the anode, protecting the metal.”<sup>4</sup>

We can surmise that the lack of infrastructure to support artistic practice, particularly in the U.S.—for instance affordable long-term studio spaces or robust public grant systems—structurally guides a majority of artists into the position where living and working in places such as the Ghost Ship becomes necessary. On a cultural level, such spaces are also sites in which certain subcultures find their hospice (keeping in mind that in regular parlance, once a place like this has been around for some time, we call it an institution). Through the allegory of the sacrificial anode, their position in rapidly gentrifying property markets is one of a certain kind of dependence premised on combustion. Meanwhile, financial investment is directly involved in funding recognized cultural institutions (such as Yale Union), functioning as a form of “impact washing,” drawing attention away from more ethically dubious investments.<sup>5</sup>

On the southern wall of this large and almost empty space, two kinetic mechanical shelves move in ways that appear illogical. In Jamison’s long descriptive text for the show, we learn that they are programmed to place a work of art at the ideal hanging height mandated by museum convention—they awkwardly automate the labor of museum preparators. On the left, *Applicate 2.1* (2019) is programmed with data accrued from all 1,500 works of art in the Gurlitt Collection, which was inherited by Cornelius Gurlitt from his father, Hildebrand Gurlitt, an art dealer active during Nazi Germany tasked by Hermann Göring to acquire art

for the Führermuseum, and subsequently gifted to the Kunstmuseum Bern after Gurlitt was investigated for tax fraud. On the right, *Applicate 2.2* (2019) takes stock of the Kunstmuseum Bern’s broader collection, which we might view as beneficially highlighted by this bequest. In his text, Jamison notes that the Kunstmuseum’s research into the provenance of these works and the subsequent restitution of at least nine looted pieces has shown the transparency with which the Kunstmuseum received this opportunity—yet notably, the museum’s provenance research department is funded by foundations and private donations.

While what motivated Jamison to produce this work was an interest in researching institutional transformations that the Kunstmuseum undertook in receiving the Gurlitt collection as a gift—in other words, its cultural responsibility—the work itself speaks to the mobility of art as capital. One thing to note in regard to these machines is how stupid they are, by which I mean that they are far from the “smart” technology of today. Although appearing to work on their own, their programming was drafted by Jamison, their master. Their ceaseless mobility leads to what may seem an odd reference, but if we are to think of any artist who knew how to represent the absurdity of the machine, it was Jean Tinguely, whose famous *Homage to New York* (1960) self-destructed in the courtyard of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. A lesser-known but important part of the story is that Robert Rauschenberg sacrificially contributed a work to the machine. Although other works of art are only implied in Jamison’s *Applicate* pieces, their data has been mined by the artist in order to motivate his own: they are part of its intellectual fuel, its capital motivation. They are what motivates it. *Homage to New York*’s self-destruction was performed by the machine in the context of an institution (we can even relate it to Andrea Fraser’s museum pieces) and Jamison’s does, too, but the audience is not treated to a spectacle. Instead we are provoked to consider motivations.

The other work in this large room is much simpler. It is a large paper notepad, each page of which reproduces the same image. Although mounted on the wall, it asks to be regarded as a sculpture. The image is a surgical representation of Jamison’s shoulder after he had incurred an injury from the repetitive labor of operating a nineteenth-century printing press to produce his magazine, *Veneer*. For the first time in Jamison’s career, *Veneer* appears here as part of an exhibition. This notepad work, *Untitled* (2019), was produced on this same machine, forming a loop between the artist’s means of production and the physical damage sustained in the labor of operating it. It may appear abstract, but it works on a tender level. As a kind of insider with a certain amount of background information on Jamison’s work, I hazard to say that his output is at its best when it confers something personal from the artist to the audience, although how this is communicated does not remain entirely consistent (which I think could be seen as an advantage). This is made clear with another work, situated in the smallest room, reproducing the same image but as a small open book, splayed like wings on a wooden rest. This shelf, fashioned by a router out of camphor (a wood known for its therapeutic properties), reproduces the bone from that same injury. Titled *Game Ready* (2019), this piece ironically takes the name of a company that supplies post-surgery devices. As an almost awkward form between sculpture and print, it could feel too earnest, yet within this exhibition it feels like a necessary piece of the artist’s body.

Both of these works represent the body literally, but I would argue that all of the work in this exhibition implies the presence of the corporeal as the source of its energy (Jana Euler’s paintings picturing electrical outlets usefully come to mind). Jamison is entirely invested in the biopolitics not only of art, but of the world in general, and the final piece in the exhibition makes entirely clear the dependency of material infrastructure on human beings (not the other

way around). *Servers* (2019) reproduces the general shape of the sixteenth-century reading wheel designed by Italian Renaissance inventor Agostino Ramelli, but in raw recycled green plastic. These are arranged inside modular frames composed of 7075 aluminum (military designed, and as Jamison informs us, alloyed with zinc). There are four of these functioning reproductions—they have working cogs—but they do not move. Either they hang from the ceiling by the kind of fluorescent yellow straps used to secure a load on the back of a truck, or they sit idle on one of the venue’s trolleys (also yellow). While static, in their partly ad-hoc installation they imply some kind of transit.

The forms themselves are oriented toward the viewer. In their original historical moment these machines were dependent on the literate, who held power over the mass public. In a country where it may even seem possible that capitalism works, the service economy that maintains Switzerland’s almost-too-perfect cleanliness is undertaken by labor either brought in from less economically fortunate parts of Europe, performed by newer citizens without the generational privileges of Swiss inheritance, or completely offshored and out of view. While the broader Kunsthalle system is part of a cultural economy that is also composed of individuals beyond Switzerland’s borders, they form a class with certain privileges, mobilities, and literacy in art. This antagonism between these two positions is implied when Jamison quotes Mimi Sheller’s *Mobility Justice* (2018) in his exhibition text:

“Barriers to access and controls over mobility are implemented... to serve elite interests... via formal and informal policing, gates, passes, clothing, regulation of public space, and surveillance systems that limit the right to move, filter entry and exit, and selectively apply protection of the state.”

While suggesting techniques of social control, this remains fluent in the technology of the work itself. Its disparity between twenty-first-century technology and handicraft is completely in line with what I would say is a central theme in Jamison’s work: the techniques of production. I noted earlier that Jamison’s work reminds me of the writings of William Morris, which for me is a way of thinking through the purposes and ethics of the role of the artist. Morris was known for preserving the laborious techniques of the medieval workshop; his philosophy on art; and the fact that he self-published the tracts that undergirded his practical work (recall *Veneer* in this context). Morris looked backward instead of inventing craft for his own time. It took one of his disciples, Charles Robert Ashbee, to recognize that the machine can likewise be the subject of handicraft—think of how we now work with HTML. Following these debates of the late nineteenth century, we have the invention of industrial design from Adolf Loos all the way to Steve Jobs, and the other path: art for art’s sake.

Morris remains relevant today because his questions regarding the aim of art are directly linked to artistic techniques of production. And perhaps from a political standpoint, the problem with Morris (and his socialism) was that he was inclined more toward Thomas More than Karl Marx—he was a utopian, not a pragmatist. The deeply moral character of these nineteenth-century European men toward the production of their work really is not dissimilar to how institutional critique, particularly in the United States, has continued as a way of producing a niche intellectual product (as Andrea Fraser has shown, this can

also be considered a service) catering to a relatively small audience. The argument against Morris and the Art and Crafts movement asked how such an art could square its egalitarian intentions with the niche market it served. As a solution, the industrial design that followed asked how art could reach a common, mass appeal. Art on the left—from Social Realism to Conceptual art—has harbored the problem of its purpose since that time.

While the de-skilling of art since the 1960s pushed questions of technique to one side, Jamison reemphasizes the dependency of the artist on modes of production—technology, skill, craft—thereby calling into question the ethics of the relationship between the work’s production and its purpose. In *Opportunity Zones*, he has chosen purposeful forms of industrial design in order to redirect the parlance of their use, in the process raising questions regarding the purposes of art. These objects show that he is cognizant that the audience is comprised of different sets of users (in the computing sense of the term) who have different applications for the work and different levels of access to the information that surrounds it, and indeed informs readings of it. While there is always the feeling that there are differing levels of access to these works—that there is the position of the insider and the outsider and a continuum in between—the distinction becomes superfluous when there is no ultimate hierarchy between the positions. I believe that there is no goal of attainment in the work itself. Rather, it points out well a simple function of the desire commonly surrounding contemporary art: to gain inside knowledge that will usher you into the hall of the connoisseurs, or which you might avariciously hoard as intellectual capital. In our time, intellectual property equates knowledge with ownership, and ownership implies power. If you have the opportunity.

- 1 For instance, in the last ten years the Artist’s Institute, New York; Artists Space, New York; and the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, all took on a notably kindred focus.
- 2 Richard Birkett, *Aaron Flint Jamison 06.05. - 01.07.2017* (Düsseldorf: Galerie Max Mayer, 2017).
- 3 Aaron Flint Jamison, *Opportunity Zones* (Saint Gallen: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2019).
- 4 Jamison, *Opportunity Zones*, with acknowledgment of material drawn from [https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Analytical\\_Chemistry/Supplemental\\_Modules\\_\(Analytical\\_Chemistry\)/Electrochemistry/Exemplars/Corrosion/Sacrificial\\_Anode](https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Analytical_Chemistry/Supplemental_Modules_(Analytical_Chemistry)/Electrochemistry/Exemplars/Corrosion/Sacrificial_Anode)
- 5 “Impact washing,” a play on “greenwashing,” refers to a company’s efforts to portray itself as having a more positive (usually social) impact than it actually does.



*Opportunity Zone*, 2019, *Opportunity Zones* installation view at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2019.  
 Courtesy: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen. Photo: Sebastian Schaub

*Game Ready*, 2019, *Opportunity Zones* installation view at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2019.  
 Courtesy: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen. Photo: Sebastian Schaub



AARON FLINT JAMISON (b. 1979, Montana) lives and works in Portland, Oregon. He received his MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2006. He has had solo exhibitions at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2017, 2015); Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf (2017); Pied-à-terre, Ortsville, Pennsylvania (2016); Air de Paris, Paris (2015, 2012); ETH Zürich (2015); Artists Space, New York (2013); Cubitt, London (2013); Centre d'édition contemporaine, Geneva (2012); Artspeak, Vancouver (2012); castillo/corrales, Paris (2011); and Open Satellite, Bellevue (2010). He has participated in group exhibitions at S.M.A.K., Ghent (2018); Secession, Vienna (2018); the Whitney Biennial, New York (2017); and the Liverpool Biennial (2014). Jamison is a co-founder of the art center Yale Union in Portland, Oregon, and of the artist-run center Department of Safety, which operated from 2002 until 2010 in Anacortes, Washington. He is the founder and editor of the ongoing serial publication *Veneer*, established in 2007.

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