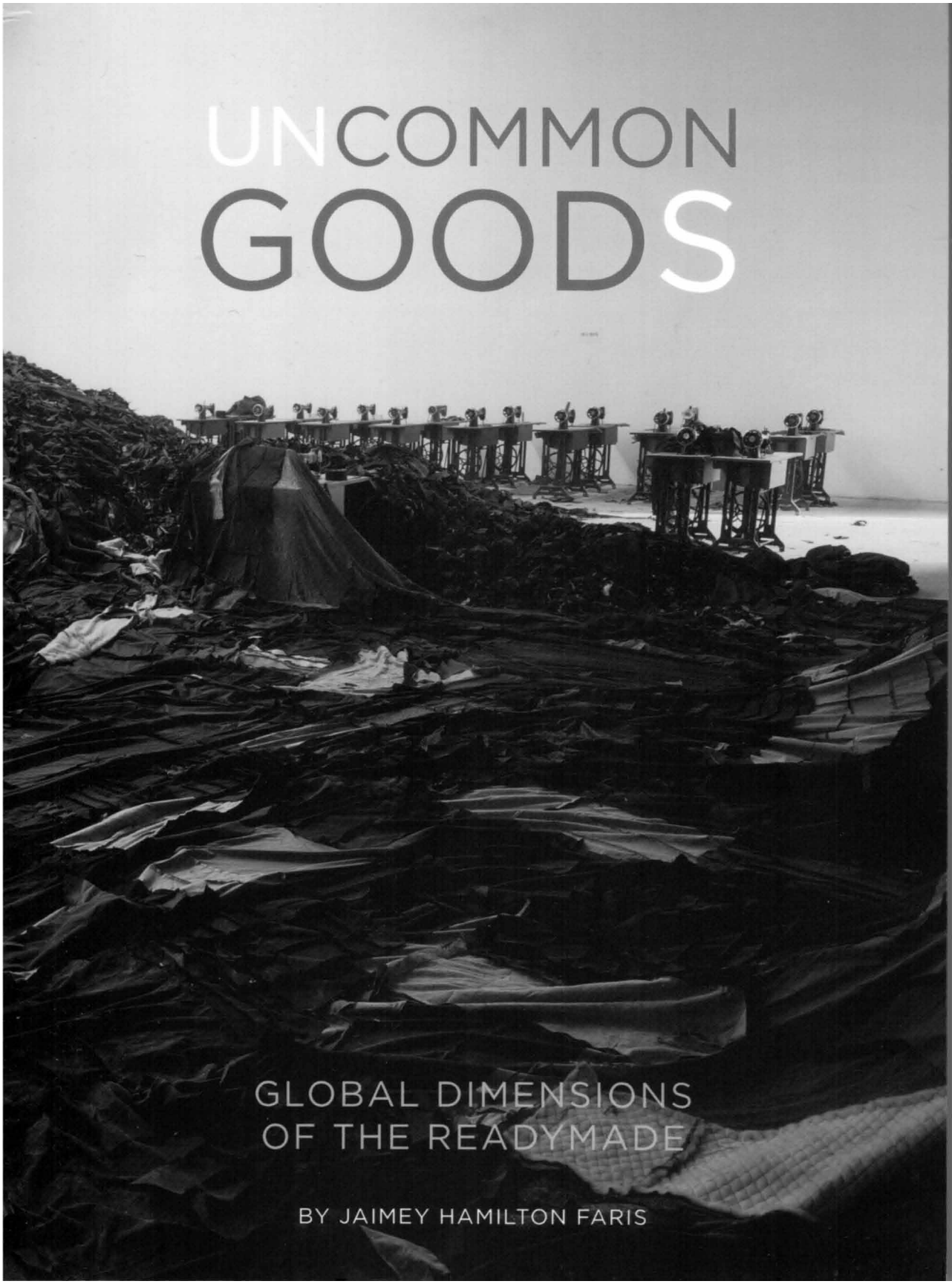
UNCOMMON
GOODS
GLOBAL DIMENSIONS
OF THE READYMADE
BY JAIMEY HAMILTON FARIS

bowling of all video games, not just because of its many versions, but because of its obvious absurdity. As he put it, "Bowling has to be one of the most awkward virtual experiences possible—it can be awkward enough in real life. But for the piece to work it had to be something clumsy" (Patel 2011).

Arcangel attached chips to each game's controller so that every one of them repeated unending gutter balls. His hack transformed what could have been a video arcade-inspired relational art piece, with viewers playing across this historical suite, into a repetitive closed circuit of systemic and looped failure across the room. Like *Super Mario Clouds*, the piece clearly disrupts the videogame's pseudo-time by denying access of play and identification with the digital bowlers, forcing viewers into a spectator role of witnessing the technological fetishization of perfect VR. His simple DIY maneuver creates a moment of non-accomplishment meant to frustrate the economizing of virtual sport competition and of VR in general. It references the "progress" toward total dis-embodiment of VR technology, but also indicates that the sophistication of the programming and digital interface does nothing for the sophistication of a gamer's skills, nor for their development of emotional and intellectual maturity: How can players grow with this game, when their fantasy life is constantly in the gutter?

*Various Self-Playing Bowling Games*' affective power lies in the way that its obvious absurdity lends an element of critical interruption. This is very important to Arcangel's work. But in looking beyond the piece and deeper into the artist's strategy of presentation and production, there is even more to say about how he attempts to make the irresolution of intellectual property visible. Arcangel did not go so far as to test IP laws for the newest Wii bowling product, which anyway would have required him to develop an entirely different technology for the installation. It seems that Arcangel liked the productivity of existing in the tension between art as intellectual property (that must respect other intellectual property) and games as potentially subversive uncanny materialities. His practice raises issues for both the growing copyleft community, which advocates common digital space everywhere, and for the corporate interests that would advocate for stronger intellectual property regulation. Artists like Arcangel, as much as they can take advantage of this slippage and make it visible in their art, are also caught between these discourses. If copyleft actualized the dissolution of intellectual property, then Arcangel's livelihood as an artist in its current iteration would vanish. If IP was too strict, then Nintendo would not be able to profit off the free creative play of hackers like Arcangel. The artist's work and attitude exists in the current simultaneous feedback loops of these different regimes. Whatever the next iteration of this dialog portends, it will have to deal with the very complexity of the intertwined cyber and physical economies.

## Headless information

The artistic duo Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby) have done exactly this in focusing their hacks on the convoluted circuitry of law, information, and finance, as it loops through virtual and physical space. In 2004, they began collaborating on *The Port*

(2004–2006), a virtual community for artists and activists set up as a creative commons space within the parameters of the highly commoditized space of *Second Life*. Within the online "reality game," they met to discuss, and eventually to create a publication, about how *Second Life* commodifies a gamer's social life and leisure time.

Like Mr. DOB and *Mario Bros.*, *Second Life* is essentially a digital commodity-sign used to proliferate franchising enterprises. But as a branded space, rather than simply a branded icon, it has the unique capacity to create virtual territory in which other companies can then purchase advertising space that will solicit the players of the game. Like so many other games, *Second Life* really has no internal narrative structure that could potentially act as a counterpoint to the dominant commodity consumer narrative. Rather, it encourages gamers to create an avatar that essentially has the same economic, political, cultural, and social relations that already exist in the physical world. In fact, at just about every turn, the game fetishizes the "meat-world" social economy. *Second Life* was created by Linden Labs, and offers a number of levels of participation. New gamers (newbies) can download free software, and create an avatar, who then wanders in *Second Life*'s virtual territory. But if a player really wants a social life, he or she has to invest. Linden Labs charges a monthly fee for ownership or rental of virtual land as well as purchasable aspects of culture and socializing with Linden dollars. The way to get Linden dollars is not by accumulating points in the game, but simply by going to the Linden Labs website with a credit card. In turn, the middle class demographics of *Second Life* players are attractive to corporate advertisers who also pay Linden Lab to fill *Second Life* with their logos on the streets and offer their services to the avatars. It has become the virtual site of real businesses who can operate outside national boundaries and who use the leisure time of the game to make a profit.

The establishment of *The Port's* critical community within *Second Life* is not the kind of activity promoted by the company and its virtual reality developers. And yet, it is a good example of how many players take advantage of the virtual space offered by the game to build a variety of intellectual commons. The first thing the artists had to do was purchase a site. In this respect (like Huyghe and Parreno) they followed the commodity system's rules. Then they collaborated with architect Tor Lindstrand to build the infrastructure of their space as a commons, initially populated by fifty international artists, and open to anyone who happened to come upon the community. This was an intellectual hack as much as a digital one, in that they simply grafted their codes of conduct onto the game's.

*The Port's* inhabitants eventually organized art projects and the production of a virtual and print publication aimed to generate reflection on *Second Life* from within its own structure. Most significant was *Flack Attack* developed through a wiki and open editorial meetings taking place at *The Port*. The first issue of the magazine was produced in December 2005. It was distributed virtually within the space of *Second Life*, and as a PDF through the Whitney's Artport. (It is still available as a PDF on Goldin+Senneby's website.) Its theme was autonomy and the articles reflected on the task of infusing *Second Life* with creative virtual choices and discourses that were different than those already existing in the physical world.

The first article in the magazine, by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter inquired into what they called "games of empire" through new concepts of transversal media studies (inspired by Félix Guattari and refined by Gerald Raunig). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter discussed the transformation of collective cognition with online games such as *Second Life*, as well as *Worlds of Warcraft* and *Rome: Total War*. They discussed the transformation of the "affects, capacities, and propensities" on subjectivity with games that inculcate players constantly into imperialist subject positions, that have "extreme capitalist" narratives with repetitive tasks related to real-world labor roles, and that demand a certain kind of isolated community online interaction. They stated:

> Capital now taps psychophysical energies at multiple points: not just at work but also as consumerist consciousness, in (in)formal education and training, in style, language, and aptitudes, and even as a source of raw materials extracted in genetic engineering and medical innovation. Aimed at optimizing and managing myriad forms of life, "biopower," as we use the concept here, designates the subsumption, extraction, and harnessing of vital forces by capital in an era when it rules over social life in its entirety and swallows human subjectivity and nature.
>
> (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2005)

They argued that one of the four main points of transversal media studies is to counter biopower, or what Deleuze and Guattari would call the desiring machines, of global capital as it uses the structure of MMO gaming. In creating characters, platforms, and critical content like *The Port* within *Second Life,* they transverse or cut across the flows of media through "constructive, participatory analysis of the potentialities of tactical media and of collaborative creativity as partial elements of a social experiment for a planet beyond capital" (2005).

Their other main concern was in describing the underlying and invisible system of profit in the virtual world. The pair argued that the shift toward online gaming was a result of the digital capital revolution in the late nineties. *Second Life* acts as the perfect example of the new sophisticated global infrastructure. The computer servers that power the game are located in San Francisco and Dallas and use about 1752 kilowatts of electricity per year per *Second Life* resident (as much as that consumed by an average actual Brazilian, according to Nicolas Carr, author of the *Big Switch: Rewiring the World from Edison to Google* and the IT blog, *Rough Type*). The key to profit for MMO games is to use cheap energy and a large government investment in the technological infrastructure for virtual communication to create a virtual commodity exchange system leveraged directly on the electronic fluidity of the global financial system. This is what McKenzie Wark has called "Third Nature" (2006). The virtual environment of *Second Life* (a "third nature" virtuality) profits off the international currency differentials ("second nature") of labor and energy resources ("first nature"). The reason this is so successful is that these differentials, and the effects they have on the environment and on lives, are hidden to the virtual game users. *Second Life* gamers have no concept of how much money comes and goes through Liden Labs's coffers, nor how many kilowatts are used for

each minute they live in the game. The *Worlds of Warcraft* boom in gold farming is another clear example of this phenomenon (see Dibbell 2007). Young factory laborers, mostly in China, are paid meagerly in real yen by entrepreneurs who sell their services to accumulate virtual wealth and points for time-pressed WoW players in other parts of the world. Because *Worlds of Warcraft* is organized into "shards," or regions of servers around the world that help handle the capacity and complexity of the 11.1 million subscribers (as of June 2011), a gray economy of gold farmers can gain access to North American servers through brokers and work with others' virtual identities. This is a perfect example of capitalism's profiteering on multiple "border" situations within its deterritorialized and reterritorialized framework.

The two most surprising aspects of the gold farming situation are these. Despite the high pressure and long hours of factory life, the young men who gold farm spend most of their leisure time playing the same game in Internet cafés. At the same time, WoW players continue to pay for other people to play a game that they find boring and redundant, at least at the lower levels. How does an obviously dissatisfying structure of commodification and exploitation of repetitive tasks and rote accumulation of resources in our physical world come to be assuaged by a virtual version of the same thing? The online gaming world perpetuates itself in the addictive closed loop of virtual time and virtual drive to accumulate virtual power. The fact that players get to act as someone else while doing this is part of the appeal. The other is the hope, desire, and fantasy that players will succeed and have satisfaction in a second life, if they think they might have failed at self-actualization in their first one. Expansive virtual territories, diversity in avatar building, sophisticated realistic motion, and instantaneous response are fetishized features that appeal to the consumer (as in the newest versions of bowling games à la Arcangel's work). They are all made possible because of the differential of national economies and regional globalization of virtual reality. Gold farmers and subcontracted animators are just a small part of the labor economies that make games like *Second Life* and *Worlds of Warcraft* profitable.

To counter the spectacularizing effects of most commercial MMO games, there are many great examples of artists trying to set up alternative online games based on a different economic model and different online worlds of imagination. Andreja Kuluncic, has been working on *Distributed Justice*, www.distributive-justice.com, a multiplayer Internet game that allows players to freely distribute material and nonmaterial goods, in an effort to prepare its players for a virtual commons. *ArgoraXchange*, an art project by Jacqueline Stevens and Natalie Bookchin, also advocates open borders, no private property, and new models of social organization to create potential emergent economic and political behavior.

More and more alternative cultural economies are emerging all the time in the game world. But obviously, the situation that appealed to Goldin+Senneby was based on an affectual readymade technique—commonizing a part of the virtual commodity space from within *Second Life* so as to provide a platform for others (including Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter) and to disrupt the game's power over schiz-consumer gamers. Yet in the end, Goldin+Senneby grew frustrated with the ease with which *Second Life* could successfully inoculate the rest of its virtual territory from *The Port*'s disruptive creative space.

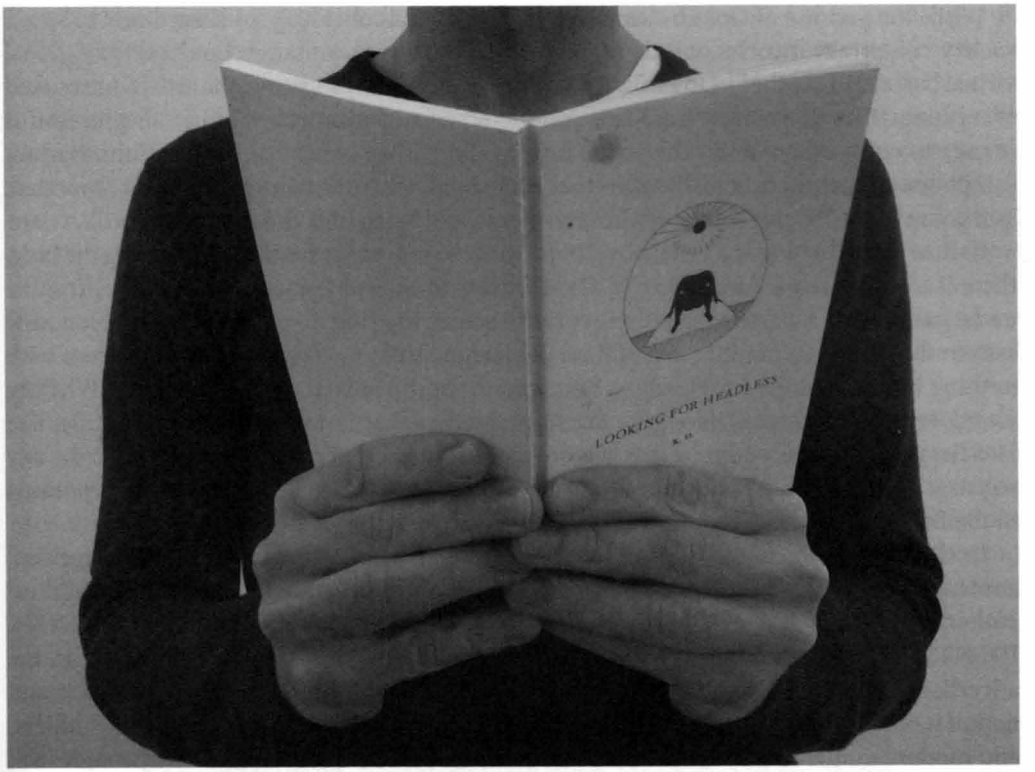


**Figure 28:** Goldin+Senneby, *Looking for Headless* by fictional author K.D., chapters 1–4, 2008. © Goldin+Senneby. Courtesy the artists.

Since then, their work has turned to even more dramatic efforts in information and consciousness hacking. In visualizing the way such companies as Linden Labs make a profit off of the continuum of reality and virtuality, Goldin+Senneby decided to change tactics, this time staking out a domain in the "real" world. The resulting conceptual project, *Headless* (2007 - ongoing) is a very complicated hack into the virtual reality system of international business, all under the guise of an investigation into a shell corporation, called Headless Ltd., based in the Bahamas. The artists fabricated a multilayered conspiratorial "accusation" that Headless Ltd. had a connection to the surrealist philosopher George Bataille's 1930s secret society Acéphale. The absurdity of the accusation begins with understanding that Bataille's acéphale, as well as his Sadean treatises, have come to be used in critiques of the global economy. As we have already seen in the work of Büchel, Rhoades, Kusolwong, Blum, and even more literally in the work of Shonibare and Hirschhorn, the *acéphale* acts as the perfect allegorical image of the decentralized schiz-flow organization of corporate power, which in turn perpetuates an unanchored ethical position in its schiz-subjects. Headless Ltd., is not a headless mannequin, but, as appropriate to Goldin+Senneby's interest in information materiality, a company with no real location or persons at its head, existing only in cyberspace.

While the premise of Goldin+Senneby's investigation is obviously an absurd nod to secret society conspiracy theories, it aids in uncovering the stranger-than-fiction reality of global virtual business. Like the "headless" corporation they were investigating, the artists outsourced everything. They got money from museums and arts organizations. In turn, they used this money to enlist others to do the actual investigation. They contacted novelist John Barlow, (via phone and email) to actually travel to the Bahamas, where the company was incorporated, as if going to the "source" of the offshore shelter would bring him closer to answers.

Barlow started a blog as a serial novel in progress to record his findings. In reading the blog, there is a strong sense that Barlow is like a newbie in *Second Life*, in a plot he doesn't quite understand, with a mission that doesn't make sense, in a world governed by an economic system that is all too familiar, but still totally opaque to him. Upon landing in Nassau with nothing but an address for Headless Ltd., he innocently looked up the company. What he found were the offices of Sovereign, a management firm that coordinates offshore entities like Headless Ltd. and a receptionist that was unhelpful, but not defensive. She sent him to the city registrar's office for public records. There he discovered that Headless Ltd. was incorporated in the Bahamas on the 27th of February 2008, exactly one month before he arrived.

In the blog, he recounts that he paused for the afternoon to take in this information, contemplating what "headless" might mean as an organization with no head, no central authority: "What kind of company chooses an identity which rejects identity IN ITS IDENTITY? And who registers it in the Bahamas?" (2008). As Barlow finds out in the advertising plastered around the town, the appeal of establishing a business in this island nation is obviously its tax-free sheltering, no requirement to publically register shareholders, and modest annual fees. He also finds that an estimated $3.5 trillion circulate through such offshore tax shelters. As he contemplates this information, like any good novelist worth their salt, he continues the fiction because it is a fascinating space from which to reflect on a global reality.

Goldin+Senneby also commissioned others to write newspaper articles, make films, and give lectures about the project. One of the documents to have emerged from this proliferation of information is a published novel, entitled *Looking for Headless*, by an author called K.D., who claimed to be a former employee of Sovereign Trust (the real-life corporation that handles the day-to-day administration of Headless Ltd.). K.D. suspected that Goldin+Senneby sent Barlow on a wild-goose chase. As one reviewer of the book put it, "Its plot hits on all the major conventions of mass-market thrillers—surveillance, double agents, paranoia, and so forth" (Kollack 2010). Another investigator hired by the duo discovered that K.D. was a fictional person. At this point, the line between fiction and reality is blurred to the point where one begins to wonder if Goldin+Senneby is itself a shell entity manipulated by a real life gaming company wanting to put the art world on and if John Barlow even went to the Bahamas. Curator Kim Einarsson, a participant enlisted by the duo, exasperatingly stated, "We are left wondering who is holding the pen." Were she, and John Barlow, and countless others simply dupes from the beginning, avatars to be scripted and maneuvered; or did they all actually uncover, in some vague chaotic indirect way, the headless operations of Headless Ltd.?

What these combined efforts clearly demonstrate is that Headless Ltd. is an allegory in action, uncovering how companies profit off an orchestration of curiosity and continual deferment of the commodity-sign. Drilling down into the scenario, viewers begin to question how far the fiction of reality goes, both in the inquiry that Goldin+Senneby set up, and in the corporate world. One could view the obsessive and dense network of information composed by the duo as the digital version of Büchel's installations, or any of the other affectual parafictional materialities this book has described thus far. Interestingly, in this movement, the fictional identity of Headless Ltd. becomes the ghost inhabiting the shell company (which as Barlow belatedly discovers is associated with another called AKEFALOS, meaning headless in Greek). That is, Headless Ltd. is a specter created within the systems of global capital, but existing askew in it, as a parafictional entity whose very purpose is to be found out. But because the actual global structures that support this fictional company *as a real entity* thwart the investigations of the participants, as well as the understanding of readers trying to follow the investigation, the act of un-discovery is the moment of affectual dissensus. The procedure of trying to make the corporate enterprise visible through its invisibility could be compared as much to Cildo Meireles's *Inserções* as to Huyghe and Parreno's Annlee. In taking a real thing (whether a Coke bottle or a company) and wrapping *Headless* in layers of fictional materiality (i.e. information) it obliquely investigates and eventually exposes the increasingly fictional and virtual basis of commodity reality. Headless Ltd., Meireles's Coke bottles, and Annlee are all ghostly presences, materialities that unhinge the purported logic and transparency of capitalism.

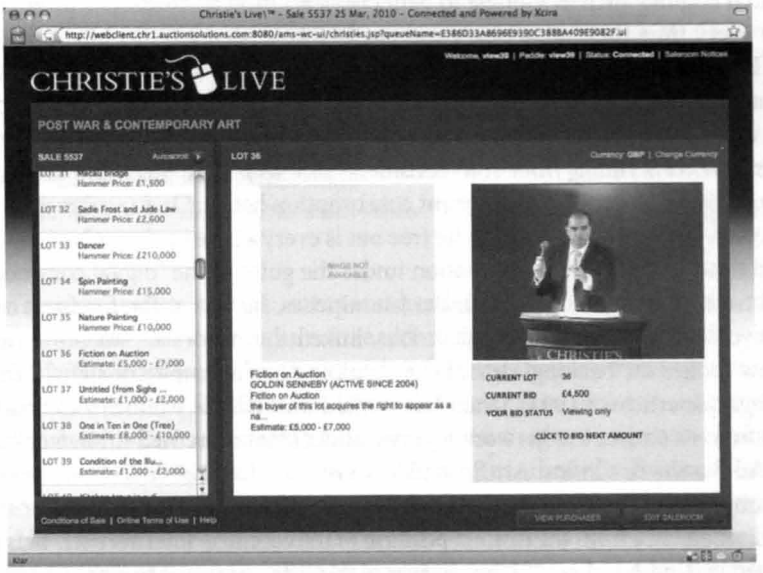


**Figure 29:** Goldin+Senneby, "Lot 36: Fiction on Auction", sale of the right to appear as a named character in the forthcoming novel *Looking for Headless*. Produced for Offer & Exchange, Electra, London, 2010. © Goldin+Senneby. Courtesy the artists.

Since no one has found Headless Ltd. yet or discovered its purpose, Goldin+Senneby have kept the investigation open, and the story evolving. This has conveniently allowed Headless Ltd. to absorb the real global art market economy in its scheme. For Christie's London Spring 2010 Postwar and Contemporary Art sale, Goldin+Senneby put "Fiction on Auction." Inspired by movies that sell the opportunity for product placement, they sold the opportunity to be a character in the evolving narrative of *Looking for Headless* to the highest bidder.

## Information wants to be free!

Both projects by Goldin+Senneby set up an understanding that information is far from free and vastly accessible, begging further questions about the importance of understanding the situation that makes information into a commodity, especially in the digital age. Despite its seeming chaos *and* omnipresence, information is actually running on fairly traceable corridors, indicated on the skitter graphs by the Cooperative Association for Internet Data Analysis (CAIDA). The location and transmission of servers around the world express a geography of digital information consistent with the distribution of global wealth. The heaviest flows move along the west and east coasts of the United States, in Europe, and along the coast of East Asia (with crucial paths to the Bahamas and other offshore banking locations, which are literally rooms with servers maintained by companies like Sovereign).

Individual usage patterns have also become equally predictable, based on the algorithms used by search engines such as Google to generate profit for their Adsense program (investors pay Google every time their ad appears and is clicked on, making $30 billion in 2010 for the company). Email systems, social-media, shareware, downloadable, streaming entertainment, and cloud storage might be free, but their accessibility is mediated and monitored by cookies that cull its users' interests into sidebar and popup ads. This has led to what Eli Pariser (author of *What this Internet is Hiding from You*) considers an invisible bubble of the positive consumer feedback loop that reinforces a user's current consumption habits. Or, to rephrase in the words of McKenzie Wark, "Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains."

Regulated flows of capitalized information under the guise of the "digital commons" has bred a healthy distrust in artist Paul Chan. In the late nineties, he was at the forefront of the culture jamming wave, which, as Mark Dery describes, linked the historical Situationist and semiotic tactics to new modes of "hacking, slashing, and sniping in the empire of signs" (The subtitle of his *Open Magazine* article of 1993). Chan has worked on multiple platforms to unanchor digital information from its chains, but his work is very distinct from more well-known culture jamming projects by Ad Busters or Critical Art Ensemble. In relation to these collectives, he is skeptical of the utopian impulses of the creative commons as a true commons. He prefers to position his acts of semiotic disobedience from the distinct position of the eccentric Internet user. This position has been described by Umberto Eco: "[T]he receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a different way … I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation" (Umberto Eco quoted in Dery 1993).