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The City of Unbroken Windows

Hito Steyerl

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In the city of unbroken windows no window is allowed to break.¹ If any window were to break, this would herald the city's downfall. "Consider a building with a few broken windows. If a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows² will soon be broken. One unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing."

Riot police³ with big wooden horses, helicopters and microphones are guarding every window in town. A maddening silence hovers over the city. Should any window break,⁴ a painter will be called in for a secret ritual. He will paint a series of windows to replace the broken ones. These paintings are able to deflect taxation, destruction and in some cases⁵ have been said to avert actual death by way of mimetic magic.

¹ Have you ever witnessed the anger of the good shopkeeper, James Goodfellow, when his careless son has happened to break a pane of glass? If you have been present at such a scene, you will most assuredly bear witness to the fact that everyone of the spectators, were there even thirty of them, by common consent apparently, offered the unfortunate owner this invariable consolation — "What would become of the glaziers if panes of glass were never broken?". *Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas* Frédéric Bastiat.

² Now, this form of condolence contains an entire theory, which it will be well to show up in this simple case, seeing that it is precisely the same as that which, unhappily, regulates the greater part of our economical institutions. *Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas* Frédéric Bastiat.

³ Suppose it costs six francs to repair the damage, and you say that the accident brings six francs to the glazier's trade — that it encourages that trade to the amount of six francs — I grant it; I have not a word to say against it; you reason justly. The glazier comes, performs his task, receives his six francs, rubs his hands, and, in his heart, blesses the careless child. All this is that which is seen. *Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas* Frédéric Bastiat.

⁴ But if, on the other hand, you come to the conclusion, as is too often the case, that it is a good thing to break windows, that it causes money to circulate, and that the encouragement of industry in general will be the result of it, you will oblige me to call out, "Stop there! Your theory is confined to that which is seen; it takes no account of that which is not seen." *Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas* Frédéric Bastiat.

⁵ It is not seen that as our shopkeeper has spent six francs upon one thing, he cannot spend them upon another. It is not seen that if he had not had a window to replace, he would, perhaps, have replaced his old shoes, or added another book to his library. In short, he would have employed his six francs in some way, which this accident has prevented. *Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas* Frédéric Bastiat.