

## **Sky Pool**

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Looking up from the ground we see a translucent container filled with water. Moving high above, a swimmer experiences the sensation of floating in space, gravity is suspended as the body glides through the air. When we encounter the sky pool the only thing that breaks the image of water joining sky is the sight of floating bodies passing overhead. The conflation of capitalism and cultural products leaves us with the ever greater question of how we situate ourselves in a city where that which should be on the ground appears to us in the sky.

The sky pool stands, in almost every respect, as the most advanced material expression of the ideological forces that constitute capitalism today.

Karl Marx argued that capitalism is built on a fundamentally unethical principle: a system of exchange where there is no limit to profit. The infinity pool was designed from its conception in 1960s California, or even before that in the 1670s with the fountains in the gardens of Versailles, to defy physical limits. The disappearance of a perceivable edge produces a sense of limitlessness and delirium. As we gaze at one expanse of water, we experience it seamlessly joining with another terrain. The pool becomes the sea, the sky and the surrounding landscape. Various tonalities of blue take us to the limits of the horizon and then further into the dreamscape of floating high above the constraints of the physical world.

The zero edge is the mechanism for creating the illusion of limitlessness.

The first generation infinity pool, which entered into our collective consciousness as a backdrop to the 1971 James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*, fully exploited the affects of this visual technology. This earlier iteration of the infinity pool has become a common feature of hotel marketing and lifestyle promotions. The environment that we perceive as having no boundaries speaks both of freedom and deceit. But is our experience of the infinity pool really one of deceit? We know very well that the disappearance of an edge is a mere illusion (and quite a clunky one at that). We understand that the zero edge is in fact a hair's lip of water lapping over a solid wall yet we continue to allow ourselves to be drawn in by the simulated experience of limitlessness. We wilfully deceive ourselves in order to experience a world that cannot exist. And here we have it, the world that appears to us as image stands in for the older world of physical boundaries and human relations. But this long established critique of the image is not encountered by us in the way that

Guy Debord speaks of spectacle. The infinity pool is more transcendental than the intoxicating images Debord associates with the media culture of the late 1960s. We might instead argue that Ludwig Feuerbach's attack on Christianity, in his book *The Essence of Christianity* from 1841, provides a closer alignment with what can be thought of as a modern day image of the heavens.

Feuerbach identifies the collective amnesia that established itself when Christian belief was considered to be the product of divine creation—rather than an ideological construct shaped by the human brain. Other theological foundations include the churches of the High Renaissance, with the tradition of trompe l'oeil ceiling paintings depicting the heavens. When seen from a certain stand point, the extreme perspective of Andrea Pozzo's late seventeenth century painting on the ceiling of the Church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome conjures up an image of depth that stands in for the limitations of physical architectural space. There is a playful back and forth of perception. One moment there is a clear and powerful image but from another vantage point there is only distortion. However, when the illusion mutates into media image—captured as a jpeg or on video—the perceptual movement between alignment and distortion is tied down to a singular phantasmic encounter.

The transubstantiation of water into the dream of freedom born from the capitalist illusion of limitlessness is always best played out on the glossy pages of sales catalogues and holiday promotions or the Instagram sites of holiday-makers and influencers.

The more recent introduction of the sky pool marks an important technological, ideological and economic turn. Lifting the infinity pool high into the sky means that the catch and the trough are only seen when leaning over the zero edge—which is not allowed because of Health and Safety. The analogue glitching, the precariousness of the illusion, the falling away of the image, these are all problems associated with the first generation infinity pool. The sky pool, such as the one built in Singapore as part of Mandalay Sands Hotel in 2010, is the technological advancement of the zero edge but remains somewhere between the first generation infinity pool and the later translucent sky pool. Here we find the infinity pool quite literally in the sky. The experience of floating or even flying over the city is made possible through suspending large volumes of water across massive supporting structures. Here we are invited to float within a suspended infinity pool. Architecture and body defy gravity to form a union that enables a new experience of physical space. Yet, in the face of all this technological advancement, there remains the older technologies of the catch and trough. The concealed apparatus might be hidden by the lapping water but the hidden wall remains physically present.

The most recent iteration of the sky pool was unveiled over lockdown in May 2021. The sky pool in Nine Elms (London) has jettisoned the now outmoded technologies of concealed structures and perceptual effects of lapping water. Unlike the first generation infinity pool, the sky pool at Nine Elms does not require the hidden paraphernalia behind the scenes but simply uses acrylic panels to create the illusion of infinity. The ten storey high translucent container cannot be called architecture; it is, instead, the highest form of engineering. Everything is now made visible, the combination of elevation, water and vast acrylic panels might be thought of as the holy trinity of infinity pools. The zero edge is absolute; water, acrylic and sky merge into a single form without resistance or struggle.

As we look up at the sky we see the occasional swimmer passing overhead. Bodies floating through the air without limits, without boundaries: limitlessness and boundlessness, an image in space that speaks to the imagination while remaining unquestionably real. On the ground we experience a new level of delirium, one that is utterly confounding. That which should be on the ground now appears to us in the sky.