

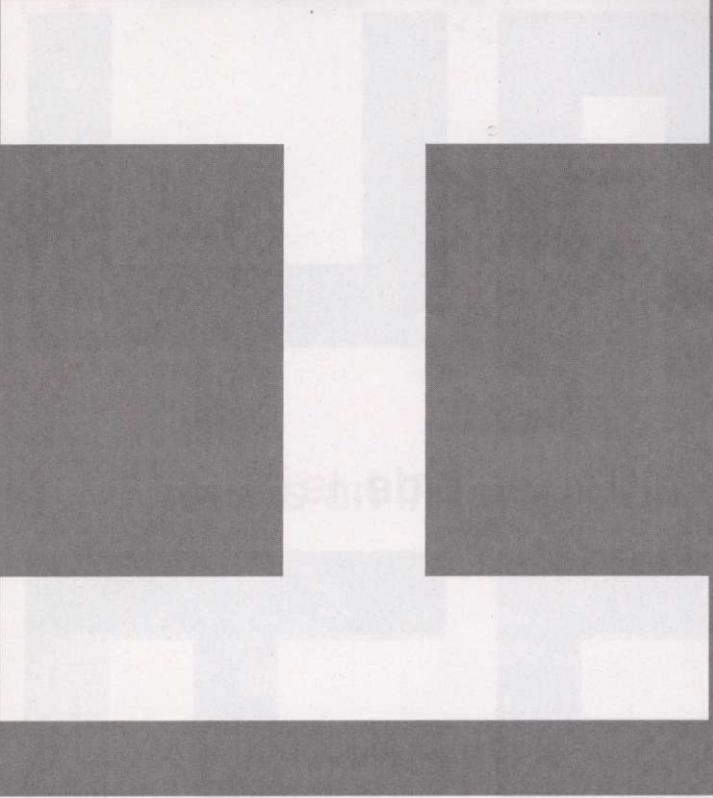
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company's workers have committed suicide. **Is it our fault?**

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**BY JOEL JOHNSON**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY LAW



It's hard not to look at the nets. Every building is skirted in them. They drape every precipice, steel poles jutting out 20 feet above the sidewalk, loosely tangled like volleyball nets in winter. ¶ The nets went up in May, after the 11th jumper in less than a year died here. They carried a message: You can throw yourself off any building you like, as long as it isn't one of these. And they seem to have worked. Since they were installed, the suicide rate has slowed to a trickle. ¶ My tour guides don't mention the nets until I do. Not to avoid the topic, I don't think—the suicides are the reason I am at a Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, a bustling industrial city in southern China—but simply because they are so prevalent. Foxconn, the single largest private employer in mainland China, manufactures many of the products—motherboards, camera components, MP3 players—that make up the world's \$150 billion consumer-electronics industry. Foxconn's output accounts for nearly 40 percent of that revenue. Altogether, the company employs about a million people, nearly half of whom work at the 20-year-old Shenzhen plant. But until two summers ago, most Americans had never heard of Foxconn. ¶ That all changed with the suicides. There had been a few since 2007. Then a spate of nine between March and May 2010—all jumpers. There were also suicides at other Foxconn plants in China. Although the company disputes some cases, evidence gathered from news reports and other sources indicates that 17 Foxconn workers have killed themselves in the past half decade. What had seemed to be a series of isolated incidents was becoming an appalling trend. When one jumper left a note explaining that he committed suicide to provide for his family, the program of remuneration for the families of jumpers was canceled. Some saw the Foxconn suicides as a damning consequence of our global hunger for low-cost electronics. Reports from inside the factories warned of "sweatshop" conditions; old allegations of forced overtime bubbled back to life. Foxconn and its partners—notably Apple—found themselves defending factory conditions while struggling to explain the

deaths. "SUICIDES IN CHINA PROMPT DAMAGE CONTROL," blared *The New York Times*.

I seem to be witnessing some of those damage-control efforts on this still-warm fall day as two Foxconn executives—along with a liaison from Burson-Marsteller, a PR firm hired to deal with the post-suicide outcry—lead me through the facility. I have spent much of my career blogging about gadgets on sites like Boing Boing Gadgets and Gizmodo, reviewing and often praising many of the products that were made right here at Foxconn's Shenzhen factory. I ignored the first Foxconn suicides as sad but statistically inevitable. But as the number of jumpers approached double digits, latent self-reproach began to boil over. Out of a million people, 17 suicides isn't much—indeed, American college students kill themselves at four times that rate. Still, after years of writing what is (at best) buyers' guidance and (at worst) marching hymns for an army of consumers, I was burdened by what felt like an outsize provision of guilt—an existential buyer's remorse for civilization itself. I am here because I want to know: Did my iPhone kill 17 people?

My hosts are eager to help me answer that question in the negative by pointing out how pleasant life in the factory can be. They are quick with the college analogies: The canteens and mess halls are "like a college food court." The living quarters, where up to eight workers share rooms about the size of a two-car garage, are "like college dorms." The avenues and boulevards in the less industrial parts of the campus are "like malls."

For all their defensiveness, my guides are not far off the mark. The avenues certainly look more like a college campus than the dingy design-by-Communism concrete canyons I half expected to find. Sure, everything on the Foxconn campus is a bit shabby—errant woody saplings creep out of sidewalk cracks, and the signage is sometimes rusty or faded—more community college than Ivy League, perhaps. But it's generally clean. Workers stroll the sidewalks chatting and laughing, smoking together under trees, as amiable as any group of factory workers in the first world.

But "college campus" doesn't quite capture the vastness of the place. It's more like



a nation-state, a gated complex covering just over a square mile, separated from the rest of Shenzhen's buildings by chain link and concrete. It houses one of the largest industrial kitchens in Asia—perhaps the world. Shenzhen itself was developed over the past three decades as one of party leader Deng Xiaoping's Special Economic Zones—a kind of capitalist hot spot. The experiment was a rousing success. Millions of workers, gambling that low but dependable wages would be more readily found in Shenzhen, migrated from the poor, rural western provinces, packing into the tenement complexes that soon riddled the city. Factory work offered a chance to change their lives and the lives

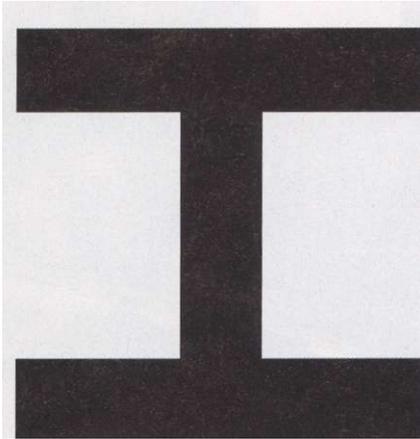
of their families back home, but it offered little in the way of security. Many companies did not supply housing, leaving workers to find shelter in dodgy slums or encouraging them to sleep on the assembly line. When they did provide lodging, it was typically a dorm room crammed with bunk beds.

According to company lore, Foxconn founder Terry Gou was determined to do things differently. So when the firm built its Longhua factory in Shenzhen, it included onsite dormitories—good ones, designed to be better than what workers could afford on their own. Terry Gou built on-campus housing, I am told, because Terry Gou cared about the welfare of his employees.

The work at Foxconn's Shenzhen plant can be repetitive, exhausting, and alienating—like manufacturing jobs anywhere in the world.

Up went a factory, up went a dorm. Up went an assembly line, up went a cafeteria. While other companies' workers fended for themselves or slept under the tables they worked at, Gou's employees were well fed, safe from the petty crime of a growing metropolis, and surrounded by peers and advocates.

It rings as unalloyed munificence—until a man puts his foot on the edge of a roof, looks across the campus full of trees and swimming pools and coffee shops, and steps off into nothing.



IN THE PART of our minds where Americans hold an image of what an Asian factory may be, there are two competing visions: fluorescent fields of chattering machines attended by clean-suited technicians, or barefoot laborers bent over long wooden tables in sweltering rooms hazed by a fog of soldering fumes.

When we buy a new electronic device, we imagine the former factory. Our little glass, metal, and plastic marvel is the height of modern technological progress; it *must* have been made by worker-robots (with hands like surgeon-robots)—or failing that, extremely competent human beings.

But when we think "Chinese factory," we often imagine the latter. Some in the US—and here I should probably stop speaking in generalities and simply refer to myself—harbor a guilty suspicion that the products we buy from China, even those made for American companies, come to us at the expense of underpaid and oppressed laborers.

From what I can tell, though, the reality is more banal than either of those scenarios. This is what it's like to work at the Foxconn factory: You enter a five- or six-story concrete building, pull on a plastic jacket and hat, and slip booties over your shoes. You walk up a wide staircase to your assigned floor, the entirety of which lies open under unwavering fluorescent light.

It's likely that your job will require you to sit or stand in place for most of your shift. Maybe you grab components from a bin and slot them into circuit boards as they move down a conveyor. Or you might tend a machine, feeding it tape that holds tiny microprocessors like candy on paper spools.

Or you may sit next to a refrigerator-sized machine, checking its handiwork under a magnifying glass. Or you could sit at a bench with other technicians placing completed cell-phone circuit boards into lead-lined boxes resembling small kilns, testing each piece for electromagnetic interference.

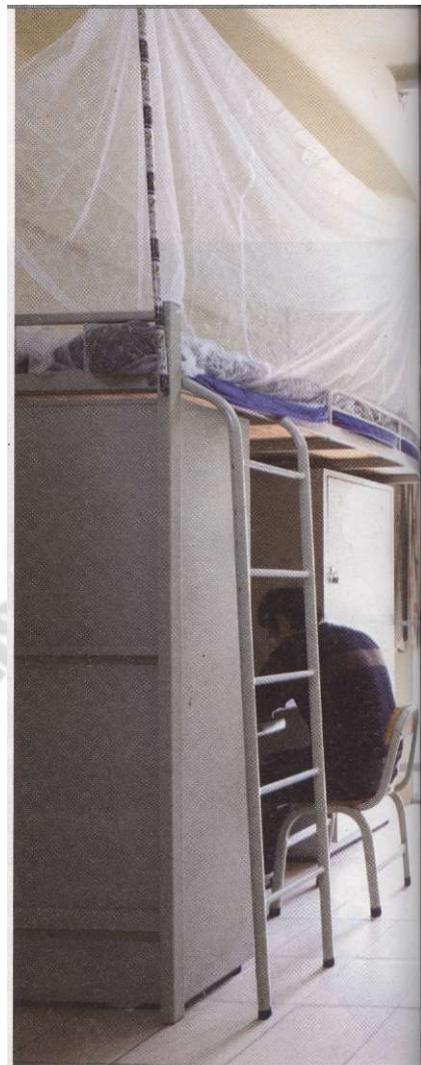
If you have to go to the bathroom, you raise your hand until your spot on the line can be covered. You get an hour for lunch and two 10-minute breaks; roles are switched up every few days for cross-training. It seems incredibly boring—like factory work anywhere in the developed world.

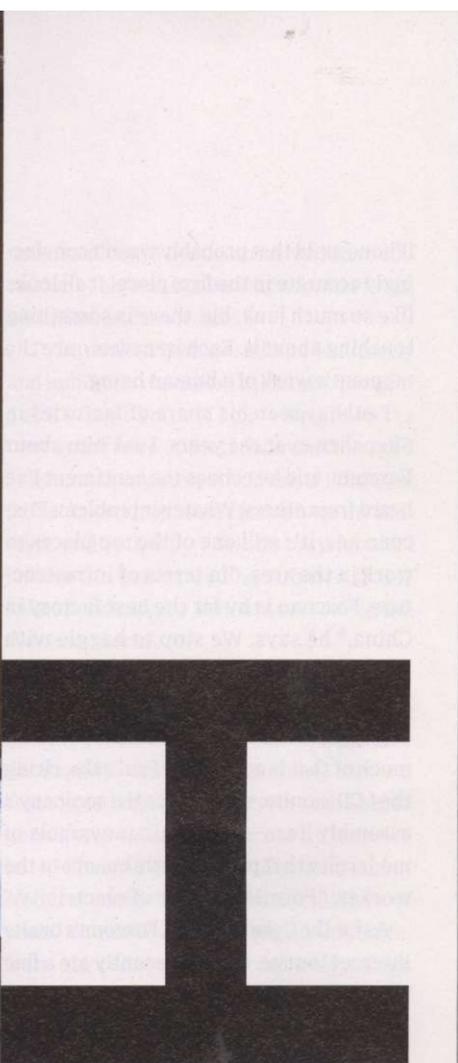
You work 10 hours or so, depending on overtime. You walk or take a shuttle back to your dorm, where you share a room with up to seven other employees that Foxconn management has selected as your bunk-mates. You watch television in a common room with bench seating, on an HDTV that seems insultingly small compared with the giant units you and your coworkers make every day. Or maybe you play videogames or check email in one of the on-campus cyber-cafes, perhaps sharing a semiprivate "couple's booth" with a girlfriend or boyfriend.

In the morning, you clean yourself up in your room's communal sink or in one of the dorm's showers, then head back to the production line to do it all over again.

A report by the UK's *The Mail on Sunday* in 2006 accused Foxconn of forcing workers to pull long shifts to meet unrealistic quotas. That report prompted an audit from Apple, which found "no instances of forced overtime" but noted that "employees worked longer hours than permitted by our Code of Conduct"—over 60 hours a week. (Apple has performed such audits every year since.)

Last April, the Chinese newspaper *Southern Weekend* sent a young reporter into Foxconn to work undercover for a month; he returned with bleak tales of hopelessness and "voluntary overtime affidavits." An October report by Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior, a Hong Kong-based labor rights group, found that workers at Foxconn's Shenzhen plant worked 13 days straight, 12 hours a day, to produce the first generation of Apple's





iPad. Foxconn has denied the reports and said it complies with all Chinese regulations regarding working hours and overtime.

That 17 people have committed suicide at Foxconn is a tragedy. But in fact, the suicide rate at Foxconn's Shenzhen plant remains below national averages for both rural and urban China, a bleak but unassailable fact that does much to exonerate the conditions at Foxconn and absolutely nothing to bring those 17 people back.

But the work itself isn't inhumane—unless you consider a repetitive, exhausting, and alienating workplace over which you have no influence or authority to be inhumane. And that would pretty much describe every single manufacturing or burger-flipping job ever.

Foxconn executives compare their plant to a college campus, and they aren't far off—the facilities contain everything from dormitories (above) to counseling centers (left).

I WALK ONE AFTERNOON to the brassiest concentration of Shenzhen's manufacturing power, the SEG Square electronics market in the Futian district. My Taiwanese guide, Paul, has spent the better part of a decade in Shenzhen as a steward for Western electronics companies seeking to procure components or goods from one of the city's thousands of suppliers. Here in SEG Square, the products of those suppliers fill glass cases and hang from pegboards in vast, low-ceilinged grottoes that would echo if they weren't crammed wall to wall with vendors' stalls. Elsewhere in Shenzhen, such markets are stocked with bamboo knickknacks and counterfeit puffy vests; this one is filled with obviously fake iPhone chargers.

SEG Square's markets are crowded, loud, and mildly mephitic from cigarette smoke and the odor of fresh-baked electronics. Whole floors are dedicated to knockoffs, not just at-first-glance-perfect clones of popular products but also cargo-cult evocations, like FM radios cast from a third-generation

iPhone mold that probably wasn't convincingly accurate in the first place. It all looks like so much junk, but there is something touching about it. Each item was once the moment's work of a human being.

Paul has seen his share of factories in Shenzhen over the years. I ask him about Foxconn, and he echoes the sentiment I've heard from others: Whatever problems Foxconn has, it's still one of the top places to work in the area. "In terms of infrastructure, Foxconn is by far the best factory in China," he says. We stop to haggle with a vendor over five nonfunctional dummy iPhones (in mythic white) that I want to buy as gag gifts for friends back home. "But how much of that is a facade?" Paul asks, citing the LCD monitors that grace the company's assembly lines—ostentatious symbols of modernity that provide little benefit to the worker. "Pointless waste of electricity."

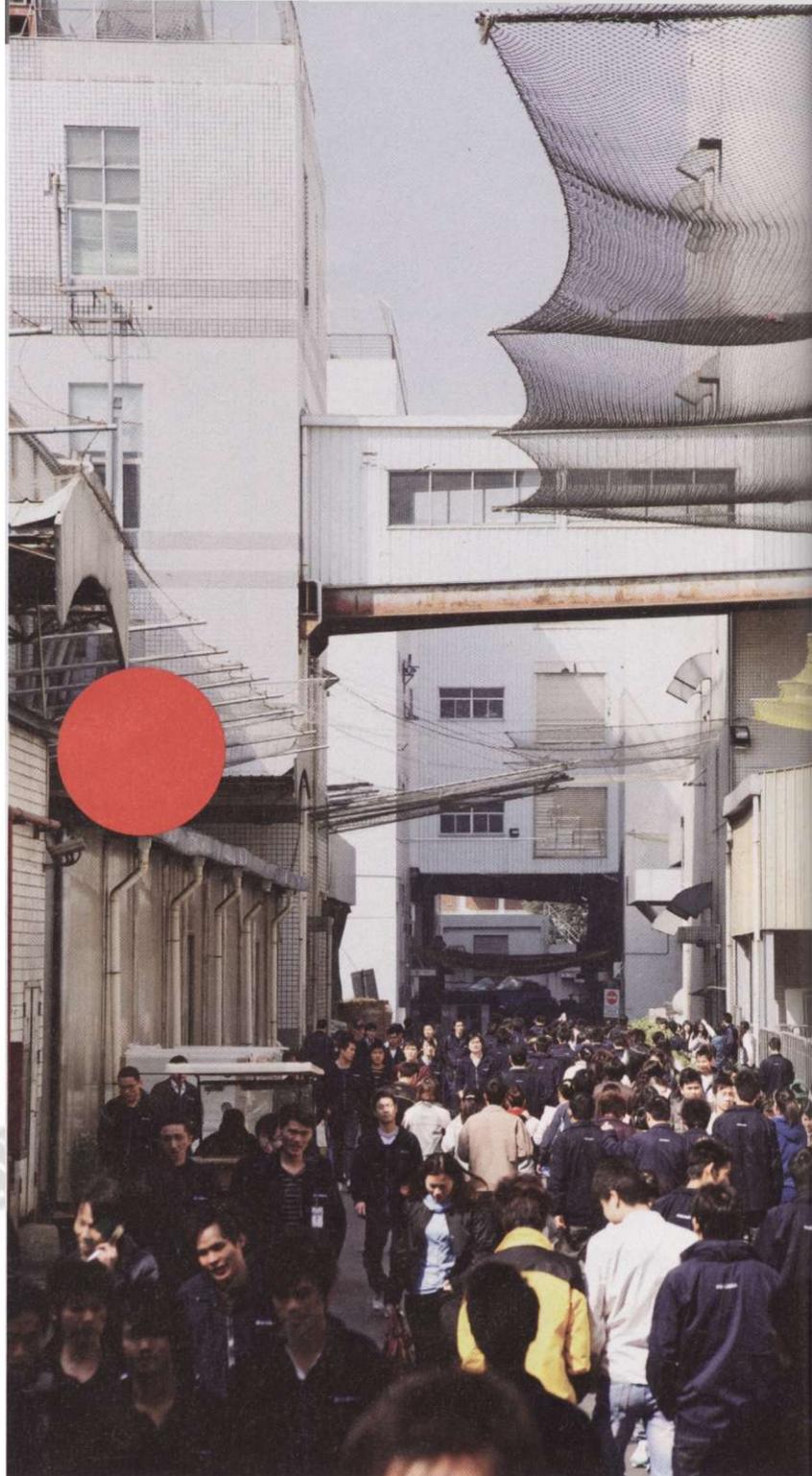
As for the Cyberfox Café, Foxconn's onsite Internet lounge, where I recently ate a fine bowl of bitter melon soup? "It might look huge, but considering the size of Foxconn's workforce," Paul says, "it can't even serve 5 percent of the employees."

Even if it is one of the better places to work in Shenzhen (at least for entry-level factory jobs), by the middle of 2010, after the suicides, it was clear to Foxconn management that they were no longer running an anonymous manufacturing company. Foxconn was now a billion-dollar avatar of globalization, and they were feeling the rubber-necked gape of international scrutiny.

The living quarters on the Shenzhen campus were recently handed off to property management companies that are more experienced at addressing the living needs of employees. Foxconn hopes the outside firms will be quicker to respond to tenant complaints, although some critics suggest that the company hopes to outsource some of the blame as well. (When Foxconn constructs new inland factories, the living quarters will be managed in partnership with local governments.)

Foxconn has also built onsite counseling facilities, which are staffed by psychologists and counselors. I toured two such facilities. One, sharing storefront space

on a busy avenue, has agents who can help workers replace lost keycards or buy prepaid mobile-phone cards to call home; this place was fairly busy. Another, off the main drag, was a full-on care center with music-therapy rooms, private counseling, and



Since Foxconn installed nets on all buildings at its Shenzhen campus, the suicide rate among employees has declined dramatically.

lounge areas; when I visited, it was nearly empty. In one room, a life-size Weeble Wobble with a scowling face could be smacked with a padded baseball bat. (It relieved my own stress for a moment.)

But the most ambitious effort to address worker morale is a modest-looking electronics store on the Foxconn campus, right next to a shop selling fresh fruit. It's called Ten Thousand Horses Galloping. (I'm assured the name has more pizzazz

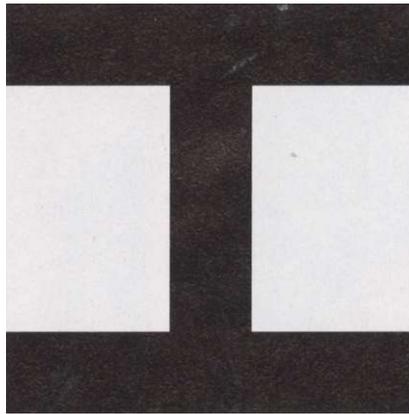
in Chinese.) Inside, you can buy rice cookers and desk fans and phones. It's like a RadioShack without the DIY components, or a Best Buy without the large appliances or racks of media. And according to Foxconn executives, it's the future of their company.

Foxconn campuses already have company stores where workers can buy the products they manufacture at discounted prices. Ten Thousand Horses Galloping is designed to be an electronics store for the rest of China. Foxconn plans to offer franchises to employees and even grant them a little startup capital.

The idea is to give some lucky, hard-working employees a way to bring a touch of entrepreneurial spirit back to their home provinces, especially in the poorer west. The workers get to own their own businesses; Foxconn gets to supply the stores with goods. To date, Foxconn has granted franchises to 60 employees and several more to outsiders.

Foxconn positions Ten Thousand Horses Galloping as a new direction for the company, one that allows it to shift into retail while tapping into the cream of the roughly million-strong workforce it has cultivated in China. But the store also offers another benefit to Foxconn, one that wasn't even needed until recently: employee retention. In recent years, factories have been sprouting up in China's interior to take advantage of cheaper labor. Workers aren't flocking to Shenzhen as they did a decade ago, when it was one of the only places to get a manufacturing job. "Now that work opportunities are increasing in the interior regions of the country, would-be migrants are willing to take a lower salary at home to stay with their families," says Benjamin Dolgin-Gardner, general manager of Shenzhen CE and IT Limited. Even Foxconn itself is building a facility in Hunan, after being lured by multibillion-dollar tax and investment incentives from the provincial government.

Shenzhen may soon relinquish its role as the stoked furnace of the Chinese dream. But will that mean even greater expansion of the middle class, with commensurate benefits—or just the same old system shifted a thousand miles to the west?



**IN AMERICA**, we have wrestled with the idea of divine sanction since the country's inception. Some of us believe we have a God-given dominion over the earth; others argue that we're bound to a larger Gaian system and are, at our best, caretakers.

My heart is with the caretakers. But I believe that humankind made a subconscious collective bargain at the dawn of the industrial age to trade the resources of our planet for the chance to escape it. We live in the transitional age between that decision and its conclusion.

In this middle age, the West built a middle class. It's now eroding and may be less enduring than the American Dream itself—a dream we exported to the rest of the world by culture and conquest. Nevertheless, most Americans have food, cars, gadgets. How can we begrudge a single person these luxuries if we want them ourselves?

By many accounts, those unskilled laborers who get jobs at Foxconn are the luckiest. But eyes should absolutely remain on Foxconn, the eyes of media both foreign and domestic, of government inspectors and partner companies. The work may be humane, but rampant overtime is not. We should encourage workers' rights just as much as we champion economic development. We've exported our manufacturing; let's be sure to export trade unions, too.

I've written thousands of posts, millions of words, about *things*. Usually things with electricity in them. Doing this for a living, on and off, for the better part of a decade, has greatly—perhaps fundamentally—changed how I perceive the world around me. I can

no longer look at the material world as a collection of objects but instead see interfaces, histories, and materials.

To be soaked in materialism, to directly and indirectly champion it, has also brought guilt. I don't know if I have a right to the vast quantities of materials and energy I consume in my daily life. Even if I thought I did, I know the planet cannot bear my lifestyle multiplied by 7 billion individuals. I believe this understanding is shared, if only subconsciously, by almost everyone in the Western world.

Every last trifle we touch and consume, right down to the paper on which this magazine is printed or the screen on which it's displayed, is not only ephemeral but in a real sense irreplaceable. Every consumer good has a cost not borne out by its price but instead falsely bolstered by a vanishing resource economy. We squander millions of years' worth of stored energy, stored life, from our planet to make not only things that are critical to our survival and comfort but also things that simply satisfy our innate primate desire to possess. It's this guilt that we attempt to assuage with the hope that our consumerist culture is making life better—for ourselves, of course, but also in some lesser way for those who cannot afford to buy everything we purchase, consume, or own.

When that small appeasement is challenged even slightly, when that thin, taut cord that connects our consumption to the nameless millions who make our lifestyle possible snaps even for a moment, the gulf we find ourselves peering into—a yawning, endless future of emptiness on a squandered planet—becomes too much to bear.

When 17 people take their lives, I ask myself, did I in my desire hurt them? Even just a little?

And of course the answer, inevitable and immeasurable as the fluttering silence of our sun, is yes.

Just a little.

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