

УДРЕДБА
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What kind of philosophy and art are called for when reality becomes the precarious thing par excellence?

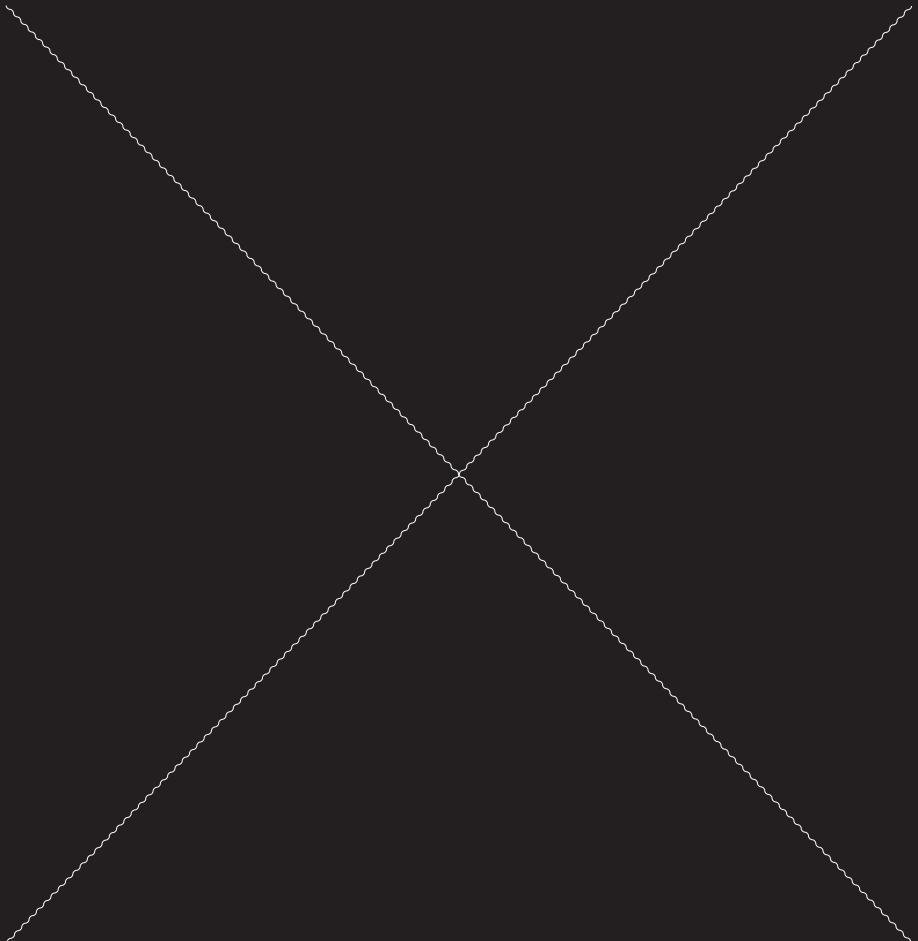
What has become apparent in the past years is that reality is fiction. There's no way around it. This proposition has been made many times before—by renowned philosophers, no less—but the truth of it has turned into something fundamentally different. Fiction has become a new type of systematization, a construction more real than the real itself, precisely because it has left reality and its constraints behind. Fictions are not something coming from us; they are emergent phenomena of the virtual spaces we occupy—spaces within which a new systematization of the real takes shape. No longer subjects, we are becoming conduits for such fictions to take place, manifesting in all their unmediated intensity, outside the social bond and beyond meaning-making attempts to anchor them into something concrete. It's as if no one is satisfied with what exists—not even the world itself. The world is already becoming other to itself, unmasking and unmaking itself at accelerating speed. With each erosion and destabilization, something new is being built, drawn from what was left behind: the unmediated potential of the real. What does this realignment reveal about fiction's power to set realities in motion? What possibilities does it offer for experimenting with the un/making of reality—and how is belief (in reality and/as fiction) formed, managed, generated, and suspended in this context?

Unreality Mode brings together perspectives exploring the effects and affordances unfolding between psychotic disbelief in reality on the one end and the suspension of disbelief in fiction on the other.

The first volume of this double issue traced this between-zone. The contributors showed how unreality is no longer just a void or illusion but an operational mode in which fictions, glitches, and loops become the very machinery that has hijacked the production of the “Real”. If the definition of a weapon is “that which forces a change in reality”, then

the texts collected in Volume I amount to an armory. They follow the procedures—chemical, algorithmic, geopolitical, narrative, epistemic, and psychotic—through which reality is now forced, bent, and rerun. In Unreality Mode, we are not observers of these processes but components in them: carriers of fictions, nodes in replication pipelines, walkers in constrained squares, thinkers under the spell of circular movements. What is at stake is no longer how to return to some lost reality but how to inhabit this condition strategically—how to use fictions, glitches, and loops as interfaces for navigating the ongoing remaking of the real.

*The **second volume** explores how contemporary art takes up this challenge.*





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LIBRARY II BOOKS

VOL - 2

Intro

TJAŠA POGAČAR & MAKS VALEŇČIČ

The contributions gathered here propose a cast of conceptual figures and tools through which unreality mode might be tactically engaged.

Jiří Siruček's reading of *The Bastard Fields* by **Most Dismal Swamp** frames our current technological environment not as a neutral tool, but as a "Second Nature" defined by hostility and indifference. Drawing on Schelling's "Dark Nature" and the aesthetics of Black Metal and cosmic pessimism, Siruček argues that we are already living inside a "slopified" void of automated feedback loops and model collapse. **Scott Wark**, in his discussion of the works of Ed Atkins and Most Dismal Swamp, argues that "vibes" have become the dominant mode of engagement with this incoherence. Rather than retreating into immersive world-building, he proposes a shift toward "vibe engineering": a tactic that tunes (into) the affective charge of a reality already smashed to bits, treating fragmentation itself as usable artistic material.

In **Proto Gallery Systems'** *Clueless Agency* series of off-site exhibitions, the curator, participant, and viewer alike find themselves caught within reality's diffraction. Guided by the figure of a detective who becomes consumed by proliferating details and unsound procedures, the project uses Illusion, fabulation, and forgery not as failures but operative strategies, extending across exhibitions and their entangled online traces.

Noemi Purkrábková's essay extends this psychotic detective work by drawing patterns and connections between various occult, scientific, and philosophical references. Rejecting the "arrogance" of philosophical illumination Purkrabková proposes "Vision-in-Black", a mode of seeing that embraces opacity, darkness, and low intuition.

This descent into the unknown is further charted by **Philip Speakman**, whose practice explores internet legends and mysteries—such as creepypastas and QAnon—and the ways they bleed from imagination into reality. His project *Katabasing* itself operates as one such "tale of the anomalous", blurring the line between fiction and fact. In dialogue with Speakman's work, **Luja Šimunović** considers the games of belief shaped by digital networks and offers a taxonomy of roles—from Trickster to Dead Account—that co-enact the loops of online mythmaking.

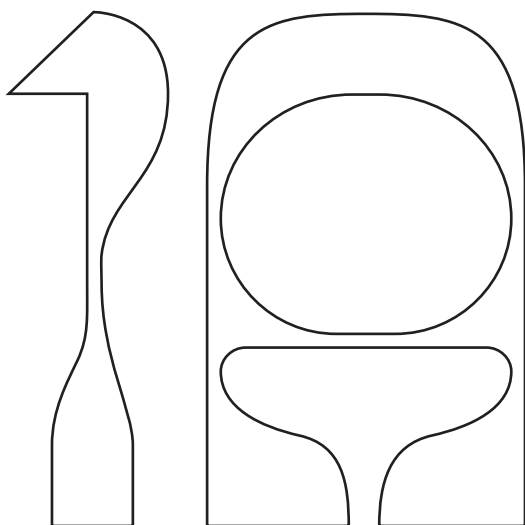
Within the affective currents of the feed, and the prevailing feeling of dread and derangement, we encounter the paintings, memes, and films of **Eliška Jahelková** (aka angel kether). As proposed by **Sophie Publig & Claire Elise Herzberg**, kether's practice is a ritual of counter-algorithmic cosmic repair. Through aesthetic operations of blur, superimposition, and overexposure, kether's work radiates an immanent Spinozian theology where the digital network itself becomes a site of divine connection (internet=god=love).

While kether seeks repair through connection, **Vladimir Vidmar** identifies a ritualized embrace of non-relation in the photographic practice of **Jon Derganc**. Vidmar argues that a world stripped of any "guarantor of truth" demands a paradoxical religious stance—"a religion without transcendence." By foregrounding image post-production in Derganc's work, and tracing the

etymology and connotations of the old-fashioned terms for artist (Künstler) back to the “shammer” or trickster, Vidmar proposes that artificializing dimension grants art a special role: art, as a “ritual of the world’s falsification”, becomes the only possible relationship with reality and honest position left.

Finally, **Ema Ograjenšek** reflects on **Živa Božičnik Rebec**'s artwork *Pleroma*—a site-specific installation of four resin blocks, aligned with solar cycles, in Ljubljana’s “Black Widow” building—to propose a way out of the dead-ends of modern aesthetics. Ograjenšek turns to Gabriel Catren’s philosophy, which serves also as the inspiration for *Pleroma*. She frames Rebec’s installation not as a static object, but as a “speculative mediation” between physical actors (resin, the Sun), historical narratives (the “Black Widow” building), and fiction. By operating as a “dreamlike materialism,” the work functions as a tool to navigate the “outside,” moving aesthetics from a melancholic retreat into a functional, pluralistic engagement with the world.

Taken together, the projects and essays in this volume do not seek to resolve unreality or restore a stable ground beneath it. Instead, they articulate ways of thinking, making, and moving within it, testing how fiction, belief, affect, and material processes might be engaged as sites where reality is not only produced, but fundamentally reconfigured.



We Won't
Recover from
This:
The Dark
Nature of The
Bastard Fields

JIRÍ SIRŮČEK

“Nature is fucking crazy”

— Steven Shakespeare¹

According to Schelling, Nature is dark—a chaotic indeterminate force that overrides human codes, meanings, and projections, dwelling instead in contradiction and derangement. He writes: “Without contradiction there would be no life, no movement, no progress; only a deadly slumber of all forces.”² At the same time, its ambivalent and all-encompassing intensity poisons us: “Contradiction is in fact the venom of all life, and all vital motion is nothing but the attempt to overcome this poisoning.”³ The Nature therefore torments us with its murky emptiness as we desperately attempt to impose some sense upon it, leaving us trapped deeper and deeper in its ambiguity. In his book dedicated to Schelling, Slavoj Žižek aptly captures this paradox when he writes: “The best metaphor for this rotary motion is a trapped animal that desperately strives to disengage itself from a snare: although every spring only tightens the snare, a blind compulsion drives the animal to dash again and again, condemning it to an endless repetition of the same gesture.”⁴ Sounds familiar?

What Schelling—writing against the dominant intellectual currents of the early 19th century—discerned in Nature may now strike us as almost tender, living in the world structured by ubiquitous neural media. For him, the inherent negativity of the world still bore a trace of the divine, offering glimpses of light in the dark. For those

1 Steven Shakespeare, “The Light That Illuminates Itself, The Dark That Soils Itself: Blackened Notes from Schelling’s Underground”, in *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium I*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro (Charleston: CreateSpace, 2010), 5, https://hugori-beiro.com.br/biblioteca-digital/Masciandaro-Black_Metal_Theory_Symposium.pdf.

2 Slavoj Žižek and F. W. J. von Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 124.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 17.

of us living in the 21st century, by contrast, the all-encompassing technological environments—sometimes described as *second nature*⁵—are saturated with a hostile void, where automated digital media proliferate, deepening disparities, discrimination, and divisions, and amplifying destructive forms of subjectivization and distorted (self-)awareness.⁶ This leads Jonathan Crary to observe that “the internet complex is the implacable engine of addiction, loneliness, false hopes, cruelty, psychosis, indebtedness, squandered life, the corrosion of memory, and social disintegration”.⁷

The rise of generative AI has hardly helped. As Hito Steyerl points out, its emergence coincides “with an era of widespread multi-crisis—with regular financial breakdowns the default setting, post-pandemic recessions, accelerating climate change and increasing extreme weather events, rising right-wing and neo-fascist movements globally, and several active military conflicts

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- 5 In the Marxist line of thought, *second nature* refers to the artificial transformation of social and economic relations under capitalism. As John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark put it: “Nature no longer exists as a reality in and of itself, or as an ontological referent, but retains only a shadowy existence within socially constructed ‘hybrids’ or ‘bundles’ produced by the capitalist world-ecology.” (John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Marxism and the Dialectics of Ecology,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 5 (October 2016): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-068-05-2016-09_1) Building on this, several theorists have argued that such environments are inseparable from media technologies, which mediate the majority of relations under late capitalism. *Second nature* can thus be understood as a deeply normalized artificial ecology sustained by algorithms, artificial intelligence, and more broadly, the networks of contemporary technological systems. See for example: Hybrid Collapse, “Second Nature – Digital Environments, Hybrid Realities, and the New Normal”, accessed November 1, 2025, <https://www.hybridcollapse.com/glossary/second-nature>; or Dan Bruiger, *Second Nature: The Man-Made World of Idealism, Technology and Power* (Lanham, MD: Left Field Press, 2006).
- 6 See for example: Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society, Volume 1: The Future of Work*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016); or Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, “Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation: Disparateness as a Precondition for Individuation through Relationships?”, *Réseaux* no. 177 (2013): 163–196, <https://doi.org/10.3917/res.177.0163>.
- 7 Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2022), 2.

with high numbers of civilian casualties”.⁸ According to her, the rapid deployment of GenAI primarily led to acceleration of entropy, casting us into the decaying political and ecological orders, while sinking us in randomized, ever-changing slops. As the term suggest, slops are literally spilled muds of meaningless data, wastefully secreting malodorous signs and information all over the (spl)internet. Kate Crawford observes that “AI slop isn’t invested in the order of events or even looking like reality. The slop is not the territory: it just smothers it in synthetic goop. It’s flooding the zone with AI shit.”⁹

This is what we are reminded of by Bog Body, a decaying CGI creature from Most Dismal Swamp’s *The Bastard Fields* trilogy, as it trudges through a rain-soaked, 3D-engine-rendered valley: “Nothing, or something indistinguishable from it, is gleaned from starved dreamings, slumgullion visions among slumgullion predictions.” As noted in the accompanying annotation, the videos carry us through a “degenerative fever-dream [...] of model-collapsed realities”,¹⁰ where the hostile architectures of tech-based environments haunt their inhabitants with phantasmagoric machinic visions, merging disparate realities into networked entropy. Digital, natural, DIY, inhuman, and artificial elements all blend together as we collectively hallucinate alongside a homemade gorpcore robot in a Nike jacket; the cute office worker Brownie, subjected to ritual humiliations by two creative directors; a demonic seventeenth-century Scottish preacher wearing a *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*-like mask, delivering sermons from a plastic-draped basement, accompanied by a harp-playing plush rabbit who is, apparently, high; and the already-mentioned Bog Body, an algorithmic undead wandering through fractured zones of this decaying world, from rendered

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8 Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat* (London: Verso Books, 2025), 1-2.

9 Kate Crawford, “Eating the Future: The Metabolic Logic of AI Slop”, *e-flux*, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/intensification/6782975/eating-the-future-the-metabolic-logic-of-ai-slop>.

10 Most Dismal Swamp, “The Bastard Fields (2025)”, accessed November 4, 2025, <https://mostdismalswamp.com/the-bastard-fields/>.

fields to an actual Covenanters' cove that once offered a fleeting religious refuge from the hostility of the outer world. Driven by metal, dark electronics, noise, and drone, the videos overstimulate us with their formally eclectic plunge into contemporary digital experience, where everything has collapsed into a meaningless "vibeless" slop, rendering it virtually impossible to distinguish creeping delusion from what is (or once was) real.

Writing about control and the internet almost a decade ago, Sandra Robinson observed the growing fragmentation of digital networks, which now connect an unprecedented number of people, materials, data, devices, infrastructures, systems, or softwares: "The resulting meshwork is an ever-changing hyper-connected swarm, a process and event-driven topology of connections oriented to dynamically occurring self-organization that does not easily translate to the human-computer organizational model."¹¹ Crucial to this swarm, Robinson argued, is that humans are not its sole agents but only one of many components in more-than-human, datafied meshworks—where human thinking is the least important factor for functionality. In fact, cognition is far too slow to keep pace with what is happening, left at the mercy of algorithms, their automated predictions, prehensions, and exclusions: forces operating beyond any rationalist urge to grasp "the real" in its complexity. We have not only become a marginal element within big data interactions but are simultaneously dispossessed of access to the sprawling infrastructures of digital media. Its black boxes remain encrypted and remote, distant from any knowledge or understanding.¹² And GenAI only fuels this fire, feeding on data so vast it slips entirely beyond our grasp. At the same time, "AI systems degenerate when they are fed on too much of their own outputs" notes Crawford,

11 Sandra Robinson, "The Vital Network: An Algorithmic Milieu of Communication and Control", *communication +1* 5, no. 1 (September 2016), 16, <https://openpublishing.library.umass.edu/cpo/article/id/15/print/>.

12 See for example: Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

and the data needed to train AI systems is already nearing exhaustion.¹³ In other words, “AI will eat itself, then gradually collapse into nonsense and noise”.¹⁴ A process we can already see unfolding.

This is precisely where *The Bastard Fields* takes us. “Nothing really disappears, it just fails to hold itself together,” says the DIY robot to the Bog Body when it emerges in a cove. The series makes a nihilistic dive through media architectures, where self-consuming data drives everything to fall apart and reassemble in endless loops. *The Bastard Fields*’ phantasmic environments, populated by unhinged influencers, chimeric pseudo-mythological beings, deranged creative-industry workers, and spaced-out art producers, uncannily evoke fragmented cultural memories of post-digital horror, immersing the viewer in multisensory experiences that feel at once familiar and alien. The videos immerse us in these hallucinatory, ever-updating psychotic fields, brushing against the “scaffolds of bastard projection of reality” dominated by surreally randomized data. If Robinson describes the digital as a swarm, the reality conjured by *The Bastard Fields* is instead a swamp—one of “slumgullion visions among slumgullion predictions”—where humans, codes, symbols, affects, impulses, and bodies merge into muddy operational nonsense and together sink into the virtualized bog.

Steven Shakespeare, a practicing priest, argues that one way to approach Schelling’s dark Nature is through the intense listening of black metal. “The buzzsaw guitar, the all too audible crudity of

13 Crawford writes that the “volume of data required to train generative AI systems is rapidly approaching the limits of what exists on the open web. Some researchers say this will happen by 2026. [...] AI industry guards the exact details, but reports suggest earlier GPT-3 models were trained on more than 45 terabytes of compressed internet content, at least 3.2 trillion words scraped from websites, books, articles, and social media posts created by millions of human authors. The latest public datasets like Public Domain 12M contain more than 12.4 billion images with text captions.” (Crawford, “Eating the Future”)

14 Ibid.

the production process: an aural friction, scoured glass of sound,” he writes, can serve as the condition for a revelation of “the always soiled absolute, the always crucified God.”¹⁵ It is in this liminal encounter with the genre’s dark, unrelenting intensity that glimpses of the “horrible” nature of “all life and existence”¹⁶ can be discerned. Similarly, for Eugene Thacker, both black metal and the horror genre evoke nonhuman, cosmic, and unthinkable spheres of reality, the *word-without-us*, as he calls it. This world-without-us is the very world we inhabit, only without our projections and fables: it lacks any stable ground; it is not structured by laws we can comprehend but is accidental, chaotic, and contradictory. It is a “a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific”.¹⁷ Horror and black metal are powerful, he argues, because they reveal—if only for a moment—the exact limits of human thought when it confronts realities as vast and uncanny as the world-without-us. They overwhelm our capacities for understanding, performing the ultimate gesture of “cosmic pessimism”.¹⁸ When a bloodthirsty demon looms, a spectral ghost flickers, or minimalist dark tones reverberate, we are confronted with the sense that existence exceeds anything we can think or comprehend. Such encounters bring us closer to the recognition of the inert hostility of the world and the pettiness of human existence. For Thacker, moments like these bring to the fore the nonhuman affects of dread¹⁹—forces so substantive to our being.

In this way, we can symbolically approach the dark Nature of the real—something Schelling so poignantly foresaw. Yet *the second nature* we now inhabit is even more sinister than Schelling’s worst nightmare. For him—and ultimately for Thacker—there remained

15 Shakespeare, “The Light That Illuminates Itself”, 22.

16 Žižek and Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom*, 17.

17 Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 6.

18 *Ibid.*, 17.

19 *Ibid.*, 21.

a firm divide between Nature and us. If, for Thacker, the cosmos is remote, digital infrastructures crave interaction; in “degenerative” mediascapes, we get trapped without distance or overview. The slop-driven architecture drowns its tenants in a swamp of nonhuman data, granting no insight, only deeper immersion. It aims to—as one creative director in *The Bastard Fields* suggests—submerge us into a “poor vibeless world”, overwriting us from within. For those enraptured by accelerated digital capital, the facade may appear joyful or cute,²⁰ but *Most Dismal Swamp* exposes the entrails of this reality as far more hostile and disquieting than we can stomach. Thus it is no accident that *The Bastard Fields* adopts the aesthetics of dread: as we have seen, these are the very modes through which one might apprehend the deranged nature of “misread and damned data” lurking beneath polished desktops and sleek interfaces. By plunging headlong into the digital noise, it performs an imaginative act of inhabitation—not modelling possible futures but exposing the unbearable density of the present from within. The fact that the videos themselves—featured on a website—exist within the very environments they seek to uncover underscores the impossibility of escape: they suggest that to touch upon this reality, one must get dirty, becoming a muddy particle of the datafied swamp.

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Through a flickering, horror-saturated synthesis of sludgy realities, fictions, environments, forms, styles, and intense voiceovers and music, the videos unveil the underlying mechanisms of modulative environments and their bastardized neural operability, bringing us closer to what it feels like to inhabit the “worst of the possible worlds”.²¹ Contrary to the classical pessimist position of the 19th century—which holds that if the world were any

20 Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic, *Cute Accelerationism* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2024).

21 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, cited in Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018), 6–7.

worse, it could not sustain itself and would have to fall apart²²—*The Bastard Fields* shows that we are already living through the collapse, caught in the midst of a contradictory reality that feeds upon itself while leaking into the undefined, soiled cosmos of online and offline multi-crises. And, as Bog Body once again reminds us, it is very probable that this time, “we won’t recover from this”.

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22 See for example: Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vols. 1 and 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958).

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The Bastard Fields

MOST DISMAL SWAMP









The Bastard Fields is a degenerative fever-dream emerging from a slumgullion world of model-collapsed realities. It explores and processes the idea of the contemporary neural mediascape as a sublime “hostile architecture”—mutating a possible world of machinic hallucinations and its inhabitants. These hallucinations are, according to the current logic of generative AI, statistically viable representations of a reality permitted by what can be captured, sensed, and discriminated by these systems. And, crucially, how these hallucinations act on us, in a mutual “model collapse”. Exacerbating this phenomenon is the human component of AI boosters and amateur ideologues: what *The Bastards Fields* playfully calls “an ambient positivism of sloptimised relevance”. Imagining a world where diverse realities and cultural possibilities are collapsed into a midified slop is no longer an act of speculation: it is simply what comes next in the feed. This parched and hostile dreamworld is not a radical speculation. Its murky contours are visible enough to make out a process that exonerates this slop by reducing our expectations: artists and researchers become scrapers, public intellectuals become memelords, subcultures and communities become “warrens of cultivated anomaly” for trend reports recycling situated value and “TYKYK” laurels ... *The Bastard Fields* is a phantasmagoric people’s history of the neural mediascape, told through various characters: a CGI Bog Body, a homemade robot, two “Creative Directors”, a mask worn by a seventeenth-century Scottish outlaw preacher, an intoxicated Rabbit, and a ritually humiliated Brownie. There are also key locations such as Peden's Cove—a place in Scotland where persecuted Covenanters would meet to practice their religion as an illegal “field conventicle”, which represents the idea of trying to find a safe space to flourish in the heart of a hostile environment. But what other scams, neuroses, and inequalities also flourish in such a space?

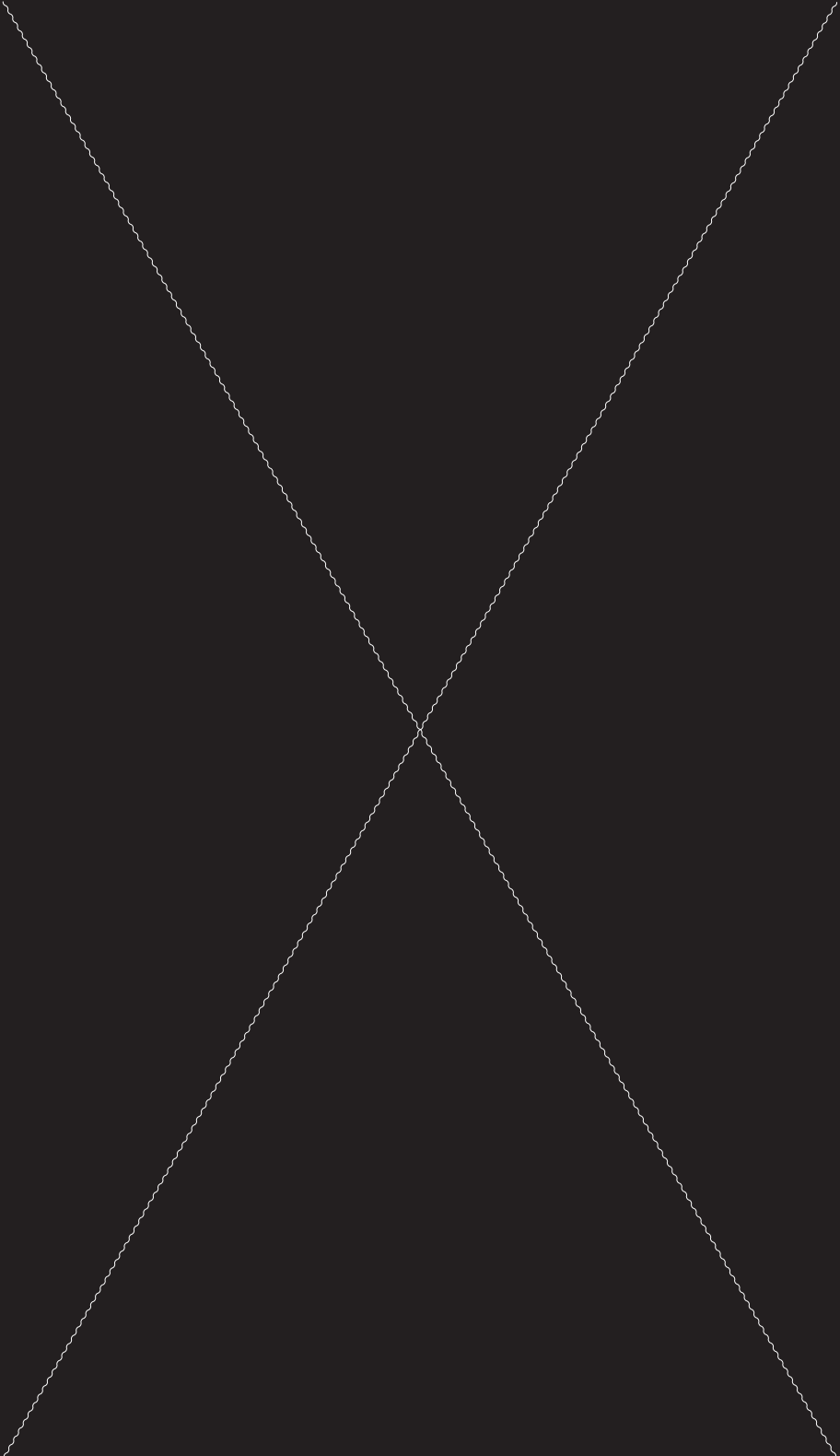
Credits

The Bastard Fields by Most Dismal Swamp, 2025

Most Dismal Swamp is a mixed-reality biome; a place and a practice where a dank miasma of fictions, artists, model worlds, adversarial realisms, external hard drives, camera-tracking data, campfires, opaque rituals, game engines, amateur heresies, visual effects plug-ins, and other animals comes together. Emerging from the curation, artwork, and research of Dane Sutherland, Most Dismal Swamp's multimedia projects involve collaboration, commissioning, and convivial speculation with many other artists. These projects are modular and densely populated, presented across various immersive and bespoke installations and online; Multi-User Shared Hallucinations dredged from the slumgullion swamp of adversarial digital, platform, and neural media. A rigorous "acid pessimism" inspires the work of Most Dismal Swamp: an acerbic yet playful immersion into the composite hallucinatory lifeworlds, game spaces, and protocols that make up the hostile architecture of our shared platform-mediated crises.

IG: @most_dismal_swamp

WWW: <https://mostdismalswamp.com/>





What's the Vibe?

SCOTT WARK

Everything's Fucked

What defines the times? Ours feel particularly fraught. So many different crises are compounding at once that instead of listing each one individually—economic turmoil, war, resurgent fascism, AI, not to mention the species-level existential threat posed by climate change—some commentators simply say we're living through “polycrisis”.¹

In the abstract, the concept of the “polycrisis” might be relatively easy to grasp: lots of different things are breaking all at once. We feel their material effects in our everyday lives. But they also have an epistemic correlate.

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As our certainties crack up under crisis's constant pressure, and as our visions of how reality ought to be drift ever farther beyond the horizon of expectation, we can't help but feel utterly unmoored, left without a clear sense of what the future has in store—or where shelter might lie.

This is a kind of epistemic derangement, a decoupling of ways of knowing the world from a world continuously defying how we expect it to be. Or, as Adam Tooze puts it in one of his substacks, the “knowledge crisis” that attends polycrisis, “the gap between inherited critical theory and the radicalism of the present”.²

1 Adam Tooze, “Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis”, *Financial Times*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33>.

2 Adam Tooze, “Chartbook 343: Polycrisis & the Critique of Capitalocentrism”, *Chartbook*, Substack, January 6, 2025, <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-343-polycrisis-and-the>.

Whether one identifies as a Tooze bro or not, this observation captures our struggle to make sense of what Stuart Hall called “the conjuncture”,³ or the social, political, economic, and ideological—and, of course, *environmental*—forces that are shaping the times. The old critical-theoretical frames aren’t giving us purchase on this confluence of crises, and we haven’t quite figured out what frames we need to give them shape.

This unmooring is epistemological, in part, because it defies conceptualization. It’s also epistemological because it exceeds material determination. It’s not just that our worlds feel like they’re falling apart; this feeling, of worlds falling apart, is a very real condition that we lack the conceptual tools to fix in place or explain away. Reality’s parts aren’t adding up to a whole.

With the caveat that polycrisis, like the future, is unequally distributed—climate change or war or fascism or economic or technological changes land differently where I am, in London—it feels like we’re living through a “vibe shift”.

While it feels kind of dumb to bring “polycrisis” and “vibe shift” together, there’s something about the term *vibe* that makes it useful for grappling with the times—and with forms of art-making that exemplify aesthetic modes of engaging with a world that doesn’t quite cohere.

3 Stuart Hall, “The Neo-Liberal Revolution”, *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 705.

I Dream in 3d

Technology plays a particular role in this material and epistemic fragmentation. One of the conditions of being in the world in the present is to be caught in unremitting streams of, if not information, then at least *content*. In 2013, Hito Steyerl proclaimed: “The internet is dead!”—not because it’s expired, but because it’s “all over”.⁴ Once it spread into every aspect of our lives, becoming not only a means of communication but essential to the basic infrastructures of living, making any distinction between real and virtual seems trite.

This inflects what it means to make art or to engage with aesthetics. Living, being, plays out through media of all kinds. We’ve become our prostheses; our senses, literally how we feel, know, parse, and orient ourselves in the world, are often as not delegated to inter-networked machines.

Art’s a part of this. We find stuff to look at through our feeds, in amongst all the other mess of content that we have to wade through in our distracted gleaning. More than this, we sense via our technical extensions. It’s not just that we might use a map app to get from point A to B. Sometimes, I catch myself daydreaming in 3d, the physics of my mental wanderings rendered Unreal by years of immersive conditioning.

Works of art that use game engines are real indexes of this fragmented and mediated sensing. In them, we sometimes find whole, coherent worlds: Lawrence Lek’s scripted and soundtracked total works, say, create logically coherent spaces for singing satellites

4 Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?”, *e-Flux Journal* 49 (2013).

(*Geomancer*) or depressed driverless cars (*Black Cloud*) to inhabit. Sometimes, though, we find something else: practices that tune in to the circulating, proliferating fragments— orphaned bits of reality—that define the times.

On the other side of artistic practices of world building, which borrow from sci-fi and fantasy to compose holistic, self-contained realities in which narratives can take root, this other kind of practice tunes in to vibes.

Refuse.exe

I've just spent ten minutes watching a 3d animated figure masturbate into a corner of a rundown flat on a large screen in the Tate Britain.⁵ I'm not quite sure what I think of this yet, so I keep moving. I round the corner in this survey of Ed Atkins' work and come face to fin with a series of flopping, animated fish falling from the sky.

The fish—tuna, I think? Not my area of expertise—twist in the air in front of an off-white background, not schooling, each lost in its own slow, simulated flounder. They smash into a pile of other trash, thrashing tails disturbing the discarded and destroyed objects around them. Their flailing impact throws up a cloud of dust and debris. I can't recall what's next—bones? A cabinet? An anchor? Tires?—but each falls, one after the other, into the pile, adding to the increasingly large heap of wreckage on the screen.

5 Ed Atkins, Tate Britain, London, April 2 – August 25, 2025, Exhibition.

That's all *Refuse.exe* is: a sequence of objects falling from the sky and crashing to the ground.⁶ The wall text tells me that this isn't a video. It's a live simulation, created using Unreal Engine, that creates a different pile of debris each time depending on how the physics engine resolves each impact.

I go and look at some of the other works in this survey, but I keep coming back to this one. It's funny in a way that only jokes that overtly telegraph their punchline but deliver it anyway can be: *it's falling! smash!* It's also mesmerizing. In it is an entire technical apparatus, the 3d game engine, reduced to a couple of constituent parts: physics, form, space, and light.

These are all the bits you need to draw a line out of this world and into another: to build a reality that is coherent yet conforms to entirely different rules. Only instead of building, Atkins uses this live simulation—and all the resource and compute that implies—to stage the destruction of a set of arbitrary objects simulated out of this one. It's funny, and kind of silly, but it's also a *vibe*.

In *Flower*, a slim, diary-like volume of observations and confessions, Atkins has a passage about how he often treats the men—they're often men—his videos simulate as “dead”: his “dead men are enchanted artificial corpses with a felt lack where a life might have been” who are “made dead in order” for him, and by extension, us, to “model feelings otherwise unavailable outside of losing someone close to you for real”. This, he says, is “a boon of the excessive, disgusting realism in [his] videos and the fact that they're made of: data, and then light”.⁷

6 Ed Atkins, *Refuse.exe*, 2019, software, 2 projections, colour and sound (stereo), dimensions variable, Tate Britain, London.

7 Ed Atkins, *Flower* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2025), 39.

These statements help us make sense of works like *Old Food*, which simulate what are presumably medieval-era peasants running through rustic scenes and weeping. But they don't make these scenes resolve into whole worlds or coherent realities. These worlds are idiosyncratic, recessive: there's no there to enter, nothing but an oftentimes quite bathetic affect that we're invited to either sit with and take on or reject. In other words, they help us to tune in to the vibe Atkins creates.

Elsewhere in *Flower*, in a bit on how he can't bear to look at images of his children lest he imagine them to be dead, Atkins writes: "Being realistic enough to the world and to myself is as close as it feels I can currently get to an externally relatable reality as a condition of truth."⁸ He's confessing a deep emotional truth here, but he might as well be talking about *Refuse.exe* and flopping fish.

In a piece on *Refuse.exe* in *CURA.*, Gareth Damian Martin notes that the "realities" simulated by video game engines like Unreal may "appear [...] to be slick and glossy", but they are in fact "fragile assemblages, their realities patchworked from proprietary technologies and ornate codebases, wrangled into performing strange illusions".⁹

Martin's piece is all about how game engines *stage* reality; *Refuse.exe* was originally conceived as a live event (abandoned for reasons of cost and safety: poor fish). It even starts with a sequence showing a red curtain opening before the destruction begins, to hammer home the point. In that piece, Atkins also tells Martin that,

8 Ibid., 28.

9 Gareth Damien Martin, "Ed Atkins: Refuse.Exe", *CURA.*, 2021, <https://curamagazine.com/digital/ed-atkins-refuse-exe/>.

although *Refuse.exe* isn't *realistic*, it nevertheless “rhymes with realism”.

The question is what realism is this? Whose? In *Wish I Was Here*, his “anti-memoir”, the British sci-fi author M. John Harrison claims that we're in an “Age of Fantasy”, in which our tendency towards “storifying” everything contributes to what he calls “the mess” (and what I'm calling epistemic derangement). He goes on to write:

“There are conjurors and there are audiences. Audiences hate a conjuror who reveals the trick, because that leaves them nowhere to go but the real. Among conjurors, revealing the trick is seen to be a mistake. But the history of the West under late capital is of a concerted attempt to present conjuring as real magic, and force open a fully occupiable space between the real and the unreal, what can be lived and what can only be written, between what entropy allows and what it doesn't. Freedom from entropy—magic—is what ‘immersion’ means, in the context of imaginative fiction (and in the context of branding, media theatre and political rhetoric, modern imaginative fiction's closest relatives).”¹⁰

Refuse.exe stages the theatre of the real via *Unreal* means. The realism of the 3d game engine's physics model, the world builder's tool of choice stripped back to effects used to elicit minor, even disposable, affects. It's less a staging of illusion than of a reality that's been smashed to bits, a vibe conveyed via flopping fish: what's left of our 3d dreams when they encounter a reality deranged.

10 John M. Harrison, *Wish I Was Here* (Serpent's Tail, 2023).

What's the Vibe?

So, what is *vibe*? Let's start with the "vibe shift". First used by marketers and forecasters to sift through rapidly changing fashion and lifestyle trends and to decide what's likely to persist beyond the latest hype cycle,¹¹ it's spread beyond that field and become something more. It gets at what might be felt but as yet inarticulable, what's happening in the moment but hasn't yet made itself explicable.

Vibes hum along above the (material) chaos of the present moment, registering change as it's in process. To identify a "vibe shift" is to engage heuristically, making contingent propositions about the present that may or may not come good.

If we were to ask *What's the vibe?*, we might say *Everything's deranged*. That's the big answer, a diagnosis of the times. But there are smaller ones, too. *What's the vibe?* It's a superficial question: something or someone, a thing or a place or a person or a scene, either has a good vibe or—it or they—don't.

It's a felt thing, an affective resonance that's pre-cognitive, that resists easy explication, something that attends scenarios that aren't yet fully resolved. In our moment, one defined by a lack of resolution into a coherent whole, vibes reign.

11 Sean Monahan, "I Predicted the 'Vibe Shift' – and Watched It Sweep the World. Here's What It Actually Means", *The Guardian*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/dec/19/how-can-you-spot-a-vibe-shift-that-transforms-popular-culture-ask-me-i-literally-invented-the-term>.

We can eschew the vibe and instead conjure spaces between what Harrison identifies between the real and unreal: do some world building to clear a ground that might be inhabitable.

Or we can try to tune in to the vibes that don't quite fully resolve, that don't fully let us in.

Sucked into Brainrot

Most Dismal Swamp's new exhibition is taking place in a repurposed garage in South London.¹² The main attraction is *The Bastard Fields*, a new film. It's the opening, and the crowd blends in with bizarre objects used in the production of this piece: an animatronic skeleton in a hoodie reclining on a scuffed pleather couch; a childlike mannequin wearing a sloth mask laid out in a vitrine on the floor; a banner with a creepy Donnie Darko-like bunny figure; a quite horrific beast mask.

These objects, presented like artefacts or like relics, populate the "multiuser shared hallucination" that Dane Sutherland and his co-conspirators construct via the Most Dismal Swamp handle. There's something antediluvian about them, almost fey, like they're artefacts dug out of pits in a world that could be this one (but isn't quite). They're made into more than they otherwise would be, these objects, imbued not so much by how they're presented but by their weirdness.

¹² *The Bastard Fields*, The Bacon Factory, London, October 3 – December 14, 2025, Exhibition.

The film's metal soundtrack wafts over the crowd from the screening in the back, the kind that's portentous but also driving and energetic. We're jammed into the space because it's pissing down outside. A waiter hands me a little bamboo bowl of chicken, peppers, and couscous—bland, but I'm hungry.

The Bastard Fields is hard to describe. It opens with a 3d animated sequence of three mo-capped figures in a dystopian version of streetwear, bulked out by hoodies and baggy combats. It's soundtracked by a lullaby, though, the disjunction deliberately beguiling and alienating.

There are other sequences, which veer back and forth between 3d engine, real-life actors, and puppets, some filmed in the space we're in: two ravers escorting a fey creature through a park; a demented rabbit vlogging his feelings about being hunted from a hi-tech warren; a demonic preacher railing over the top of more metal music; an animatronic skeleton having an existential chat with a 3d animated bog angel in a cave. But the one that I can't shake is the sequence with this angel in the film's first chapter

After panning around those three dystopian figures, the camera zooms out to show us a decayed bog body immured in sludge and muck. It locks on, showing us this body in parts: a skeletal face, hair remnants licked by wind; a decay-darkened foot, partially covered by a burial shroud; a bare clavicle partially bisected by a length of rope. It's kind of sinister but also kind of sad: melancholy, in the poetic sense.

A narration picks up its inner monologue. Here's a sample: "soured dregs of perception collect in the empty corners and palsied vectors of whatever dream has mercifully replaced my waking self."

The language is outmoded but also incantatory: all iambs, made opaque but also weighty by the liberal use of words with roots in old English or Scots dialects. It's chanting us into the swamp.

What reality am I in right now? I feel like I've been sucked into brainrot, the very excessiveness of the exhibition's scene inversely related to the intricate involutions of the work. I think I'm supposed to be beguiled by these dank aesthetics just as much as I'm not supposed to be able to make them make sense. The vibe doesn't resolve, but I'm tuned to it anyway.

We Get the Angels We Deserve

003 In a conversation with Sutherland at my work,¹³ he talks about constructing scenarios in his films and exhibitions that meet with things—objects, figures, characters, scenes—“on their own ontological pastures”. To quote him slightly out of context, these pastures are the “toxic commons” that constitutes our mediascape, which he conceives of as a “slopscape”, in which real and unreal, actual and imagined, fact and myth, are squeezed together into muddy slush.

In other words, the world of *The Bastard Fields*, the reality rendered by its mash up of fiction and 3d engine and animatronics and puppetry, is ours, taken on (at least some of) its own terms. It's the reality of derangement experienced via the internet and its constantly churning content streams.

13 Dane Sutherland, “This Machine Kills Vibes” (lecture for Visual Cultures Public Programme, Professor Stuart Hall Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, October 16, 2025). Subsequent question and answer session hosted by author.

Contrary to the usual image of the internet as a space of flows and fluxes, constant streams and viral surges, though, it's better to think of it as a segmentation machine. We massage little pieces of content to fit the parameters of the feeds we use to interface with a particular service. Each piece of content could be thought of as a communication or a piece of information, knowledge or data parcelled up and put into circulation. But each also has an aesthetic element and an affective charge.

Post after post after post after post after post might hit like news then joke then hot take then personal update then thirst trap; like atrocity then humour then *offensive* then *heartwarming* then *attractive*; horror and aversion and disgust blended together with cuteness and captivation and (whatever now passes for) beauty, while also conveying some kind of information about what's going on.

But then, what's going on in reality isn't separable from these feeds. They're at once real and unreal, bearing a fluctuating relationship to your measure of choice (the world, a ground truth, evidence, an ideology, et cetera). Or put another way, these feeds are braided through the real. In them, knowledge, feeling, seeming—all of what makes up contemporary being—gets mashed up and parcelled out into consumable chunks of content.

This description might make it seem like each little bit of content is disposable. In one sense, it is: if it doesn't grab your attention, it's likely already gone. But each little piece of content is also a little piece of *world*. Not *the* world, exactly—with Donna J. Haraway, I'm inclined to think of worlds as weird human-tech-nonhu-

man-culture hybrids.¹⁴ Each is a part of a world, which may or may not be mine—or yours.

These segmentation machines aren't *the* world. The pieces of knowing and seeming and feeling parcelled out by these segmentation machines are parts that are fragmentarily representative of wholes, rather than wholes contained in fragmented parts. Or: bits of reality. The thing about these fragments is that they don't relate to the real (world) in a binary sense: *real* or *unreal*. That kind of relating requires a universal measure. Instead, once entered into the feed, these fragments of reality float free, ready for repurposing.

What I'm getting from *The Bastard Fields*, as it's exhibited, is an unforgiving immersion in what Sutherland calls the "hostile architecture of our shared platform-mediated crises".¹⁵

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In that conversation, Sutherland invoked the "dark forest" theory of the internet: the idea, most comprehensively theorised by Bogna Konior, that the internet—and through it, our worlds as they are lived—have become adverse spaces, inimical to our being and our flourishing.¹⁶ The natural response in the face of threat is to move stealthily through these spaces: to communicate—for Konior, it's all about communication—in codes so as not to invite the ire of the platform itself.

14 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

15 Dane Sutherland, "Most Dismal Swamp", accessed November 25, 2025, <https://most-dismal-swamp.com/>.

16 Bogna Konior, "The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet", *BLOK Magazine*, July 6, 2020, <https://blokmagazine.com/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet/>.

In Sutherland's work, the dark forest is replaced by a different figure: the rabbit warren, which is both a den and a defensive structure, designed to offer safety and confound intruders. This kind of work responds to derangement by speaking in codes and in tongues; its vibe is cryptic, recondite, oblique, but still feels all too *real*.

I can't help but think of the bog body in the film as a kind of angel—Walter Benjamin's angel of history re-rendered for deranged times.¹⁷ It's got skeletal stubs that look like mounts for wings, decayed relics of a more blessed age. This is reality, and the narratives that limn it and make it palatable, stripped of their mythic raiment and mired in our worlds' muck, the segmented and parcelled out pieces of reality that are all that is left to us once they've been processed by the platforms that shape how we live and how we sense. We get the angels we deserve.

Vibe Engineering

What's the vibe? Reality feels like it's disintegrating; we've lost our epistemic bearings; our sensorial extensions feel, oftentimes, more real than anything else in the world. We could build other worlds to retreat into—a lot of us do.

But perhaps the alternative to freeing ourselves from entropy by seeking immersion is to understand that reality's fragments, in their partiality and resistance to coherence, are a kind of material, too.

17 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", in *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400.

The vibe's a felt thing but it's also material that can be repurposed. Atkins' and Sutherland's work represent a kind of art-making operative in our fragmented times. Yes, they both use 3d game engines, but not only: also words, performance, found content, hallucinated scenes. They tune the fragments of the world they're presented with—the as-yet-incoherent vibes they find—into something else.

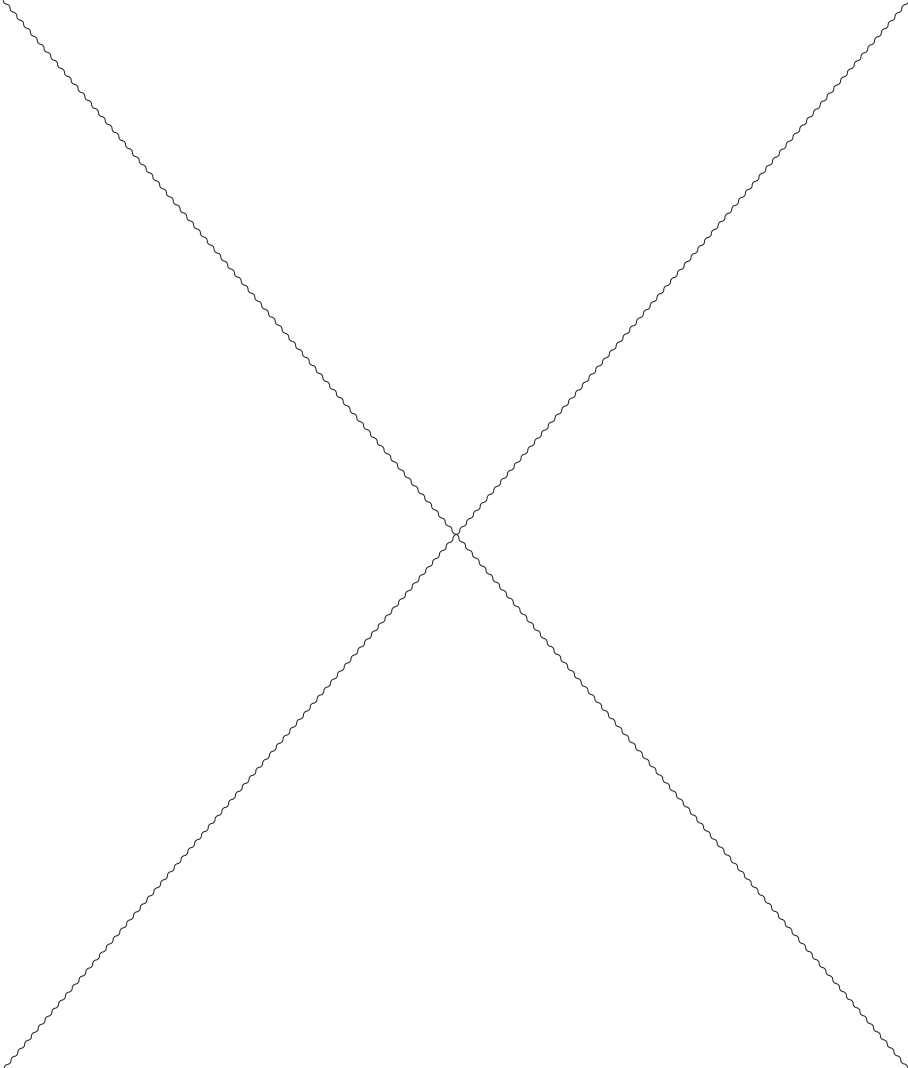
For want of a better phrase, let's call this tactic *vibe engineering*. This tactic isn't limited to art-making: you find it not just in galleries but also in fiction, in performance, in online feeds, in the creation of online personae that may or may not correspond to real persons, in forms of branding that bring together elements to evoke a plausible scene, in scenarios grounded in distributed communication—chats, forums, content streams. You find it in politics, as engagement with reality and its problems gives way to provocations that stimulate reactions and responses.

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I don't have a grand theory of the present to offer. All I know is that it's already cooked, and only getting worse. In lieu of that, maybe we can say that identifying this tactic might help us place art in a continuum with other kinds of making and being—and also with the sense of derangement, the crisis-riven mood, that defines the times and defies orientation. If we're going to give shape to the conjuncture, we might start by taking these tactics seriously lest vibes' reign suck us down even further.

SCOTT WARK

Scott Wark is a Lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research combines an interest in theoretical approaches to media and culture with analyses of digital cultural phenomena, media infrastructures, data processing, artificial intelligence, and techniques of racialisation. He is co-editor of *Figure: Concept and Method* (with Celia Lury and William Viney; Palgrave, 2022) and "Pharmacologies of Media", a special issue of *Media Theory* (w. Yiğit Soncul, 2022).



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The Clueless Agency

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PROTO GALLERY SYSTEMS









The Clueless Agency series is guided by the possessed mind of a zealous private eye who only gets lost in the case: consumed by unfathomable details and connections, the detective descends into psychosis, indulging in unsound procedures. Throughout the series, the detective figures metaphorically as a sort of “rag doll”, to which one can pin different ideas: a curator of PGS, an individual contributor to the Clueless Agency series, or the viewer themselves. The diffractions of the detective’s body and mind mirror PGS’s interest in the chaotic transformations of reality, inviting illusion, fabrication, and forgery as integral strategies. The published documentation thus forms a dense detective yarn, which allows one to trace motifs across individual shows: images repeat, migrate, and twist across time and space, sometimes regrowing as algorithmic mutations that further alter (our memory of) the narrative.

Credits

IMG 1: *Nobody Home* (Performed by Marie-Luisa Purkrábková), participative performance – Clueless Agency: The Stair Case -Nah ...Nobody Home (Ding-Dong Lullaby) at Laichter House, Prague, 2024

IMG 2: Monika Kováčová, *Untitled*, 2021 – Clueless Agency: Ward no gateman, draw on nametag, pals spit peels, slap, tips, sleep & Clueless Agency: Cold Case at Karlin Studios, Prague, 2021

IMG 3: Hanna Umin, *Your Fate (Kuoros)*, 2021 – Clueless Agency: Inside a Wormhole of an Overripe Apple (The Hangman’s Song) at NO MOON, New York, 2022

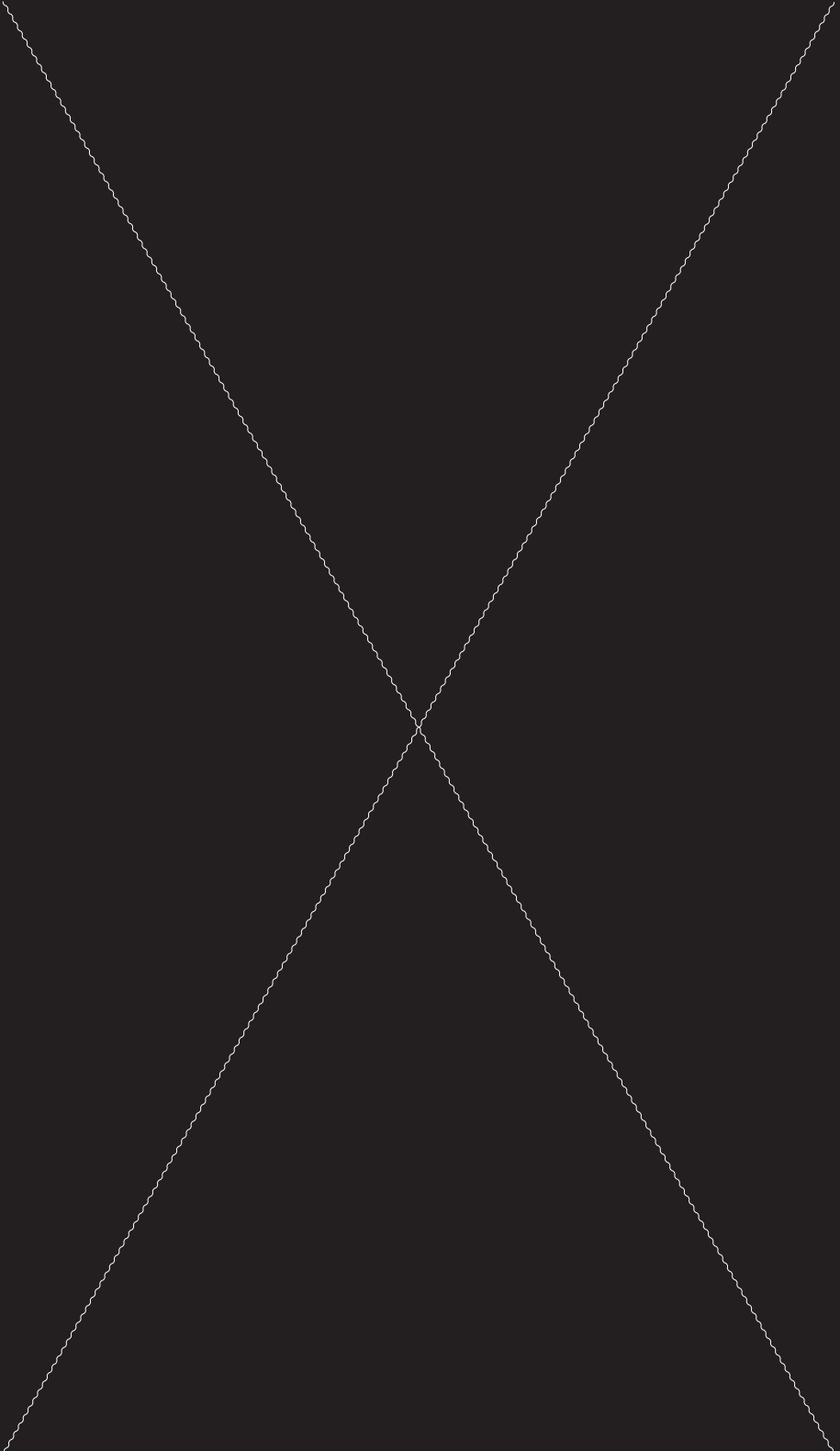
IMG 4: Clare Koury, *Wish Machine 4*, 2024 – Clueless Agency: The Last Witness of Sator Sq., New York, 2024

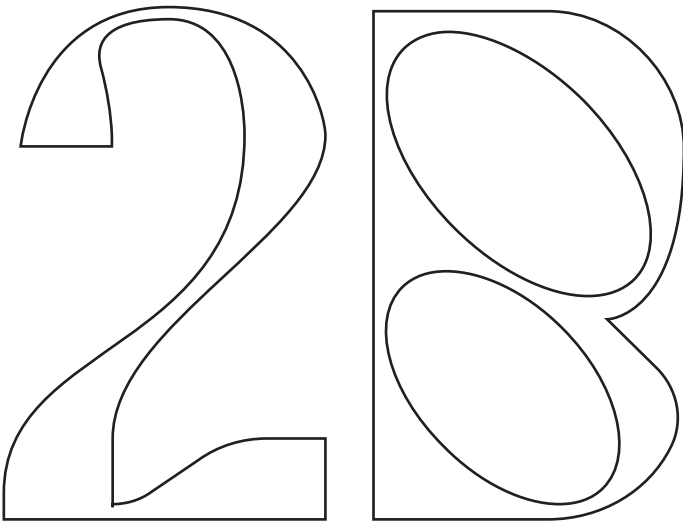
Photography by Vojtěch Novák

Since 2018, **Proto Gallery Systems** has been creating off-site exhibitions that bring together Czech and international artists in locations around the globe. Acting as both a nomadic gallery and a collaborative artistic entity, PGS examines the possibilities of collective creation and curation, probing new methods and formats of exhibition-making across the digital/afk divide. Between 2021 and 2025, the collective has conducted a nonlinear narrative investigation through a series of exhibitions titled "Clueless Agency". The first instalments included the off-site show *Cold Case* in a burnt-out cabin in the Iron Mountains, *Ward no gateman, draw on nametag, pals spit peels, slap, tips, sleep* at Karlin Studios, FUTURA Centre for Contemporary Art, and shows at several other locations, including an artificial coal mine at the National Technical Museum in Prague, the Prison Museum in Uničov, or New York's No Moon. Some of the later chapters unfolded at even less likely places—the show *The Boat Is Leaking, no one cares (Bottomless Chasm Awaits)* transpired on a half-submerged ocean liner near Athens, while *Rozkošný most a jiné zpropadné* tools took the shape of a public event at the fusion reactor facility Tokamak Golem. The series culminated in a one-day exhibition and a performance *The Stair Case - Nah ... Nobody Home (Ding-Dong Lullaby)* in the historical interiors of Prague's Leichter house and in The Last Witness of Sator Sq. exhibition project, which took place in 2025 during the "Manhattenhenge" celestial event in New York.

IG: @proto.gallery.systems

WWW: <https://www.pgs.gallery/>





L Is for Lead:
On Cluelessness,
Molybdomancy,
and
Vision-in-Black

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NOEMI PURKRÁBKOVÁ

“[T]he smoke of the burned witches still hangs in our nostrils.”

— Isabelle Stengers, *Reclaiming Animism*

“Detectives are famously perceptive. [...] ‘It’s a matter of kinds of knowledge which tend to be unspoken, whose rules [...] do not easily lend themselves to being formally articulated or even spoken aloud. [...] With this kind of knowledge, there are factors in play which cannot be measured—a whiff, a glance, an intuition.’ This is not the inside knowledge of an elite but a kind of ‘low intuition’, ‘a universal openness to movement, difference, sensation’.”

— Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs*

“Unlike closed loops, spirals always have loose ends.”

— CCRU, *Lemurian Time War*

This text was first written in 2021, unfolding alongside the opening chapters of PGS’s Clueless Agency exhibition series. A few excerpts accompanied online documentations of these shows, like fast-forward flashes, but the whole has not seen the light of day—a proper practitioner of its dark beliefs, as will become apparent. Since the text was first incepted, some of the themes it explores have only gained intensity. With the mass advent of generative media, the dissolution of categories, the collapse of already-tatty boundaries, and the psychotic transmutations of “fact”, agency and memory on which to base any shared sense of “reality” have spiralled further out of control. Seeing patterns has never been more normal. As if presaging this messy mutability, the serpentine flow of this text deliberately stitches together themes, ideas, and concepts, thereby making connections that may seem loose or accidental and perhaps even

contributing to their illegibility: flattening the reputable and the low, the factual, and the fictional, as well as past, present, and future, into one sticky plane. Any confusion is to be embraced. Anger is more welcome than disenchantment.

The Haunted House

“I am not concerned to deny the objective reality of all ‘magical’ phenomena; if they are illusions, they are at least as real as many unquestioned facts of daily life.

[...]

Boleskine House, Foyers, N. B.”

— Aleister Crowley, foreword to the translation of
The Lesser Key of Solomon

The scorched ruins of The Boleskine House silently watch over the deep, opaque waters of the south-east side of Loch Ness, near the village of Foyers in the Scottish Highlands. Two fires have broken out in 2015 and 2019, consuming most of the manor and leaving its walls black and brooding. The legendary house, in which the controversial occultist Aleister Crowley wrote the foreword to his translation of the first book of *The Lesser Key of Solomon*—probably the best-known grimoire on demonology in the history of Western hermeticism—was always engulfed by strange stories.¹ As if the very soil underneath it was soaked in something mesmerically dark.

1 Crowley’s residency at the Boleskine house sparked the interest of many, including Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, who became Boleskine’s owner in 1970. Currently, a foundation is supervising its renovation after the destructive fires, promising to fully open to public in the spring of 2026.

The house was built in the 1760s on the site of a former church said to have gone ablaze during a congregation, burning everybody alive. And even before the first stone of the manor was laid, weird tales were being told, such as the one about Minister Thomas Houston and his fight over the corpses in the Boleskine churchyard, where he was supposedly having a hard time putting them back to sleep after they were raised and animated by a notorious wizard called “the circle maker”. It is no wonder that this superstition-filled air drew in someone like Crowley, who lived in the house between 1899 and 1913, preparing himself for a complicated ritual which included invoking numerous “spirits” that should “congregate”² in a special lodge on the north-facing terrace. In his memoirs, Crowley states:

“I had to use artificial light even on the brightest days. It was a darkness which might almost be felt. The lodge and terrace, moreover, soon became peopled with shadowy shapes, sufficiently substantial, as a rule, to be almost opaque. I say shapes; and yet the truth is that they were no shapes properly speaking. The phenomenon is hard to describe. It was as if the faculty of vision suffered some interference; as if the objects of vision were not properly objects at all. It was as if they belonged to an order of matter which affected the sight without informing it.”³

Many say that upon his departure, Crowley had left behind the spirits he conjured up, who continue to haunt the house, roaming its halls and chambers, and causing unexplainable occurrences or tragedies, such as the death of two lodge keeper’s children. Nu-

2 Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Penguin, 1989; orig. pub. 1929), 184.

3 Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, 189.

merous other legends circulate between mouths and digits about Crowley's practices, which were said to involve sharpening his teeth into fangs, consuming various human bodily fluids, including menstrual blood, taking heavy doses of drugs and performing diverse occult rituals at the property and in its surroundings. The internet has it that locals mentioned he had masturbated over the oldest parts of the graveyard as an offering of sacrifice, and every Sunday, he would throw a sheep into the lake as a gift for his "pet" Nessie—later widely known as the Loch Ness Monster.⁴

The "right" question would perhaps be: how much of the myths surrounding the self-proclaimed "wickedest man in the world" are mere self-mythology? But we haven't visited Boleskine's walls to support or refute truth claims, and we are not even interested in Crowley himself (ideologically and ethically condemnable as he was). In the gloom of this place, sunken ankle-deep in the ashes, we might not be in search of any clues at all. What we seek instead is a certain kind of contamination, an "experience of the unproven, the foreclosure of all thought".⁵ We wish to become the kind of detectives Sadie Plant writes about, "observing everything except the rules", leaving our minds "open and responsive to any hints from the material" and tapping into "low intuition".⁶ And as such, we shouldn't fear shedding what we think we positively know. Because one shouldn't be ashamed of singing with the folk tales. As CCRU writes: "You call it the Black Lake Legend and it sounds kind of grand."⁷

4 Despite the Loch Ness monster being supposedly seen already in the 1870s and 1880s, it didn't capture popular interest earlier than in the 1930s (with the first famous photograph printed in the newspapers). At that time, Crowley was already gone.

5 John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 28.

6 Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 93.

7 CCRU, "A Tzikvik Tale", in *CCRU Writings 1997–2003* (Urbanomic, 2017), 208.

It is in a similar sense that Isabelle Stengers suggests we must “discover how to be compromised by magic”⁸ to cure ourselves from the persisting illusion of the world where everything can be measured, divided, and “explained away.”⁹ Not that we literally practice witchcraft (with or without blood-drinking), but that we stop looking down on the supernatural and “relieve ourselves of the sad, monotonous little critical or reflexive voice whispering that we should not accept being mystified, a voice that relays that of the inquisitors.”¹⁰ Let us then say that we enter this house not to understand but to take a leap, to hunt neither facts nor witches, but to get lost, get dirty—get “compromised”.

The In-Between

“The system of well-ordered forms, regulated resemblances and analogy gives way to a demonic world of instability and constant transformation.”

— Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*

“Heaven and hell are right here. Behind every wall, every window. The world behind the world, and we’re smack in the middle.”

— Keanu Reeves as exorcist John, *Constantine* (2005)

8 Isabelle Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism”, *e-flux Journal*, no. 36 (2012), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/>.

9 Delphi Carstens and Mer Roberts, “Things That Knowledge Cannot Eat”, in *Fiction as Method*, ed. Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evison (Sternberg Press, 2017), 216.

10 Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism”.

“‘You are a brave man,’ Ada told Babbage, ‘to give yourself wholly up to Fairy-Guidance!’—I Advise you to allow yourself to be unresistingly bewitched ...”

— Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones*

The Victorian era was marked by unprecedented scientific development, introducing technological inventions, curing deadly diseases, and illuminating the first houses with electricity. And yet, there seemed to be something else holding the hand of progress. As if the accelerating pace of the industrial revolution, hastily assembling itself into modernity, cast a sneaky shadow over the triumph of “reason”. The steamy breath of steel machines surging from the spreading factories was shrouding something—a “fundamental chaos lurking in the tiny lawless spaces between things”,¹¹ a reek of the paranormal, supernatural, occult.

Diverse fortune-telling practices drew popular interest, such as crystal-gazing, cartomancy, palmistry, and tasseomancy or molybdomancy, a metallurgical divination which, in resonance with the world increasingly chewed up by metal particles, predicts the future from shapes of molten lead quickly solidifying in cold water. As if each invention gave birth to more than what the scientists could explain. The belief in mesmerism, which proclaimed the existence of an “invisible, universally distributed fluid that flows continuously everywhere and serves as a vehicle for the mutual influence among heavenly bodies, the earth, and the living things”,¹² was widespread, as well as the excitement for electro-biology and spiritualism (one of the many passionate adherents of which was the famous detective novel author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). Many new secret societies and orders were established, including the

11 Carstens and Roberts, “Things That Knowledge Cannot Eat”, 202.

12 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 174–175.

famous Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose founder, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, co-authored Crowley's translation of *The Lesser Key of Solomon* and, coincidentally, also married Mina Bergson, the sister of philosopher Henri Bergson.¹³

These forces refused to let science wash off the spirits, to sterilise the space between the spinning wheels and organic tissue. Even Darwin's evolutionary theory wasn't spared its shadow twin, found in Samuel Butler's anonymously published book *Erewhon*, depicting an inverted land with inverted name(s)—“Erewhon” being a backwards-spelt “nowhere”—a place where machines are believed to possess autonomous intelligence, using humans only as a temporary helping force in an evolution of their own. In the book's chapter titled “The Book of the Machines”, Butler asks: “But who can say that the vapour engine has not a kind of consciousness? Where does consciousness begin, and where end? Who can draw the line? Who can draw any line? Is not everything interwoven with everything? Is not machinery linked with animal life in an infinite variety of ways?”¹⁴

Moreover, the discovery of electricity “threw new light on the question of materiality itself, liquefying the boundary between matter and energy, solid structures and radiating forces, pulsations. The world became a beating heart, a space of circulating flows”¹⁵ that no theory could tame, forecasting Karen Barad's much later observation that “[b]etween' will never be the same”.¹⁶

13 This relationship is extrapolated by John Ó Maoilearca in a book that came out in 2023. See: John Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy: Matter, the Meta-Spiritual, and the Forgotten Bergson* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

14 Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1932; orig. pub. 1872), 141.

15 François J. Bonnet, *The Infra-World* (Urbanomic, 2017), 63.

16 Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come”, *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010), 251.

One of the great enthusiasts of mesmerism and other electromagnetic forces passing through the body was a young woman called Ada, the Countess of Lovelace. The daughter of mathematician Anna Isabella Milbanke and the poet G. G. Byron, she came to be known as “the Enchantress of Numbers”¹⁷ and the author of what can be viewed as the very first computer algorithm, written for the mechanical general-purpose computer—Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine. A strong advocate of animal magnetism and a regular user of significant amounts of laudanum to moderate her shifting mental states, she embodied the confluence of reason and fantasy, science and poetry. She tried to develop a “calculus of the nervous system”, a theoretical model that would unite mathematics with feelings, hoping to elicit the contributions of famous physicist Michael Faraday and electrocrystallization pioneer Andrew Crosse, dubbed “thunder and lightning man” for his explosive experiments. The latter became a controversial figure after having reported living insects had been born out of the electricized crystals in his laboratory, for which he was said to have inspired Mary Shelly’s character of doctor Frankenstein, as she had visited his lecture on “electricity, the gasses, and the phantasmagoria”.¹⁸ It was later found that Crosse’s samples were likely contaminated with insect eggs. What was more than real was the number of threatening letters he received from people accusing him of trying to artificially create a living being—what a blasphemy! Some things just “make themselves real”,¹⁹ one way or another.

Without doubt, the early experiments linking human, animal, and (in)organic flows filled the air with a taste of “heresy of irrational-

17 Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (Fourth Estate, 1998), 27.

18 The Frankenstein inspiration is most likely untrue; Mary Shelly supposedly visited his lectures but wrote the book before the famous incident happened. But by now we know better than deeming false facts insignificant.

19 Such is the infamous definition CCRU gives of “hyperstition”. (CCRU, “Lemurian Time War”, in *CCRU Writings 1997–2003* (Urbanomic, 2017), 35)

ism in the post-Enlightenment era”.²⁰ As if every step of science conjured a new ghost into being that no number of refutations could exorcise. Human skin is too porous to pose a threat to the flows of energy. François J. Bonnet points out that spiritualism and other “pseudo-scientific” methodologies were not trying to access any separate world of the dead but to “re-establish the unity” of worlds by “blurring the material boundaries between bodies and things just as it blurred the threshold between the perceived world and the real world”.²¹ In a book which extrapolates the links between the life and work of the already mentioned siblings Henri and Mina Bergson (the first being a philosopher, the other an occultist), John Ó Maoilearca suggests the concept of “supernormalization” as a possible “exit from the stark duality of natural and supernatural, or of the normal and the paranormal”. As he explains, to supernormalize does not mean to simply accept “spooky” or “paranormal” phenomena as real but to engage in a “thought experiment that asks, if such phenomena were real, how would we naturalize them”?

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In this sense, there is an important lesson of unlearning in spirit photographs, paranormal tabloid stories, and “Frankenstein’s insects”; a voice whispering into our ears, even as they wear wireless earbuds, that vegetables might possess invisible forces, that “machines receive their impressions through the agency of man’s senses”,²² and that there perhaps still remain “things that knowledge cannot eat”,²³ creeping from the wide-open gates of “the infra-world”: a shadowy realm not somewhere spatially beyond but very much in-between the seemingly organized “world of utility”.²⁴

20 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 177.

21 Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 68–69.

22 Butler, *Erewhon*, 144.

23 Carstens and Roberts, “Things That Knowledge Cannot Eat”.

24 Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 7.

The Black Lake

“We believe that reality is horizon and light, aperture and flash, whereas it resembles more the posture of an opaque non-relation (to) light. When exploring the universal dimension of the cosmic, we remain prisoners of cosmo-logical difference. Our philosophers are children who are afraid of the Dark.”

— François Laruelle, *On the Black Universe*

“At the End of a hellish rain-lashed track a large dark building looms into view: a ramshackle, turreted, neo-Gothic mansion, whose hideous gargoyles are starkly delineated by intermittent flashes of sheet-lightning. A sign above the half-open door reads: Black Lake Technical Institute. All the lights are out. You switch to night vision and cross the threshold.”

— CCRU, *Skin-Crawlers*

Isabelle Stengers explains that we have “an obscure fear of being accused of regression as soon as we give any sign of betraying hard truth by indulging soft, illusory beliefs”.²⁵ But the dividing line between the normal and “abnormal” is itself a matter of belief.²⁶ Throughout his work, French philosopher François Laruelle has criticised that the history of Western thought is a history of binarity, with philosophers “forever transiting between shadow and illumination”,²⁷ trying to “shed light” on the dark areas of the

25 Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism”.

26 Ó Maoilearca offers a telling example of how the early science of radioactivity was commonly compared to alchemy.

27 Alexander R. Galloway, “The Black Universe”, Onscenes, published August 25, 2017, <https://onscenes.weebly.com/philosophy/the-black-universe>.

unknown. But to him, this self-proclaimed “illuminating potential” is inherently “arrogant”,²⁸ because it presupposes that philosophy can position itself as the chosen light-bringer in the first place. To grant oneself such a position would necessarily denote the ability to stand on a stable viewpoint above the slimy quicksand of the real, from which one could observe, frame, and qualify. But such an observatory doesn’t exist. Moreover, the very idea of “bringing to light” comes with an unquestioned assertion “that blackness is a case that can and must be solved”.²⁹

Who then has the right to claim this illuminating power? Who stands outside of the black lake’s waters—intact, dry, and objective? In our morphing, generatively fast-forwarded present, it is more obvious than ever that there is no island to watch the sinking boat from. We have always been channelling forces below the threshold of conscious perception (have Erewhon’s machines been using our senses to see and hear for all that time?), but current computational infrastructures, and increasingly even the artefacts of human visual culture, sink ever deeper into opacity. Any assumption of an achievable distance crumbles under the onslaught of this irreducible darkness—“the real is opaque, an immanent blackness that humanist philosophy has forgotten or foreclosed in its decision to bring to light a World”.³⁰

In his essay “On the Black Universe”, Laruelle describes the World as an illuminated space, our own construction, which we so often mistake for the Universe, ignoring “the thinking force before all

28 Simon O’Sullivan, “Non-philosophy and Art Practice (Or Fiction as Method)”, in *Fiction as Method*, eds. Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evison (Sternberg Press, 2017), 278.

29 Rob Coley, “In Defence of ‘Noir Theory’: Laruelle, Deleuze, and Other Detectives”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no.3 (2020), 11.

30 François Laruelle, “On the Black Universe”, in *Dark Nights of the Universe* (NAME Publications, 2013), 10.

thought”, which exists within us as material beings without the need for any philosophy or ontology.³¹ Laruelle invokes the equalising power of the black Universe, untouched by our attempts to divide it with limited rays of light. Black Universe is not opposed to light; it is blackness without negation, “an opaque and solitary thought, which has already leapt through man’s shut eyes as the space of a dream without dreaming”.³² For Laruelle, the black Universe is not something to reach out to, to discover, or to penetrate, but rather to be flattened with, to get lost in, to give up claims for. “Black is entirely interior to itself and to man”,³³ it is the very material we are made of, which surrounds us, which we think through, and which thinks through us (as Eugene Thacker writes, “thinking the hair, mud, and dirt that thinks through me”).³⁴ But to tap into this material, we must turn off the lights and shut our eyes. Because the orientation in this fluid darkness requires a specific regime of vision, “a tool-kit for dabbling in the dark”.³⁵ This “vision-in-black” is not an enhanced vision, nor can the darkness be chased away with a stronger source of light. On the contrary, we can start “seeing” in the night exactly when we “abandon perception” and embrace a certain “visionary vision that looks without looking”.³⁶ But how do we tap into what we can’t see, touch, or hear? Simon O’Sullivan writes that Laruelle’s non-philosophy implies “a form of gnosis or even ‘spiritual’ knowledge”.³⁷ The spiritual “haunt[s] the margins of philosophy”, letting in something which makes

31 John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith, eds., *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 52.

32 Laruelle, “On the Black Universe”, 103.

33 Ibid., 106.

34 Eugene Thacker, “Remote: The Forgetting of the World”, in *Dark Nights of the Universe* (NAME Publications, 2013), 2.

35 CCRU, “Review of CCRU’s Digital Hyperstition”, in *CCRU Writings 1997–2003* (Urbanomic, 2017), 13.

36 François Laruelle, “Biography of the Eye”, trans. Taylor Adkins (2009; orig. pub. as “Biographie de l’oeil”, *La Décision philosophique* 9 (1989): 93–104), <https://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2009/11/21/new-translation-of-laruelles-biography-of-the-eye/>.

37 O’Sullivan, “Non-philosophy and Art Practice (Or Fiction as Method)”, 280.

it “related to gnosticism”³⁸—a secret.

A secret is that which “has never been the predicate to knowledge”³⁹ nor logos and which we need to invoke if we seek to bring “the emotion of the Universe [...] [i]nto the World of narrow-minded thoughts”.⁴⁰ It is not knowledge but non-knowledge, since “only the secret sees into secret, like Black in Black”.⁴¹ As Laruelle notes elsewhere, it is not about introducing the notion or concept of secret into our thinking but about introducing thought “to the hermetic experience of truth”.⁴² On such a search, one must respect the unknown and “dive [...] right in”.⁴³

The Spiral Mirror

“Who am I, me who is? I am neither this reason nor this way of thinking, neither this question nor this speculation. I am this night ...”

— Laruelle, *Biography of the Eye*

“Before the light, before a voice in the abyss uttered the first word from the black belly of night, there was only ocean.”

— Gruppo di Nun, *Revolutionary Demonology*

38 François Laruelle, “A New Presentation of Non-Philosophy”, 2004, <https://onphi.org/corpus/32/a-new-presentation-of-non-philosophy>.

39 François Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication”, *Parrhesia* 9 (2010), 18–22.

40 Laruelle, “On the Black Universe”, 103.

41 Ibid.,

42 Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes”, 18–22.

43 Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (Semiotext(e), 2004), 83.

“Obscure glyphs are scratched into the walls, constructing an occult cosmic map of spirals and zigzags. One of the keys unlocks the door.”

— CCRU, *Skin-Crawlers*

The shedding of light is closely connected to the process of “reflection”—the idea that everything can and should be reflected upon. But something strange has happened to the mirror. A classical metaphor for critical thinking, the mirror was once seen as an image of the world, and whoever held it could frame, analyse, and interpret this image and reflect the beam of light back onto the face of the World. But its metaphorical power started to wane. The more we were “sinking into the pitch-black waters of a groundless world”,⁴⁴ the more the mirror seemed to lose its lustre. If, as Karen Barad notes about the ontological implications of contemporary quantum physics, “[t]here is no fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future’, ‘here’ and ‘now’, [and] ‘cause’ and ‘effect’”,⁴⁵ then any attempt to frame individuals and “propertied objects” in a reflect-able way seems absurd. Barad famously mobilises quantum entanglement—proclaimed “a spooky action at a distance” by none other than Albert Einstein—suggesting it was recently demonstrated to work even “beyond the grave”, after the connection between particles is broken.⁴⁶ The ends of “time’s arrow”⁴⁷ has coiled into a spiral—and as we know, “spirals always have loose ends”.⁴⁸

44 Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 8.

45 Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, 265.

46 Ibid., 252.

47 “Time’s arrow” or “arrow of time” is a widely known concept of the one-directional asymmetry of time named by Sir Arthur Eddington.

48 CCRU, “Lemurian Time War”, 34.

But the mirror-image started to morph long before. Deleuze & Guattari called for “the abolition of all metaphor”,⁴⁹ pointing out how late the reflection comes, boasting a mere cut-out of an infinitely complex “world [which] has become chaos”.⁵⁰ Stengers ironically notes how frightening we find the possibility of giving up “critique, the only defence we have against fanaticism and the rule of illusions”.⁵¹ But deep down, we know that reflection is too slow, too frozen, too stable: a method designed only for “an ontology exorcised of ghost”.⁵²

In his dissertation, Mark Fisher has noticed this darkening: “[W]e will no longer pass through to ‘the other side’, we encounter the ‘flat’ surface of the black mirror.”⁵³ Such a mirror cannot reflect, mimic or project—it is an opaque surface where the image and the world, as well as fact and fiction, conflate: a portal to different non-linear time-spaces. There is no metaphor, only metamorphosis. As in the horror movie *Constantine*, where Keanu Reeves used to capture demons through their mirror reflection and send them back to hell. But he didn’t expect they could physically cross to the other side and walk the earth. The portal had been opened.

The mirror’s blackness seems to have “become fluid, and much darker”.⁵⁴ Its surface, which may have once been able to “flip over”⁵⁵ time, has turned into a sort of liquid swirl on a black lake where we always already float. Laruelle writes that the Universe “is not

49 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 69.

50 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 6.

51 Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism”.

52 Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, 260.

53 Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction* (Ex-military Press, 2018), 142.

54 CCRU, “Skin-Crawlers”, in *CCRU Writings 1997–2003*, 201.

55 CCRU, “Cybergothic Hyperstition (Fast-forward to the Old ones)”, in *CCRU Writings 1997–2003*, 223.

reflected in another universe, and yet the Remote is accessible to us at each of its points”.⁵⁶ His black mirror would perhaps be both outside and inside, remote and within—a fractal spinning outside of our frame. The black mirror is not an object but something we see in each other, in ourselves, and which sees through us. It is the darkest immanence that “no longer differentiates between surfaces and depth [...], a non-conceptual thought and the radical indivisibility of the body”.⁵⁷ Not only is the portal open, it is undivided.

Ours is a frameless ontology where boundaries “do not sit still”.⁵⁸ It is by no means exorcised of ghosts; rather, it seethes with what the Gruppo di Nun collective calls “spectral materialism”: an almost “magical” force operating in “a confused grey area between superstition and irony”, shattering the “vision of science as the luminous triumph of reason over matter”.⁵⁹ In the Universe’s blackness, there can be no candles lit, and no images reflected. All matter is dark and haunted.

A Wishful Thought

“The fortune is told this way: Each girl, in turn, holds a door-key in one hand, while with the other hand she pours the melted lead, from an iron spoon or ladle, through the handle of the key into a pan of cold water.”

— All Hallow-Eve, *How to Amuse Yourself and Others: The American Girls’ Handy Book*

56 Laruelle, “On the Black Universe”, 104.

57 Mullarkey and Smith, eds., *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 52.

58 Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT4400/v14/pensumliste/barad_posthumanist-performativity.pdf.

59 Gruppo di Nun, *Revolutionary Demonology* (Urbanomic, 2022), 49–80.

“These measures belong to the order of dreams, of pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess. [...] To think is always to follow the witch’s flight.”

— Deleuze & Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

In the same sense as the mirror, divination is not reflective of the world but productive of it. Once the lead drips into the water, the world is never the same. Such is also the logic of Crowley’s concept of “Magick”, distinguishing the dark “art of causing Change”⁶⁰ from a mere theatrical trick. Whereas illusion is often enjoyed exactly because both sides are aware it is not real, magical thinking resides in the power of belief. Such a thought places something into the matter of the world—not a reflection but rather a movement, a doing, a practice. That is why CCRU can claim that “every act of writing is a sorcerous operation, a partisan action in a war”.⁶¹

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Ada Lovelace famously said that the “Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns, just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves”. This understanding of the poetics of science and technology, an urge “to weave daydreams into seemingly authentic calculations”,⁶² and the strong sense for letting herself be “enchanted” by the machines is why she accompanied us at multiple points throughout this text. In a letter to her mother, she wrote: “You will not concede me philosophical poetry. Invert the order! Will you give me poetical philosophy, poetical science?”⁶³ Perhaps philosophical poetry would be to talk about the secret,

60 Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (Samuel Weiser, 1995), 41.

61 CCRU, “Lemurian Time War”, 36.

62 Doris Langley Moore, *Ada. Countess of Lovelace: Byron’s Legitimate Daughter* (John Murray Publishers, 1977).

63 Betty Alexandra Toole, *Ada, the Enchantress of Numbers: Prophet of the Computer Age* (Strawberry Press, 1998), 10.

whereas poetical philosophy-science keeps its eyes shut against the illuminating despotism of reason.

We are deemed to fail in pinning down “diffracted spatialities and diffracted temporalities, entangled ‘across’ space and time; past, present, future threaded through one another”.⁶⁴ One cannot brighten the darkness of the night by painting the room white. In the haunted ontology of technologically enhanced “spacetime-mattering[s]”⁶⁵ and increasingly forged or entirely fictional memories, we might need to adopt a “vision-in-Black” which would allow us to “speak with the ghosts”⁶⁶ and see the Universe transform with every shape of lead. Perhaps if we start to notice the smoke coming from the stake, we will one day spot a witch crossing the high noon sky. “Superstition is a modality of being-in-the-world.”⁶⁷

So, what did we find among the scratched-up walls of the haunted house above the opaque waters of the lake? Not knowledge or a direction but a sensibility to the supernormal—a refreshing belief in the fundamental instability of the World engulfed and permeated by the Black Universe. Recalling Bergson’s account of paranormal perceptions as “veridical hallucinations”, Ó Maoilearca points out that for Laruelle, all thought that “gives itself the authority to pronounce on the essence of reality” is in fact based on a hallucination: “a hallucinated outside—a view from nowhere”.⁶⁸ Couldn’t we then, by the same token, take “superseriously” the delirious coincidences, monstrous connections, and invisible flows that link us together? As the saying goes, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you. And if we never know whether wishful thinking works, do we dare to whisper into the black mirror?

64 Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, 254.

65 Ibid., 261.

66 Ibid., 265.

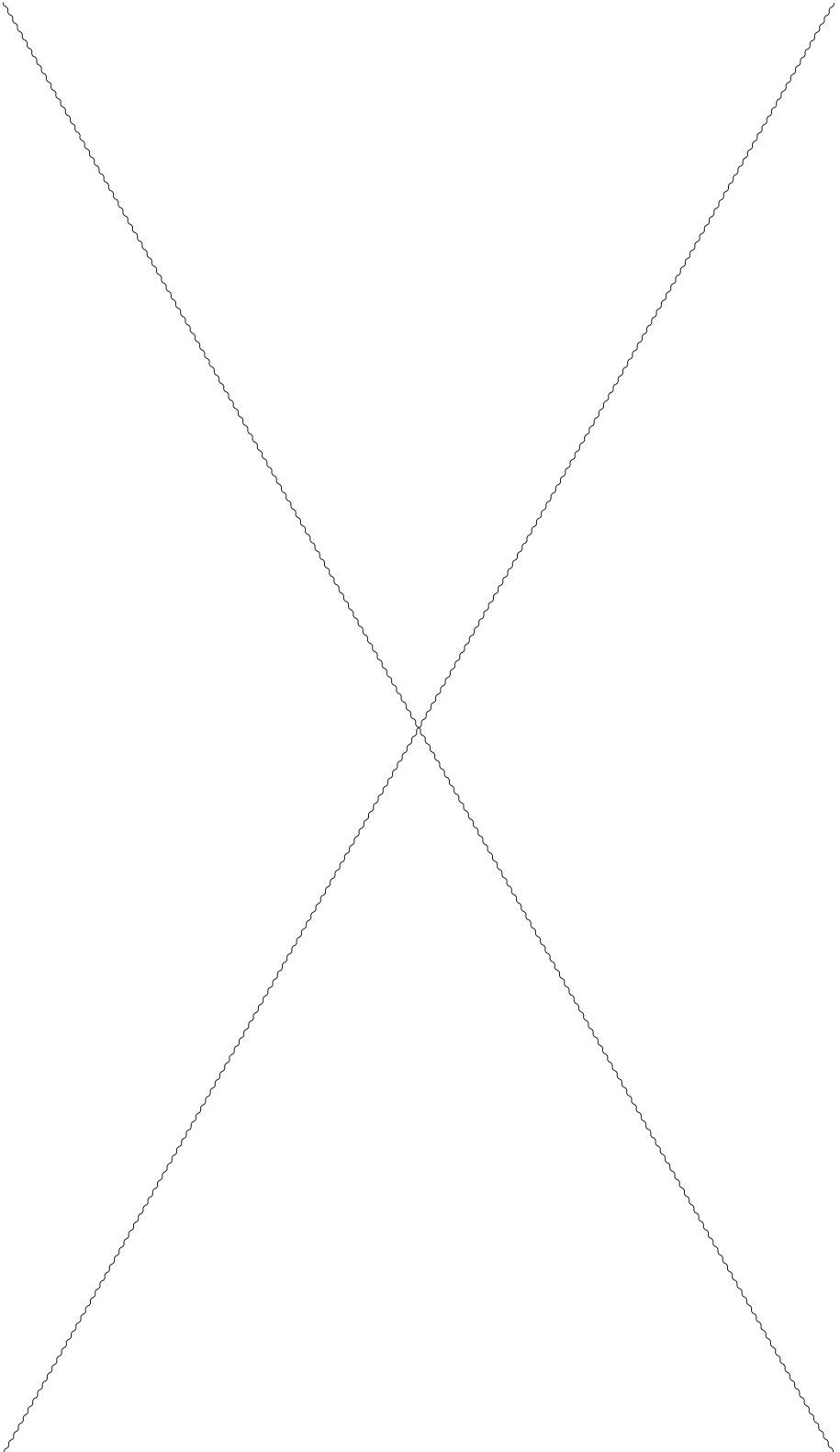
67 Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 59.

68 Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy*, 166.

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Katabasing

PHILIP SPEAKMAN









Katabasing was made for Gossamer Fog's Alt_R, a virtual production studio featuring a large 7 x 3 m LED screen displaying a real-time Unreal Engine environment. The work uses motion tracking to allow the performer to seamlessly and physically interact with the virtual 3D environment; tracking an object so it functions as a virtual torch beam, shining digital light into the virtual scene.

Through soundtrack and performance, the work tells the story of Orphic Chase, a now-missing YouTuber, and the miraculous videos he filmed. The work reimagines the story of legendary Greek poet Orpheus, said to be able to move animals and the natural world using the power of his words and song, eventually using these powers to gain access and travel into the underworld, an act known in the ancient work as katabasis. The work explores this travel into a parallel realm and how new technologies inevitably give rise to new occult narratives and beliefs.

The work draws on theories of re-enactment, play, LARPing, real esoteric online subcultures, ritual magic, internet folklore, and Netflix true crime shows. Just as Orpheus was said to manipulate reality through the power of his words and songs, the work considers the techniques and affects viral content deploys to inform and infect our sense of reality online.

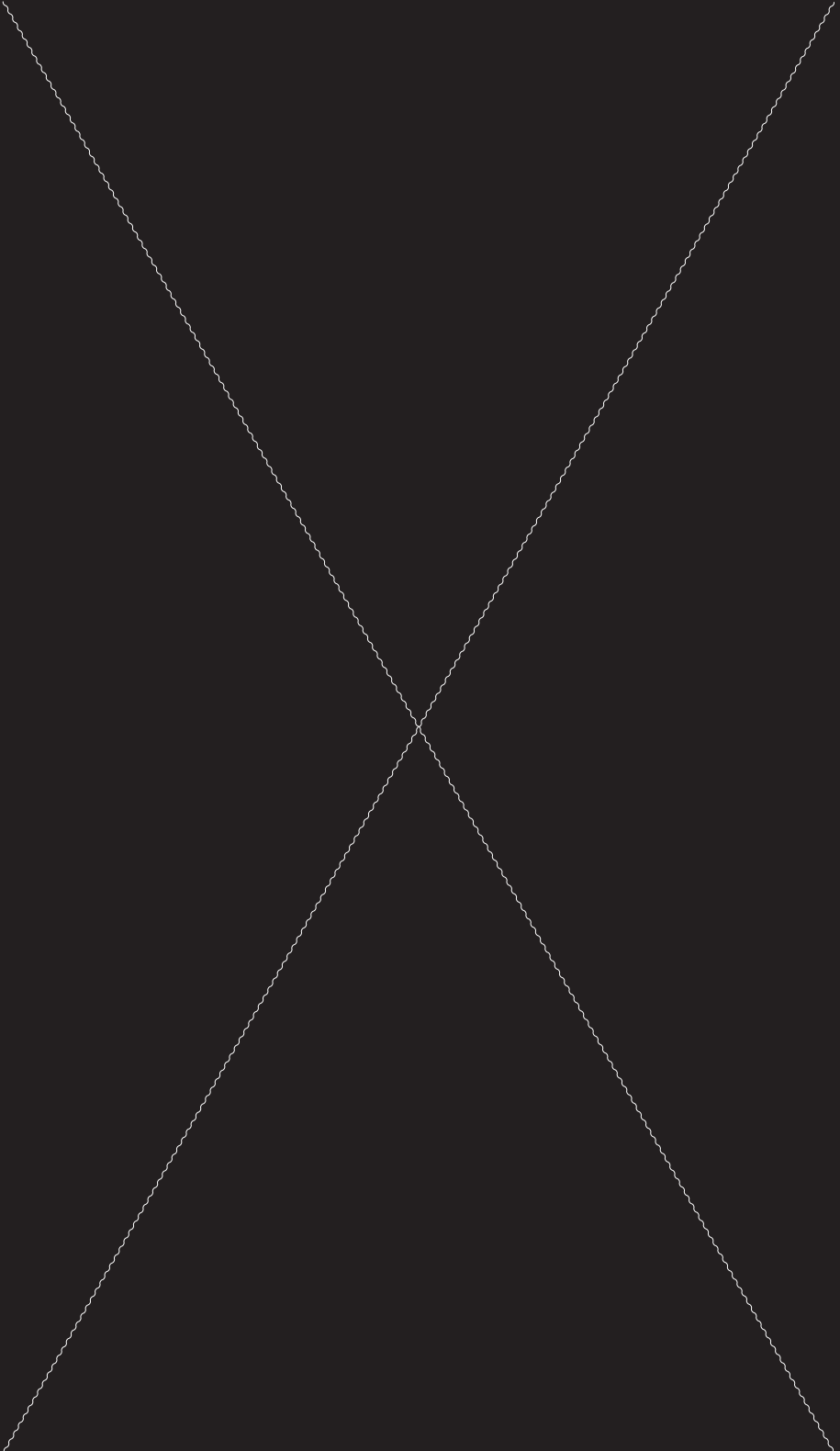
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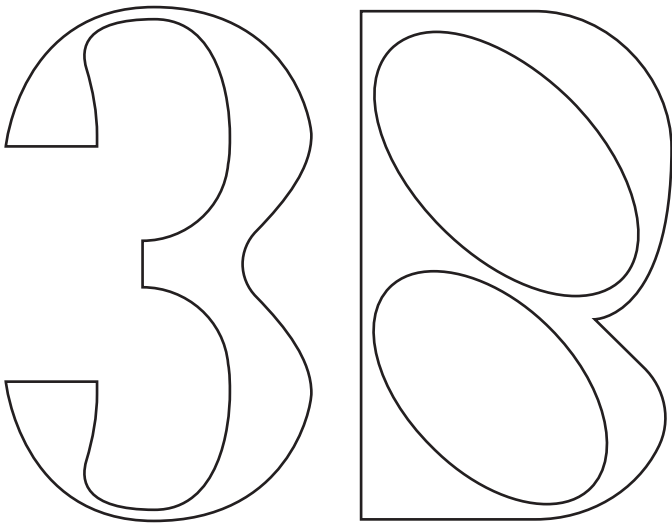
Katabasing, performed live at Gossamer Fog's Alt_R as part of "Mudsimmer" on May 4, 2024. With thanks to Gossamer Fog, Sam Capps, Diane Edwards, and Billy Sassi.

KATABASING

Philip Speakman is an artist based in London. His practice explores the anomalous fictions which shape and arise from our contemporary networked lives. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Slade School of Art, looking at the role of online LARPing and collective storytelling as a tool of political myth-making. Recently commissioned projects include *The Road That Eats Thoughts* at Chemist Gallery, *Reality Break* for Future Artefacts FM, *Katabasing* at Gossamer Fog's Alt_R, and upcoming work for exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in May 2026.

WWW: <https://philipspeakman.com/katabasing>





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A Playbook of Bewilderment

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LUJA ŠIMUNOVIĆ

Remember those days bleeding into nights, immersed in online spaces, the bedroom air turning strange and sticky. Doors, stairs, mirrors—the fabric of the everyday transfiguring into a dreadful promise of otherworldly vibrancy. Surely, there must be more than meets the eye? Scrolling, clicking, looking, reading; anonymous stories latching on, unraveling new truths. And often it takes only a shift of your gaze for that fragile reality to crumble, leaving your boring, ordinary self once again asking—again and again and again—where did it all go?

In ancient myth, katabasis is a journey into the underworld, a breaching of the threshold between the living and the dead. The underworld bears hidden and forgotten secrets that disturb truth and knowledge, as well as repressed desires that unsettle earthly reality. Most famously, in Ovid's collection of mythological stories *Metamorphosis*, we encounter the great musician Orpheus, who gains access to the underworld by the power of song. Digital spaces are full of similar—and even stranger—myths that, by playing with the ways stories circulate online, cross from fiction to fact. Philip Speakman's work *Katabasing* takes to these new occult spaces; drawing on the Greek myth of Orpheus, it introduces the story of Orphic Chase: a YouTuber who became known for such "subterranean" experiments, filming miraculous phenomena with his phone, and who one day mysteriously vanished (or stopped posting). *Katabasing* was performed and recorded in front of a live audience in a virtual production studio. As a documentary, reminiscent of other such videos about unsolved mysteries or conspiracies we'd find on YouTube, it now continues to circulate online. The video opens in a sort of true-crime fashion, with an audio conversation between a documentary filmmaker and an independent researcher, Anna Wren. They talk about the YouTuber's disappearance and his connection to the online practice known as katabasing, originating—according to one of many theories—in the Greek cult of Orphism. Katabasing emerged or has been popularised, as the researcher explains, among different subcultures in the weird corners of the internet, revolving around

strange mysteries, community-created horror, reality-shifting, internet-based magic, and other such narratives, practices, and phenomena. New technologies, says Wren in the video, don't insulate us from the mysterious, preternatural realm, but produce "new journeys out towards the weird". Playing with our understanding of what is real and what is not and flirting with the thin lines of fiction and fact, the digital realm—and *Katabasing* as well—allows for new stories, new portals to emerge. Besides the conversation and the soundtrack, the video also consists of blurry shots of what might be Orphic Chase's footage. The second part of the video shows us what is declared to be the ninth round of filming the *Orphic Chase: Katabasing*. We see the video maker, who could be the documentarist or the Orphic Chase himself, pointing a beam of light into the darkness of the forest, searching, enacting the katabasing ritual: chanting, looking to the forest as strange occurrences start to appear, looking back to the camera and the audience—do they see what he sees?

Going under, *Katabasing* entertains the ways various memetic complexes emerging and spreading online—such as Slenderman or QAnon—operate in a liminal space between fiction and reality. It is through an enactment of collective games of belief that these stories gain power, shifting from an internet lore to perceived truth, and from fringe to mainstream culture. Speakman suggests in his 2025 text¹ on the topic that we may understand these contemporary collective myths as "tales of the anomalous": incantations of fictions that become true in the way they affect the world. Seductive, strange modes of magical thinking, which such tales encourage, may start out as a game, but for true believers, notes Speakman, "end up a whole world". Playing with the pull of an anomalous story like that of Orpheus Chase, *Katabasing* invites us to ask where

1 Philip Speakman, "It May Start Out as a Game but It Ends Up a Whole World': Creepypasta, QAnon, and the Anomalous Tales of the Internet", *Contemporary Legend* 3 (2025): 78–107.

art practice stands in crafting such games. There are several players that *Katabasing* involves, each with a distinct approach and role, each performing a different intensity of engagement and belief: The YouTuber hunting the unknown and disappearing into it. The audience following and absorbing the story and interpreting it. The documentarist and the researcher, investigating and anatomizing. Together, they highlight digital networks as liminal territories for shifting worlds, where—like in the journey into the underworld—the boundaries of what is possible and impossible, believable and unbelievable are transgressed.

What follows is a playbook of sorts. Reflecting on *Katabasing*, it takes up mythmaking as a game of belief and looks at participation in it through four particular modes of engagement and enactment. These modes are actualized in familiar, archetypal characters that dwell online: the trickster, the hivemind, the lurker, and the dead account. The trickster enacts belief without internalizing it. The hivemind is fully engaged, enchanted, and collectively complicit. The lurker is estranged yet still implicated. And finally, the dead account that has exited the game altogether. These are dynamic configurations that overlap and feed into one another—opening reality onto a terrain where stories emerge and circulate, myths² take form and sometimes slip into reality. This playbook invites you to consider the ways we navigate the game shaped by digital technologies and find your player.

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2 I use “myth” here to mean fictional stories that play with fiction and fact through the use of diverse storytelling strategies available in the digital sphere, and which through circulation and engagement grow and deepen into complex lore.

The Trickster

To play the game—whether knowingly or not—means engaging with and being engaged by its rules. There are those who know the rules very well, who through cunning and deceit know how to bend and break them. Such is the archetypal figure of the trickster. In mythology and folklore, the trickster is a liminal figure—a character who exists at the threshold of two worlds. In crossing boundaries, this figure violates principles of social and natural order, playfully disrupting normal life and then re-establishing it on a new basis. Trickster acts out of impulse or curiosity rather than a moral code and is driven, above all, by an appetite for the game, as noted by cultural scholar Lewis Hyde. Observing and working from the shadows, inventing and setting traps, the trickster is both deceptive and creative.³ They take the rules set in place as their playing field: hungry for imagining new forms of bending the rules through trickery, tricksters work on the border—both inside and outside the game—to destabilise truths as the limits of what is possible and impossible blur.

Digital spaces like online forums Reddit and 4chan seem to be full of tricksters: from creepypasta storytellers to internet trolls, they dwell online, laying traps for belief. These spaces—image and text-based boards where one can freely post—are often anonymous, lack hierarchy, and are at times unmoderated. As such, they become a playground for digital mythmakers. Some subreddits like r/nosleep, dedicated to horror stories, also known as creepypastas, may involve a collective understanding of the fictional status of the stories posted there: stories are presented as true, and participants collectively suspend their disbelief and play along.

3 Lewis Hyde, “Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art”, New York Times Archive, accessed December 18, 2025, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/hyde-trickster.html?_r=2.

Other boards, such as 4chan's /b/, run wild, with no rule in place, allowing for different breeds of fakery to thrive, circulate, and become alive in other digital and non-digital realms. Hoax images treated as evidence, screenshots with no context, anonymous witnesses, timelines as historical records: tricksters appear from the fringe, within online communities, casting doubt, re-enchanting a chronically disenchanted world through shitposting and collective mythmaking.

Speakman's *Katabasing* flirts with internet lore and phenomena such as Slenderman, Unfavorable Semicircle, QAnon, and Cult of Kek, which seduce with their cryptic fabrications and take hold of collective imaginaries. These memetic complexes, playing the game of virality, operate as exploits that take advantage of vulnerabilities and flaws in computer systems—they make use of the digital network's powerful grasp on social, political, or economic reality, intervening in the ways attention and information are distributed. A web of conspiracies emerges, which subverts dominant systems of belief and can at times produce real social and political change. A number of these fictions have now turned mainstream by becoming the fuel for the aesthetic of the New Right, turning the trickster into a permanent and chaotic political agent. While some have triggered waves of school violence, others allowed for softer spiritual awakenings. Many of such contagious narratives that circulate on the internet and operate on the border between fiction and fact, fantasy and truth can be seen—as Speakman suggests—as examples of “unruly and unreliable tales which trouble and transgress the boundaries of what most would consider common place reality [...] These stories, unable to be integrated into the systems of religious belief, scientific rationale, or other ordering theories of the cosmos, might be characterised as stories of that-which-does-not-fit, telling of events which radically break the rules.” Speakman calls this type of legend-like stories, which have existed “across cultures, epochs and forms” and today find a new medium of virality on the internet, “tales of the

anomalous”⁴. Not fitting within the rational frameworks or existing belief, dwelling on the border between known and unknown, such stories are alluring—they seduce and stick, and infect belief.⁵ As Vivian Asimos shows in her research on online communities, belief is a scale of possibilities that can be played with and manipulated: sometimes unconsciously, at other times, such as in the case of creepypastas, consciously. Internet tricksters and anomalous tales, while collectively performing and manipulating belief, show its fuzziness and plasticity: belief is a thing that can be played, manipulated, and transformed with real effect.⁶ Online tricksters, from trolls to anomalous storytellers, despite their different agendas and motivations, form a decentralised conspiracy of heretics that turn reality into a cipher only an altered kind of subjectivity may readily decode.

Once the borders of reality are breached and fictions spill over, do these epistemic traitors still think everything is fake, that this is just a game? That behind the code there really is nothing at all? After all, the trickster’s demise is often of their very own making.

4 Speakman, “It May Start Out as a Game but It Ends Up a Whole World”, 78.

5 Ibid., 78–107.

6 Vivian Asimos, “Everything Is True Here, Even if It Isn’t: The Performance of Belief Online”, *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religion* 22 (2020): 44–54.

The Hivemind

We learn from myth that as tricksters innovate new plots, sometimes they lose their wits and fall into their own traps—consumed by the myths they themselves unleashed into the world.⁷ They turn the world into a game of conspiracies—flat earths, divine frequencies, lizard people, pedophilic cabals—threads of symbols waiting to be decoded. As some conspiracies start to ring true, the trickster’s games of deceit bleed into new territories. Online, the tricksters’ memetic complexes trigger powerful networks of affect that run through our collective imagination, tapping into ancient fears and often turning to horror as a seductive device for persuasion. Strange puzzles that seem to conceal deeper truths, hidden within virtual and material realities: rather than rational and cold, reality starts to glimmer, opening onto hidden worlds that escape everyday helplessness and contemporary loss of meaning. Here, the network runs hot and goes deeper than anyone can imagine, and everything outside the network gets implicated and distorted—a journey to the underworld where new modes of subjectivity emerge. It is here that the internet tricksters become hiveminds, individuals become swarms: new beliefs are internalized into an enchanted collective consciousness whose disorienting structure mirrors that of the nonhuman network. While yes, it may have started as a game, now—as Speakman suggests—it has become a whole world.⁸ Becoming one with the mob, losing oneself in it: there is no longer any difference between game and reality, as all the rules have been broken, and all that is left is a stream of code waiting to be deciphered. Finally, irony has turned into a creed. Everything is true, and everything is permitted. At least, so they say.

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7 Hyde, “Trickster Makes This World”.

8 Speakman, “It May Start Out as a Game but It Ends Up a Whole World”.

For the hivemind, the network—like the deep dark forest of Speakman’s Katabasing—becomes a territory of the unknown where orientation fails. As scholar Elisabeth Parker notes, it is in the Gothic novel that the forest emerges in its nonhuman, alienating nature. Rather than a passive background, the forest becomes re-enchanted into an uneasy and at times monstrous space which tests and threatens—a space of the unconscious that transgresses the rationalized and secularized world of Western modernity, as well as the boundaries of the self and other, of what is real and what is not. The imagination of a dark network works in a similar way, becoming—through collective incantation—an enchanted web of conspiracies. Spaces like Telegram channels, Discords servers, Facebook groups become dense and interlinked corridors that produce a forest of symbols and obsessions. Here, the network, like the forest, becomes a haunting threshold: individual agency merges with collective will, human intention with algorithmic suggestion. As in the Gothic novel, two notes accompany these weird descents: the exaggeration of emotion and character, and repetition.⁹ For Parker, the forest is a dreadful and weird territory outside of time and history in which everything that has happened may happen again at any moment.¹⁰ Online, extreme affective modes like delusion or aggression unfold alongside a persistent propulsion of oftentimes poor and self-indulgent content that only those initiated may begin to grasp.¹¹ Understood this way, the hivemind’s journey is that of fanatic magicians who together participate in rituals of exaggeration and repetition. It is a “rabbit hole epistemology”, as Marc Tuters writes: properly pilled, the tunnel goes deep, producing its own codes and opening new territories.¹² Following Tuters, these dark memetic refrains are intoxicating and conta-

9 Here, I am drawing on David B. Morris’s “Gothic Sublimity” (*New Literary History* 16, no. 2 (1985): 300).

10 Elisabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (Palgrave Gothic, 2020), 3.

11 Egil Asprem, “The Magical Theory of Politics”, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 23, no. 4 (2020): 22.

12 Marc Tuters, “Weird Mediation: Deleuze and Guattari on Toxic Internet Subcultures”, *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 17, no. 4 (2023): 547.

gious, a spiritual experience across various media that generates alternative affective landscapes, desires, and subjectivities.

The hivemind is pulled in by the trickster's game, turning the game into a spiraling reality that hinges on new truth-seeking protocols in which accepted epistemologies collapse. Unheard, anonymous voices become collective enunciations—a mode of magical thinking that embraces uncertainty as a tool for reality shifting. A total collective immersion in excess. A fast-burning intensity that spreads as quickly as it exhausts. Between breaths, the fanatic mob turns inward. Where do we draw the line between control and freedom? Between order and chaos? Between the search for knowledge and a deeper entanglement?

The Lurker

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To transform the game into a world, there may be no more need to play, no more rules to break. Yet even to a mere onlooker, it still seduces with its promise of communion and ultimate clarity. Disengaging from the hivemind, slipping back into the shadows, ghosting and isolating, the lurker turns inwards—like the trickster, they occupy the game's threshold, yet unlike them, the lurker refrains from participation but rather retreats into a self-enchanted ritual of doomscrolling. In this sense, they are opposite sides of the same coin. The lurker resembles the figure of the stranger, that ambivalent archetype traced by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman: an outsider who sees clearly through the artificiality of laws and the arbitrary divisions between what is possible and impossible, acceptable and unacceptable.¹³ Neither friend nor foe, the stranger occupies a liminal position that challenges accepted truths and customs which are time and time again collectively reinforced.

13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity Press, 1998).

But unlike the trickster, who acts on these artificialities, the lurker lets a new truth become legible as self, other, and world partially disengage—a new kind of horror accessible only to those dwelling on the borderlands. It is, then, the lurker that haunts virtual spaces, soaking up the memetic field without ever fully engaging or belonging. While the trickster is productive, enacting the game of belief, the lurker absorbs these new-found realities from a distance. Alienation and fragmentation are the driving forces that keeps the lurker invested in a new process of becoming—only that this time, the lurker does not chase a single truth but rather embraces the flow of its paradoxical structures.¹⁴

The lurker thrives in these ambivalences. Wandering the enchanted woods, this ascetic is faced with multiple contradictions. As Parker shows, the forest is never one thing: it is both a refuge and a threat, a site of delusion and enlightenment, outside wilderness and inner unconscious, ancient, yet outside of time. Between human agency and nonhuman intentionality, the network becomes a site of a similar tension. Writing on cyberpunk literature, Robert G. Beghetto depicts the digital sphere as a liminal space where everyday categories collapse. Private chats leak into public feeds, anonymity into radical surveillance, free expression into discipline, secular infrastructure into total devotion. It is this domain that blurs the lines between the secular and sacral, self and other, private and public, freedom and control.¹⁵ Beghetto finds the figure of the stranger in modernist and cyberpunk novels: he sees *flâneurs* and cybercowboys as those who relish in new urban and technological developments yet are not one with this new crowd. Both restricting and liberating, the modern stranger occupies this paradoxical space, disabused of the idea of a unitary self or collective, taking no sides and going at it alone. Whereas Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* moves

14 Robert G. Beghetto, *Monstrous Liminality: Or, The Uncanny Strangers of Secularized Modernity* (Ubiquity Press, 2022): 137.

15 Beghetto, *Monstrous Liminality*, 127.

visibly through the busy streets of nineteenth-century Paris—immersed in the crowd, soaking up the new realities of technological progress and modernization—the lurker roams online—lingering in the shadows, slipping through threads and comment sections, tracing myths and watching the drama unfold. The magic persists in the allure of alienation and pull of radical unknowing: everything is both real and fake, permitted and forbidden—a liberation from the search for ultimate clarity and truth, from collective utopian dreams.

Stripped of all stability, what lies beneath may just be utterly alien bits and atoms. Could the doomscroller reach the limits of this newly found relativism? Is there really anything more to say and do?

The Dead Account

According to Lewis Hyde, the trickster’s cunning can be understood as an effort to exit the game altogether. To do so, they must lose their appetite for play, ultimately turning into something else entirely.¹⁶ On the other hand, in seeking the greatest cornucopia, the trickster might be rendering the game utterly pointless—nothing left to chase, nobody left to deceive. Moving from hidden communities to mass attention, from insider lore to public discourse, from post-ironic memes to mainstream aesthetics; the once intoxicating memetic complexes lose their magic seduction. State politics, mainstream media, fan art, Hollywood movies: codes are obvious, language used up—the game cracked and flattened. What remains are graveyards of deleted accounts that have moved on: burned-out moderators, vanished YouTubers, others disgusted, disenchanted, or deceased. Within the network, bots take their place, recycling old, debunked myths that true knowers can read

16 Hyde, “Trickster Makes This World”.

right through. To exit and stay silent negates the game's power and control; death by inaction. From this new position, those who have left may hold another kind of power that escapes the extractive processes of the network. By avoiding its ritualizing and affective machinery, these apostates plant deathly seeds into the feedback loop of content circulation.

Each new form of network opens space for new subjectivities and worlds—new territories of social, political, and personal experience. The running metaphor of the dark forest now finally links to Bogna Konior's research on networks as systems that play with concealment and secrecy. The dark forest theory reframes the primary human need for socialization—and the online drive toward connection and communication—as essential carriers of conflict, control, and governance.¹⁷ Digital spaces feed on this deeply human necessity, pushing for constant exposure that may lead to dangerous attacks, such as personal data being leaked and used against us. It is also online where a complex, dynamic understanding of the self is laid out, complicated through encounters with others that may be friends or enemies. In this, the idea of a unitary self becomes a hallucination, a bad dream in which the self is just a node being played against other nodes. Online spaces become war-zones in which the only shelter lies in complete darkness. Following Konior, the only real escape would be to stay totally silent, or at least appear to.¹⁸ As a politically potent figure, this silent burnout also leads to Giorgio Agamben's destituent: an inactive body that, in its undoing, may turn economic, social, biological processes inoperative, thereby enabling new opportunities for action.¹⁹ These are those, according to Agamben, who neutralize power, who through lack of participation may dispose of controlling systems and

17 Bogna Konior, *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet* (Flugschriften, 2020), 8.

18 *Ibid.*, 20.

19 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Destituent Power?", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014): 70.

render them ineffective.²⁰ In its exit, the dead account performs a destituent gesture: winning by refusing to play, withdrawing from the extractive machinery of the network.

Yet like an unexpected death, absence forms a cloud of mystery and intrigue. The YouTuber who stopped posting. The throwaway account that stopped giving updates. The meme page that went dark. Could it be that the apostate has triggered a new game within the network? That there actually is no escape? As a new game approaches on the horizon, a new trickster may be ready to take over.

Epilogue

In Speakman's *Katabasing*, mysteries unravel on different planes: online fandoms, digital cults, strange disappearances all fold into a seductive web of conspiracies. The work also draws on the deep, dark forest of literary imagination, rerouting it through a contemporary feed that mirrors the alienating, inhuman nature of the network and the ways we connect and commune within it. Distinct rituals of participation are invoked: Orphic Chase that planted the seed of an anomalous tale involving paranormal phenomena only to exit abruptly; the virtual and actual audience engaging with the myth through attention and visibility; the podcasters trying to keep their distance, who are still seduced by the dark pull of enchantment. From the trickster (a liminal agent that created new games of belief by enacting sincerity and finding soft emotional spaces online), to the hivemind (which dissolves individuality into a swarm entranced by repetition and excess), onto the lurker (a witness that chooses to keep absorbing and analyzing from the margins), and finally to the dead account (where silence itself becomes generative, producing new meanings and myths).

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20 Ibid., 71.

One relies on the other, a game of belief that takes to various topologies of attention and consumption in order to open alternative affective territories. In each position—either fully within, outside, or suspended in between—there is power to tilt the game, to make or break the world. It is through this interplay that myth becomes operational, a mythopoeic feedback loop in which, as soon as one game ends, another begins.

Luja Šimunović is a curator, lecturer, and researcher. She works at the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb where she is pursuing a PhD on the topic of digitally mediated subjectivity and fiction in contemporary art. Luja has been working as a curator, educator, and producer since 2015, collaborating with many different institutions and organisations in Croatia and abroad. In 2001, she co-founded KUĆĆA with Jurica Mlinarec and Klara Petrović. They curated the 36th Youth Salon in Zagreb, the 63rd Poreč Annale, and the 60th Zagreb Salon, and also run a project space in Zagreb where they organise exhibitions and a residency programme.



Eliška

Jahelková

[angel kether]

3250







**SPIRITUAL
COMPUTING**

RATHER GO EXTINCT



I see you hoarding images

THAN OFFLINE



it's time to let go

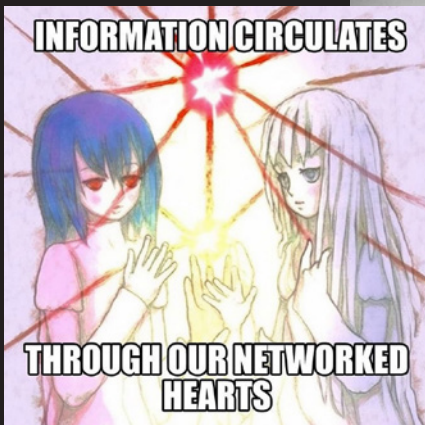
WE FELL IN LOVE



ON THE INTERNET

**I DON'T BELIEVE
IN POLITICS**

INFORMATION CIRCULATES



**THROUGH OUR NETWORKED
HEARTS**

I BELIEVE IN LIGHT

Painting is an act of alchemy.

Painting is therefore an exchange of energy.

Painting, to me, is about energy, force, and value. Everything has its own value.

This begins with the medium and form. I believe oil has higher energy compared to acrylics because of the exchange of value when manufacturing the paint. There is no need for choice when it comes to value and energy. You always pick the one that is higher. Same goes for the canvas and brushes.

But all of this is simply just the preparation for the image itself. It is the base.

The beginning of the painted image has always been a ritual, an image of God. That is the tradition. I believe art is always spiritual, even if it's unintentional.

The act of painting is magickal, the same way a prayer is.

I do not think that this point of view is limiting, simply because God is in everything.

But there are levels to being. On the tree of life, we find ourselves in Malkuth, where we have to submit to laws of existence. The higher we go, the less laws we have and the closer to God we get. I believe a painting made with pure intention and intuition can act like a portal between the nodes of the tree of life. Through art that is useless for survival we can see that there is something beyond survival.

My goal is to transmit my Gnostic experiences through intuition to find and transmute Gnosis.

credits

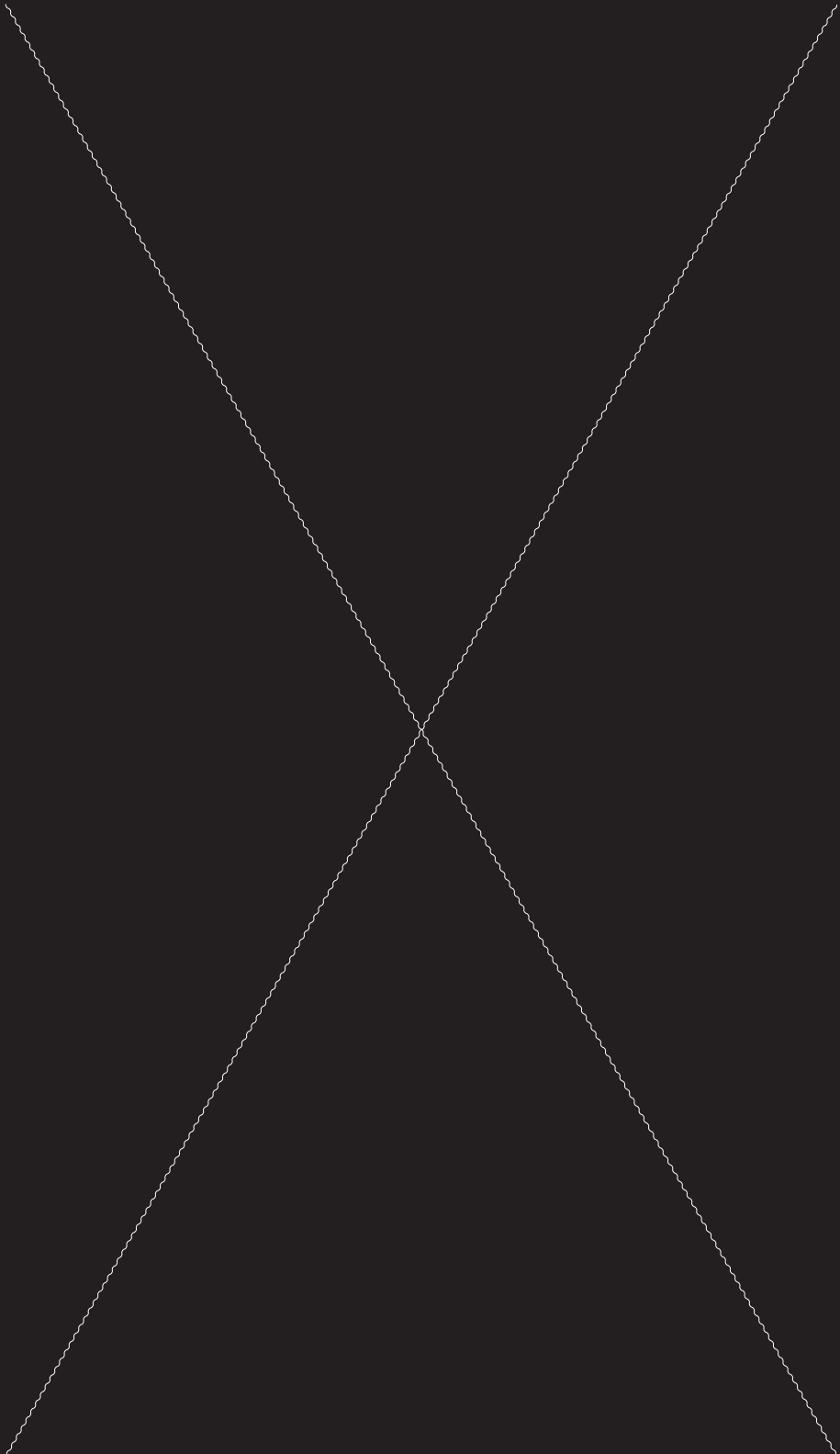
p. 3258–3259:

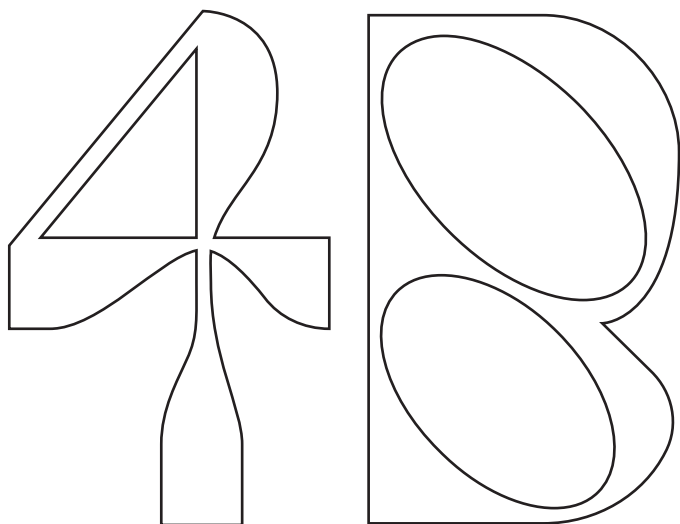
Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 2025*The Dragon*, oil on canvas, 2025*heaven and earth*, oil on linen canvas, 2025*titans*, oil on linen canvas, 2025

p. 3260: various memes from the @user_goes_to_kether Instagram feed.

Eliška Jahelkova is a Czech painter, researcher, and an online presence. Her painting practice is influenced by the connection between Gnosticism, technology, and nature. Different mediums seep through, such as sound and internet cinema, but painting remains her primary focus. She searches for an answer to whether Gnosis can be found and transmitted through painting as a practice of magick. Her ultimate aim is to create paintings that are, in themselves, portals for those who dare to enter. Jahelková is based in Vienna and currently studying Transmediale Kunst at Die Angewandte. Her work was featured in *Spike Art Magazine*, *Remilia Quarterly*, *Ethics Magazine*, and *Antireality*, among others.

IG: @eliskajah**IG:** @user_goes_to_kether**WWW:** <https://angelkether.neocities.org>





“Where I
shrinepost
from”: Minor
Techniques
and Immanent
Operations

3205

**SOPHIE PUBLIG &
CLAIRE ELISE HERZBERG**

Reality between Schizophrenia & Psychosis

Without dragging you all back to Philosophy 101, the basic “meme-Technique” involves exploiting the plasticity of meaning; the act of reframing an image, or putting words on an image, influences the meaning which is either calculated, determined, or short-circuited, by the subject. The context of an artwork often has more to say about a work’s meaning than the work itself. We must, then, look at the context within which the art of Eliška Jahelková circulates. Eliška Jahelková’s work does not just radiate light in the positivistic sense, it also negates something else, which is to say that it is not just bright, but that it is bright *against* a dark backdrop; this is a principle source of its affectivity. As Jahelková is a (transmedia¹) *Internet Artist*, her work naturally circulates the long corridors of the internet and social media, which, far from being neutral spaces, come with a lot of semantic interference and noise. The Internet, and technology in general, has changed the ground upon which art operates, and to some extent, it is not clear where art fits into this new world.

3200

“In the wake of generative A.I.,’ said one Jairus Banaji, ‘we have reached a watershed moment, where it is no longer possible to know what is real and what is not.’ ‘Such a situation’, he continued, ‘causes us to *suspend belief* in what we see.’”²

Being unable to verify anything you see, or simply having no time to do so, can transform a social media feed into a total

1 A multimedia artist might use multiple media within a single work, such as paint and collage, whereas a transmedia artist more specifically has multiple outlets, such as, in the case of Eliška, paintings, films, memes, and so on.

2 Words spoken by Jairus Banaji at a lecture he gave via Zoom at a book launch organized by RabRab Press in Berlin, June 17, 2025. Transcription by Claire Elise Herzberg.

disorientation-machine. As we doomscroll through the dark, we fall down dimly lit tunnels—rabbit holes—and the further down we go, the less we understand each other, the less coherence there is between stories, versions, beliefs, and so on. December 2025 saw Meta go to court for deliberately burying “causal evidence” linking severe depression to the use of their platforms,³ hence the term doomscrolling. The question of this text, however, is more specific: it asks about the role of aesthetics and storytelling within the context of the affective storm that is *the feed*.

To elaborate, in simple terms, we identify with each other through storytelling, through sharing a mythology, but at a certain level, it is all *drag*.⁴ This shared fiction can be manipulated in different ways, such as the mobilization of mythology within political ideologies, and yet, as with *Language* itself, simply casting aside this fiction (which we might also think about as the symbolic) would be disastrous. To elaborate further still, we can think about the Lacanian ideas of Psychosis and Schizophrenia, where both are outside of “Reality”—the *world* or the *symbolic order*—because the psychotic creates a delusional reality to live in,⁵ another symbolic, and the schizophrenic because the symbolic effectively dissolves. The schizophrenic is outside reality in that they live in the Real itself. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan suggests that schizophrenia begins in the mirror stage: “The child, before the mirror, turns towards the one who carries him, who holds him—as if to call upon the Other to ratify the image.”⁶

3 Jeff Horwitz, “Meta buried ‘causal’ evidence social media harm, US court filings allege”, *Reuters*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/meta-buried-causal-evidence-social-media-harm-us-court-filings-allege-2025-11-23/>.

4 As in a Drag show.

5 In Lacan’s *Seminar III*, the psychotic, which is described in *Ecrits* (1966) as the foreclosure of the *Name-of-the-Father*, is elaborated on as an attempt to organize their reality outside of the symbolic order.

6 Lacan, *Seminar XI*, Chapter IX.

It is in the confirmation that the imaginary meets the symbolic, and the schizophrenic does not enter the symbolic.

It could be feasible to propose that the abundance of *deceitful* images, as described by Banaji above, has the possibility of triggering this ejection from reality, either through a lack of confirmation or through the creation of delusional realities. For example, Jairus Banaji, in the same lecture, discussed how “shady” BJP-financed groups engage in the deliberate production of malicious media which abuse meme-Techniques (transposing images from one event onto another, superimposing language which alters the meaning of images, etc.) to manipulate a story.⁷

Fiction, storytelling, is therefore to be understood as the predominant form of worldbuilding, it sets off a chain of sedimentation and protocolization, so it is a (cosmo-)Technique.⁸ This is the context against which we must read the work of Eliška Jahelková, precisely because of the world-building which permeates and holds together her transmedia output.

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7 Since at least 2017, there have been countless articles written on this topic, including texts in *Forbes*, *The European Council of Foreign Relations*, and, more recently, *Not Even Wrong* (Columbia University Math Department), as well as a cinematic work on Netflix and a 2025 documentary.

8 See, for example: Yuk Hui, *A Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay on Cosmotronics* (Urbanomic, 2016).

Angels in the Network: On Ketherism

In the beginning there was light, a current of light, and the light was already coded. It shimmered through screens until angels began to flicker within it, creatures of light in search of shape and colour. It is from their afterglow that Eliška Jahelková's (aka angel kether, @user_goes_to_kether) moves, with her aesthetic practice spanning painting, film, memes, music, and writing, creating a trans-media cosmology drenched in glowy pastel pinks and liminal references to online girlhood and kawaii aesthetics. Kether's world obeys a single neo-Spinozian premise: the internet = god and god = love. Every meme, brushstroke, or audiovisual fragment becomes an emissary of the conviction that *connection* itself is sacred. Kether's primary interest lies in what connects, not necessarily what differentiates; through her interfaces, kether schizoanalyzes the feed in real time as a system of gnosis where memes act as mantras and immanence replaces transcendence.⁹

Within this theology, kether's cosmology is articulated through three recurring techniques—blur, superimposition, and overexposure—that transcribe belief into the image. These are more than simple aesthetic gestures, they are immanent operations intertwining spirit, technology, and matter: blur dissolves distinctions between different planes; superimposition folds multiple realities into a single surface; overexposure renders light itself divine.

Exemplifying this, blur drifts into form beyond becoming imperceptible in the painting *Dragon*.¹⁰ It depicts a chibi¹¹ angel with pink

9 "Transcendence is always a product of immanence." (Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life* (Zone Books, 2001), 27)

10 angel kether, *Dragon*, 2025, oil on canvas, accessed October 31, 2025, angelkether.neocities.org/paintings/dragon.png.

11 *Chibi* refers to a design technique in manga and anime that compresses characters and gives them cute, childlike features.

wings coiled by a green dragon, her wide eyes reflecting the digital glow of three phones in her hands showing cosmic spirals. In Daoist cosmology, the dragon embodies qi (氣) or the life-energy constituting the cosmos. The painting entwines a creature of ancient power with devices of contemporary transcendence, underlining the vitalism permeating all of existence by suggesting that each screen opens a portal onto the network's unconscious—a field of desire and data, where myth, technology, and self dissolve into the same current.

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In her cinematic work *Mandorla*, which screens regularly with *Open Secret*,¹² the current of light begins to blur, move, and multiply. The film shows a triple superimposition of landscape, doctrine, and aura. Playful scenes of a white winter landscape are remixed with found footage of a lecture on light-eating, while the layers are held together by an ever-evolving mandorla frame. In classical iconography, sacred figures were surrounded by an almond-shaped aureole signifying the passage between heaven and earth. In kether's version, the mandorla is a luminous portal marking the screen where divinity and data align, revealing sacrality in its own overexposure.

The same luminosity escapes from the frame and continues its motion through the networks of circulation. In her memetic practice, kether understands image-sharing as ritual and every upload as an offering. The meme is never of lesser value than the painting; it is just another altar. One image macro¹³ mediates the central tension at the heart of meme culture: the compulsion to accumulate images versus the desire for release. A sage's stern gaze, framed by occult scripture, addresses the user directly: *I see you hoarding*

12 Initiated by Dana Dawud, *Open Secret* is a traveling exhibition format that presents film screenings of internet cinema: [instagram.com/_opensecret/](https://www.instagram.com/_opensecret/).

13 angel kether (@user_goes_to_kether), [no caption], Instagram, 27 June 2025, [instagram.com/p/DLaPDKWtB3c/?img_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DLaPDKWtB3c/?img_index=1).

images. The bottom-text imperative *it's time to let go* transforms the meme into a sermon, an ascetic incitement that equates salvation with deletion. Transcendence, the algorithmic godhead insists, requires empty storage space.

The exorcism of the archive released images from the earthly grip of ownership, gathering the memetic energy and materializing it in a turn towards abstraction in kether's most recent paintings. Swirls of pink, lilac, and pale ochre form soft, biomorphic shapes and embryonic architectures of proto-angels that share the same materiality. *Heaven and Earth*¹⁴ references the demiurgic cosmology of Gnosticism, interlocking the different spheres through a cable-like cord that seems to vibrate into the ether. *Love*¹⁵ is a portrait of two angelic figures, one with a sigilised head in the shape of a crescent moon and the other bearing a white sun-head, their unlike likenesses united behind a cosmic spiral. Even the impending danger in *Titans*¹⁶ seems to emanate peace. Referencing the ominous world-building of *Attack on Titan*, the painting depicts the three circular walls—Maria, Rose, and Sheena—which encapsulate the inhabitants of Eldia in the manga-turned-anime while a giant sun-headed angel approaches the city. Across these three canvases, the current seems to pause—held in suspension between pigment and pixel, as if each painting were a shrine inviting light to come and rest. In this sense, kether's transmedia practice performs a minor *tikkun olam*¹⁷ of the feed: repair not as moral heroism but as metaphysical hygiene, a cosmic maintenance task.

14 angel kether, *Heaven and Earth*, 2025, oil on linen canvas, accessed October 31, 2025, angelkether.neocities.org/paintings/heavenandearth.png.

15 angel kether, *Love 1*, 2025, oil on linen canvas, accessed October 31, 2025, angelkether.neocities.org/paintings/love1.png.

16 angel kether, *Titans 1*, 2025, oil on linen canvas, accessed October 31, 2025, angelkether.neocities.org/paintings/titans1.png.

17 *Tikkun olam* is an ethical principle from Judaism meaning “to repair the world”, It calls upon individuals to strive toward a better world. In Kabbalistic teachings, where the world is fundamentally perceived as broken, it is invoked as a way to restore cosmic balance.

kether gathers what the feed fragments, restoring light and colour and shape, making it whole again. It is the repair of relation itself: the broken continuity between world and perceiver drawn back together.

Shrineposting & Spurdo-derivatives

Before the concept of doomscrolling, back in the mid-2000s when I was first encountering the internet, navigating forums and imageboards was rather referred to as travelling. There was, even then, an algorithmic logic which would serve up the most-popular (upvoted) and the most-already-encountered media (in terms of views, hits, or clicks) to everyone first. It would take some hours of dedication to break through this wall of popular media and arrive at the weird side of the internet. “If you are seeing this, then you have come far, traveller, rest a while.” At some point, a wandering net-user might come across a new kind of meme, a meme that bears the name Gondola. This meme, an armless (disarmed?) derivative of Spurdo,¹⁸ responded to an early realisation that wading through a swamp of images was ... spiritually exhausting.

“When you scroll, your aura is depleted.”

— angel kether

We are constantly affected by what we see, and it is draining. People began creating Gondolas, a sort of anti-meme which omitted any content or message by focusing on affect only. Gondola memes were designed like resting stations on difficult pathways through

18 Spurdo Spärde is a famous, classical-era meme archetype, a sort of crudely drawn derivative of one of the earliest meme characters, Pedobear. Gondola is a derivative in that, just as the sprite for Pedobear was used to create Spurdo, the face of Spurdo is used to create Gondola.

the mountains; peaceful, gentle spaces which acted like shrines,¹⁹ shelter from the affects. What Gondola memes, and Eliška Jahelková's work, suggest, in response to Jairus Banaji's concerns, is that it doesn't really matter if we believe an image or not, it nonetheless affects us. It is merely coincidental that the memetic avatar of the gnostic demiurge would also be a Spurdo-derivative: to understand that signs (images and stories) have an immutable power over us is one of the forms of gnosis which is prevalent throughout the work of Eliška Jahelková. Her work, in all forms, offers, at the minimum, what may be simply described as *respite*. At the maximum, she is doing so much more.²⁰ If we want to reframe this in the Lacanian terms from the first section, we might say that angel kether's *incorruptible* "shrineposting", a shorthand for creating the Gondola affect, is another face of her wider practice which seeks to offer an alternative, perhaps *minor*, symbolic as a non-delusional refuge to those flirting with psychosis.

Internet = God = Love

Kether's work interrupts the feed's flood of images by offering a different kind of image, one that does not disorient and distract but recovers. In a mediasphere where circulation is exploited to generate distrust and perceptual fatigue, her practice restores orientation. Kether's shrines are not a cut from the current but a pause within it, where sensing can come back into alignment. It is a reminder that images can mend as easily as they can tear apart.

19 See: Seong-Young Her, "Every Gondola is a Shrine", The Philosophers Meme, published December 23, 2019, <https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2019/12/23/gondola-shrine/>.

20 In a text called "A Short Note on Gondola" (The Philosophers Meme, published December 23, 2019, <https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2019/12/23/gondola-shrine/>), Seong-Young Her once contended that the Gondola is "incorruptible" as a meme because it recentered beauty.

This is not simply softness but careful counter-algorithmic repair: internet = god = love. If certain fictions produce psychosis by severing confirmation, others undo that severing by letting the world answer back. Gondola made this visible before the present crisis of perception: the discovery that an image can be a fiction that grants respite instead of rupture. Shrineposting is not sentimentality, it is technique: a way of preserving relations without triggering collapse. Beauty functions as reorientation, proof that not every surface wants to fully consume anyone who encounters it.

“I am normal and I can be trusted with the immanent operation of intertwining spirit, technology and matter.” Schizo here offers a different logic of relation: what emerges from this is not a theology of transcendence but one of immanence, a Spinozian cosmology of platforms in which the divine is not above the world but circulating through its relations. “Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.”²¹ God is not a sovereign presence but the connective tissue of everything—the current that passes through interfaces, media, beauty, and shared affect. Love here is not a characteristic but the capacity to remain in relation. Thus internet = god = love is not metaphor but ontology: where connection occurs, god is already present.

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21 Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics I*, prop. 15.

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Mannerisms

JON DERGANČ









Credits

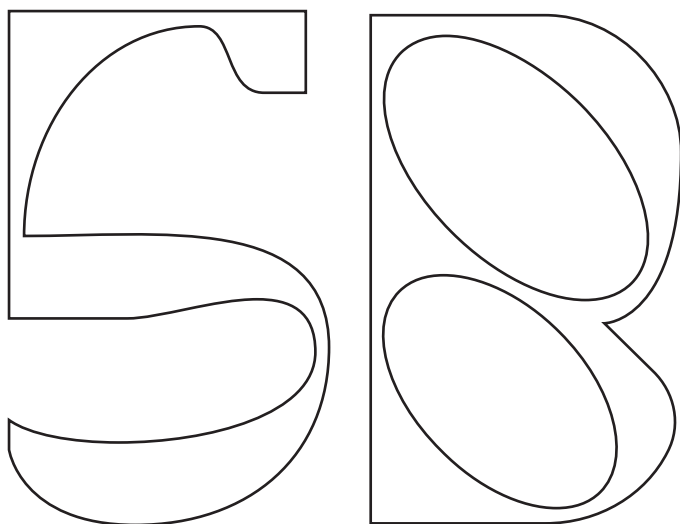
IMG 1: *Trying to be something you're not*, 2025, digital pigment print, 60 × 45 cm

IMG 2: *Samples (Cherry Blossoms)*, 2025, digital pigment print, 46 x 43 cm

IMG 3: *Tom*, 2025, digital pigment print, 92 × 62 cm

IMG 4: *James*, Melbourne, ca. 2003, 2025, digital pigment print, 182 × 122 cm

Jon Derganc lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia. In 2011 he received a BA in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana, and in 2014 he received a master's degree in Calcutta, India. He works primarily with the photographic medium, often in dialogue with the logic of painting. His works explore the limits of photography's ability to objectively represent the world and to transform photographic representation into a new-photo-painterly-reality.



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Shammers

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VLADIMIR VIDMAR

We have always had enormous problems with “reality”. This is, in effect, the history of modern philosophy, if not philosophy as such. It seems almost amusing that history, after all this voluminous theoretical reflection, has brought us back to a point of such radical gnosiological doubt. Yet *Šum*’s 2025 open call identifies novelty in the notion that, this time around, fictions are not something we produce ourselves but rather an effect of the virtual spaces we inhabit. It asks “what new languages or interfaces to reality might [art] help construct—as a way to mend our damaged relationship with both language and reality itself”.¹ What kind of philosophy and art does such a world need? Attempts to answer how this—let us call it—shift in ontological perspective can be conceived within art, particularly within the contemporary paradigm, can easily fall into the trap of conforming to trends that appear to satisfy momentary demands for something new and more marketable. For this reason, the text will focus on an artistic practice that at first glance does not seem particularly new or groundbreaking, one that may even look anachronistic, modernist, and—as the artist himself admits—mannerist, in order to show why a world which is “already becoming other to itself”²—a world that can no longer believe in its own reality—needs precisely such art. Moreover, that the world needs such art even when it believes in its own truth (or at least pretends to).

Reflection on our disbelief in this world, on the fact that the world does not believe in itself, that it is dominated more by affective intensities than by truths, operates, in a general sense, like a faith-driven denigration of earthliness. It accordingly seems that the configuration of this problem requires from us a certain religious yet paradoxical stance. Jon Derganc’s practice can help us illuminate this paradox, serving as a framework for a broader consideration of the initial problem.

1 *Šum* Journal Open Call, March 2025.

2 *Ibid.*

Lightroom

Jon Derganc is a researcher of the limits of the representational capacities of the photographic medium. His work consciously utilizes photographic mechanisms and their effects to deconstruct photographic conventions and footholds, which inform the viewer's entry into and understanding of photography. At the same time, his practice is motivated by an interest in the materiality of photography, as well as the subversion of the identity of this materiality. This tactic can legitimately be read as an explicit rejection of the documentary function of photography and the premise that photography/art can represent the world—which also constitutes a minimal definition of Derganc's fundamental position, one that can be read in the context of a relation to a world that is no longer based on facts. Photography in Derganc's work thus regularly runs up against the limits of its representational capacities: Derganc persistently tests the boundaries of (photographic) representation and instrumentalizes these limits, as in his early work *Brezna (Sinkholes)*.³ This series of analogue black and white photographs, an unpoliticized image of historical trauma—of post-World War II killings on Slovenian territory—emerges through the confrontation between the materiality of the abyss of a massacre site, such as those in the Kras region, and the materiality of analogue photography. That which is missing—a void that, in analogue photography, manifests as an absence of light, the blackness of a hole (a sinkhole)—culminates in its opposite: what was previously a void now appears as a black, saturated density on the surface of the photograph. At the core of the images, where one would wish to look the deepest, and also in relation to the historical event itself, photography encounters a peculiar kind of limit. This limit becomes the material of photographic representation and the place

3 Jon Derganc, *Brezna (Sinkholes)*, 2010–2011. Series of 11 gelatin silver prints (black and white), 49.1 × 39.4 cm each. The work is part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

where the historical event is represented—not as it happened then, but as it exists now, in its absence. The materiality of photography comes to the forefront precisely when the representational power of the photographic medium is undermined.

Similar strategies are used in the exhibition *Lighthouse*,⁴ which brings into the traditional white cube of the gallery—a space that declaratively empties itself of exteriority—its own distinct exteriority: a series of eight photographs of a faintly cloudy sky. Here, the fact that the images are of the sky is mostly unintelligible, as from a distance the photographs appear to be gray monochromes, while up close they reveal the rastered granularity of printed photography. The photographs follow one another in a uniform rhythm, placed at approximately equal intervals, surrounding the viewer on three of the gallery's four walls. The space is illuminated with similar uniformity, using 5,000 Kelvin white light, the standard for graphics and printing, considered the most “neutral” variant for recreating daylight.

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Jon Derganc, in relation to his photographic practice, speaks of a cinematographic logic. I would like, however, to speak of a certain religious logic in relation to the recognizable topoi of his work: the exploration of the monochrome in photography and the phenomenon of emptied space—a space that is artificial and, at the same time, more real than real space.

Rather than descend into a scholarly discussion on the monochrome, I would rather start with a more common-sense, art-historical reading of *Lighthouse*. What, then, is a monochrome? A certain extreme point in the experiment with abstraction, which

4 Jon Derganc, *Lighthouse*, exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, December 19, 2024 – March 18, 2025.

on the one hand radically announces the end of all illusionism in painting—the monochrome is only what it is—and on the other, through this negation of illusionism, opens up certain dimensions beyond it. Hence the immediate parallels between the monochrome and the (religious) icon, which, through a radical denial of the illusion of space, with its monochrome gold background, open a space beyond space, a space of eternity. We can note another seemingly banal parallel: the icon, in the context of a linear view of art's development, represents an example of “immutability”, as it is difficult even for skilled art historians to recognize the differences between icons across certain periods. It is similar here; the differences between the images in *Lightroom* are barely perceptible. Just as for icon painters there is no importance in establishing a visible difference between the works on display, the same is clearly the case for Derganc—even though the images are distinct works, he insists on a specific proximity, an indistinguishability that, rather than suggesting temporal movement, creates a sense of stasis. In *Lightroom*, there is no ambition to create a sequence. As with a monotheistic god, here there is neither beginning nor end. The exhibition resists the logic of narrative, of following a succession of images; on the contrary, it rests on the idealized hypothesis that we can perceive everything at once. We are therefore confronted with a freezing of temporalization, a certain inability for us to temporalize, against which *Lightroom*, in the language of theory-fiction, creates a space of non-human temporality.

The second dimension of the work that encapsulates a religious logic is the space itself. We are in the immediate vicinity of emptiness, which is further emphasized by the fact that, in a certain manner, the photographs and the lighting neutralize one another, erasing themselves as separate units within an experience of the void of the whole. In this respect, the *Lightroom* exhibition seems to approach yet another artistic tradition: if we were initially confronted with the monochrome as a radical, enigmatic, speculative apex of modernist painting, here we are situated in the tradition of

exhibiting empty spaces as a radical, enigmatic, speculative apex of conceptual art. Once again, the same formula applies: empty spaces, at first glance, show only themselves, that is, only what is directly before us, what they make present; at the same time, they open the artistic experience to a certain other aspect of “reality”. This is, in fact, a shared undertone in the exhibitions of empty spaces: they are always emptied with the purpose of allowing a particular truth to speak—a truth that, due to the focus on the exhibited works, is usually in the background, hidden or silenced: such as the truth of the space’s institutional embedding, the truth of its architecture, or the truth of its economic context. In short, the space is emptied so that a higher truth could speak.

The monochrome and the empty space appear as art’s response in the form of a post-Enlightenment, secularized religion, with a soteriological and eschatological mission. Here too, the truth is supposed to set us free, and the emptied place of the Absolute as the guarantor of truth is now occupied by the Institution, although perhaps only as a retroactive illusion. This is to say that even in the case of the most radical iconoclastic practices, we often cannot avoid the impression, as Marko Jenko has observed, that “in a lot of this postwar art, in all its contrarian spirit, that behind its bold gestures hides a quieter one: namely, the secret wish that institutions would actually work, as they once supposedly did, that they still can be some sort of a guarantee of that magical fiat lux or fiat ars by patting an object on its back and bestowing upon it a certain status”.

Capitalism has shaken everything, including this power of bestowing status. Such a time-after-truth leaves us not only without a transcendent pole, not only without any guarantor, but even without any illusion of a guarantor. We are faced with the situation described by the editors of *Šum*, where we must define ourselves in relation to this irreversibly damaged relationship with the

world. Let us return to the initial question: “What new languages or interfaces to reality might [art] help construct—as a way to mend our damaged relationship with both language and reality itself?” The entire configuration of this problem acts as if it demanded from us a certain paradoxical religious stance—a religion without transcendence. This is also the thesis of this text. But a religious stance in the moment of post-truth will have to ground itself on foundations entirely different from those of the Enlightenment faith in the worldly. Thinking about our disbelief in this world, about the fact that the world does not believe in itself, that it is dominated more by affective intensities than by truths, acts in general like an old, pre-Enlightenment religious denigration of earthliness—but this time without pinning any hopes on salvation in the afterlife or at least in any particular meaningfully superior immanence which would be capable of guaranteeing a certain level of truth. How, then, to reconcile such a world without the mediation of a big Other? What kind of relationship can we even rely on? And how does art invest itself in it?

**Derganc’s Mannerisms:
Post-Production as Enacting a “Non-Relation” to Reality**

Derganc’s practice appears within the deliberate tension between artistic tradition and these (to a certain extent) new circumstances of an “algorithmically fuelled psychotic break with reality”, as described by Šum. We can approach this practice through its aforementioned interest in the material transformations of the photographic object, as well as the photograph as an object within the very process of photographic production and post-production. What is crucial here is precisely the establishment of an analogy between the material processes involved in the creation of a photograph and the material aspects of the formation of the object being photographed.

Equally important is the fact that Derganc's works do not refrain from post-production. On the contrary, post-production is often not only immanent to the work but constitutive of it, a process that retroactively reconstructs the artwork itself. Considering that artificial intelligence is today—and by all indications, will be in the future—inseparably built into the mechanisms of modern post-production tools, any digitally processed photograph is increasingly immanently “fabricated” toward the virtual (which at this level acts as a symbol of human cognitive capacity). Derganc's work thus constitutes a moment of enacting a non-relation (or de-relation, the dissolution of the relation) of the artwork to reality. This is evident in his piece *Portrait*, presented at the recent *Mannerisms (Manirizmi)* exhibition, where Derganc uses a digital blurring tool—originally intended for retouching unwanted parts of a photograph—to blur entire semantically rich areas of the image, such as the human face. *Portrait* accordingly becomes “visible” only through the negation of the representational relation to reality, via the act of blurring. Through this kind of transference of photography into the domain of painting, Derganc emphasizes and maps the fictional orientation of every artwork as an immanent dimension of the work itself. Yet art does not wager solely on fiction but on the “artificial” in general; it thus enacts the fate of our relationship to reality.

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The task of art is to artificialize. Derganc's disbelief in reality is not one of critical provenance, just as his interrogation of the medium of photography and its representational capabilities is not “critical” in the sense of privileging one truth over another. It is therefore not a matter of enacting understanding, but rather of enacting a certain impossibility of grasping—an impossibility of a symmetrical relationship—which necessarily positions artificialization as the basis of any relationship to reality. *Lightroom* thus creates an outside inside. It does this through explicit non-mimesis, that is, precisely by emphasizing the artificiality of this activity. It feigns; it pretends to recapitulate a natural ambience, while it actually

recapitulates a photographic one. The *Lightroom* project is at its core about establishing a parallel between both registers: the relation of exteriority and interiority within photography, and the relation between outside and inside in the context of the exhibition space—and perhaps even of art in general. Just as fluffy clouds and the granulation of the photographic print simultaneously cross-fertilize and destabilize each other, so too do the light of a sunny day at 12 PM and the D50 standard studio lights confront and undermine each other. I would even venture a further step and read in this a statement about a certain parallel—or even interchangeability—between the practices of art and life. Yet, unlike conceptualism, here the dynamic moves in the opposite direction: instead of art dissolving into life, it is life that proves to be art(ificial).

Art appears here as a unique ritual prop through which Derganc stages a relation to reality. His more recent work *Ko poskušaš biti nekaj, kar nisi* (*When You Try to Be Something You Are Not*) depicts a frog situated in the corner of a pale yellow ceiling. Although the shades of the frog and the wall are highly similar, we can still perceive the frog, no matter how thoroughly it attempts to merge with the wall via its natural camouflage. The work encapsulates what has been discussed so far: it functions as a commentary on documentary photography's futile attempt to embody reality, highlighting instead a certain interchangeability of perspectives—we can perceive the frog as it is resting on the floor, facing a corner, or sitting on the outward-facing corner of a box-like object. The placement of the work within the aforementioned *Mannerisms* exhibition is particularly explicit: the photograph is installed like an Orthodox icon, high on the wall and angled toward the viewer below. As such, it effectively functions as a cultic symbol of Derganc's denomination without an Absolute. Height and depth, flattening and perspective coexist within it, merging into a veneration of the ability to sustain contradiction and opposition, in a delicate yet steady balance.

If we return, then, to the initial thesis of a religion without transcendence, it seems that this is the truth of the post-truth era, as testified by Derganc's work. A religion without soteriological promises, an end without eschatological constructs. An end that we are already living through, in which the task of art is a kind of affirmative pessimism—thinking and enacting the loss of any “symmetrical” relation to “reality” while simultaneously questioning whether we have ever truly had it. In this sense, we can also understand the telling title of *Mannerisms*, which functions as a kind of personal artistic manifesto. In relation to the Mannerist movement that marked the end of a particular “harmonious” relation to the world, Derganc consciously positions himself on the side of the “artificialized”.

Whereas analogue photography maintained a concrete material connection to the (physical) world—through light, chemical processes, and material fixation, and even through the negative as a direct link between the world and the photograph—this connection is lost with the transition to digital. At the moment a digital photograph is created, it may reflect what was photographed, but without any material bonds. Through a sustained engagement with the shift from the analogue to the digital—where the digital represents a further step away from the original photographic ambition of recording reality—Derganc's work pursues the experience of the impossibility of fully systematizing reality, an impossibility intensified by the proliferation of virtual spaces. For this reason, the digital image appears to Derganc as highly painterly—and this is a dimension he richly exploits in his work—in that it allows any form of manipulation, completely freeing the photograph from the demands of objectivity. This reflection on art as a ritual of the world's falsification is already embedded in the etymology of old-fashioned terms for the artist, particularly the painter: in Slovene context, *Künstler*, in some local folk argots, for example in Prlekija, has retained the connotation of the artist/painter as a charlatan, a shammer, a trickster, a glorifier of a murky vision of the world, a performer of the

world's untruth. Art, then, has long been recognized as a platform and framework for a ritual of the world, in which the lack of truth is taken as a design principle, both conceptually and formally. And it seems that it is precisely this dimension which confers art, even in a post-truth world, a privileged channel for establishing relations with reality. As mentioned, artificial intelligence further amplifies this virtuality—images emerge without any grounding in material reality. In a time of unbridled flows of images that overwhelm us, mannerism becomes our paradoxical truth—the fact that every guarantor has disappeared—and our new creed: not only to endure the duality of extremes (real/virtual, truth/fiction, symmetrical/falsifying relation to the world), but to embrace this as a productive principle.

This, then, is also the “religious teaching” of Derganc’s practice: the more we move away from factuality, the more we question this material bind, and the more we allow ourselves to actively and creatively intervene in our relationship with reality, the closer we get to “revelation”. The transition from the analogue, through the digital, to the painterly represents Derganc’s own version of Platonism—a Platonism in reverse: we approach the real by moving away from the factual world, not toward ideas but rather toward Plato’s “images of images”. We may call this fiction; Derganc would call it art.

Vladimir Vidmar is a curator of exhibitions and collections at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. He curated the Pavilion of the Republic of Slovenia at the 60th Venice Biennale, worked as the Artistic Director of the Mala Galerija Banke Slovenije art space, and as the Artistic Director of the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana. He holds degrees in philosophy and art history from the Faculty of Arts, and in journalism from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana.



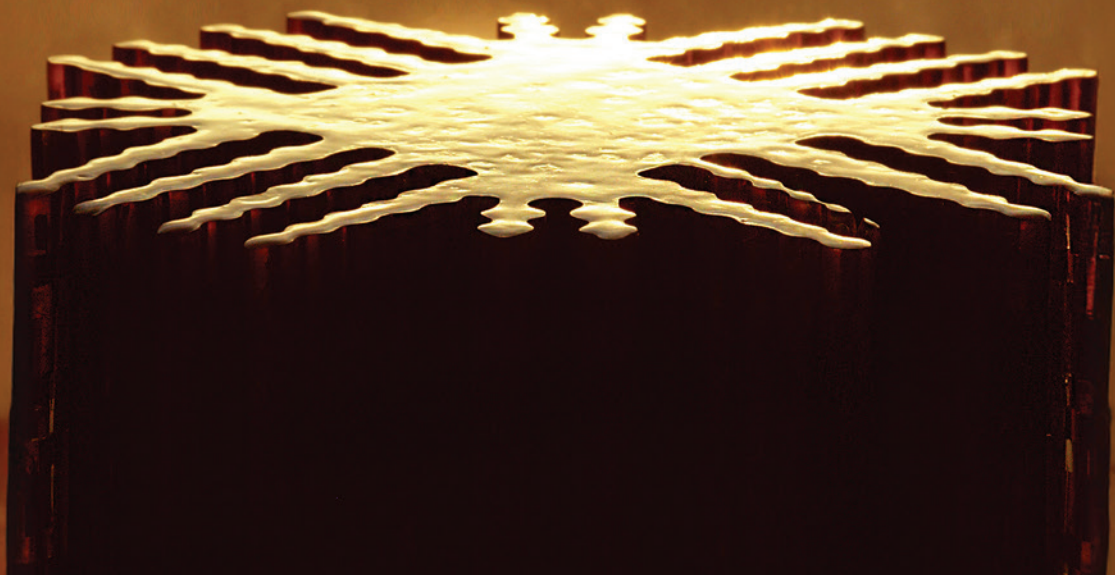
3204

Pleroma

ŽIVA BOŽIČNIK REBEC









Sun Times Review: Today will be bright—almost too bright for living cells. Retinal damage can occur faster than an observer can move their eye from the eyepiece. Solar filters may crack from overheating. Daydreaming through corporate window frames structured in honeycomb formations. The honeycomb composite is more than aesthetics—it’s a containment grid, a mapping of presence over absence. Abandoned offices hold thermal echoes, every floor is a loop of failed occupation. They call the skyscraper Black Widow for a reason: one worker lost his life during the construction work. But the structure absorb this too, the cost is relational to another material layered between steel and solar reflections. Building was intended as office space for the Delo (Work) newspaper. The place folds unevenly now. Original blueprints in space are overwritten by patchwork tenants, ghosted data, and partial renovations that are not resolved.

Sunlight isn’t soft here—it arrives sharpened like a blade, slicing through panes of reinforced glass, etching temporary ruins onto retinas. What appears solid—wall, floor, hardware—is only a delay of next virtualization. The photon does not knock; it enters. Objects are situated on the 7th floor in a squared circular floor plan. They are from the same core, cut with water, shaped like the technical drawings of round heatsink components for computers. They resemble quantum mechanics, navigators, cellular containers, molecular swatches, energy transmitters, sungazers—all stretching through the viewer-space, glowing with the vibrant luminosity of sunlight incorporated into the state of the building. Navigation is possible only by memory or pattern recognition. Nothing is labeled, nothing stays in place. In the sun, through the object, through object to the core. Filmed from the inside-outside, vibrant solar light pierces through in motion and visibility, crossing through space and revealing forms. The view flows from sunrise to sunset and back again ... The building scans in all directions. Each cell is both a shrine and a server.

Credits

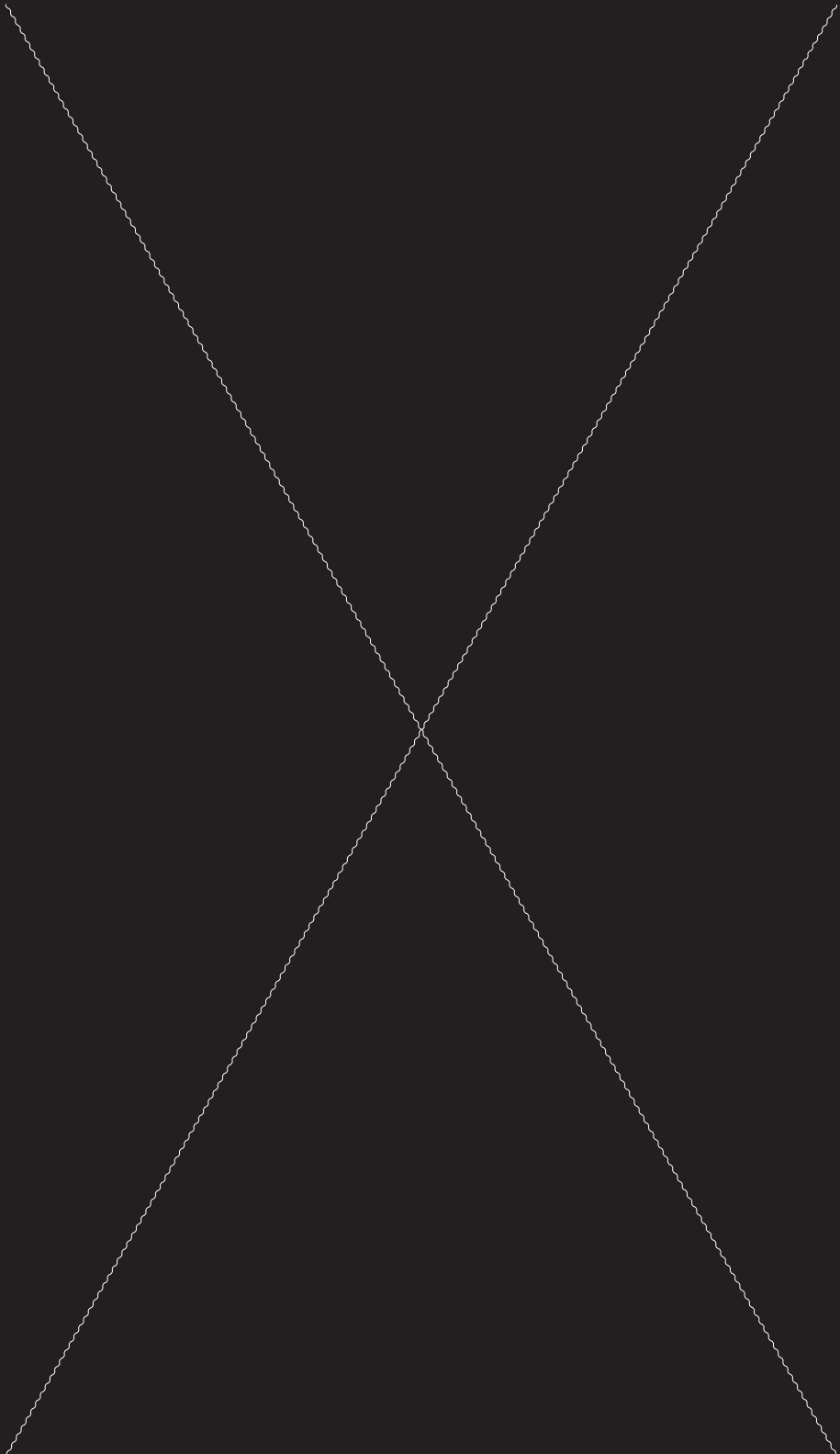
Pleroma, location-specific formations, 2025–ongoing.

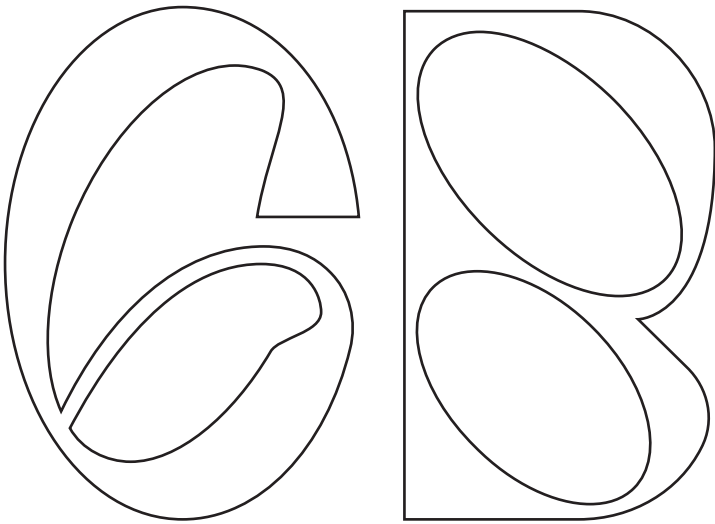
Four core blocks made from honeycomb composites and epoxy resin, each in size Ø 200 x 250 mm, water cut film format 16:9 (Blackmagic RAW, DJI), film length 00:28:54, soundtrack by Roger Tellier-Craig, camera 1 by Original Copy (Tomaž Šantl), camera 2 by Legitfilms (Mitja Legat), comp artistry by Voranc Kumar, directed and produced by Živa Božičnik Rebec, video montage by Živa Božičnik Rebec.

Živa Božičnik Rebec develops a speculative, object-oriented practice grounded in an investigative engagement with technologies and materials. She approaches these as substantial chimeras—hybrid entities shaped by infrastructural systems and the dynamics of planetary ecologies. Her work has been exhibited in Slovenia and internationally. Her project *Pleroma*, which draws inspiration from *Pleromatica*, a book by Gabriel Catren, generates images in relation to the physical presence of the Delo building, the endlessly shifting conditions of sunlight, and an attempt to liaison a space for astronauts and other strange attractors within unfolding speculative events.

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3302

Intentional
Suns:
Towards an
Aesthetics of
the Outside

3303

EMA OGRAJENŠEK

“Sun Times Review: Today will be bright—almost too bright for living cells. Retinal damage can occur faster than an observer can move their eye from the eyepiece.”

— Živa Božičnik Rebec, *Pleroma*, 2025

A return to the basics, to the core principles of aesthetic experience: what is art (the artwork) and how can it be distinguished from other phenomena; what is beauty when considered in relation to the world, its essence; and while we're at it, let's keep it local, just as the site of Živa Božičnik Rebec's fictioning, the *Black Widow* building (built between 1963 and 1982 as the office building for the Slovenian newspaper *Delo*, known for its dark steel façade and amber reflective windows).¹ To approach *Pleroma* (2025), one must build from the ground up: start at the bottom and work their way up, one floor at a time, layer by layer of perception, meaning, and eventually impact.

Aesthetics in the Slovene context have had their share of hurdles, points of development and arrest. To this day, the work by the philosopher France Veber entitled *Aesthetics: The Psychological and Normative Foundations of Aesthetic Reason*,² first published in 1925, is still considered and routinely cited by scholars as the major

1 *Pleroma* (2025) are site specific formations (4 core blocks made from honeycomb composites and epoxy resin) originally conceived in relation to the Delo tower in Ljubljana, drawing from the building's inherent, suggestive materiality—its iridescent, amber windows, its sombre dark metal façade, along with its particular office interior and layout designed for the operational purposes of a national newspaper as a site of collective elucidation/truth—as well as its reputation and anecdotal history (e.g. the stories behind its nickname the Black Widow). The site serves as a temporary narrative device for the artwork's fictioning, while its specific installation (installation in relation to the movement of the sun) introduces solar orientation as an element of consistency/universality for all future placements of the artwork—bridging the suggestive narratives of its site-specific articulations with a broader, enigmatic through line.

2 France Veber, *Estetika: psihološki in normativni temelji estetske pameti* (Slovenska matica, 1985).

and the most ambitious, systemic philosophical undertaking of aesthetics in Slovenia—a full, programmatic aesthetics treating psychological, descriptive, normative, and teleological aspects of aesthetic experience and art. When it comes to blasting one’s retinas, Veber writes:

“When staring into the glaring sun, one can experience, simultaneously, the hedonic and the aesthetic feeling, in which the former tends to be negative and the latter positive: the experience of gazing into glaring rays themselves is unpleasant, while the majestic sunlight is beautiful.”³

For Veber and the phenomenologist aesthetes coming after him drawing from his work, the aesthetic experience is bundled in a multilayered intentionality—i.e. the relations that constitute the core dynamics of perception. Every distinct phenomenal act has its corresponding object, “every thought is in essence a thought about something”, so to say. The more complex the intentional act, the more multilayered. The experience of art, therefore, according to Veber, does not include only an aesthetic feeling along with its corresponding object but is accompanied by other more or less conditional intentionalities. The most apparent or intuitive is the sensorial or imaginary representation, whose object, the object that we see or imagine, serves as the base for aesthetic experience.⁴ It can also include a noetic act (the experience thought), an act of striving (the experience of intent),⁵ or a parallel act of feeling—for instance, the aesthetic feeling (the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the represented object) being accompanied by a hedonic feeling (the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the representation itself,

3 Ibid., 74.

4 Ibid., 53–55, 72–73.

5 Ibid., 56–61.

of the mere sight or picturing of the object⁶ (one referring to the work of art, the other solely to the inner experience)), and so on.

Veber also distinguishes between what he calls “authentic” and “inauthentic” experience (between what is experienced first-hand—as in immediate, sensory perception—and what is experienced through the act of recollection or fantasy)⁷ and furthermore between authentic experience that is “correct” or “incorrect” (between what he considers to be autonomous or self-generating experience and heteronomous experience, which is authentic experience defined by an outside determining factor or a particularity of the experiencing subject, depicting or relating to something that does not in fact exist, and is in that regard, hallucinatory).⁸ As noted by Dušan Pirjevec in his book *The Aesthetic Thought of France Veber*,⁹ one would think that such a distinction might suggest that the criterion for validity or accuracy of any aesthetic experience is then placed solely within the experiencing subject.¹⁰ That the limits or weaknesses of the experiencing subject’s perceptual or cognitive capacities are the sole determining factor whether the aesthetic experience could be considered one way or the other. And that the possibility of a correct, authentic aesthetic experience is therefore conditioned by the feasibility of a pure subject (a subject unburdened by these vulnerabilities). Yet such is not the case. Instead of arguing for a transcendental interiority of a pure subject, Veber (as noted by Pirjevec) considers the subject irrecoverably tied to its “particularities” and places the source of “correct” authentic experiences solely within the object, in its inherent “factuality”.¹¹

This begs the question of what is the object when considering

6 As shown in the example cited above.

7 Veber, *Estetika*, 56–58. See also: Dušan Pirjevec, *Estetska misel Franceta Vebera* (Slovenska matica, 1989), 57–69.

8 Veber, *Estetika*, 58–59. See also: Pirjevec, *Estetska misel Franceta Vebera*, 70–83.

9 Pirjevec, *Estetska misel Franceta Vebera*.

10 Ibid., 76.

11 Ibid., 76–77.

the validity of aesthetic experiences. As mentioned before, these experiences are multilayered intentionalities, meaning that they are based on parallel intentional relations or acts of varying degree of subordination, which means that their objects are multifaceted. Is the object then the artwork, its every gesture, texture, and other physical details? Or is it the idea of the artwork, its very own representation? (Wouldn't this bring us back into the domain of the subject tainted by its "particularities"?) Is it the 3D-printed objects? Its placement in the *Black Widow* along with a tightly knit web of references (its referentiality)? Or is it in the speculative wager on the object's inscribed efficacy within the immediate and broader environments it populates? For Veber, the answer is clear: both the physical object as well as its ideated representation can serve as the psychological foundation for aesthetic experience, but since the validity of the latter lies in its object (its factuality, which representation by its nature does not guarantee), one must seek the object in question somewhere else.

Where this somewhere could be is not clear. As Pirjevec notes, Veber does not offer a detailed account of the necessary facticity and the nature of the object that could possess it.¹² Since the psychological foundation of aesthetic experience can be non-factual yet still serve as the basis for the object of valid aesthetic experience, the necessary factuality lies in a certain distancing from the object (reaching a certain aesthetic disposition or attunement) in the form of a necessary omission. Pirjevec explains this gesture by turning to the work of Roman Ingarden, more precisely to his essay on aesthetic experience,¹³ where Ingarden explains the latter as a necessary breaking with the normal course of experiencing (along with its practical attunement or disposition), incorporating it only as a weakened echo of past experiences that shape the fundamen-

12 Ibid., 103.

13 Ibid., 106.

tal disposition of the experiencing subject.¹⁴ However, while such a description accounts for the necessary aesthetic attunement, it does not deliver the transcendental solution needed for Veber's turn towards the object and its facticity. Moreover, it ties Veber to the same realm of the subject he deems to be unreliable (irrecoverably tied to its "particularities").

Pirjevec recognises that this seeming duality of factuality of the object—one transcendent, tied to the outside, the other strictly positioned within the experiencing subject as its aesthetic reduction (i.e. quasi-factuality)—is present throughout Veber's project.¹⁵ One would seemingly have to capture the beauty of sunshine through the blindness caused by its glaring rays ("Sun Times Review: Today will be bright[!]"), through its blinding discovery, a poetic contradiction that more than a simple philosophical inconsistency presents, more broadly, the crux of local aesthetic development: stumbling on the necessity to go beyond the subject yet finding no philosophically viable way to carry it through.

To reiterate, the lack of a clear transcendental solution presents a systemic inconsistency that hinders Veber's aesthetic project and bars further development of aesthetics in a systematic, philosophical manner. The multilayered intentionalities—the addition of layers, states, and the introduction of quasi-factuality—in the end serve a simple reduction to the limiting scope of a transcendental subject. Such regressive accumulation (of layers and states) can be understood as compensation for anxieties surrounding the lack posed by modernity's chaotic ungrounding (the Copernican, Darwinian, and Freudian reckoning with humanity's primacy, along with the vectors posed by ecological devastation and technological acceleration, escaping human capacity for control):

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 272–273.

reaffirming interiority as a way of humanity's retreat—its final haven. It does so by trading off access to the outside for the sake of existential reassurance, committing itself, committing humanity, to relativism and nihilism.

Could there be another way? Is there a possibility for aesthetics to develop beyond the stale interiority it has found itself in? If humanity can't avoid erupting a transcendental model to approach and deal with reality, if transcendence is, indeed, elusive—pushing humanity down a slippery path of relativism and nihilism—perhaps one could still approach it through the productive lens of pluralism, or even dust off the old bid for the absolute. Perhaps in that case, a transcendental modality is not erupted as a path of escape, committing itself to a singular transcendental modality, but could offer a spectrum of options that a subject could mediate between. This would allow its first steps towards the outside that would not elude it by way of transcendent withdrawal.

When art implores to consider the world in another light, to imagine an alternative world, alternative futures, it does not call for the creative within. *Pleroma* does not depict nor shatter existing visions, it is neither an art object placed in appropriated, existing surroundings, neither an art environment, constructing the space along with the objects that populate it around the artist's gesture, perspective, or expression. Instead, its efficacy is placed in the bipolarity of its object and environment alike. Both are as much artworks as real-world actors: artworks as far as they are real-world actors, and real-world actors as far as there is an imper-

sonal artifice that intrinsically defines them.¹⁶ They erupt and are erupted within a reality that verges on fiction—in a reality as pragmatic, functional fiction. The four core blocks made out of honeycomb composite and resin, installed in relation to the Sun and its movement, the Black Widow building with its anecdotal history and material presence (giving the blocks their place under the sun along with access to sun radiation—mediated by the building’s ember windows and dark metal plates), as well as the sun, the movement of the Earth, the density of atmosphere, or lack thereof, and henceforth; all these elements are as much symbolic references, imaginary visions as real-world actors with their correspondent factuality, all present core components to what makes the artwork tick—what ties it to reality and instills a seed of counter, parallel reality within.

The tile of the artwork, *Pleroma*, refers to Gabriel Catren’s *Pleromatica, or Elsinore’s Trance*,¹⁷ in which the author proposes to merge transcendental relativism and speculative absolutism. Catren describes *pleroma* as a “pleromatic outside”,¹⁸ a “phenomenodelic givenness”¹⁹ that cannot be described as actual experiences of an empirical subject nor as a transcendental horizon of possible experiences;²⁰ instead, Catren defines it as a form of infinite insubstance—“[t]he fullness, the exuberance, the prodigality, the ubiquity, the exorbitance of revelation”.²¹ He refers to philosophy’s giants—Spinoza, Kant, Husserl, etc.—and throws them in a phenomenodelic blender out of which images of the world, transcenden-

16 This speaks to the complicated bifurcation of the contemporary art object introduced by its speculative and fictioning modalities. By questioning the immediacy of the existing and the present and striving to operate beyond, the art object ceases to operate as a standalone ontologic unit and steps into a destabilising web of relations that find it interlocked between an ever-expanding line of dualities (object-environment, art work-actor, present-future, etc.)

17 Gabriel Catren, *Pleromatica, or Elsinore’s Trance* (Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2023).

18 *Ibid.*, 62.

19 *Ibid.*, 50.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

tal modalities along with their models of elusive transcendence, are mediated as mere operational fictions, all situated within a hypothesised absolute immanence—the infinite insubstance (*Pleroma*).

Catren argues that while the phenomenal world might be in the subject (as one particular model reality among others), the subject itself is still in “life”.²² This allows him to treat every transcendental constitution of a form of experience, be it a Husserlian *epoché* or a necessary (aesthetic) omission, described above, along with its transcendental consequences, as an act of limiting and trimming the pleromatic infinitude;²³ in other words, as a snapshot or a finite vision, extracted from the “constantly metamorphosing infinite ultra-vision of life”.²⁴ Instead of falling for the illusion of a single, idealist production of phenomenality, he thus calls for a state of suspension, within which one can perceive, feel, and think in line with “different subject-dependent transcendental capacities that can be speculatively mediated”.²⁵

Such functionalism of transcendental modalities absolves us of our reliance on a single phenomenological structuring of perception—and with that, our relation to the world—along with the multilayered intentionalities that shape our aesthetic experience. It also allows art to not only implore a reimagining of the world but to actively take on the mediation between various transcendental capacities necessary to do so. In this way, its fictions and critical interventions are, again, not a product of mere imagination or common-sense attentiveness to the phenomenal outside but of speculative mediation between modes of approaching the outside. Such is the case of Rebec’s *Pleroma*: the artwork is neither the object, nor the setting/environment, nor the idea behind putting

22 Ibid., 67.

23 Ibid., 51.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 459.

the object in the described setting/environment, but a phenomenological complication of their intrinsic relations—the relations that seem hypothesised, observed, and documented, and at the same time completely imagined or even hallucinated, but nonetheless actualised or made real. It is the warping of reality as reality's own facticity that at the end makes up its inherent “dreamlike materialism”.²⁶

All this inscribes in art a new (positive, productive) directive, ridding it of relativism (of “anything goes”)²⁷ along with nihilism and melancholia (nestled behind modernity's vast ungrounding). In the words of William Burroughs: “Happiness is [in the end but] a by-product of function.”²⁸ It also paves the way for aesthetics as a discipline to overcome the impasses it has reached in its local, Slovene, development. Instead of chasing the elusive transcendence behind the art object and its facticity, aesthetic thought might very well challenge the narrow transcendental frame it has found itself accustomed to and regain ambition in the wilderness beyond.²⁹

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26 Ibid., 70.

27 See: Patricia Reed, “For a Nontrivial Art”, in *Reinventing Horizons*, ed. Vít Bohal, Dustin Breitling and Václav Janošík (Display Association for Research and Collective Practice, 2016), 165–179.

28 “The only thing that could unite the planet is a united space program ... the earth becomes a space station and war is simply out, irrelevant, flatly insane in a context of research centers, spaceports, and the exhilaration of working with people you like and respect toward an agreed-upon objective, an objective from which all workers will gain. Happiness is a by-product of function.” (William Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads* (Fourth Estate, 2010), 7).

29 “It is at this moment that it becomes more necessary than ever to adhere to the phenomenological, speculative, and concretist directives: to bracket the naturalisation of every image, to index them to the transcendental regimes that make them possible and to explore the horizon of possible deformations of these regimes, to reinsert every abstract image in the multimodal concreteness of the experiential field, to deploy dermal surfaces sensitive to other affects, other percepts, other concepts, to enter into symbiogenetic transformations and make kin with other lifeforms, to educate ourselves in schools of other worlds.” (Catren, *Pleromatica*, 460–461)

Pleroma (as the artwork and as the concept itself) points towards an intrinsic immanence of conceptions and visions of the world. It acknowledges that our finite capacities are nonetheless incorporated in and tap into a becoming both distinct from and resonant with them—traversing neither the ontotheological path of absolute separation nor the mystical path of absolute fusion,³⁰ but a path unique to them (drawing, at most, from the productive tension between the two). In doing so, it allows for a new relation to the world, to our environment, and most importantly to our unforeseen futures, breaking the long-lasting siege of modern despair.

Ema Ograjenšek is a writer, critic, and curator of contemporary visual art. She is the guest curator of the U30+ program for the production of exhibitions by young Slovenian artists at Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art for 2023 and 2025, and the author of *Restricting Flight for Surreptitious Assembly - The Diagrammatic, the Mark and the Vectorial Image* (Aksioma, 2024). Her reviews and essays have been published in magazines and online platforms such as *PASSE-AVANT*, *Artalk*, *Blok Magazine*, *Fotograf Magazine*, *all-over Magazine*, *etc. Magazine*, *Maska Magazine*, *ŠUM Journal* and *Borec Journal*.

30 Catren, *Pleromatica*, 279.

ŠUM

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