

A HABIT OF HAUNTED SPECTRES

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00—a habit of haunted spectres

(this page is the colour I imagine my skin to be)



IMG_00 A still taken from a work in progress, provisionally titled *alright*. It shows my body slowly performing an amateur self-examination whilst covered in a simple syrup. I wear the traditional garb of someone on vacation at the beach.

This essay is a body—it has limbs and it is gangly and it has parts.

You can think of it as cuts of meat, strung through with a sinewy¹ slime. Or as tectonic skin, elastic and all dizzy at the seams. Dumb and awkward, together it is a body at odds; a fabric of thought gathered up for a quick exist.

Which is to say, this essay is intimate and more than a bit discordant.

So where does it begin?

I live cleaved in two between the tension of my two selves, like this: me and my O.² Neither one nor the other. I move, I feel, I feel myself moving³, but I am not simply that thing which moves and feels nor that immaterial moving feeling alone. I live between their cleaved expanse. Somehow gathered within their interstitial slime, contingent and unstable. Moving, ineffable and overwhelmingly opaque. So this is how I see myself: a cohabitation of many intractable parts, each enfolded into the other which ultimately refracts at times into a surprising double-vision of the same perceived thing. Am I seeing myself from another angle or is this another self altogether? Which one am I and to which do I belong? The unity of conscious experience is momentarily upset by a registration of these parallel alien *me*'s, each distinct but inhabiting one another.

This shock congeals⁴ into a most banal and ubiquitous knowledge. One we carry with us everywhere. That is: some things are *me*, while others are *mine*. Within the cognitive sciences, a theory of self is exactly that capacity to identify with one's self-object. Matter reflected back at you. As I move it moves, attached by some invisible thread. *Does it then feel as I feel?* A self is only a self insofar as it assumes this inhabited objectivity. Made coherent only through its own material. The body becomes this fleshy habit for some other unnameable I. It belongs to you, is you, and

¹ These “inward affections of ours, like sinews or cords, drag us along and, being opposed to each other, pull one against the other to opposite actions.” Plato's body in the cave, the one seeing images dance against the wall, are bodies shot through with passion—‘affections’ controlled by the gods. Chiara Cappelletto, ‘The Puppet's Paradox: An Organic Prosthesis’, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59–60 (2011), 325–36.

² My cartesian Other—ie. the body

³ “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels.” Brian Massumi, “Concrete Is as Concrete Doesn't”, in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), (p. 1)

⁴ The use of this word invokes Adorno's dialectical desire to “awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as ancient,” as a way to “break the catastrophic spell of things.” Alison Stone, ‘Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 32.2 (2006), 231–53.

is the only thing which bears the physical presence of you. Our body is our most intimate Other; ours and yet not entirely us. Us but not entirely ours.

This vision, this being cleaved, is not by choice, of course, but one of happenstance. A confluence of my happening to be here now (chance), and 'here' itself having certain conditions (circumstance). The fact remains that a subject literally finds its self-object through the world into which it is born. Currently, we are now in the historical conditions of the postmodern. But I've come to believe that to be postmodern is to be constantly haunted by the spectre of modernity, where modernity is itself haunted by its own spectral ancestor, Enlightenment. And so on. Like a nested doll, impossible to parse apart, and stuck inextricably to itself like a growing pile of fetid ruin.

This happenstantial haunting lurks within, animating the whole cultural organism to freaky occurrence—a ghost in the machinic doll. A *haunting* is a certain liveliness but a *haunt* also refers to location. A thing haunted is then a thing coalesced into both a gathering place and a mode of spooky movement—motion and stasis. This nested doll, though, has a face. The surface is painted with a microbial lacquer; temporal juice that made its way out through the layers of all the petrified cultural sediment to sit there like that, as a skin. A referential image. It is through this activity that the postmodern is produced, and historical conditions percolate. But at the same time this perhaps demonstrates the means by which a counter-movement can occur. A potential de-congealment of the doll by tracing back through the marbled veins to perform a remembrance of the fetid potential of being fluid.



IMG_01 Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster, or '————', as the monster was referred to in the playbill of the first theatrical staging of the novel in 1823, which Mary Shelley described as a 'nameless mode of nameing the unnameable'.

So to be here now, is to be on this skin.⁵ It is to be stuck there, as a node, biomassive and light. Though less a matter of being in the substance of the postmodern than above or just beyond it, propelled by a levitative force as if afloat on a semiotic tension. As it presents to us a painted visage, we mirror back our own lacquered appearance. A kind of mimetic relation. But all the same we are entangled, so as we move and we feel this network is affected. We are there as an interstice, within and beyond, entangled yet autonomous. We are in a kind of co-conspiratorial relationship, our cleaved self and the postmodern. Each of us within the other, beholden to each other for meaning. Neither of us the sole proprietor of our being.

Me, my O and this spectral fetid doll. Though each exists in and through the other, each has a definition, an edge—a boundary which marks the terminus or entrance of our being. And it is there that our interrelation congeals into a meaning. It is there that we register one another, describe one another, and use the language of image, myth and metaphor to make the other legible. It is in and through our skin that we understand ourselves as an object within an environment.

A world of things, all moving, feeling, flitting, and sticking. To me, from now, and from and to my O, back to me and to the now. Feeding in and around. Things flit and gather from surface to skin. They cling in and on the material of things, from each one to the other. Which is to say, remember, I move, I feel, I feel myself moving and so I myself course between things. I act as a transmitter. Indeed, why should my body end at the skin?⁶ I transgress the boundary of myself, excrete beyond my skin to feed and consume my environment as it consumes me. A subjectivity feeling out its own hazy terminus in the form of a dancing bio-static buzz interfacing with a world aware of itself as a world being interfaced with. And so I am, like all things are in this fetid spectral doll: a media object; a haunting transmission. Transmitters gathered at the haunt.

⁵ To grapple with the surface of a thing is to understand that it is “not a question of materials, but rather concerns the substance of material relations.” Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Paperback edition (Chicago London: University of Chicago Press, 2016)

⁶ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, *Posthumanities*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), (p. 61).

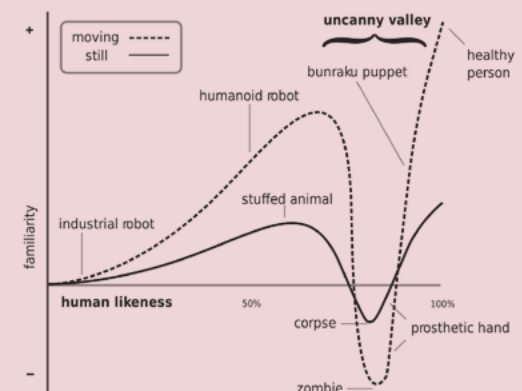
But sticking and dripping from clogged and gaping pores to engage in such an economy of semiotic⁷ fluid exchange. Now might be a good time to recall that the object in the mirror which affected the invention of a self is itself an abject microbial ecosystem—preternaturally liquid but culturally and linguistically congealed. Plasma and juice in motion. Can we forget what immanent sticky things we are made of? How else could a putrid pile of postmodern ruin stick to us if we weren't both composed of the same globbing gummy matter?

But as congealed, we are petrified and baked—mummified bones. Once bereft of its natural vitality, we know well that the skin is prone to flake and flit as well. It can dry out and puff ethereal. The wasteland can be equally gossamer as murky and miresom. But while the world of globbing things can't help but gorge itself in direct infection, the dry wasteland is one of spooky action at a distance. Winds hustle and whirl, pick up dust and mutate any moisture into a wistful mirage. It is the place of mythic transmission, an uncanny valley⁸ of spellbinding devilry. Dehydrated, the body in this terrain collapses, folds into a flattened corpse; reduced to a pure surface. It is a body composed entirely of skin; narrative built entirely through image. While to be postmodern is to be stuck to its surface, it is also to levitate just above. It is to be adhered to something immutable while aware of only the glistening of juice on the skin, infected by its direct biology but interfacing with image.

So what could possibly affect this process of congealment? What could move the body flat, poured entirely into its own skin? Reduced to impulse; compelled to flit, shiver, or drip? Can we call this involuntary egress of our will anything but desire? Each little pore of our ethereal self opened wide, little mouths and eyes agape and at the ready. Our skin pleading for the chance transmission of something else. Something to violate it. Something to either affirm or destroy it as a clear and definite boundary. Desire is a posture, an always-open readiness for receiving the Other within us, or being received as the Other elsewhere. This desire congeals. It

⁷ semiotic + amniotic

⁸ A concept first introduced by Masahiro Mori, the uncanny valley is that zone of human likeness which dips into the abject. Things which appear either minimally human (like a stuffed animal) or maximally human (like a healthy person) receive a great deal of affection from us. But there exists a slight dip where human likeness of a thing becomes too close and yet not close enough, making us feel unsettled. This is the uncanny valley—a place of simultaneous fascination and horror. (see **IMG_02** below):



fixates you onto this object of the Other. It fixes, like a magnetic orientation towards difference and strangeness. The seductive movement of the taboo and the search for secretion beyond norms. The movement of a body outside of its own skin.

So how do we reconcile this paradox of being both movement and stasis? Both a thing *out there* and an ontology *within*?⁹ As much a corporeal body as an unnameable presence. That is the question of this essay, one which will not be answered so much as splayed open—held apart by crude instruments, and poked about and prodded at while still beating alive, coursing with the mana of mystery.

It is a thinking through of subjectivity and the body—a habit of haunted spectres. And what follows are its limbs and gangly parts. Pieces which amount to nothing more than an amateur self-examination.

01—the long unending murmur

One day a ship left port in the north of Europe. Sailors on board had said that a long unending murmur boarded with them that day. It began as soft but grew so imperceptibly that it was soon extended throughout the entirety of the ship, to be heard in every material crevice and mind of each sailor alike. Unable to shake this strange invasion, however, the ship's captain one day took it upon himself to discover its source.

His explorations took him to a room. The quarters of a mathematician and his young daughter. He could hear the man talking each night, telling long tales of fantastical whirling machinery and complex assemblages. The ship's captain listened to story after story before learning that inside this room was a case. And it was this case that was the source of the long unending murmur.

⁹ This is the paradox of *reification*. To borrow from Steven Helming, we can recall that “thing” in Latin is *res*, the root of “re-ification; in Greek, “thing” is *ontos*, the root of “onto-logy,” another “thing,” so to speak.” Steven Helmling, ‘Constellation and Critique: Adorno’s Constellation, Benjamin’s Dialectical Image’, *Postmodern Culture*, 14.1 (2003)



IMG_03 Lee Bul, *Scale of Tongue* (2019).

A work which recalls the history of ships and events of bodily horror. It is an assemblage depicting the sinking hull of the Sewol ferry, a maritime disaster in 2014 where over 300 people died (250 of which were students) as a result of bureaucratic negligence and incompetence.

For days, the captain thought about the case until he came to believe that it housed all manner of instruments of life. He believed that the immanent presence of a divine spirit was contained in there, and it was due to his being in such close proximity that it rendered itself a mere overwhelming murmur. Every object on the ship was soon suffused with this strange energy and his every interaction with the crew turned quickly into dense impenetrable meditations of philosophy and life.

One night, the ship's captain could stand it no longer and went to confront this strange pair and their case. But when he opened the door, he found the mathematician fast asleep with his daughter nowhere in sight. So slowly he crept forward.

The room lay ominously still and the case loomed large before him. He stood transfixed, swaying with the boat when his eyes suddenly blinked and he found himself pressing his fingers gently at the lid.

When it opened, inside was something so utterly bizarre it snapped the night into

perfect stillness, as if all the world was pinched for him. It was the girl and she was just as he imagined, but overwhelmingly stranger. She bolted upright and her eyes fixed themselves directly upon him. He couldn't move and saw her for exactly what she was: an automaton.

He wretched with horror, convinced she was a work of black magic and devilry. The ship tossed suddenly and he stole her from the case and brought her out onto the careening deck of the ship. There he tore her apart limb by limb, smashing each one to infinite pieces before casting her wholesale into the sea.¹⁰

02—corpuscularianism

Before the tension pulley, tension spring, and belt tensions of clocks and engines, the first machine invented was the body.¹¹ This was achieved through the wholesale disenchantment nature. No more were angels and spirits, as the old regime of witchcraft, alchemy and magic gradually¹² lost its persuasive power over the European imagination. Minds encultured with a new paradigm of domination and armed with the rigour of scientific rationalism emerged to unmask the mystery of natural phenomena, reducing it to the simple formula of matter plus motion. The infinite potential of a world coursing with spirit, always open to new configurations was supplanted by the tenet of cartesian sameness. All things made equal when reduced to the mathematical plane of logics. The experience of a vast world of manifold phenomena was now understood as an illusion, the trick of manifesting difference within an essentially homogeneous reality; the same identical stuff but colliding with different spins and speeds.

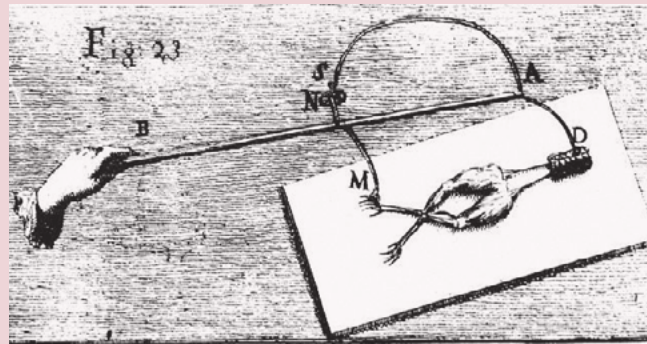
This philosophy was coined as *Mechanical*, but before that term gained currency, several other monikers were considered including *Corpuscular*. This because the

¹⁰ This is an apocryphal story about René Descartes originally found in a 1699 work entitled *Mélanges d'histoire et de littérature* by Vigneul-Marville. While it began as a two-sentence attempt to save the philosopher's reputation against perceived slander by insisting his illegitimate daughter was instead a marvelous work of mechanical genius, it has since grown legs of its own. The story survived in part because of its apparent reconfigurability to serve the purpose of whichever agenda the author had in mind at the time. After losing some currency, it resurfaced in the 1990's having resonance with the emerging themes of cybernetics, robotics and posthuman theory. Here, it has been once more reimagined in the spirit of its reconfigurability. Minsoo Kang, 'THE MECHANICAL DAUGHTER OF RENE DESCARTES: THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF AN INTELLECTUAL FABLE', *Modern Intellectual History*, 14.3 (2017), 633–60

¹¹ "We can see, in other words, that the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism." Silvia Beatriz Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 2., rev. ed (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), (p. 166).

¹² The term, 'gradually' is perhaps misleading as it doesn't actually convey the true nature of the process and instead obscures it as a natural and inevitable process. Silvia Federici demonstrated the true horror of the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, whereby the erosion of magic was a deliberately violent and systematic attack on specifically women of the poor and working classes. Their persecution was necessary from the standpoint of the elite as these women played a large role in organising collectivized resistance to the emerging social and gender relations which sought to fix women and other marginalised bodies into an oppressive hegemonic order necessary for the uneven development of capitalism.

movement of food and blood through the body was seen to demonstrate the nature by which all matter moved in space. Thus, before we were cleaved, turned from machine into media, we were first reduced to food. Digestion through the intestines and the gaseous transmogrifications within the gut acted as the familiar feeling making the spectacular logic of disenchantment palatable.



IMG_04 A diagram showing the experimental use of electricity in re-animating dead frogs legs by Luigi Galvani, a central figure in the emerging field of *medical electricity* in the 18th century

The world reconfigured by the imagination of Enlightenment was a nature ghostbusted of spirit and turned into an arena of penetrable *corpses*. Dissection proliferated in this era of experimentation, driven by the insatiable need for empirical evidence. But where an operative practice restricted to the purely dead matter of the non-living failed to properly galvanize theories of corpuscular liveliness (ie, how dead material could possibly be alive), the turn towards still vivid bodies did. The machine could not operate without an angel lurking within. So they trapped it, folded it deep within itself as if obscured within an ontological labyrinth. It's there somewhere, the tenet of cartesianism states, but of a wholly other sort so undetectable. We may only bear witness to its footprints within the material world. We see then that the operation, that cleaving process which produced for us our Other, is not one of dissection but vivisection. We are alive on this table, and perhaps have been some time. Somewhere within, you might still feel the cold pang of stone beneath your back, or remember the prescient flash of fluorescent lights above as hands-before-hygiene coursed a strange energy through your flesh, building a cage for your hidden angel.

Through this spectre of enlightenment, we see that what occurred was a kind of re-enchantment of the world.¹³ Mystery wasn't wholly eradicated, but left lurking behind a translucent veil. That which we do not understand about nature is now seen

¹³ Stone.

as the immutability and limitlessness of nature. The ineffable congealed by a caged imagination. Likewise, our relationship to nature has changed, from one based on sacrifice and ritual to one of extraction. The angel within projected outwards into a picture of eternal bounty, an Edenic garden of exploits. What we call the sublime is this encounter with the angel of limitless resources. It is us awestruck by the presence of divine generative potential. A very particular posture we adopt when faced with the unknowable. Like sitting at a table.

Reduced to food, we feed on ourselves, consuming our own regurgitated myth. It might be fair to say that Galen got it right nearly 2000 years ago when he proposed that our vital spirit originates as food, turning directly into blood in the liver before it courses throughout our entire body, through a type of imperceptible suffusion.



IMG_05 A screenshot of David Blaine performing his notorious frog regurgitation trick on Jimmy Kimmel Live. As of 07 July 2020 it has 29.9 million views on YouTube.

03—old food

It centred medieval peasantry as a discursively urgent material through which feudal landscapes, earth-caked serfs, and hamburgers form a conceptual locus. Relations where capitalism, surveillance software, physics, abject digestion and narrative all interplay.

A looming two-tiered rack of theatrical medieval costumes cuts the space in half to produce a foreboding sense of history, skin and performance. Elsewhere adorning



IMG_06 Ed Atkins, *Old Food* (video still). Courtesy the artist.

the walls are stone didactic plaques and multiple impossibly sharp video screens. On them are simulations. Virtual experiments with actors rendered to a level of fidelity seemingly beyond my actual capacity to register them. A plaque beside one of the screens tells a history of crash test dummies, imparting a scrambled temporality.

They are moped around in an apparent attempt to demonstrate their immutability to the simulated physics and psychological torment they're being tested against. One actor, a peasant, stumbles drunk-like down a hill, past a piano, and off screen, only to appear again every few minutes, looping in a programmed routine. While another is a giant ballooned baby. This baby floats down the same hill on the same screen as the peasant, feet limp and scraping along the dirt path. But instead of disappearing off screen to the left, it careens to the right onto a second screen beside the first. On this screen is the interior of a shack into which the giant ballooned baby appears. It is far too small for its oversized body and so it bounces around, knocking over

anything and everything before being made to settle down at a piano. This is done just in time for the peasant figure to reappear and start its own loop over again. He stumbles down the hill once more, but this time collapses on the ground in front of the piano outside. Our view is cut to a close-up where a hand reaches up from below and hovers just above the keys.

At this moment, both figures begin to play, in exact synchronicity, the most boring barely-tune ever heard. One note. Eight second pause. Another. Mathematical in its precision to discordance. These eight seconds constitute, I understand, the time it takes to forget a note. They are coordinating a kind of musical amnesia for us—the notes barred from harmony and bereft of actual relationship with one another. It is a tune at odds, a collection of parts, and it's agonizing. One note played just as the previous one disappears from memory. They are disparate and individualised. Hauntingly close to pure emotion. The only thread which connects them are the strange empty hands of simulated bodies.

These figures are vacuous and crystal, and are protected against the attempts to violate them. They are composed of only a single organ which acts as an impenetrable barrier—unreality. They are hollow and alien to me. A clinical arrangement of information, hard and sharp and surrounding a perfect vacuum. If by scalpel or shotgun I could reach out and puncture them, open them wide up, then I imagine two things would happen. First, all manner of visceral insides would spill out and their skin would be no more crystal than mucous. And secondly, there would be trauma; the transgressive act gushing inwards to abhor the inner vacuum. But over and over



IMG_07 Ed Atkins, *Old Food* (video still). Courtesy the artist.

again, through the petrification of repeated performance, nothing ever happens. They are crystal hard and impossible to scratch.¹⁴

It is true, there is sadness on their faces. Expressions inscribed by facial recognition software which gives them a sick verisimilitude—a distinct parodic register of being human. Rivers gush down their faces, but are they actually sad? Maybe they are mourning, but what have they lost? Their behaviour, ceaseless, and ostensibly meaningless, suggests something else. Something pathological. Maybe melancholy would be a more accurate word for this supposed emotion. Maybe they're experiencing an absence, their own internal vacuum, or a loss they cannot really fathom.

Or maybe the melancholy being registered is ours? But what did we lose?

I realize, finally, that their pure and crystal surfaceness is scratching back at me. I'm caught within their loop. Something has reached beyond them to seep inside my own body. It doesn't so much as enter me as empty me. They are hard and hitting me somehow. Visually and conceptually they are bricks. They are stacked together, sometimes dropped into a sandwich with brown sauce and chairs. All gloopy and globbing, glistening with the food porn gluttony of base corporeality. They are made existent in a world of homogenous material, where everything is the same as everything else. All of it equivalent and reconfigurable. Homogeneity obscured through a ruse of algorithmic difference. They are bodies of visceral haunting. They are non-bodies, objects of absence. They carry this void as a painful presence or cause its infection within me.

04—premise 1. meat¹⁵

This is the stuff of *meatspace*¹⁶ where meatspace is 'the physical world,' as opposed

¹⁴ In a talk given by Chantal Faust, she mentioned a quote of which I couldn't remember the source, but found to be always lurking in my mind. This was, "a surface that when scratched, reveals only more surface." As it turns out, I had actually invented this quote from one which she herself had initially invented, from her memory of a quote which doesn't exist. Her version went, "scratch the surface and there's just more surface." Chantal Faust, 'Swimming in the Shallows', in *Surfaces: Friction, Translation, Corruption*: RCA Print Symposium, 2016.

¹⁵ In old English, meat (spelled 'mete') simply meant 'solid food.' It wasn't until the 13th century that it began to refer to the edible flesh of animals (as in dark meat for thigh and light meat for breast), and then later still as genitals or prostitution (c. 1896 'meat markets,' a place to find sex partners) or a corpse (c. 1920 'meat wagon' for ambulances during WWI). The Oxford English Dictionary, ed. by J. A. Simpson, E. S. C. Weiner, and Oxford University Press, 2nd ed (Oxford : Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ This is a term that surfaced online in the 1990's, and used by netizens to describe activity in the "real world," which was anything outside of the strictly virtual world of the internet.



IMG_08 Korakrit Arunandonchai, *With history in a room filled with people with funny names 4* (video still). A work of cosmological scale which looks at the 2018 Thailand cave rescue of a boys soccer team through the myths and stories which framed it globally. The character of Naga (pictured here and performed by Boychild) represents a body in a constant state of becoming, a body divorced from human subjectivity.

to cyberspace which is the 'virtual world'. This is meat where meat constitutes the dumb soulless matter of tables, chairs, brown sauce and bodies. .

This is meat with all its attendant incidental properties; the causal reality of biological, cellular, and chemical processes that are experienced carnally, by that meat, as emotional, affective, and haptic sensations..

I mean meat like, 'you and I are meat,' like, 'you play that meat beautifully,' like, 'I really love mid-century modern meat,' and 'I have to eat instant-meat for the rest of the month.' . . .

I mean meat like, 'they're a piece of meat,' and 'your meat is making me hard, or

wet,' and like, 'my meat is walking all half-drunk down the hill.'. ..

I mean meat like 'this morning, meat-drops poured from the sky and soaked my meat to the bone. But I wasn't wearing anything meat-proof and now my meat is miserable and wet and on its way to a split-shift to serve meat to other meat to earn a little bit of meat to spend on more meat to keep my meat alive to earn more meat tomorrow.'...

That kind of meat. .. .

The kind of meat that hits your shin when you're caught up in thought to remind you again that fuck we're all just meat

The meat that is real actual stuff, the stuff that is the most real, that stuff that can be touched, prodded, poked at, and proven. That meat which is empirical and solid and not at all in any way whatsoever abstract and fancy and unreal

.

.¹⁷

05—the transit of fatberg

There's movement and then there's feeling.

A delicate scent can conjure a force far beyond itself, allowing it to stick temporally in ways it should not, almost as if it bends time the way a cosmic body bends space. Only a smell can trigger a memory all other senses have forsaken. It shocks and halts, casts you into an enchanted state of remembrance. An onslaught of vague

¹⁷ Bataille riddled his texts with these ellipses, signifying the droppings of rats, the imposition of the abject onto the page. As Biles states, "in these gaps, the unutterable announces itself". Take these droppings to mean just that. Jeremy Biles, 'A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille's Simulacrum of Abjection', *Performance Research*, 19.1 (2014), 111–25, (p. 111).

nostalgia demanding your full attention.

Aromas linger—in a room as much as in the mind, saturated deep within unmarked neural repositories. As everlasting as they are elusive. The ancient Egyptians are well known for their veneration of the nasal cavity, using it as a portal to the brain which they viewed as useless and dumb since the heart did all the thinking. They would insert delicate metal hooks through the nostrils of the deceased and excavate the skull of such superfluous material. For a person's transit to the afterlife, the body must be preserved. It was this which was of utmost importance. After the solid matter was removed, the rest of the brain would be liquified and the body turned over onto its stomach so it could drip slowly out.

Nearly 2500 years later, neurosurgeons are performing similar endoscopic surgeries but with tiny cameras and non-invasive instruments. But only now it is the preservation of the brain which is the pathway to eternal life. And we can imagine smell invades through a similar operation. Little gossamer hooks boring themselves deep into the labyrinth of the olfactory body, reconstituting our memories into the ethereal stuff of scent. There they wait, lurking in anticipation of their next recollection. In this way, each smell harbors their own miasmatic¹⁸ potential—their latent ability to infect a devastating presence and demand full attention. A reunion with the material world from which its been estranged. Our bodies the site of their afterlife.

The miasmatic actually produced its own biopower in 1858, when 'a force of sheer stench' affected the greatest public works program in the history of London. The effluvial power of our own waste broke through the

¹⁸ Miasma theory is an obsolete medical theory which postulated that diseases such as typhoid, scarlett fever, and cholera were airborne and spread through a form of bad smelling air known as miasma.



IMG_09 The head of mummy of Pharaoh Seti I.

barrier of bureaucratic neglect to demand emergency engagement. The power of miasma is this. It's the ability to conjure up the wretched reality of being corporeal, a facilitation of the abject into sacred domicile of the self. It's a visceral violation of your person through the nasal cavity and the transgression of your body into your consciousness. It is, as Biles states, 'vermicular, polymorphous, fragmentary, slippery – and biting.'¹⁹ It is a rat in an upturned bucket on your skin; the chaotic imposition of heterogeneity in a world of enforced sameness.

¹⁹ Biles, (p. 112).

During the 'Great Stink', domestic cesspits—the ritual haunts of working-class excrement—had begun to collectively infect the literal architecture of power when the government were forced to hang enormous disinfectant-soaked sheets around the newly constructed parliament buildings. Like the prone post-operative corpses of the Ancient Egyptians, the liquid remains of our old digested food seeped from our bodies and into the surrounding groundwater (the solid particulate having been brought to market as fertilizer²⁰). It would transit the dirt in a not dissimilar manner to how Galen envisioned blood travels the body. The environment, so miasmatically ensouled, then fed back into our bodies through the mouth and nose, infecting us with the presence of our own excess and discarded spirit.

²⁰ A kind of economic sleight-of-hand only possible in a place with a long history of conjurers and jugglers and an audience already primed to witness feats of magic.

As a result, the great Victorian sewer system was born, along with the discipline of epidemiology. The miasma of old food now collected into hidden rivers of waste below ground, wrapped in careful bandages of bricks and mortar, coursing through a labyrinth of impossibly dark canals. From this, a new domain emerged, one for the fetid and the transit of ruin.

In 2017 a video went viral, showing a Thames Water engineer wading waist-deep through the murk and mire of this spectral network. It catches a glimpse of a creamy opalescent mound before a rat appears on top. It scurries left and out of sight, into another passageway. The camera returns to the glistening monolith,

showing us that what has grown below ground stretches the width of the sewer and recedes as far as the flashlight will shine. As it soon became known, this was Fatberg. A single 130-tonne mass of congealed waste, equivalent to 11 double-decker busses.



IMG_10 'Fatberg' Clogs London Sewer, video taken by Thames Water engineer.

Fatberg is the petrified movement of miasma coursing towards another apparition in our cultural consciousness. A piece of it was preserved and displayed in the Museum of London, causing visitors to wretch and close their noses, to protect the sacred portal to their brain. This was Fatberg sending out little gossamer hooks, attempting to affect a slow resurgence of its own idle biopower. The miasmatic was beginning to find its way back into disenchanted bodies; sensing opportunity to reunite in a material afterlife.

The curators felt this prickle of political reckoning, producing promotional material for the show that leaned into the aesthetic of B-level horrors films. It had all the tropes: fearful citizens running away from a grotesque monster; exaggerated looks of despair; screams of hysterical cries. In one shot, the monster even lurks behind a cardboard cutout of the skyline. The transit of Fatberg through the streets of London ends with a text zooming into frame: FATBERG IS COMING!

06—strange but not strangers

It's hard to tell sometimes between what feels strange and what feels way too familiar. Both are eerie sensations and provoke, probably, what has been variously

called the ‘uncanny’. That feeling of, *I know this—wait, why do I know this?*

The uncanny feeling seems to call forth a certain impulse from within. One which fastens itself to memory, beckoning one to stretch and elongate their gaze deep within to reach some far off recess of the mind. Full of cobwebs and eerie creaks, the uncanny acts like a siren song to gather you up within yourself, pulling you in with the promise of potential truth. In that way, the strange is not entirely alien for it may yet be real. The hope lingers like a gossamer thread stitched to your skin, moving you almost involuntarily inwards. A chimera²¹ is a chimera for precisely the pretense that it might be real. Its allure is in its proximity to the truth. If it’s not real, it’s at least real-adjacent, and that’s enough to entrap you within its hex. You curl into your memories, peeling apart every inkling in an attempt to discover from where this familiarity emanates. A sound, a smell. Any fragment gets tossed, unearthed and loosened. *Where is it? What am I reminded of?*

The tip of the uncanny tongue is not so much near the edge of one’s mouth, on the precipice of speech, as it is lashed deep within, curling like a finger to call you into the impenetrable darkness; a labyrinthine network of fetid sewers. On this journey you come face to face with your own amnesic potential, the felt presence of an absence. Dead flecks of what never became your story haunt the walls around you while laying aching out of sight, known only through the gravity of atmospheric pressure.

The self is like that—a story of flecks or excerpts—held together by this pressure. A precarious tension where the boundary demarcating the self works equally to demarcate otherness. You are what you are not. The story of familiarity is marked also by difference. Moments are cut from the raw lumbering of a narrative saw, cleaved out of their perceptual flow to join an already established order. Moments sought for precisely their affinity to what is already present. But those other parts,

²¹ In Greek mythology, the Chimera was a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lioness, the body of a goat, and a serpent’s tail. This monster terrorized the people of Lycia and the King eventually called on his son-in-law, Bellerophon, to kill it. But the King secretly hoped his son-in-law would perish when facing the monster. Bellerophon, however, called upon Pegasus and defeated the Chimera when the winged horse brought her down from above. First recorded in the Iliad, the Chimera is one of the earliest examples in Western literature of a grotesque monster of incongruous parts, one which simultaneously evokes both horror and hope. The word has since persisted in our imagination and now means any fanciful illusion of the mind, or something impossible to achieve.

the ones on the floor, leave a ghostly residue all the same. A burning afterimage never actually witnessed; a sticky filmic presence. The dust and awkward offcuts remain, settling into and indeed even composing the very architecture of this hollow void. They sit there, like unused structural cache, awaiting a restoration that becomes increasingly unlikely. That is, until a confused gust of wind rattles through those forlorn canals to grab a handful of haunts to make you sneeze.

Why do I know this? What does it remind me of? Both you and not you, and perhaps a brush of the cleaving process itself. It's almost as if beneath this veneer of one's self—the privileged one, the one assembled incessantly, the one insisting on its own stability—it's almost as if beneath this monolith lies something even more significant. Something that doesn't want to be discovered, or something which can't, but which would validate the whole pursuit all the same. The disquiet of potential self-transgression is oddly alluring. *Am I this monolith, so bounded and resolute? Or am I something far more? Something beyond even my own capacity to grasp?*

The eerie sticks to you. Makes you sticky, makes you strange, and makes the world through which you pass also strange. You yearn to imagine in terms unknown, but even your imagination has its limits. It is, itself, a language composed of tropes and stereotypes, capable only of reproducing its own structure. The unknown is bounded by the language of the known. The strange then is a dumb tinge or a kind of mute omen, a magical foreshadow of the importance of things just out of reach.

Remembrance and redemption, although strange are not strangers to each other. They figure centrally in Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History* where his angel of history, Angelus Novus, appears. This angel is configured almost through its own character of strangeness itself. He describes it as turned around and facing the past, paralyzed in a violent storm blowing from a place called Paradise. As if oriented along a bizarre compass. This wind propels it behind itself, backwards but toward the

future.²² This orientation of the Angel leaves it vulnerable, subject to the whimsy of the wind and blind to what may come. But in its backwards-facing confrontation with the past, it can see what has happened for what it truly is: a pile of catastrophe and a history of oppression. Non-linear, amorphous, the groundspring condition of heterogeneity. Remembrance here is imagined as a kind of messianic power, one which can redeem the hopes of generations past.



IMG_11 *Angelus Novus*, Paul Klee.

07—auditory verbal hallucinations

Did you hear that? Quiet down now and really listen.

They evolved when vocal cries and calls first cleaved themselves from the grip of limbic control and became ours. We learned to direct our noise with intention, and produce inflectional endings. Soon new speech forms were born. First came commands, then nouns, names, and verbs filled out our linguistic arsenal as finally syntax arrived to gather it all up into a configurable structure. We had language. A guttural ambience from us and transmitted to others. This formed the basis of our relations to one another, and to the world. For 200,000 years, our vocal folds gained greater and greater sophistication. And then, we heard them. It's believed that between 10,000 and 1,000 b.c.e., our lives were dominated by auditory verbal hallucinations (ie, voices).

We had no concept of time and lacked even an inner mental space. No arena for the play and practice of an imagination. We had no beliefs, desires, memories or intentions. We had no story or an ability to narrate our lives. There was no 'I' or 'me' to speak of. Not even a self per se around which such a story could organize. But we

²² "A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." Walter Benjamin, *On The Concept of History* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009).

had the voices; our hallucinatory auditory Other.

The voices which spoke came to us as if from elsewhere, to command, admonish, or chastise us. In moments of grave indecision and crisis, they were there to guide us; instructional echoes of parents or leaders retained deep within our neural bodies to thunder forth on their own as vivid auditory hallucinations. Our own past stored within us, cached without a key. But a short-circuit of the mind could still course through those hallways. A gust of need would activate the language centre in the right side of the brain to produce the algorithm of a speech act. This proto-voice would travel beyond itself to enter in again by the left, manifesting then as genuine speech, heard but unspoken.

It is said that before we were conscious, we related to ourselves through this haunting estrangement. Two chambers of a mind internally disconnected, functioning through what must have seemed like magic, or barring such a concept, divine revelation. These voices were there with us, dominating our lives for 10,000 years. They operated as an almighty and powerful presence. So much so that it was these which we first called gods. Our own language, having conjured itself within us beyond our knowledge, possessed and cleaved us in two, and dominated our spirit. These humans built The Great Pyramids of Giza and wrote the Homeric epic of Iliad.

But by the time of the Odyssey, those ancient warriors had been born into a state of consciousness; aware of themselves in a wholly unprecedented way. This experience of ontological revolution resulted in the near incessant presence of something now ubiquitous: anxiety. Characters within that reconfigured epic became overwhelmed with uncertainty and it is there that we see the first written reference to any mental state in the canon of Western literature. Those ancient Romans experienced for the first time what is now all too familiar: the existential angst of existence. The haunting presence of one's own strangeness.²³

²³ Roughly speaking, this is Julian Jaynes' theory regarding the origin of human consciousness. He proposed that until about 3000 years ago human beings did not possess consciousness and through a bicameral mind operated through cognitive executive functioning assisted occasionally by auditory verbal hallucinations when faced with insurmountable indecision. Rowe, 'Retrospective: Julian Jaynes and The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind', *The American Journal of Psychology*, 125.1 (2012).

08—the measure of parallax

The monolith of the self is perhaps just another way to say the monolith of the present. The world, as it exists, exists through you. Its stability and permanence is known only through a subjectivity perceived as equally stable and permanent. But while the two exist as co-conspirators, the whole premise of their relation is that they are absolutely not the same thing. We move through the world is a statement concerning the relationship of two distinct parts: us and the world. But how certain are we that the world does not move equally through us? Which is the moving body and which is the one standing still? And how is it that our experience leads us to separate the two rather than intertwine them? After all, has the one ever been known without the other?

So perhaps it is not so much a matter of the insurmountability of our difference, as its imperceptibility. That is, what if the two were so close that they could not actually be told apart, and so we mistook that confusion for essential otherness? Perhaps then, it is a relation of closeness and not of distance. So let us begin to measure this distance. And here is our tool: parallax.

This is a measurement of distance. One put to revolutionary use by Copernicus, and one usually applied to the grandest of scales like stars and other cosmic objects. It is the calculation of the motion between bodies relative to each other. But this knowledge is actually embodied and not at all in any way abstract and fancy. Think sign posts and mountains from the window of a car where you're the bored kid looking out. For two objects travelling in the same direction, if one moves faster than the other, that object is understood to be closer. And also if one object were to conceal or hide another object, that would be registered as a kind of closeness as well. This kind of measuring exists within our bodies as intuitive knowledge. Our perception is built around this tool of parallax.

However, in this equation, all three parts—the sign post, the mountain, and the kid—share two central premises. The first is that they are different and discrete. We don't really care what the signpost is. That is, we don't care about the meaning or content of that object. We only care that it is not the mountain, and that neither the mountain nor the sign post are the kid. It would do us no good to measure the distance between two things only to find out they're the same thing all along. We would be tripping over ourselves, unable to figure out why the numbers don't make sense or why the equation is broken.

The second premise is that they remain the same throughout—this is the concept of permanence. This is the need for the sign at time x to be the very same sign at time $x + 1$, if only now in a different location. We cannot start with one sign and then end up with another one later on. This would not make sense. The same permanence must also hold true for the tree and also the kid. It is imperative that at no point throughout the calculation does the sign or the tree or the kid transmogrify into a completely different entity, or that we lose track and allow some other thing to enter our experiment at some point. Devilry and black magic are strictly forbidden and belong to some other realm with different rules and physics. Those things in that realm can't be measured and don't exist. Think dreams or like angels and spirits. The assumption of permanence is thus a central feature of this whole operation and would cause it to all crumble apart if it were missing.

Lastly, it must be said that these two premises—discreteness and permanence—are themselves couched in the big bracket of relativity. The sign post, the mountain, and the kid move relative to one another. It's easy to say that the sign post and the mountain are fixed into the Earth and so it is the kid which is moving. But we could equally say that the kid is fixed and it is the world which is moving. Likewise, if both were moving (as, in fact, they are), we would still end up with the exact same

result as the other two configurations. This movement of discrete permanent objects within the measurement of parallax results in a *relative* certainty, not an absolute one. Pedantic, maybe, but important as we shall see.

So, returning to our original proposition, if we wish to measure the distance between us and the world, or even one world from another, the first issue we must resolve is the problem of permanence. From there we can move onto determining our discreteness from one another, and barring any unforeseen issues, we can be certain that there is indeed a distance to be measured and therefore the method of parallax is suitable. For our purposes, though, we don't need to actually measure that distance, because all we're really interested in is the fact of there being a distance in the first place.



IMG_12 *The burning of Louisa Mabree, the French midwife in a cage filled with black cats suspended over a blazing fire. Aquatint, Artist Unknown.*

For this, it's not enough to simply point out that when you woke up this morning, you arose as the exact same person which fell asleep earlier. Nor is it enough to assert a similar certainty for the world through which you slept. For like the ship of Theseus²⁴, through each moment, your parts are gradually being replaced. What rots gets replaced anew by the curator of your museum: your physical cells degrade and regenerate and even your thoughts, beliefs, and values change as you get older.

So what exactly endures throughout this transit of the night? What part of *me* maintains this sense of permanence? Let's think of it as this: not only do I wake

²⁴ 'It is supposed that the famous ship sailed by the hero Theseus in a great battle was kept in a harbor as a museum piece, and as the years went by some of the wooden parts began to rot and were replaced by new ones; then, after a century or so, every part had been replaced. The question then is if the "restored" ship is still the same object as the original.' 'Ship of Theseus', Wikipedia, 2020 <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ship_of_Theseus&oldid=965558298> [accessed 8 July 2020].

up anew, but so does the world. What's more, even from one moment to the next, a whole new world is composed. Our existence is what Campagna might call, "a history of different worlds."²⁵

A history of different worlds. But yet something persists. What is that thing if not a permanent object? For Campagna, this chimera of endurance is achieved through one absolute and dominant tool: narrative. The monolith of the world, like the monolith of the self, is sustained through language and its ability to produce story. Absolute and total. An object endures from one moment to the next precisely because it is consumed into its own ongoing story. It is that story which has permanence, not the object. And it is the difference between stories which lends a discreteness to the operation. For the measurement of parallax, the distance being measured here is not between objects, but stories.

Okay, objects flit in and out, change and transmogrify. But even stories evolve. So how do we resolve the equation of our movement through the world? *These damn things are moving too fast. I can't tell where and how and when they appear and disappear. When they move from here to there and which thing even I'm supposed to keep track of. Their directions are all misleading.*

Back to the beginning.

We move through the world is a statement of two parts: us and the world—where those words refer not to objects, but stories. Two narratives in relative motion, around each other, but also in and through one another. While I certainly feel some authorship over my own unfolding story (which I write incessantly), the story of the world is in the hands of a great many subjectivities through which it passes. The sign post, the tree and the mountain all passed before my eyes—I'm the kid—and they passed with wondrous awe. I saw things I will tell for years to come. Things no

²⁵ 'The way in which the world appears to two different people living in different moments in history in different areas of the world, what you have is not an anthropology, you have a metaphysics—so not the history of different ways of perceiving a world, which in itself the world remains the same objectively throughout, now you have a history of different worlds.' (13:08) Federico Campagna —Talk: On Facts and Fiction, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xfgn1pEgIIA&feature=youtu.be>> [accessed 8 July 2020].

one else saw—a world open only to me. But beside me, someone else saw the same three features and more, things only they saw—a world open only to them. Together we constructed the world through our stories, a world open to both of us. A social world. One which we cooked, reduced, and congealed into mutually digestible bits. The vast heterogeneity of experience which entered our noses, we simmered into a buffet of sameness—food to share and old food which had long already been shared with us.

So where does one foodstuff end and another begin? Is it true that we can produce discreteness through the use of a word alone? *I find this hard to believe*. To name a thing is to cleave it, then. It is to render it as Other and mark it as different. Us and the world, me and my O. Can language really flit things into and out of existence like this? What of the things beyond my capacity to grasp? What of the unnameable and the ineffable?

Patrick stopped writing. 'The nausea of something ghostly passing through my body causes me to wretch,' he thought. *Prohföhfhfh--- lalfhahHAHH. . . ckah*

Almost fainting, I see stars. But unlike the ponderous cosmic expanse of Copernicus, these flecks of way-too-bright things feel all too close and far at the same time; hot and cold; bland and miasmic.

We say, there must be a thing which remains throughout. *There must be a me at the seat of this whole thing, one which lies beyond the flux of*



IMG_13 Video still of French magician Yann Frisch performing his signature cup and ball trick, *Baltass*, which won him the Grand Prix in close-up magic at International Federation of Magic Societies (FISM) 2012.

temperamental change. The monolith of a self sits here, and it's overwhelmingly successful at it; at unifying my conscious experience into a locus of me, *goddamn it, me.* Okay, I can only point towards it, only infer it, but the subjectivities I live through only affirms this immortal character. *The more I change the more I stay the same.* Who I am is a natural and immutable law because it *must* be, the preservation of my distinctness and distance depends on it. . . .

It's all too much. There's an excess here, and it haunts the history of the world—*our world*—the one we cooked together. It's sticking.

09—limitless globspace

It's all just there. Sitting there, waiting to collect dust. A sow, on her side, and little piglets crowding around her teats. There's a car muffler on top of a stack of I-don't-know-whats; white things carefully cut. Blue flippers are on the ground beside those. It's arranged with conspicuous intention, a kind of curated haphazardness that fails to achieve and always self-defeats. Dilapidated and sad, these things feel displaced from their place of origin. They sit like this in the middle of the room, which is also strange. There's too much light, or not enough, somehow the ambiance is off, or else our registration is somehow suppressed. The visual equivalent of an aural ring in the wake of a loud bang, but in this case the precursing trauma is flash blindness. The lights once bright, feel now artificially dim. Maybe it's that thing called an afterdischarge?²⁶ Where neurons rebound in the wake of sudden visual change, retaining the scene for a split second. A burning afterimage. That sort of thing that's useful for comparing with what comes next, a yardstick for difference.

It feels as if we're suspended here, a microsecond stretched to eons. Everything, even us, feels like it's been transposed from an underground or a place of other atmospheric

²⁶ John Thompson (aka The Great Tomsoni) was well known for his stage trick in which his assistant's dress would change from white to red instantly. To achieve this he would first perform a 'joke' trick by simply flooding the stage in a red light, then, when the audience was let down believing the trick was over, the lights would change back to its normal white and the dress, miraculously, would remain red. His knowledge of neural processes in the spectator's brains allowed him to develop and pull it off. Susana Martinez-Conde and Stephen L. Macknik, 'Magic and the Brain', *Scientific American*, 299.6 (2008), 72–79.

or temporal pressure—a little too light and heavy at the same time. Simple, reduced, and flat; all bloblike. And the stuff in the centre just sits there, on another thing of the same sort—a raft out of water—looking like an operation table without legs, full of bodies in the midst of a very old and ongoing dissection.



IMG_14 Mark Leckey, *Under Under In* (video still). Courtesy the artist. Leckey produced a life-size reconstruction of the M53 Motorway where he encountered a fairy sprite during childhood. This experience has haunted him ever since, formed a big part of his own biography, and informed his belief about the interpolation of magic and the municipal: 'I feel like that's what we inhabit now: this strange state of very advanced technology that seems to return us to an almost medieval mind-state. The imagined world and the factual world collide and are indistinguishable.' 'Mark Leckey on Using Victorian Techniques to Evoke Magical Memories' <<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/interview/mark-leckey>> [accessed 7 July 2020].

It's a non-place of eerie familiarity in what you might call *limitless globspace*²⁷, 'chunks of matter in an uncertain space'. Somewhere between something real and something not. Red high heels, bleach-white animal bones, human skulls, a cannon, a treasure chest, an accordion, a chandelier, candles, soap, a sack, a milk bottle, and potatoes in a crate. It's all the same stuff, rearranged and veiled under different skins. Are we encountering a story of the object, or the object itself? A brooding sense of three dimensionality divorced of any weight and volume, like surface with the pungence of presence but lacking in empirical substance. Stuff all old and new at the same time. Like caricatures of themselves, these things demonstrate what they are not. They are absent things. Things of absence, born from the non-place of nowhere—call it purgatory or the abyss. Creatures of the black lagoon trudged into a performance of their own dilapidation. *But a performance for whom?*

Displace, transport, vanish, and transpose; aren't these the actions of conjurers or magicians? We are indeed in the midst of a long unending performance, but we are an audience made privy to the underground, the below stage—the under spectators of the less than spectacular. This space is one of excess, the discarded

²⁷ In *Cinema in the Round*, a performance-cum-lecture about, 'things that appear as images or pictures but that somehow impose [...] a sense of their actual weight, density, and volume,' artist Mark Leckey describes the polyurethane objects of Fischli and Weiss as 'limitless globs' and models of homogeneity, stuff which, 'can be, quite literally, made into anything'. 'Mark Leckey "Cinema in the Round" 2077', Vimeo <<https://vimeo.com/73861892>> [accessed 7 July 2020].

props of devilry and black magic. It's all the rubbish, duplicitous 'blobs of matter' accumulated beneath the deranged table of, say, Yann Frisch, or another weary magician-cum-instrument-of-divine-mystery. Call them coins or red foam balls, it doesn't matter. Their purpose is one of conjuring displacement, to be vanished and transposed at will, 'loaded' surreptitiously so as to affect the trick of enchantment. It's a wonder that our social relations are learned and our sense of self achieved through the close mimicry of others, the social attention of their gaze and facial cues. But in this limitless globspace, it is the hands which become the source of cognitive manipulation.²⁸

This strangeness we feel in this space is akin to viewing the world through infrared technology, or through some sort of hazy glass. We are perceiving a world that is necessarily beyond our capacity, and so it is distorted, flat, and reeks of the uncanny. It is a space without articulation, almost unreal, as if it doesn't exist. A space of unreality is simultaneously a place of magic—a fantastic underground.

Here, cups and balls recall their origin in the ancient con game of *acetabula et calculicon* performed by Roman conjurers in old food markets. Throughout their performance, these things of absence demonstrate their immense potential to go anywhere and become anything. In front of these magicians, our bodies almost involuntarily shiver with the desire to experience the ineffable. The urge to both reveal the illusion and succumb to it's reverie. This yearning is the



²⁸ Cognitive science studies have shown that contrary to magician's beliefs, their use of social attention (where they look and they socially perform) has next to no bearing on the misdirection of the audience. Viewers are almost singularly focused on the hands and props and for the master magicians, it is through such high-level sleight-of-hand skillwork that their magic is performed. Hector Rieiro, Susana Martinez-Conde, and Stephen L. Macknik, 'Perceptual Elements in Penn & Teller's "Cups and Balls" Magic Trick', *PeerJ*, 1 (2013), e19.

IMG_15 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjurer* (detail).

Here, the spectator stares fixedly at the trick being performed, while a frog emerges from his mouth.

power wielded by those conjurers. You cannot trick someone who doesn't not already want to be fooled. We are held, there, in the palm of their hand, beside the ball, and moved just as deftly.

And quick, we see it, but even quicker, it's gone. Three cups, three balls, each a unique space. Each ball is held and each are loaded. *Pay attention now*. In turn they go, first cup, second cup, third. From up on top, into the palm, into the cup. On top, in the palm, in the cup. Top, palm, cup. He shows you. *See? No where to hide*. As the cups shuffle and the balls dance, you're fixed, poised. There's a trick happening, but when and where?



IMG_16 Fischli, Peter and David Weiss, *The Raft*
(pictured at Sprüth Magers, 2019)

10—I'd rather die of passion

This Of imagination It's unreal Doesn't exist The object of angelic
fixed contemplation and the violent storm blowing within

The atmospheric landscape of our fleshy habit Our cleaved
expanse This is the twin horizon of our Edenic past and our
paradisiacal future This is the promise of redemption; the motor
of desire This is utopia like, 'someday I'll get what I want,' and, 'the second
best time to plant an orchard is now' This is utopia like, 'dream big and dare
to fail,' and, 'do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life,' or like,
'I'd rather die of passion than boredom' It goes like this:

We are entirely within the vice grip of this wind Call it the American
Dream, limitless globspace, the wasteland, modernism, progress, whatever This
is the glass through which we look and the axis around which we swing

Our own personal, individual pole Everything that we are, every belief
that we hold, every intention that we have, all possibilities are defined in relation to
this concept It is our orientation, our always-already posture

We swing around it Things either tend towards it or they do not

All coordinates in our space of understanding are defined in relation to
that zero point of utopia $u + 1$ or $u - 1$ We relate and understand
experience relatively Morals, ethics, codes of behaviour hold meaning in
relation to a particular axis, this one being utopia Absolute certainty is not our
aim It never has been Relative certainty is in Descartes made that
clear We hold ourselves relevant to a set of
coordinates, a brand of axioms We use them as definitions, prescriptions, or golden
means to compare against These axioms are our atomic clocks, the frequency
standard against which we measure, the harmony of our beating heart

A set of beliefs or a set of memories Value is judged on those grounds
and movement is produced with the aim of always facing towards this horizon

of utopia The pole star Move, act, feel Feel good or feel bad Did
that decision tend towards or away? Good

Even if it didn'tGood You stay fixed on that horizon, motivated by the fear of
nausea setting in Indeed, our eyesight developed in precise accordance to
that horizon They register precisely that
frequency, the electromagnetic spectrum spanning $u \pm 1$ Ask a flashlight to
scan a dark room for anything which does not have light cast upon it Like that,
utopia is total in our consciousness and is the total sum of consciousness

The rest is dark and illegible and moreover, nonsensical and ineffable,
to us This is the relative certainty I'm talking about Here's an example

A pole sits at the centre of a game called tetherball The ball, on a rope, swings
around it It goes this way, or that Doesn't matter It is attached to the
pole and all players are as fixed to that pole as the ball In fact, the ball?

Also you But one you can see and touch and move and transform and
transport and pretend with and play with and act out and make your proxy

You and the ball The game? Do not let the movement
stop What does it mean for movement if the pole broke, lost its foundation?
This is the question We may hate the swing, despise the pole, wish for
that ball to eradicate the chain We may seek the
total dismantlement of the entire contraption But this is the only movement we
have ever known Our language is as tied to the pole as we and the ball are

Our words themselves manufactured to relate only to the pole, and evolved
with the sole purpose of making sense of that centrifugal movement

Those words cannot destroy the pole as in their very utterance, they construct it
Language constitutes our tether to the pole, and it to us What happens
when the pole is dismantled? We do not know, we cannot speak of itWhen we
lost the pole, we lose our axis of motion, the material against which all else is
measured We lose our certain stick A loss of axis Imagine the
centrifugal force keeping us tethered to the pole Now imagine that bondage

snapped Suddenly Us, the ball, our language and the
 pole flung out away from each other in every conceivable direction One big
 jumbled mess A cyborg in space Everything unpredictable
 and without reference Every coordinate for themselves Each
 plot returned to dumbness Data, numbers, nonsense Without an
 axis, we have no force to centre us Without an axis, we have nothing planar,
 no ground Without a plane, horizons disappear Without horizons, we
 lose our object of fixed contemplation, our utopia Without utopia we have
 nothing But we have never experienced this A loss of utopia This
 presence of absence Even if we swing so far down the pole as to not even see
 the top, we are still on that axis We still orient ourselves to the total horizon
 of utopia Oh we are so far away from them We imagine What if?
 What if we lost the pole? What if the pole was flung out, far away
 So far into the background as to be gone We can dream, we can imagine if we
 dismantled it all In every media—movies, shows, books, and stories—we
 have built a vast language which imagines just such a world, one where the pole
 explodes But here's the thing This language may try as hard as it wants to
 imagine the total dissolution of the pole, the total dismantlement of certain relations,
 but it will never happen Language constructs the pole This
 dissolution is a trick, a sneaky sleight of hand The pole remains, but saturates
 every pixel so as to be effectively unrecognizable We know this by the feeling
 of centrifugal force that remains This familiarity Our word for this
 bizarre landscape? Dystopia It is a pretense, a formula still solving for
 u Catastrophe Apocalypse Dystopia We still swing just the same
 A familiar sensation Our axis is held B u t
 what would actually happen in a world without the pole? We don't know If we
 really truly blew the whole contraption to smithereens, even dystopia would be lost
 Our language would be completely indisposed And our imagination? Also useless
 They must also vanish We must dismantle those as we have the pole And what

about us? We too are constructed by this same language, by our imagination,
by the pole as well Then it seems clear We must dissolve ourselves as well
No pole No ball No language, no imagination No me No you No utopia
This is how we dismantle dystopia This is how we open up again to rejoin the
landscape beyond our axis, to see beyond our narrow spectrum To find new
poles and new horizons To view the breakdown of all that is fixed and stable
as a new potential field of every possibility, ones we can't even imagine
Not yet

11—Premise 2. Imagination



IMG_17 Fishli, Peter and David Weiss, *Untitled (Rat and Bear, Sleeping)*, (pictured at Museo Reina Sofia, 2008-2009). The pair of artists have collaborated throughout their oeuvre, the Rat and Bear series being one of their earliest and dating back to the 1980's. In those early videos, they play two figures who struggle with the philosophical questions of life; plotting, daydreaming, and yearning for success, they have travelled from the noir-backdrop streets of LA (*The Point of Least Resistance*, 1981) to the sublime Swiss Alps (*The Right Way*, 1983). In this installation, the actors are no longer present inside their costumes, but return them to a kind of skin, though not entirely lifeless. At one point in *The Right Way*, Rat says, 'I'm taking my dream with me – into the unknown.' I imagine this is where they are.

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