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Shifted Realities
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Artists

Shifted Realities

In trying to understand reality, we often teeter on the edge of the conceivable and the imaginable. In a world in which a molecule of a virus becomes the active agent of history, our Cartesian conception of that world crumbles. The ideal of man as a universal rational subject on which our modern (Western) history is based is no longer convincing. Like fragments of different realities, more and more forces are breaking into our reality, transcending the limits of our perception and thought, to remind us that we were never so special and sovereign.

The group exhibition *Shifted Realities* refers to the ways in which we are constantly evolving in relation to a series of global events whose origins cannot be described as purely human, natural, or technical. We are increasingly dependent on processes that exceed human life and imagination in dimension or duration, yet condition the very existence of society. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the impossibility of understanding social processes independently of natural ones. The climate crisis, natural disasters, or the gradual extinction of animal species remind us that the Earth cannot be seen as a reality separate from human activity. Similarly, sleep disorders, burnout syndrome, or so-called digital amnesia point to the way in which our subjectivity is radically open to the waves of information and communication channels. One of the main challenges we face today is precisely

to understand the world and our place in it as something that is both human and inhuman at the same time.

In the face of the changing present, we need a new, expanded map to move along the scale between the human and the inhuman, the natural and the technical. The works represented in the group exhibition *Shifted Realities* engage in such testing, sketching maps that help us to break down binary oppositions and find new visions. Interconnectedness as the blurring of dividing lines between the reality of man and the reality of nature, between the virtual and the physical, the inner and the outer, is one of the basic threads of thinking about contemporary shifted realities. The exhibited works introduce “alien” actors into their worlds and processes and show the composite nature of our supposedly homogeneous and stable reality.

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And What About the Earth's Core?

Jen Kratochvil

Recent history has taught us a lesson about the collapse of great narratives. About the ends of histories (political, artistic, microhistories and macrohistories, and all kinds of others). The end of individualism; of collectivism; of God/gods (though admittedly this is hardly a recent phenomenon). The end of philosophy. The end of work. The end of freedom on the Internet. The end of totalitarianism and the end of democracy. And dreams of the end of capitalism (thus far, nowhere in sight).

We are good at endings. Less so at what happens next (just as Hollywood movies often end with the prelude to a sequel, prompted by the market's need to make another dollar from a box office success – as described, for example, in Lana Wachowski's metanarrative that is, hopefully, her final word on the one-time cult franchise, *The Matrix*). What, then, is an end without a sequel? The invocation of these endings turns out to be merely the pompous declaration of an attempt to override waning interest in the subject and to rekindle its opposite. The ending itself is not the end, then. The end is its own continuation. History has not ended. Each side of the spectrum of conflicting interests and schisms continues to write their own history, and we have no choice but to eagerly anticipate which of these will receive more votes. For this is not the end of

democracy. There is no end. Or rather, there are no endings. What probably do exist, however, are shifts in perception. What we do not have is one single reading. What we do have are shifted readings.

But I suspect that this game may be getting on your nerves at this point. I beg your pardon. Let us demonstrate these all-too-obvious truths through a series of examples.

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Jacinda Ardern resigned as Prime Minister of New Zealand, and the BBC subsequently tweeted how difficult it must have been to balance political office and motherhood, ending its comment by saying that "quite possibly women just can't have it all" (meaning career and family). Following a wave of outrage pointing out the sexism of the remark, the BBC retracted its comment and issued an apology. Ardern's decision to leave her job was not prompted by necessity; her government was not facing any insoluble crisis, neither was she herself compromised in the public eye by any sort of controversy or scandal. Ardern resigned her post stating that five and a half years of leading the country and her government had been an immense privilege with immense responsibilities, and that every politician is first and foremost also a human being who should be capable of self-reflection and understanding what is manageable and what is no longer tolerable. The ability to put one's professional life in perspective through the lens of the personal – that is, by accepting the need to care not only for others but also for oneself, and by acknowledging one's own limitations – is very

likely related to the slow but ongoing penetration of feminist principles into the wider social discourse (and let us please understand feminism as a broader effort to assert human rights, not just the rights of one gender, as the one is related to the other – just to make sure we're on the same page). Only time and more figures such as Jacinda Ardern will answer the question as to what extent this disposition is generational in nature. "The young don't want to work" vs. "the young work three times as much as you" vs. "nothing really changes, only the media of distribution," etc. Is burnout the invention of lazy Millennials, or the even lazier Gen-Z? Or is this the consequence of the Boomers' laziness to invest energy in the consideration of their own humanity? Shifting reality. Shifting realities.

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The issues of mental health and mental healthcare are central to the work of Paul Maheke. Specifically, he regards this theme through the perspective of a member of a social minority – the LGBTQAI+ community. Queer narratives of healing by mutual care, attention, and collective sharing are inherent to all his works, though they are not necessarily conspicuous or visible at first glance. Queer identity does not always come with a label. Visibility can often cut both ways – in reinforcing the assertion of individual identity, it can also expose someone to the danger of aggression. The film *Mauve, Jim and John* (2021) was made during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a protected nature reserve on the site of the former Orford Ness military base in Suffolk, UK. This site used to be off limits to the public, and its isolation helped to preserve its wealth of endemic

flora and fauna, while also giving rise to a number of contemporary folk superstitions and legends. One of those is the alleged UFO sighting by a pair of mechanics, John Burroughs and Jim Penniston, who claimed to have witnessed the existence of an extraterrestrial civilization in December 1980. In the film, Maheke and dancer-choreographer Robert Bridger play the two military base employees, and through movement and interaction with the environment, the surrounding nature, and the ruins of the concrete architecture, they endow the story with a new touch of queer romance. These two are not the only characters in the story – Orford Ness itself becomes personified as Mauve, a living non-human entity, embracing and open to embrace. This act of admitting that something as abstract as a nature reserve can be a living thing can also be read as one of the queer narratives running through the film. The film is presented next to the spatial installation *YOU & I*, offering a clue to its possible interpretation, as well as its introduction and epilogue. *YOU & I* – consisting of a series of large-format murals, podiums, and scaffolding, a multitude of kitsch statuettes portraying pairs of cute animals, and a group of masked faces – opens up the question of our personal space and that of those standing next to us. At the same time, it instantly disrupts this binary through the realization of how easily blurred such boundaries are, or rather, how impossible it is to define fixed boundaries within any human relationship (or even human–nonhuman relationships). *YOU & I* is not about couples, but rather about the myriad of possibilities that open up between oneself and another.

At least ostensibly, the space between “me” and

“you” is also the subject of Adéla Babanová’s new video work *The Law of Time (Zákon času*, 2023). It explores this theme through the intense attention it focuses on an artistic couple and the exploration of their relationship over the course of three stages of their lives, displayed alongside one another in a synchronized spatial installation. The protagonists of the film unquestionably play a key role, though rather than portraying themselves they represent a sort of litmus test of a far more complex situation within society as a whole. Babanová’s camera never leaves the space inhabited by the couple, but as we continue observing what happens in their lives, it becomes increasingly obvious that the equation of the story of the film and the actions of its protagonists must include other variables that remain unseen. Compared to the relatively clearly defined exploration of the limits of historical reality, credibility, and fiction in the artist’s recent works (*Return to Adriaport*, or *Neptune*), in the present film Babanová is at her most abstract. It is as though in making this film she herself were caught up in the undefined unknown in the equation, a factor that unexpectedly renders *The Law of Time* autobiographical in nature. Yet this aspect is not expressed in relation to Babanová’s individuality as an artist, but rather in respect to society at large. It is sufficient to watch just a few minutes to feel a pang of recognition in some of the more or less likely moments of the footage playing out before the viewer. Flashbacks to times of lockdowns, isolation, and the desperate quest to find some kind – any kind – of footing, attain more defined contours with each successive shot. How many times did we bury our partners, family members, roommates, or ourselves, only to have them walk right past us in

the next moment, as if nothing had happened? How many times did you vanish into a space where the otherwise dependable laws of physics no longer applied? Probably because, among other things, this isolation and room for contemplation, at other times unavailable to us, allow us the rare opportunity to reassess and question what we otherwise take as unassailable intrinsic givens – whether this concerns the laws of physics, our notions of truth(s), or precisely the issues of mental health and its importance, suppressed until recent times. In spite of its ostensibly surreal appearance, *The Law of Time* could actually be read as Adéla Babanová's most concrete work in the video medium. It can nevertheless only be read within the very specific time frame of our collective experience over the past few years. Without this shared experience, the film will, according to the laws of time, shift into the province of artistic fiction.

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Jennifer Coolidge's acceptance speech at the Golden Globe Awards literally took by storm not just the room full of her hitherto more famous colleagues, but the entire Internet. After a lifetime of supporting roles, often all but invisible, Coolidge stepped into the spotlight of contemporary popular culture in the HBO series White Lotus, *directed by Mike White. Coolidge's unconventional performance is unquestionably one of the main reasons for the series's high visibility. The openly acknowledged age of the actress, together with a growing awareness of the dramatically widening gap of social stratification, economic inequality, and the almost absurd gulf between the perception of reality of those with an*

abundance of wealth and those without. Compared to its usual standards, contemporary Hollywood (or North American film and television production) is becoming uncharacteristically attentive to issues of wealth inequality and class struggle (apologies to those for whom the term "class struggle" is tainted with the context of another era; another shift in time). The most obvious example of this trend last year is the abovementioned White Lotus, *with its stories of chance encounters between parties of the privileged classes holidaying in the eponymous chain of luxury hotels and their clashes with staff and locals. Other examples include* Triangle of Sadness, The Menu, *and* Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery. *What they all share is the pulsating and layered sense of anger and the desire for revenge on the part of the middle class (if indeed anything like a middle still exists today) against the privileged top few percent of the population. Various forms of social segregation are a constant trait of the functioning of human society, regardless of its political system. What is nonetheless remarkable about the current interest in critical analysis of this phenomenon within broader popular culture is that the sarcastic humor directed at the rich and powerful comes from within their own ranks. "Have all the young people become Communists now, or what is the story? Is that what we have fought for?" vs. "Solidarity, inclusion, equality, and responsibility for one another are the essential premises of freedom, not the division of people into those who successfully passed the selection process of capitalism and those who did not," etc. Shifted reality. Shifted sensibility. A shift in perception, of seeing the same thing from different perspectives.*

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Marwa Arsanios's long-term video project and installation, at present bearing the laconic and straightforward title *Who's Afraid of Ideology?*, concludes with its fourth part under the subheading *Reverse Shot* (2022). The film raises a number of points concerning the notion of private property, specifically the ownership of land.

An opening shot of a camera surveying an imperfectly rendered digital landscape is followed by a cut to the perspective of a drone flying over an abandoned quarry somewhere in the middle of the woods (later we learn that the setting is Lebanon). A disembodied voice introduces us to the premise of the film essay: what if a plot of land had a separatist consciousness? In a conversation later in the film, one hears the voice of an older opponent: "Let's not fetishize the idea of land or a plot of land." To which the response: "It is not fetishization, but imagination." The older voice then insists, "Fetishization by imagination." This format of a critical conversation runs throughout the film – whether as a verbal exchange of views, a tension between computer-generated and real-life footage, artifacts housed in a museum and their reflection in the landscape, and perhaps also an oscillation between codified history and its retelling from a different perspective. The notion of land as universally used rather than owned corresponds to *Mashaa*, the law anchored in the Qur'an that provides an avenue for the expropriation of land for purposes related to the practice of faith. Ownership. Dispossession. The very absence of language for expressing land that is not expropriated but rather

"de-expropriated," land returned to nonpossession, clearly speaks of the complexity of the issue at hand. Language and its formation is always very much about creating and structuring reality/ies. Thus, one of the voices explicitly declares that, in order to shift our perception of property, ownership, and nonownership, we must rethink the meaning of words such as community, communication, or communism, to unburden them from their history and be able to regard them in a manner that is relevant today.

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Elizabeth Holmes exited the courthouse, reportedly on her way to Mexico. But her one-way ticket was discovered, preventing Holmes from escaping. When the collapse of traditional economic structures after the 2008 financial crisis paved the way for the development of tech companies and their expansion into the out-of-control billion- and trillion-dollar giants of today (Apple remains, Amazon is floundering slightly), not only techno-optimists but the general public believed that this represented the dawn of a bright new future. Smartphones allowed for reconnecting with old school friends one hadn't seen for twenty years via the new social networks, summoning a car with a tap on the screen, or a steaming hot meal on your table before you know it, with no effort. And Elizabeth Holmes promised us a complete health test from a single drop of blood. Less than a decade later, we began to realize the pitfalls of the uncontrolled flow of information and dubbed our era to be "post-factual," because what can be trusted nowadays when anyone can write and publish anything they like on the Interwebs, amirite? And we have also begun to consider the

growing potential of future artificial intelligence algorithms and to dread – much as we did in the late 19th century – the perils of automation. How many people will likely lose their jobs tomorrow? The trial of Elizabeth Holmes was one of the many alarms going off simultaneously, along with seeing the android gaze of Mark Zuckerberg during his countless testimonies in front of Senate committees in the United States, or the European Union fining Meta. Has the tech bubble of so-called platform capitalism burst completely? Or have we just learned to be more skeptical of the overblown marketing of companies selling what are essentially empty promises? It is hardly likely that we will take a step back to push-button phones, and to waiting in the street hoping for a taxi to pass. But can we manage to live without dreams of exponential developments in technology and its potential to bring "good" to humanity? We have long mourned the flying cars and space stations envisioned for 2001 and learned to live without them. Can we mourn and move on even in regard to automated freedom on a universal basic income? Shifting realities, one on top of the other, layered and slightly stuck in place.

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Leslie Thornton's *Ground* (2020) was created during the artist's residencies at CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) and Caltech (the California Institute of Technology). The contrast between the universal fame of both institutions and the general public's simultaneous lack of awareness of their actual activities runs through the digitally processed film, which combines the urban landscape of Los Angeles with details of the interior of CERN,

taken from an interview with one of the researchers.

The frame is divided by an oscillating grid, morphing the real-life footage into waves responding to the scientist's voice and movement, just as much as to the traffic of a busy North American city. The words we hear are carried by a similarly shifting line between conscious and unconscious perception and the understanding of their content. The extent to which the scientific jargon employed is intelligible or not depends on one's individual orientation; but in this case, Thornton also works with the communicability of meaning on multiple levels in parallel. The moment that it ceases to be clear what the conversation is about, the potential for interpretability shifts to the intonation, reinforced by the cyclical repetition of specific phrases. Most of us live in a reality far removed from the one represented by the protagonist of the film. Or is it the researchers at CERN and Caltech who live in a shifted reality, a reality far removed from the rest of society? The connection between science, research, and the application of its results to the development of technology, leading in the end to the palm of our hands and the mirroring of the pupils of our eyes, may also remind us of a grid in motion with no clear direction. Cyclicity. Sequencing. Rapid change. Fluidity, continuity. The abstraction of research or of art.

Other, more tangible steps in the emergence of technology and its distribution find resonance in the work of Zach Blas and Ed Atkins. The main thrust of Blas's work is somewhere mid-point between the developers of big tech and its end consumers (in other words, you and me). Namely, it offers a critical

reflection on the cult of Silicon Valley, on its self-proclaimed geniuses, those responsible for the push to technologize society, as being based on the most predatory form of planetary extraction and economic exploitation. Atkins in turn locates his métier within the mind, integrated into a digital world that may be representative of a new evolutionary stage... or its opposite – simply a more sophisticated replica of what we have already been experiencing since time immemorial. Cyclicity. Fluidity.

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Enough far-reaching examples. The pandemic has served as a catalyst for further layers of meaning, splitting, fragmenting, confronting, and conceiving new shifts in both mutually shared and unshared realities. For a while it seemed that COVID-19 brought (to the privileged Global North) a fragment of a possible future utopia. For a moment we thought we could create a new solidarity, a greater sensitivity to each other, irrespective of who had previously formed part of the social majority or minority. For a moment it seemed that we could work differently, create new and more meaningful forms of interaction, to earn differently, and provide for our basic needs with the help of caring neighbors and nanny states. It seemed that technologies were virtually faultless (and that the few lingering glitches could be easily fixed), that the room for ideas knew no bounds, and that truth and love would prevail. And then only days later we were at each other's throats, trying to kill one another (fortunately, in most cases, merely figuratively speaking – although it should probably not come as a complete surprise that the most significant geopolitical reverberation

of the pandemic, besides the anticipated economic crisis and resultant inflation, was the radicalization of a dictator and a return to the antiquated model of war with tanks and trenches, as if we had turned back the clock by one hundred years). Where are we coming from, and where we are going? It is hard to say.

It may be worth taking into account the findings of a recently published paper by researchers of the Peking University Institute of Theoretical and Applied Geophysics, summarizing many years of research into the Earth's core. According to this study, the Earth's solid inner core, a ball of metal located roughly three thousand kilometers below the surface, has been gradually slowing down, and it is quite possible that right now it may be standing still. The researchers came to this conclusion by studying seismic activity in various places on Earth; they believe the process of slowing down to have begun sometime around 2007. Much of secular Western society, in its quest for new forms of authority, has over the past decade developed an implicit faith in technologized astrology, which brings daily information about the conjunction between the movement of the stars and one's own life via phone display (don't tell me you don't have, or at least know of, Co–Star!). If for the sake of argument we accept as fact this time-honored phenomenon (and no, it is not just a Millennial or Gen-Z fad) – that is, if we accept that remote celestial bodies have some sway over our lives – then what are the implications of a body roughly the size of Mars, right under our feet, suddenly changing speed or the direction of its movement?

I am attempting to conclude the present essay on an upbeat note, so please bear with me and try to tune in to my logic. Thank you. Well then, if the Earth's core started turning differently as of 2007, then perhaps all that has happened since – from the crunch of 2008 to the Russian war in Ukraine – can be put down to geophysics. Well, wash your hands of all of it, dear friends, and enjoy the exhibition.

Jen Kratochvil is an art historian and curator.

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Digital Beings

Eva Drexlerová

The multimedia installation *The Doors* (2019) by the American artist Zach Blas conveys a peculiar atmosphere. It transforms the exhibition space into an immersive environment of moving images, symbols, and sounds, whose inspiration derives in equal measure from counterculture and the corporate world. Chromatic visuals generated by artificial intelligence endlessly change shape in the six-channel projection, creating a sense of hallucinatory reconfiguring. The visuals are accompanied by classic rock music, mixed together in certain sequences with artificially generated tones and binaural beats, which are believed to exert a calming and relaxing effect on the nervous system. The images and sounds surround us in affective and aesthetic flows that escape definition or capture.

The ways in which Blas's garden engulfs our senses cannot be understood solely as an attempt to create a more immersive viewing experience in a fictional world operating in opposition to the real one. Rather, the environment of his multimedia installation portrays (and also makes us feel) the degree to which our existence is permeated by networks, images, and sounds that serve to mediate reality. It is just a drop in the ocean of the fictional worlds that proliferate in our everyday interactions, on the Internet or via mobile apps, which are increasingly

driven by artificial intelligence. With ever greater intensity we experience the world through machine-driven processes that feed us content based on algorithmic evaluation. As one of the most important contemporary philosophers of technology, Yuk Hui, notes, “We are currently living in a digital milieu; we Facebook, we blog, we Flickr, we YouTube, and we Vimeo. Nouns and brands have become verbs, even forms of life.”[1] By entering *The Doors*, we enter a world that seems very familiar. It draws our attention to the close connection between human subjectivity and the digital technologies that penetrate our bodies and minds through invisible yet very real waveforms.

This kind of observation invites us to rethink the role of the image. In the context of digital media, which, as US cultural critic Steven Shaviro puts it, does not “represent” reality but rather serves to “create” it, the traditional metaphor of the mirror as an image of the world that can be fitted into a frame is no longer tenable.[2] As Blas suggests in his multimedia installation, images have begun to spill out of their fixed frames, and are increasingly becoming haptic and sonic referents. What we might term as one aspect of our contemporary *shifted* realities is precisely their leaking out of their fixed frames and infiltrating their surrounding reality. I would therefore like to move away from the notion of critical visual analysis that looks at images in

1 Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 41.

2 Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009), 2.

terms of representation or the personal intentions of the artist. Rather, I propose the perception of digital images as *objects* that actively influence our own development. Contemporary art of the moving image enables us to observe the ways in which our lives are conditioned by technological media that has a profound impact on our thinking, acting, or perception. The works of Zach Blas and Ed Atkins that are presented in this exhibition showcase worlds in which the boundary between what is human and what is machine dissolves. They disrupt traditional binary oppositions and open unexplored territories, in which there is an increasingly intense collaboration between the human and mechanical imagination.

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The British artist Ed Atkins is widely known for his hyperrealist, computer-generated videos challenging the relationship between physical bodies and their digital counterparts. The strange atmosphere of his animation *The worm* (2021) stems from this tension. On the one hand, we witness an intimate conversation between Ed Atkins and his mother; we hear their real voices, filled with emotion, long sighs, and uncertain assurances. While Atkins's mother is distant in terms of space (*The worm* was created during lockdown), his own body is *all too present* on the big screen; we can see, for example, the detailed rendering of his facial hair, or the perfectly sharp shadows that reflect the maximum resolution of the image. Yet despite this, we *sense* that this is not quite Atkins. "We were in a wonderful, sort of decrepit hotel," the artist recollects. He was alone in the room, while the crew of the Berlin-based

Mimic Studio, specializing in animation using motion capture technology, “sat in the neighboring room, like Stasi members. They were monitoring me as I sat, awkwardly, in full-body Lycra, and an unwieldy head rig with a GoPro on it.”[3]

An almost perfect image of reality, accompanied by the real sounds of a chair creaking or hair scratching, is constantly disrupted by the strange behavior of Atkins’s double, his stiff movements and awkward posture. On the one hand, we can see the stunning range of possibilities for constant improvement and the heightened believability of digitally produced objects, which make it increasingly difficult to distinguish digital creations from actual reality. On the other hand, the smoothness and fluidity of the image is constantly disrupted by moments of “failure” that reveal the *strange materiality* of computer animation, which in turn repeatedly reminds us that Atkins’s body is in fact just a digital copy, stored somewhere in the cloud.

This sort of visuality reflects something of our everyday experience, in which physical bodies exist in relation to the grainy backgrounds during Zoom calls, simulating a beach or space galaxy; of CCTV footage; or, conversely, of perfectly rendered and convincing deepfakes. This peculiar material quality allows the digital images to stretch across platforms and spill out of the screens directly into

3 Jason Farago, “Ed Atkins and His Mum Are Starring in a Museum Show,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2021, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/22/arts/design/ed-atkins-artist-museum-videos.html.

reality. There, they are embodied as successful business meetings, intimate family gatherings, or escalated airport security. In this sense, images are increasingly becoming *objects* whose specific mode of existence allows them to freely transcend both scale and space.

However, it may seem contradictory to speak of digital objects in the context of interactions taking place online, consisting of pixels and signals that are invisible to the human eye. As Yuk Hui notes, a digital object is not simply located *inside* a computer or cloud storage. Its existence must be understood in terms of the relationships that digital objects – consisting of data and metadata – establish with each other and from which our digital milieu is woven. Digital objects are inherently elusive and unlocatable, "hidden" behind graphics interfaces and composed of multiple layers across spaces.[4] Understanding digital images as objects therefore challenges us to define something that lies beyond the human imagination. Yet they are objects in the sense of how we work with them, and in the manner in which they bring us back to reality.

Atkins's avatar, stylized as a TV presenter wearing a dark checkered suit, reflects the complexity of the ways in which digital image-objects step out of the virtual world. His character's story has a "real-life" context, connected to an individual family history, and cannot simply be reduced to a generated sequence of images. Such a reading is further challenged by the way in which he makes his double

4 Hui, *On the Existence*, 1–2.

experience emotions. As Atkins's mother recounts her childhood and the disappointments she has been forced to deal with, we watch the artist's avatar struggle to metabolize this distress, despite the fact that he is not quite human. The empathy and sense of connection the viewer establishes with the avatar is not intended to attribute human qualities to computer-generated personifications. Instead, Atkins gives us the opportunity to recognize aspects of ourselves in something we are accustomed to regard as alien. In other words, he opens the possibility to contemplate the often hidden effects of digital objects that trigger responses that are not quite inherent to us. By showing digital objects as *beings* with relationships and emotions, Atkins challenges the perception of technology as a mere tool for entertainment or utility. He questions the very distinction between object and subject, and gives us an insight into how we change and evolve through technology. Atkins's comment that he sees his work not as "a second world," but as "part of ours," is close to what I am trying to outline here – digital images are *objects*, and the emotions they evoke are undeniably real.[5]

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While Atkins does not attempt to explain how we should or should not think of digital technologies, and his interest lies more in, as he puts it, "how something feels, rather than what it means," Zach Blas's multimedia installation *The Doors* refers to the

5 "Ed Atkins: Recent Ouija," Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/70432.

ways in which digital technologies function as tools for the needs of those who control them.[6]

In his garden, we are presented with a series of auditory, visual, and haptic elements that illustrate multiple connections between the past, present, and future, rich in associations. On the one hand, the work successfully evokes the atmosphere of a good psychedelic trip, with all the requisite allusions to the artistic creativity and authenticity of 1960s' counterculture. On the other hand, by tracing the mysterious prospects of post-human life through artificial intelligence, the work takes on a future-oriented dimension. "In this giant glass," we hear, "we have the Power to change your mind." An extinct lizard walks across the six-channel video projection, coming to life through a shimmering array of pixels as an avatar of technological innovation. In a gravelly voice, generated by a neural network trained on Jim Morrison's famous voice register, he invites us to follow him into "Nootroo," a land where the reincarnation of Jim Morrison as "The Lizard King" is celebrated along with the current phenomenon of nootropics – so-called smart drugs designed to enhance cognitive function, reflecting the ideals cultivated in Silicon Valley.

The transhumanist tone of Blas's garden presents a vision of the future that reflects the cybernetic assumption that human experience is a matter of calculation and that man is a cyber machine. We

6 Timo Feldhaus, "Ed Atkins: 'I Am Not an Authority on Who I Am'," *SSENSE*, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/art/i-am-not-an-authority-on-who-i-am.

are repeatedly reminded of this ideal by a series of objects that serve as idols of worship. A neon light in the shape of a neural network diagram looms over the space, like an icon elevated in a ritual setting. A hexagonal green carpet outlines the shape of Metatron's cube, a symbol from sacred geometry, which has since been appropriated by nootropic branding. The symbols herald the arrival of a new age, which is defined, as Yuk Hui notes, as "technological singularity, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and the realization of *homo deus*."[7]

While Ed Atkins's animation refers to a specific personal experience, the work of Zach Blas charts the manner in which both subjective and historical time – nowadays referred to as globalization – are embedded in technological development. From their different perspective, each traces the ways in which contemporary digital images and algorithms are able not only to register, but also to alter and influence everything human and nonhuman. We live in *shifted* realities in which we increasingly become *technical* beings. If *The worm* suggests that digital images are not mere bits and bytes, but have a physical effect on reality, Blas's multimedia installation reminds us of the stories that lie behind the effect. These often reflect techno-utopian visions of the future, which combine science fiction and scientific fact, offering an idea of technology as a *tool* to transcend the human. Like many other contemporary artists,

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7 Yuk Hui, "Problems of Temporality in the Digital Epoch," in *Media Infrastructures and the Politics of Digital Time*, ed. Axel Volmar and Kyle Stine (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 82.

they suggest that we should be careful in terms of understanding the world through the binary categories of man/machine. Whether we like it or not, we are evolving ever more and more intensely in alignment with what we have traditionally considered to be separate from the human.

Such changes cannot be explained simply by how we use or understand technology. We must also take into account how machines look at us: how they communicate between themselves about us and what they think about us. If we choose to ignore their specific form of existence, not only will we cease to understand them, but we will also lose the ability to understand ourselves. Such fears resonate with the post-humanist world of Blas in his multimedia installation – the danger of alienation in an age where industrial rationalization disrupts traditional forms of knowledge, replaces the individual with automatisms, and subjects thought to mass synchronization. In his famous 1954 essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger notes that, in the modern world, the traditional understanding of technology in terms of *techné*, associated with craft and regarded as a creative poetic force, has been replaced by a purely expedient “framing” (*Gestell*) that renders every living creature and inanimate object into its “reserve army” (*Bestand*). Zach Blas and Ed Atkins employ moving images, which interact with or actually become digital object-beings, to forge new ground in terms of posing technology as a question, offering new meanings that lie far beyond contemporary notions of technology. They allow for the exploration of new forms of subjectivity, as well as providing a much-needed platform for

rethinking the notion of materiality itself and how it is situated. In this respect, contemporary art of the moving image teaches us to embrace the unknown and the incomprehensible, helping us to better understand what the human subject is becoming in its increasingly intense entanglement with digital beings.

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CLOSE-UP: YOUR LOSS

Hal Foster on Ed Atkins's The worm, 2021

How many of us, when we speak with our parents, feel like stock characters, as though we were simulations of ourselves? In *The worm*, 2021, the centerpiece of "Get Life/Love's Work," his recent show at the New Museum in New York, the English artist Ed Atkins presents a telephone call with his mother in this very manner. In the roughly thirteen-minute animation, his mum is heard but not seen, while Atkins is rendered, by way of performance-capture technology, as a digital avatar who listens attentively, mumbling in agreement, sympathy, or surprise, asking a question only when her narrative falters. Aurally close, the mother is spatially distant (*The worm* was made during lockdown), while the son is almost too present on the large screen—there are extreme closeups, odd angles, abrupt cuts, awkward gestures, and unconscious tics—even though we know it is not truly Atkins that we see.[1]

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1 The initial concept was to interview people in isolation—jailed, disabled, poor, old—but the pandemic made that scheme redundant. Still, *The worm* is all about the desire—and the difficulty—of connection. For the conversation, Atkins set up in a hotel room in Berlin while his mother remained in England. The data captured during the conversation was used to animate the avatar, though "it's my face that palpably lurks beneath the CG wireframe and JPEG skin." In an excellent essay in the catalogue,

His double, a three-dimensional model purchased online, is no double at all: The usually scruffy artist appears as a natty television host in a dark windowpane suit with wire-rim glasses who diverges from the often-abject characters featured in his previous videos. And the setup, with its soundstage, blue light, stylish chair, small table, glass of whiskey, Silk Cut cigarettes, and ashtray, is indeed that of a studio interview, a dated genre that conflates reality and artifice in its own way. One inspiration for *The worm* was the final TV appearance of the English writer Dennis Potter, who, on the brink of death from cancer in 1994, talks, bluntly yet poignantly, about the immediacy of sensuous experience (a plum flower outside his window strikes him as the "blossomest blossom"), his commitment to writing to the end, his faith in community over "the rumor" that is God, and the corruption of journalism and politics by Rupert Murdoch (already then!).[2]

The mum talks about her family—some about her insensitive father, more about her depressive mother—and how she took on the worries of the

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Ed Atkins: Get Life/Love's Work, edited by Massimiliano Gioni, Erika Balsom provides an overview of relevant works by Atkins. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this catalogue, which includes two essays by Atkins, a conversation with Gioni, and a note by Mark Leckey.

2 The interview is the basis of several Atkins videos. "For such a long time, I made these works alone, at a computer, interrogating myself with technologies that surveilled my every grimace. For me, it was a pitched self-surveillance that ended up melodramatizing me to myself." Imagine the Warhol Screen Tests updated technologically, self-inflicted, and not at all silent.

latter, especially about “lovability,” to little avail, mostly because such cares could not be expressed openly (depression was euphemized as “weekend letdown”). The theme of her reminiscences is emotional inheritance, in particular that of unhappiness, and we watch the avatar struggle to metabolize this misery even though (or precisely because) he is not altogether human. “The way she talks of her mother, Nanny Bea, is how I could talk about my mother,” Atkins writes. “Thwarted artists, manic-depressives, chronic dysmorphics through and through. All of which is contagious, hereditary poison.” This “empathy-mirroring” was arduous for both parties, a self-conscious performance, but it was “also love,” Atkins insists. “Love! Tenderness!”

This point brings into focus the import of his titles. “Get life” is an ethical imperative: here, to address the repressions in a family and to resist the predations of media technologies. Yet it is also a prison sentence, for both struggles are likely to go on forever. “The worm” is multivalent, too. A worm is base, like the spider that represents the formless for Bataille, lowly like a daughter burdened with the pain of her mother, squirmy like a son who cannot settle the debts of the past. “The worm of time” comes to mind as well, the turns of fortune through the generations, as does *The Sick Rose*, the Blake “song of experience” in which a worm threads together eros and disease: “O Rose thou art sick. / The invisible worm, / That flies in the night / In the howling storm: / Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy: / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” This allusion calls up another source cited by Atkins, *Love’s Work*, the 1995 memoir of the English philosopher Gillian Rose, who, like Potter, was brought to her

"reckoning with life" (the subtitle of her book) by a death sentence of cancer. This "sick rose," who writes magnificently about eros and disease, argues that the near-oxymoronic work of love is to convert melancholy into mourning—a Freudian labor also important to Atkins—and then, somehow, into delight: "I want to sob and sob and sob," Rose tells us, "until the prolonged shrieking becomes a shout of joy."[3] Atkins desires this transformation, too. Even as *The worm* foregrounds the difficulties of his mother, the death of his father, also from cancer, looms in the background, as it does in other of his videos (Atkins calls his characters "dead men, surrogates, auto cadavers").[4]

At times, the maternal monologue verges on confession or therapy, yet there is no priest here, only a son, one who, rather than talk about his mother, listens to her talk about her mother. The expected analysand becomes the unexpected analyst, and this also makes the Atkins avatar squirm. The fact that he processes private matters in a public setting (fictively in a television studio, actually in a museum gallery) makes us squirm, too, especially as we are reminded how personal exposure has become the obscene norm in media culture. Atkins adapts the

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3 Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 74. For Rose, "love's work" is a reckoning with risk and loss. "Philosophy, ancient and modern, is born out of this condition of sadness" (124). This is also true of art for Atkins.

4 These surrogates "descended, psychically, from that literal dead man who began this whole sorry mess for me. Making videos became about reparative mourning."

Lacanian term *extimacy* for this everyday confusion of the intimate and the alien. “Everything’s become involutional,” he writes in a free association typical of his hyperbolic prose. “Think family, heredity, history, antecedents. Think of history as a movement inward maybe.” Yet rather than see this involution as a limitation only, Atkins wants to run with it, to revalue it: “going inward both in memory, in body, in heredity, in technology, and, of course, in psychology. That we might pursue this psychical memory . . . bliss.”

Atkins calls his characters “dead men, surrogates, auto cadavers.”

The sound of *The worm* is penetrative, and the image is immersive; the avatar appears as “a country of pores, wrinkles, and, I hope, the tiny inflections and winces of a detailed, silent response.” So what kind of realism is at stake here? The video is hardly realist in the old sense of referential; its setup is entirely artifactual. Yet Atkins seeks not to reiterate the technological derealization of the world so much as to resist it. His aesthetic goal is to “model those parts of life that steadfastly elude representation.” “That’s my utopianism: a faith in the eternal singularity of materiality,” which he locates above all in “the irreducibility of IRL/mortal experience.” This realism is rooted in the body and the psyche, especially in extreme states of abjection and trauma (Atkins is interested in Kristeva and Lacan as well as Bataille).[5] It is the real as remainder, understood as

5 See my “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* 78 (Autumn 1996).

that which resists the symbolic order—its task made all the more difficult given that this order is now supported by technologies of computer generation, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic scripting.[6]

The wager made by Atkins is that if reality can be derealized by such technologies, it might also be rediscovered there, and this might occur in a few ways. First, he believes that, once outmoded, technology passes over to the side of "base materiality"; its very clunkiness becomes a reality effect. Atkins adapts the term *corpsing*—the moment when an actor breaks character and so dispels the illusion of the performance—"to describe a kind of structural revelation more generally"; his examples are when a vinyl record jumps or a streaming movie buffers. To corpse a medium is to expose its materiality, even to underscore its mortality, and in this moment the real might poke through. Second, punctuated by the gestural tics of the Atkins avatar, *The worm* is also rife with manufactured glitches—sudden blurs, flares, beeps, and crackles—and these apparent cracks in the artifice might provide another opening to the real. Although these reality effects are artificial, "they baffle the signs of reality by parodying them,

6 "The presumption of the project, from the beginning, was the accentuation of those aspects of life that elude technological remediation, recoupment, representation, rendering, capture. The work would try to rehearse freedoms by their omission from the remit of what's reproducible. In this, at least structurally, it would recapitulate the core thesis of my work."

engendering a new kind of realism."[7] Third, if the real might be felt when an illusion fails, so too might it be sensed when that illusion is "glazed with effects to italicize the artifice," that is, when illusionism is pushed to a hyperreal point. In this register, Atkins conforms to the criterion of "fidelity" in technological reproduction, but excessively so, and in this way claims such fidelity for the side of "revelatory materialism rather than techno magic." Fourth, Atkins exploits a central feature of high-definition video inherited from photography and film, at least when they were experienced by early viewers: The inanimate appears to be alive. This confusion is a telltale attribute of the uncanny (in his account, Freud was inspired by those avatars known as doppelgängers), and this uncanniness is another "mortal experience" that evokes the real.[8] Finally, if photography and film opened up an "optical unconscious" for Benjamin, a reality not perceived by the naked eye, high-definition video expands this realm for Atkins. His surrogate dead men make visible the psychopathology of everyday technological life.

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7 "Analog flaws [are] re-created digitally in order to militate against the sterile horror of computer-generated nothings." In the film *Anomalisa* (2015), Charlie Kaufman also uses glitches in the animation—cracks in the avatar—to evoke the real. See Zadie Smith, "Windows on the Will," *New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2016.

8 For Atkins "the celluloidal story" has "the uncanny at its heart," and the digital image is even more "spectral": Its "persistent aping of analog reality means that the animation, the life, is doubly lost, doubly dead." In some ways, Atkins continues, by digital means, the old cinematic fascination with ghosts, robots, and doubles of all sorts.

Rather than reiterate how the human is given over to technology, Atkins seeks, perhaps impossibly, to bend technology back toward the human.

"Unlike with movies, my CG stuff is deliberately janky," Atkins states. "Enough to underscore it, draw attention to it. Which is a perversion of its aim to disappear." This is a contemporary version of the modernist call to reveal the medium, "to bare the device" (as the Russian formalists put it), but Atkins goes further: His formalism is dedicated to realism, one of "bleak histrionics" that he calls "Bruegelian." "[I] want to realign the tech in the service of life's *beggared*—'love's work'—rather than as a tool of captivity." For Atkins, then, to bare the device is also to "impoverish" the medium and thus to point to other impoverishments—in his life, in his family, in society at large. At the extreme, the bared device stands in for "bare life," or life defined by Agamben as utterly subject to power, life that is indeed beggared.[9] Here Atkins proceeds by way of analogies: "Analog error feels as if it is to the reality of a CG image what impoverishment is to representation at large—what tragedy is to depictions of life; what misery is to experience." He knows that this string of "allegories" is a stretch, but he is not afraid of bathos, which he sees as the other side of pathos. Atkins risks these states because he sees affect as an essential dimension of life that must be both wrested from media technologies and rediscovered there. This is why he aims to find an "emo, cybernetic surrogacy" in computer-generated

9 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

avatars and to graft his "sentimental self to the tech, rather than the other way around."[10] This is not to deny that life is steeped in loss but, on the contrary, to acknowledge that reality, and to produce work that addresses it, that assists in "affective recognition." It is to contribute to "love's work."

Here his notion of art confronts his theory of media, which Atkins sketched in a 2018 lecture titled "Losslessness." "Losslessness," he tells us, "refers to a category of data compression algorithm that allows original data to be perfectly reproduced." To achieve this fidelity, digital media, even more than analog media, aim to disappear; "technology constantly seeks to be lost." The magic of technology wants not simply to cover up our existential lack—this is what makes it the ultimate fetish—but to distract us from its inevitable failure. Its myth of losslessness serves "ideological ends," among them our fantasies of "coherency," "holism," even "immortality." However, it never quite succeeds: Loss is felt nonetheless, and because this loss cannot be acknowledged, our relationship to technology is rendered "neurotic," marked by "aimless melancholy or shame." In response, Atkins argues, "the artist must first set out to *find* the technology," and the initial step is to make the technology "corporeal, analog, mortal." This "movement toward the literal" is not simply "a rebuttal of the desires of the tech"; it also

10 Atkins delves into "travesty" and "caricature" in his writing, too: "Typically for me, the prose is purple, bathetic; mortifying, in retrospect." See Mike Spelinger, "Close Without Saving," in Ed Atkins, *Seer Reader* (London: Koenig Books, 2015).

points to the “uncovering of other realities,” which in turn promotes the “freedom of the subject.”[11] Here we are back on the familiar ground of modernist defamiliarization, a project that is now vastly complicated given that the human seems almost fused with the technological and the world often appears to be media all the way down. Moreover, for Atkins, it is not enough to defetishize technology, to demystify its magic. For his work to be effective, illusion must be allowed “sufficient function” not only “to sustain critique” but also to promote affective recognition—to express loss, to “set in motion a shift from melancholy to purposive mourning,” to find in media technology an interpersonal connection that it always promises but rarely delivers.

Atkins signals a shift among artists steeped in new media. Just as the Pictures artists once assumed the society of the spectacle so that they could engage its image repertoire, so Atkins takes computer-generated technology as a given but attempts to “misuse” it critically. Here he differs from the practice of immediate predecessors such as Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, and Hito Steyerl, for, rather than reiterate how the human is given over to technology, he seeks, perhaps impossibly, to bend technology back toward the human. His true utopianism is that he believes technology might aid the human to become human again—to become emotive and empathic on our own terms. His art

11 “I do think all this structural reflexivity I apparently demand of the medium is maybe a manifestation of the kinds of structural reflexivity that I try to undertake in my personal life.”

is not a lament for humanism or a celebration of posthumanism but a snatching of a neohuman from the belly of the beast.[12]

Again, Atkins subscribes to a philosophy of the remainder—of the recalcitrant detail, the personal *punctum*, the traumatic real—but, as with Barthes on photography, this fascination can lead to an occlusion of another reality, social reality, Bruegelian (or Brechtian) concerns with the beggared notwithstanding.[13] His interest in the "arts of impoverishment" (a title taken from Leo Bersani, who features Beckett, another Atkins favorite, in his account) is in tension with his commitment to an aesthetic of reparation (Bersani is critical of any "culture of redemption" that frames experience as always already damaged).[14] Finally, can media technologies truly be turned so as to enrich our affective lives rather than strip them like so

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12 In his latest novel, *Klara and the Sun*, published this year, Kazuo Ishiguro presents an AI avatar who develops an emotional maturity that the nominal humans around her either lack or have lost.

13 Another sign of an inability to think the social is the recent turn to autofiction; like much art, much literature has narrowed its scope to the personal.

14 See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Atkins might reply that there is no contradiction here: Love's work follows on loss. But might he primordialize and hypostatize loss? "Love is our exemplar," and he aims to render it "sublime."

many assets? Alongside the old ideological state apparatuses such as the church and the military, there have arisen a whole slew of social media leviathans that produce, circulate, and monetize all kinds of intense affects in ways that disorient us politically as well as psychologically. But then, when it comes to art, no one should complain about contradictions. For Atkins, they are what drive his practice; they may also be, in part, what keep us human.

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The Age of Mixed Reality

Pavel Barša

The 19th century saw the world through the prism of dichotomies, the sides of which consisted of heterogenous, mutually-exclusive layers of reality. The natural sciences revealed and worked with the determined reality of matter, while the humanities explored the free reality of the spirit. The interior stood in opposition to the exterior, and the unique stories of *history* in opposition to the repeating processes of *nature*. In keeping with this, there was a dual concept of freedom: it was a recognized necessity, but also creation from nothing. Sometimes it would be realized through scientific progress, carrying the promise that man could overcome the limitations of nature; sometimes through artistic creativity, allowing radically new worlds to arise from the chaos of the human interior. In the utopian visions of the 19th and 20th centuries, the development of these two types of freedom resembled parallel lines that grew closer towards each other in an asymptotic fashion. At the place where they touched, man was to become the beginning of himself – an earthly god.

This climax of history was described by the early Marx (in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844) as the renaturalization of man and the rehumanization of history: it was the return of man to nature, from which he had been alienated by

a civilization divided by class. At the same time, it was the transformation of nature into the congenial environment of human creativity. Marx did not deny his Hegelian starting point: the utopian reconciliation of subject and object was grounded in the first of these. It was as if the self-realization of the soul was the main thing, and in this, nature played the role only of a necessary condition.

The mature Marx moved away from the utopia of the reconciliation of man and nature towards a Promethean vision of the technical and scientific mastery of nature. In this form, Marxism joined liberalism, becoming the second main version of the ideology of modernization. As humanity progressed forward, it was meant to consign to the legendary dustbin of history everything that had not passed through the critical net of the rational subject. Ever since Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1637), this rational subject had boasted that it was capable of achieving a point of absolute certainty in itself and, at the same time, of revealing the laws of nature, independent of it. It was this combination of belief in the self-anchoring of the subject with a belief in its ability to capture adequately the reality of the object that allowed modern reason to claim for itself the position of merciless destroyer of cultural traditions on one hand, and of "lord and master" of nature on the other.

The beginnings of the Romantic reaction to the other side of this project of rationalization were hatched from the womb of the Enlightenment itself. Critics took issue with the reduction of nature to a manipulable object, instead describing nature as the omnipotent source of all being, including man.

Their forefather, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, turned the Enlightenment's assessment criteria on their head: as it advanced through history, rationalization did not bring liberation, but instead plunged man into ever deeper alienation. To regain his authenticity, man had to turn away from the civilization of reason and back to the feeling with which nature had endowed him.

This reference to nature as something independent of man (and which could therefore offer him the absolute measure and linchpin of his existence) was as equally crucial to this "Romantic reaction" as it was to the modernizing "revolution" that, pointing to the revealed laws of nature and the natural rights of man, was demolishing historical traditions and establishing the dominion of science and technology. However differently these two opposing positions defined the relationship between (material) nature and (human) civilization, they were agreed on their conceptual division and antithetical position. They shared these starting points with the third utopia of the modern age – the abovementioned Communism of the early Marx. The three utopias differed in the way in which they intended to deal with the conflict of these two opposing positions. The Promethean answer, which had its philosophical beginnings in Descartes, was that the conflict was to be solved by the victory of man over nature and future over past. The Rousseauists, on the contrary, called for man to turn back – to the mythical golden age in which man had not yet issued from the womb of nature. The Hegelian Communists, such as the early Marx, presaged the mingling of this distant past and a bright future. The differences between these three utopias of the modern age may be summarized as

follows: in the first case, reason, technology, and the future were to be paramount; in the second, nature, feeling, and the past; and in the third case, the two sides were to be reconciled – necessity was to be imbued with freedom, scientific knowledge with artistic creation, and the golden age of the beginnings of humanity with its bright tomorrows.

The last great battle between the Promethean, Rousseauist, and Communist utopias took place during the cultural and political ferment of the 1960s. Today, they have lost a large part of their mobilizing potential: we are living at a moment in history in which hopes for perfect fulfilment in the future have been overtaken by fears that the future will deprive us of the imperfect satisfaction of our present. We have been led to this pessimism by the chain of events of the past fifteen years: the financial crisis of 2008–10 and the EU's debt and refugee crises of 2014–16; growing awareness of the impact of global warming from 2018; the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. From belief in the "final," minimalist utopia of human rights,[1] which in the first two post-communist decades replaced the utopia of socialism, we have shifted over the past fifteen years to a fear of dystopia – social, environmental, nuclear...

Besides this short-term *political* reason why the three classic answers to the conflict between man and nature have stopped resonating with us, there is also a deeper, long-term, *ontological* answer: we no

1 Samuel Moyn, "The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

longer take as self-evident their shared assumption that we are capable of conceptually separating two sides of an antithesis and attributing them to different layers of being, in order to explore them in two separate ways – one with the aid of the natural sciences, the other with the aid of the humanities and social sciences. The COVID-19 pandemic showed the impossibility of understanding social processes independently of natural ones. Global warming and the decline of biodiversity remind us that our Earth cannot be understood without regard for the impact of human activity. The natural environment can no longer be seen as a reality that is independent of us. This is because it includes the results of our past acts. In searching for answers to the issues of today, we can no longer be helped by the dualistic ontological map that has aided our orientation for the past two centuries. It is a map that marked out the sphere of human subjects as separate from the sphere of nonhuman objects. Material being was to be explored using different intellectual tools than those used for spiritual being. The exterior was not meant to interfere with the interior, and the future and the past were mutually exclusive.

The current situation calls for a change of map. The stark boundary line marking the abyss between the reality of man and the reality of nature, between the future and the past, must be replaced by a continuum on which the inner and outer, human and nonhuman, spontaneous and constructed, poetic and technical, living and nonliving mingle, overlap, and interact. One of the results of this transformation is a redistribution of the positions of activity and passivity that were formerly allotted to opposing sides of the antithesis between man and nature, spirit and matter. In this

mixed reality, it is possible for an entity that until now was relegated to the passive side of the man–nature dichotomy – such as the COVID-19 virus – to become an actor of history.

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This exhibition offers a number of stimuli in the search for a mixed ontological map. Marwa Arsainis's 2022 film *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* talks in the same breath about the *history of colonization* of the Lebanese mountains, which legally institutionalized the system of private land ownership, and the *history of the Earth*, which created its inorganic and organic profile and ecosystems. We are called on to view the creation and reproduction of "social formations" in human history through the prism of the process of the sedimentation of geological strata, periodically interrupted by a period of breaks caused by the movements of tectonic plates. Lebanese activists who want to replace private ownership and land inheritance with collective land use are aiming at just such a revolution. They do so not only in the name of those who work on the land, but of all the other creatures and entities that belong to it, in the name of "animals, bacteria, moulds, people non-settled, settled, and other entities." All of these are its inhabitants, whether they live in the soil or merely pass over it. As soon as the activists began the process of "deprivatization" or "communalization" of the land, they awoke thousands of spirits that had been subjugated by the system of private land ownership: they raise their heads, "cast doubt on the direction of history, call for a reverse shot. They start moving [...] and new cracks appear in the earth."

As the numerous references to Marx show, the artist really is not “afraid of ideology.” Nonetheless, this protest against the “direction of history” is difficult to express using the ideological antithesis of the 18th and 19th centuries, between a “reactionary” turning back to a Rousseauist state of nature and a “revolutionary” leap forward to a bright future for man that, according to the mature, Promethean Marx, was meant to ensure the maximum development of labor productivity driven by scientific innovation. The call to return to a geocentric view of the world and the worship of Gaia is rejected, with a reference to Engels’s acceptance of heliocentrism in *Dialectics of Nature* (1883). On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire gains a positive mention for not having recognized the absolute right to land ownership, since it was governed by the theological idea that God had entrusted the Earth to man to inhabit and administer, not to own and exploit. The explicit tension between the tendency to invoke the spirits of the past and the progressivism of Marx – who in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” (1852) called on us, in Jesus’s words, to “let the dead bury their dead” – does not threaten the coherence of the message. This is precisely because the work no longer issues from the antithesis between two realities defined in opposing terms – human history and the laws of nature, bright future and obscurantist past, spirit and matter, subject and object. Instead, it takes as its starting point the idea of a single mixed reality, in which moulds, viruses, and nonhuman creatures are active participants in human history, just as human activity is part of the histories of ecosystems and the past remains part of the future. This mixed ontology precludes both the modernistic absolutization of power and the

status of man as “lord and master” of nature, and the absolutization of power and the status of nature as the mythical “mother” of man and the consecrator of his existence.

That we are entering a post-romantic period, in which nature can no longer play this second role, is shown by Paul Maheke’s film *Mauve, Jim and John* (2021). A loving couple take a trip “out of town” in a world in which we can no longer seek the consecration of our feelings in communion with immaculate nature, since we find the results of human activity even in the most remote places. The space through which the pair of lovers move, examining it with dancelike gestures, carries traces of having been exploited by military activity. We are ushered into the film by the sounds of industry, which then retreat into the background, mingling with birdsong and music. Unlike the romantic landscape, which we best enjoy from a distance or from above, from a “viewpoint,” here concrete places are explored from close up and below: by walking, turning in a circle, making prints in the loose soil, the slow shifting and crawling of entwined bodies. The body touches itself, the other body, and the immediate material surroundings.

While Romanticism allows the inside to resonate with the landscape, seized by the sight from afar as a *whole,* here the central purpose of the linking is bodily contact, in which we are only ever acquainted with the individual *parts* – from the point of view of our location in the given space, which we cannot encompass and control with our sight. Rather than as a subject that captures the world from the outside and from a distance – either in order to identify with

it in romantic fashion, or to control it in technical fashion – man examines the world from within and from close up through the touches of his moving body: he is part of it and cannot therefore put it in front of himself as a panoramic picture to dwell upon. At the ironically lighthearted close of the film, little shining lamps appear in the hands of the two protagonists and a kitsch pop song announces that, after this excursion, “life will never be the same again.” Instead of a romantic fusion with immaculate nature, the lovers have affirmed their love with an outing to an abandoned military area.

If Jim and John communicate with each other (but also with the places in which they find themselves) by means of their bodies, then the intimate couple in Ed Atkins’s 2021 film *The worm* communicate exclusively by means of voice and words. We witness a mother transmitting to her son the trauma of distrust in life, by telling him how her mother transmitted it to her. As Rousseau said in his “Essay on the Origin of Languages” (1781), only speech is capable of authentically conveying feeling, because it closes the gap between the sign and the designated: it expresses the interior at the immediate moment that we hear it. Unlike a gesture or a letter, it does not have to let this expression pass through the deadening medium of space. Today, unlike in Rousseau’s time, communication technology allows people to speak together when they are thousands of kilometers apart. This only underlines the skewed nature of the voice that we hear, and the body that we see. The element of the first is diachrony – a sequence of moments that follow *one after another*; while the element of the second is synchrony – the present time of points that exist *alongside one another.*

The specific atmosphere of *The worm* derives from the way in which these two heterogenous dimensions overlap. The internal meaning is concentrated in the voice of the mother, which we hear, while the son, captured by sight, comes across as a lifeless dummy. The voice, disconnected from the place in question and coming from a body we cannot see, gains even more in internality, while the visible body loses it, becoming stiff and mechanical, as if without a soul. That it is not the body of the artist but of his avatar merely underlines the peculiar mixture of intimacy and foreignness, naturalness and artifice, that emanates from it. In the contrast between the voice of the mother and the enlarged shots of the downy beard beginning to grow on the son's face there is a confrontation between deep sense deprived of a surface and a surface deprived of sense – pure emotionality carried by the voice and pure materiality perceived by sight.

From the sober medium of the European avant-garde used by Ed Atkins we move in Zach Blas's film *The Doors* (2019) to the wordiness of the avant-garde of the American west coast, which since the 1960s has been searching for the meeting point of the two freedoms mentioned at the beginning. The techno-utopianism cultivated during the past five decades in Silicon Valley combines the Promethean dreams of modern science with the invocation of artistic creativity and existential authenticity – the legacy of the counterculture of the 1960s. One of the concrete reference points symbolizing this Californian utopia was LSD: a product of scientific innovation stimulated artistic innovation. The life and work of "The Lizard King," Jim Morrison, were filled both with megalomanic hopes and the catastrophic

end of the project. This ambiguity is expressed by Blas's installation. As we enter, it is not clear whether we are in heaven or hell. References to drugs both synthetic and organic are mixed together, the technical is imbued with the vegetative, the machine with the organism. Creative eruptions take place against an ominous background, out of which peer anxiety and madness. The music of The Doors is twisted into a huddle of sound. Time spent in this garden of wonders and metamorphoses cannot be anything but ambivalent – man's mystic dream of being imbued with the creative forces of the universe and taking up the position of God has its dark side in the presentiment of impending catastrophe. Utopia shakes hands with dystopia.

Leslie Thornton's video *Ground* (2020) takes us to the more moderate environment of the east coast avant-garde, without leaving the intersection of experimental art and experimental science. And not any old science. The work was created from a combination of shots of Los Angeles and material shot in CERN in Switzerland, the research center whose experiments have tried to explain some of the greatest mysteries of quantum physics and thus to reveal the very nature of our material world. This ultimate attempt of scientific reason to provide a clear and direct picture of the mysteries of being is presented in indistinct film pictures that seem to be transposed into negatives, with the human figure becoming a bundle of lines, waves, and hatchings. The enthusiasm of the scientist explaining his research is ironically relativized, if not directly undermined, by the deformation of his figure (at times reminiscent of the deformations created by the mirrors in the maze on Prague's Petřín Hill). Does

Thornton mean to indicate by this that the utopian promises of technical science metamorphose into a force that man stops being able to control and instead is controlled by?

Thornton has never hidden the defining role played in the orientation of her work by the fact that her grandfather and father were involved in the Manhattan Project, which enabled atom bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The history of the 20th century, in which top-level science aided the discovery and use of means of unprecedented destructive force, was not therefore external to her everyday life, which she experienced with concrete others, as part of her family. The young man at the start of his scientific career, who was to become her loving and beloved father, played a direct role in the preparation of one of the most spectacular massacres of the last century. In this case too, we see the inseparable mixing of two dimensions of reality that the 19th century had kept apart: the intimacy of the family hides a highly public aspect, the personal permeates the political, “small” individual everyday life is directly connected to “big” history.

This reminder of the biographical context is important partly because in *Ground*, as in her previous films, the artist avoids summarizing her message in a clear-cut thesis. On the contrary, she allows us to feel the aspect of reality that cannot be captured by casting light on a single point, as a philosophical assertion or scientific finding would do. It is as if her aim were to touch the dimension of our existence that subjectivizing reality passes by. This is not, however, about invoking the irrational,

but the development of another type of knowledge. According to French philosopher Michel Serres, this type of knowledge was a fully blown part of ancient civilizations, but modern civilization has marginalized it.[2] The modern West, he says, proudly endorses the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome, but has founded its project almost exclusively on the Greek passion for revelation and put aside the Roman respect for the hidden. The road to the future was to be shown only by the light of reason, while the Roman or Egyptian respect for the dead enshrined in the dark bowels was cast aside as unnecessary. If Serres claims that modern science has inherited the Greek instinct for "explication," the revealing of hidden truth, then we may add that modern art has inherited what he characterizes as the Roman capturing of sense by means of "implication" – wrapping it or shrouding it in something else.

In her interview with Natalie Bell and Judith Berry at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in October 2021, Leslie Thornton referred to the points of contact between science and art: they are driven by an instinct to explore and discover new things, and they are prepared to bear the risk of failure, which is inextricably bound up with experimentation. While science, however, always has a concrete goal in casting light on something that was previously hidden, art experiments without a concrete goal – what it achieves cannot be condensed into a single point, but is dispersed. We may add that this difference between science and art allows them

2 Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

not only to limit each other but also to complement each other. Through their dialogue, the balance between two ways of knowing may be renewed, after having been disturbed by modern science, with its ambition to control the *whole* area of knowledge. There would be a cleansing of everything that did not meet Descartes's criteria of truth, which was the "clarity and distinctness" of ideas that were gradually to light up all the dark corners of the world. All that was indistinct and ambiguous was in time to be transformed into its opposite. Evasive *sense* dispersed between moments of time, and sometimes place, was to be replaced by *truth* captured with the aid of light at a single point of time and space.

Scientific knowledge, culminating again and again as it reaches this goal, would appear to have entirely displaced artistic knowledge, which is imperfect by definition. It can never stop at a certain point, since it brings a sense that is created from the cross-reference of many points. Diffuse and mobile, sense escapes all attempts to condense it and render it immobile in "clear and distinct" knowledge. While science always nails the same to the same, art shows the same always veiled in the other. If the first relies exclusively on light, the second is embedded in the play between light and shadow.

The absolutization of the scientific type of knowledge is connected to the contemporary cult of transparency, which celebrates the exhibition of everything hidden and the unambiguous denomination of everything that is ambiguous. This cult is just as dangerous to man as global warming or the decrease in biodiversity. We will be capable of surviving with dignity on Planet Earth only if we

answer the age of mixed reality by developing mixed knowledge, in which artistic “implication” will have an essential place next to scientific “explication.” Michal Serres said our wisdom should not be like that of Galileo’s but of Kepler’s picture of the planetary system: it would not revolve only around light, but would represent an ellipse, the second center of which would remain in darkness. The first center represents science concentrated into illuminated points, in which reason directly captures reality. The second center represents a knowledge whose element is not immediacy, but neverending mediation.

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Literature

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1637)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781)
Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844)
Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851)
Bedřich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (1883)
Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (1990)
Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (2010)

Leslie Thornton by Feliz Lucia Molina

The filmmaker on painting, portraits, and process.

Filmmaker Leslie Thornton is a contemporary of visionary image-makers such as Chris Marker, Chantal Akerman, Michael Snow, and Harun Farocki. The poetic breadth and conceptual depth of Thornton's work—which bridges the gap between video and cinema—express a commitment to the vulnerabilities and complexities of the human condition, the guiding thread in her work. I imagine a rope pinned to the trees at different points in a dark forest, something to hang onto while moving through the dark cinema sky.

Thornton spent her early teens living in rural New York with her family. It was there that she was first exposed to experimental film through screenings of contemporary works that a minister of a local Unitarian Church put on every Sunday. When she went to college at the State University of New York at Buffalo, she studied under some prominent figures in Structural Film, such as Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage, Peter Kubelka, and Paul Sharits. Thornton made her first 16mm film *X-TRACTS*—the beginning of an extensive body of work—while in graduate school in the 1970s at the Hartford Art School. The artist is currently a professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, and also teaches film at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. This summer, she collaborated

with students on a film involving athleticism and trampolines, which was somewhat inspired by Werner Herzog's *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1974) and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Phantoms of Nabua* (2009).

The following conversation with Leslie Thornton and her partner, artist and scholar Thomas Zummer (who teaches Theory at the European Graduate School), took place at a coffee/tea bar in the tiny town of Saas-Fee in the German-Swiss Alps, where the EGS is located.

Feliz Lucia Molina I was watching some of your films on UbuWeb and I was wondering about *X-TRACTS*, the first film you made. I'm curious about the stuttering, the hesitations and hiccups that happen through language and sound paired with the cuts.

Leslie Thornton I made that film when I was in school as a graduate student. Up until then I was painting which was my life when I was a young teenager. But I was painting in a way that was reductive. It was during a period of Minimalism moving into Conceptualism.

I was doing what one did when working within the art realm (it was a period we call Modernist) and there was a strong sense that everything one did was in dialogue with other works. If you weren't in New York, you tried to keep in touch through journals, if not actually going to see the work. And in the dialogue that I was caught up in, it felt honest making a painting disappear. So I was using grids—not as severe or austere as Agnes Martin, but I was aware of her work. The paintings were moving

towards white but there was some kind of grid that kept being laid down and re-established, obscured, and then re-established. I also had a lot of color and the color was gestural, seeping out of the seams between these rectilinear surfaces of white so it felt like there was a touch of Expressionism. That's what I was talking about in painting.

FLM In *X-TRACTS*, there's this element of the personal. Was there a trace of the personal in the paintings?

LT No, I wouldn't say that about the paintings I was doing. It wasn't any more true of my paintings than anybody else's at the time. These were more conceptual problems. But I felt I was painting myself into a corner. When I decided to go to grad school I arrived as a painter and within a month, that was over. I had extensive background in the study or witnessing of experimental film. I had transferred to the State University of New York at Buffalo for two years and it happened that all of these great filmmakers—the people who were the early sages of American avant-garde cinema—were conducting the classes. They were teaching aesthetics classes.

FLM Did you know that sages of Structural Film were working and living in Buffalo?

LT I did know because I was already interested in experimental film by the time I was fifteen. It just so happened that in Schenectady, NY—which was a horrible place where I had an unhappy life for four years as a teenager—one fun thing to do was to go on Sunday afternoons to the Unitarian Church where the minister was showing experimental films.

FLM That's really bizarre that a minister was showing those films.

LT I was too young to even realize what his background was, but the Unitarian Church at the time had the reputation of being very liberal and not so church-like. So the hip kids in high school—

FLM —were going to church and watching cool films.

LT Yeah, that's what we did. So I had an awareness of it when I went to Buffalo, NY, where I had an extraordinary experience with a brilliant teacher and great painter, Seymour Drumlevitch. At the same time, I was taking all these aesthetics courses that were all taught by men. They were "geniuses" and were told they were geniuses and told us they were geniuses and just presented their work without engaging the students. So it was intense.

There was a lot of money available through the arts. It was a state university, but was chosen by Governor Rockefeller, who poured money into the arts. So it was the state art school at the time. So I thought, This is just like what I read about Black Mountain College. It wasn't just filmmakers; it was theater, and a lot of writers, poets, and experimental music events. There was a great exhibition while I was there at the Albright Knox Museum that was entirely given over to experimental music. The musical pieces were objects; they weren't just sounds at all. It was about the way sounds were generated; the places they came from—this was all a part of the exhibition. It was an extraordinary hothouse situation in the cold snowy city of Buffalo.

FLM Did you shoot *X-TRACTS* in Buffalo?

LT No. I wasn't making film at all. But when I went to grad school [at the Hartford Art School] I met somebody there who was a British student, a sculptor, who had also started making films, and we just clicked and very soon we started making this film together, *X-TRACTS*.

The Hartford Art School was at the time considered the conceptual art school in the country. *X-TRACTS* came out of my history with painting and my greatest attraction was to do films that were identified as "structural-materialist." So, how could I do this? My painting was analytical but also gestural. I had to translate what I understood already through painting into this new medium that included time and imagery from the world. So we decided to do something that was very simple—just focus on one person. We didn't think of it as portrait; the person is just a kind of vehicle that we could move around and record. We developed a score ahead of time, a patterning of sound and image in units of six moving from lengths of a maximum of three seconds to a quarter second incrementally over the course of the film, which developed a rhythm and then we did a kind of counterpoint relation between the sound and image in terms of duration. I was very interested in linguistics at the time and so this was what led to being able to imagine taking speech and fragmenting it to other units that were elemental units of speech consisting of phonemes and morphemes which would not have content beyond sound.

So we took a journal that I kept in high school and college. It was embarrassing to look at, because

at that age you think you know a lot and you don't know anything. I wanted to get rid of it but the way I could get rid of it and keep something at the same time was to use the text for the film. So I read from it and we physically cut up the recording, because at that time you put sound on strips of magazine stock that was exactly the same size as 16mm film, that had sprocket holes, and you edited the film and the sound together on a Steenbeck. We didn't listen to any of the sound. We just cut it according to our pattern and put stacks of short and middle and long pieces of the image together with the sound. So we edited without looking, going by the score. And we really didn't change anything. And there was the film.

FLM I'm curious about the translation process. Do you feel like it was a pairing or insertion of some kind?

LT It was just a way to begin. I began with something that was like a grid, which was a score based on time and relations between two different elements—the variety of syncopations there could be between an image and sound.

FLM In terms of duration, what about the gaps and hesitations between sound and image that create a disjunction between senses?

LT We didn't cut in silence except maybe between the sections of six we put a little pause. But that was just natural—I mean, my speech is hesitant if you noticed. And it was more hesitant then than now. So that was just the absence of speech within speech.

FLM *X-TRACTS* feels as though we are given an impression of the internal rhythm of your thinking or something like that.

LT The curious thing is that that became the case after the fact. We really had this cool attitude towards what we were doing. And there is a point where I say one phrase that comes out—and it's arbitrary that it happened to stay together—and it's, "of necessity, I become an instrument." It was from the notes I was making in my notebook about this piece that we were going to develop and so we really didn't see the more emotional and portrait-like quality of the piece at the time. And I don't think other people did either. In fact, one extraordinary thing about living with *X-TRACTS* all these years is that when it was produced, I couldn't understand what was being said even though I knew what had been said. There are only a couple of points where you could hear words or put words back together. I remember I was able to hear the broken word "signi . . . ficant," to put it back together.

FLM Almost like a cut-up poem.

LT Right, but we weren't thinking that.

FLM The cool attitude of it (because there are some moments like the cigarette and spinning around and hair throwing everywhere and walking down the long snowy road) doesn't feel at all off-putting. It still feels like even though that cool factor is there, there's a real investigation going on.

LT When I say cool, I mean disinterested, distanced. We shot all around the house—filming things I would

do. I would smoke a cigarette. I would go for a walk. It was staged, but it was also stuff that was just common. One of the other factors was how the camera would relate to the subject, for instance, in terms of camera-movement or subject-movement. So for one section, for instance, we'd say the figure always had to be moving away from the camera. In another section the camera had to zoom in.

FLM Right, especially in the parts of repetition and zooming-in on the gesture of closing a curtain. So it almost feels like repetition might not totally be the point because there's also this inching closer, which feels more like a visceral movement.

LT And we were thinking of it as just a kind of taxonomy of ways the camera and the subject would be in relation to each other and if you look closely at the zoom-in in the bathroom where I'm closing the curtain, you can see I'm holding a stopwatch to time it. And then some of the other shots were longer, were more colloquial and then cut-up, where I'm walking or the dog comes in. Another variable was the light.

FLM Was there a purpose in repeating six units in relation to inflections of speech pattern in *X-TRACTS?*

LT We used identical units of time but we just placed the timing so that there was no point where quarter seconds of image line up with quarter seconds of sound. There was no great significance to the choice of three seconds maximum. Though I did want to get to the units of phonemes and morphemes. So maybe we tested that a bit, I don't remember.

FLM So you were using phonemes and morphemes in the language abstracted from your journal to syncopate units of time in the film?

LT Yeah, like how short the cuts would have to be—short enough to isolate just a letter or two letters. I don't know if we just lucked out or if we tested that. At least I definitely wanted to reduce or break speech into these units. I was starting to say that the thing that was quite extraordinary was that when we made the film we thought it was very fast and couldn't understand what was being said until we got to the three second sections, and nobody else could either. And in fact, teachers didn't like the film at all. One person who was maybe the most philosophical of the faculty just said it was "too much." *(laughter)* But ten years later, our perception had changed and we could hear and other people could hear what was being said and the film slowed down and now there's no problem.

FLM Strange to think the experience of time (through film) was different even while viewing—its weird that it took ten years for it to soak in.

LT No, no, it's not that. It's probably that media, or our perceptual apparatus was speeding up and speeding up and speeding up and still is speeding up. I don't know if we'll explode at some point. But it's speeding up. We do move much faster today.

FLM Right, that's what I mean in that it takes time for it to seem like it's slowed down. Because our perception has sped up and now we're able to grasp what couldn't have been grasped at the initial time of making the film.

LT Right, but that wasn't the point because we wanted the thing to be what it was when we made it. And in a way it became something else—like more "personal" when it wasn't just this sped up montage of sounds and images. Because the human mind—at least in media cultures—we are just processing differently now. When I realized this, I felt, "oh, this is a basis for scientific study. Is anybody doing anything over periods of time such as ten years, measuring what we perceive with the same objects?"

FLM The way perception changes over time due to technology—that perception evolves in symbiosis with the apparatuses—

LT When you make a film in the old analog world, it's a slow process. When you go out with a digital camera today it's not a slow process.

FLM Do you feel that way about the process of painting—that there's immediacy in painting that is different in film?

LT I didn't think of time in relation to painting. The only time I thought about it was, How long does it take for this painting to dry? *(laughter)*

FLM Or the feeling of time in a brush-stroke versus cutting film?

LT I dropped thinking of what I had been doing with painting once I started the process of making film. I didn't draw comparisons though I probably could now, if I thought about it. I did start painting again for a while, not long ago, and it is slow, it's like gardening—appreciating being able to slow down.

The painting I have done recently is more representational and that partly does come from my long history of work with people in the world of media. But I'm not "going back" to painting. It's actually more of a hobby. I'm more concerned with photography and thinking about photography in relation to the moving image.

FLM Like in your recent film *Photography Is Easy*?

LT Well, I was thinking about the technology of digital photography versus what I did know of an analog practice in film, and being put-off by the abundance factor. And on the other hand, there's a great liberty in the technology: we don't spend a fortune, you can work even more impulsively than ever and study things, observe, witness, with the digital. So the fact that I'm making these pieces that are ten or twelve-minute long shots, completely static, maybe shooting as many of these as one would shoot many still photographs, and then choosing one in which something stands out—this significant one that I would share, that I would call a piece of work. I am bemused by this; that I've started doing this, making pieces that are ten minute long static shots.

FLM You said you like to choose or focus on one image. What leads you to choose that image?

LT What I look for is something that occurs that I'm not controlling that has a salient presence. It can be behaviors that seem somewhat odd. When people are at a great distance you can't hear what they're saying but you watch the pattern of movement of their bodies and you say, "I don't understand."

FLM You allow a peculiar distance to the subject. For instance, in *Peggy and Fred In Hell*, you let the children be themselves and "act" as they are. So this distance—what is it that you try or not try to reveal about the subject?

LT You mean in *Peggy and Fred in Hell*?

FLM In any of your films that have actors or people on camera, like in *The Last Time I Saw Ron* or *Howard*.

LT Well, *The Last Time I Saw Ron* is different—the footage is very formal. It was shot to be projected in the theater for four months as part of a play in Brussels. Ron was the lead and co-director but then he passed away shortly after the project was finished. It was only presented, I think, for three nights, but it had been scheduled for a long run in Europe and then it stopped at his death. The whole piece was about his death. It was about dying and the isolation of dying and then he died. So that's a different kind of piece. It's a memorial to him.

But with the other work, I just have an attraction to the unexpected or off-kilter or quirkiness in speech and gesture. I find pleasure in that and so working with children, maybe you could see this happen all the time in life and be amused. Recording *Peggy and Fred in Hell* was something else because they were playing to the camera and I had to make sure they weren't playing to me. I had to use tricks that directors use working with grown-up actors as well. I'd say to the boy, "you could direct the next scene, you're in charge."

FLM It's apparent that you were treating and directing the children in *Peggy and Fred* as though they were grown-ups.

LT Yes, in a way I was, by seeming to give them responsibility, but really it was a game. For instance, I could tell them both that they were directing the next scene. And then there was a bit of a tussle with their impatience, especially from her towards him when she had been told that she was in charge even though he was also told he was in charge. They'd end up doing things with this kind of instruction and it went beyond just play of children. I came to understand that what they were doing was acting as if they were "actors"—what they understood their job to be because they were in a movie.

FLM So were you also playing with their awareness of being watched?

LT Well, yeah, that became essential. When they were younger, they weren't as much in charge and so my camera was voyeuristic while they're sitting around having a tea party or whatever. And also, the girl (whose name is Janis) would do these poses and I was so attracted to her because I thought she was very beautiful—the odd physiognomy—and she just moved that way. You know, she was lanky and she had a tendency to stop and think and it looked like she had many different thoughts, many different expressions would come over her face, which I caught a few times on film and I just thought they were exquisite moments because it was no one thing, one gesture or expression. So I was just generally *looking*, and with Howard as well. A lot of my work has started when I met a person and felt turned on

by them somehow. So to be turned on by them meant that they didn't read in the same way most of us read while walking down the street and taking care of business—something about them. And so that was the case with the children and Howard.

FLM How did you find the children to play *Peggy and Fred in Hell*?

LT I moved into a new apartment in San Francisco and they were the upstairs neighbors and they saw me moving in and came to help. There was a fence around the property and suddenly these two little heads popped up and it was just love at first sight for me. And then they started helping me move and they saw my equipment and so right then, that first day, they wanted to record—they saw my tape recorder and they wanted to be recorded. We sat down on the front steps and we recorded some stories, which I used in the film on that very first day. And I knew I had to work with them. I had already planned this project working with adults and it was going to be about technology exceeding the scale of mankind and the iconic technological product was the atom bomb—that that was the shifting point of who or what's in charge.

FLM Do you want to talk about *Let Me Count the Ways* and how this film corresponds to what you're saying about the atom bomb? After we watched it, I approached you and said that what struck me was the speeding up of scientific text and also the ethical decision to not empathize too readily with the other side, instead taking on the position of telling the story from the side of that event that you were familiar with.

LT The “American” side, and that is something you were thinking partly because someone in the audience asked me why I didn’t give a voice to the perspective of the Japanese—that was a fair question. I think a problem in the piece—and I’m not worried about it as a problem and I think as we move further away from WWII (in the ongoing series), it’ll read as less of a problem for the audience—is that I don’t delve into anything very far. So to cover Los Alamos and the delivery of the bomb and also a testimony of a survivor in the course of four minutes—I could be involved and do research and make a documentary that was an hour long about just that, but that’s not the work I’m doing. The work in the end will only be this: it will function more in being condensed, as poetry is condensed. So it has echoes and puns and a kind of poetic rhetoric of condensed, suggestive work that the viewer has to expand.

FLM It seemed that part of the intent was for there to be an undefined relation between the image of Hitler and the poetic sequences referring to the atom bomb. The still photographs of Hitler captured him in his speech rehearsal sessions with his acting coach, crafting his performance of a speech. Someone in the audience wondered if there was any direct connection between the photographs of Hitler and your father, who was essential in the development of the atom bomb.

LT *(laughter)* On some level, I mean, if you want to go there, yes. It was so far from the point. If you want to say all soldiers of WWII or of history—

FLM —are echoes of Hitler—

LT —that would be pretty silly. They were men involved in a war, but the scale of their involvement—

FLM But this tactic in trying to confront power, in trying to confront its source by looking at the body and face of power in these still photographs of Hitler—

LT I was so struck by the fact that these photographs and the quote from Goebbels are from the 1920s, and that somebody in class was saying that nobody knew what was going to happen and I said, "Well, that's not entirely true." They did have a plan and Hitler had already written *Mein Kampf* at that point and he was getting financial support from businessmen who weren't necessarily Nazis yet and a lot of them ended up being killed by him—who were supporting him—and they saw in him a mechanism to recover the economy in the country, that he would be the agent. He was a puppet to these men because of his charismatic performance.

FLM His figure functioned as an open channel or vessel where all this power could be poured into.

LT I don't know, people thought they were using him but he was way past that. It was very convenient for him that they decided to use him.

FLM You also mentioned at some point that you developed an obsessive curiosity about evil.

LT I was just saying that I've read a lot, even obsessively, about WWII and about Hitler and Stalin in particular because I don't know evil. I'm looking for it. I'd like to be able to say to myself definitively,

“This is evil.” Now I know I can say personally that some people are evil. But when you’re reading a good history that’s presenting a vast landscape, you look at this and say, “At what point did this person become evil, what was the crucial turning point? And was he evil when he was twenty-five and trying to look like a big shot with the other people supporting him behind the scenes?”

You could make a film using archival footage of him only playing with dogs and show it to someone who doesn’t know the history and they would think, “Wow, what a nice animal lover and look how he is with children.” Then he had a lot of guys helping him out that might’ve been more diabolical and so this machine came together. I can’t say much with authority about this at all. I can just say I’ve had a fascination with the complexity of history. That’s it. And then a kind of focus on evil with a big question mark—like, was Osama Bin Laden evil? I don’t know. But let’s not go there. It’s too complicated right now for this conversation.

FLM The title *Let Me Count the Ways* feels like a pull of daisy petals: “He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me...”

LT Well, it was because it started out with my father. But the “How do I love thee” gets dropped in my mind past that first episode. The question “How do I love thee?” is significant in the first episode because I’m showing something that’s filled with an ambivalence and accentuated by the voice which isn’t translated—the voice of the exhausted Japanese woman who was a witness to the Hiroshima bomb. Seeing the young men running around having a good time on

their break or being the soldiers that they were, preparing to deliver this weapon, doing their job—

FLM So it's also capturing this, I don't want to say, *innocence*, but—

LT I didn't say, "I love thee" but "How do I love thee?" How can I love you and—I do love you but how, how is that possible?

FLM Right, the part about the group of soldiers watching the dancer almost felt like there was this crystal clear expanse of naïveté or innocence and yet it felt as though there were no basis for judgment.

LT Yeah, well years after the atomic bomb was dropped after the testing, for instance, somebody sent me a link to a film (documentary footage) and commentary about five men who volunteered to stand beneath a bomb that was being detonated to demonstrate its safety. It was detonated in the air. It was during the testing period of bigger hydrogen bombs and there was one occasion in which five men volunteered to stand at ground zero beneath the bomb. They all lived and most of them lived into their seventies or eighties. Pretty strange, huh? They were demonstrating that it didn't necessarily produce instant death for humans and they weren't so aware of the long-term effects of radioactivity. The real irony—or it's not really irony—is that most of those men lived a long time and it might be that the radioactive material was blown out beyond them by the force of the bomb. It's possible that they were in an umbrella safety zone without even knowing it.

FLM In retrospect, unbelievable events in history seem totally fictionalized. For instance, the voice of the American woman living in Hiroshima who gave a testimony of the aftermath immediately after the bomb was dropped. The tone of her voice is desensitized and radically optimistic in that “no Americans or Westerners were directly affected.”

LT Well the woman is just bizarre. She lived in Japan for twenty-something years but she certainly saw herself as different. She wasn’t integrated into the society she lived in so you can’t see her as an authority.

FLM I just meant that it seems totally—

LT —fictionalized. Yes, after any event, after any great event. My film *Adynata* used to have this subtitle that I dropped: *Murder is not a story*. I was thinking about how when such a thing as a *murder* occurs, there’s that initial moment in which a person is killed by another, gone, but what we do is to turn this blunt event into a narrative. So there’s this physical reality and then all we can do is analyze it kind of scientifically for criminal purposes. But also we explain it in narrative terms. Like with these slaughters that have happened in the US—recent ones—the guy in Colorado, for instance. When you see the headlines the first day after the event—I know that what I’m looking for is an explanation. Who is this person and why did he do this? Often there’s no answer that day. And then you read the next day and the next day and maybe you’re less interested in the fact that another person died from the wounds than finding out why this happened. What went wrong, who

was this person? I have a desire for some kind of explanation and I need some kind of closure to separate the event from myself because until you are told, “Oh, well he was high on a mix of this and that drug,“ or, “He was paranoid schizophrenic,” or something, then anything’s possible at any time so you need to contain the potential of this catastrophe with a narrative. That is what I am doing, to some extent, in the series *Let Me Count the Ways*. It offers no closure, just a continuing progression of digressions —it’s as if there are many closures.

FLM Right, or variations of paths towards closure.

LT Well, just because something ends doesn’t mean there’s closure. WWI ended but there was no closure for the Germans.

FLM It’s a split, creating more openings—

LT Right, and a good example of no closure is the position the Germans were left in after WWI, essentially producing a Hitler and WWII. And right now we live in a time (in terms of warfare) with different ideologies, interests, when terrorism becomes a political and military strategy. There’s just no closure and there won’t be any! This is it. Now we live in a world in which we know there’s no closure. There’s no treaty. You can’t write one. There can’t be a treaty signed. Nobody’s thinking about it—this symbolic piece of paper.

FLM It’s as if the awareness of no closure exceeds the symbolic. There’s too much awareness of the hopelessness of a symbolic treaty. News headlines of

current events are now making me wonder how you go about titling your films.

LT Yeah, I just—sometimes when I have to come up with a title I start writing a whole lot of horrible things down. Tom's making a face [Tom Zummer, who is present during the interview] because he collects them. So I have many horrible titles that I don't use, but then almost always, the title I end up using comes, I trip across it. I just suddenly know and it can happen when I open a book to an arbitrary page and my gaze falls on a fragment of a sentence and then I realize, oh yes, this is the title. There's serendipity to it. But a title does give a lot of direction to a reading and I think in my own case because I want the field I'm moving through to be so open as I work, it's good that I don't have a title because that would limit my—I think it would focus me in a way that's not productive, like I'm trying to prove this theorem...

FLM Right, because the anxiety of titles can function as pre-determined or pre-destined markers for a piece of developing work that needs a lot of space. It pulls the work towards an idealization of what it should be.

FLM There's one more thing I'd like to ask, if you'd like to pick one: ghosts, *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, your obsession with Isabelle Eberhart, or Herzog's *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*.

LT Why were you thinking about ghosts or what do you associate that with?

FLM Well, I don't know what I mean by ghosts, just

that, say, if you noticed any in your films after the fact—

Thomas Zummer May I? With Jennifer, there's the ghostly presence of the disembodied voice. Because it's repeated, it is a voice returning from elsewhere. There are multiple layers—of address, sexuality, meaning, threat—in the return of that voice, which never properly links to Jennifer even though we apprehend this voice only in close proximity to her image, like an unexpectedly close whisper. Also, when the figure of a man appears upside down and in reverse, there's a dislocation in that one image is black & white and the other in color. It is also found footage—a cinematic fragment from elsewhere takes up residence in the presence of Jennifer and yet it has that haunting presence of a direct command or interrogation. Precisely, *Jennifer, Where Are You?* is both command and interrogation and in a sense is, for me, the ghostly nature of a particular kind of haunting, and the attempt towards a possession. What happens is that in *Jennifer, Where Are You?* Leslie induces a kind of release of the possibility of that containment or capture of Jennifer.

LT I do think that when I finish a work I don't own it anymore and it just is in the world and circulates and whatever it does or doesn't do, I take responsibility for it, but it's not mine. My ego isn't attached. So it's a bit strange. It's even a bit like giving birth, I suppose, you could make that analogy. In terms of ghosts as a metaphor, I would say—I've already mentioned what happened with *X-TRACTS* and how it changed. You can make something and you let go of it when you think it's OK, it's full, it's doing what it needs to do. You've had an interesting trip along the

way and then forget about it and then have occasion to see it again, ten or twenty years later, or even one year later. And it's like a stranger and a friend. It's both.

I guess there's a ghost in it because there's a ghost of your own intimacy, once upon a time, with this work. That's in there and that is what is so surprising to re-encounter. I always find with the works that I think have longevity and continue to not read as nostalgic—I say, "How could that have been in me?" I don't know. You marvel because you always feel much smaller than this thing. It's almost magical because it flows through you, but really it's just that it was hard work and there was a risk that you needed in this period to produce a work—you needed it to grow and grow and grow and grow. And then when you take it all in at once—like somewhat of a stranger, an old friend has changed—that's when you say, "Well, I couldn't have done this, how is it possible, how could I have known? I'm not that good, I'm not that smart." But it's because of the investment of so much over a period of time. So it does exceed. If it's good work, it exceeds the maker.

Feliz Lucia Molina is an academic researcher, poet, writer, occasional painter, and psychotherapist.

This interview was commissioned by and first appeared in *BOMB Daily* on October 15, 2012.

■

Marwa Arsanios

Who Is Afraid of Ideology?
Part 4: Reverse Shot
2022
video installation with banners
35'

Courtesy of the artist
and mor charpentier

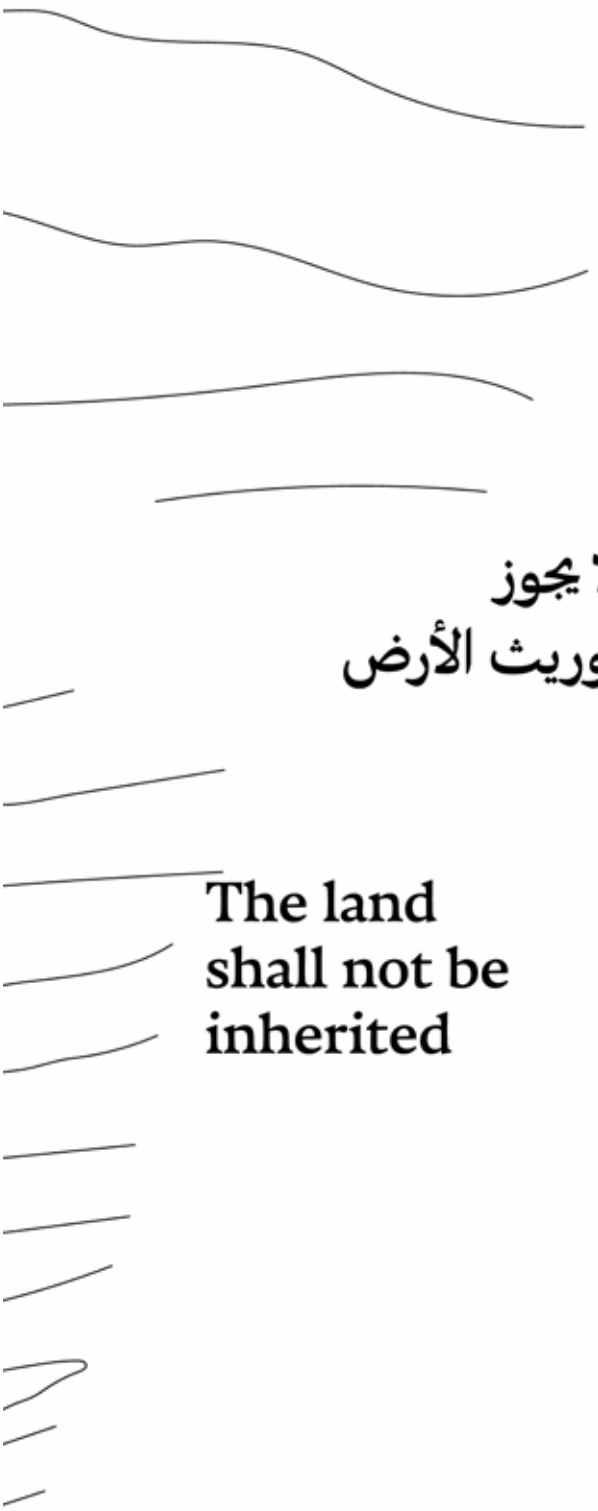
Marwa Arsanios (b. Washington, DC, USA) is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher based in Berlin. In her practice, she reconsiders mid-20th-century politics from a contemporary perspective, with a particular focus on gender relations, collectivism, spatial practices, and land struggles. In recent years, Arsanios has been attempting to think about these questions from a new materialist and historical perspective, through different feminist movements struggling for their land. She looks at questions of property, law, economy, and ecology from specific plots of land. The main protagonists become these lands and the people who work on them. She approaches research collaboratively and is a cofounder of the research/project space 98weeks. Arsanios is also a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna.

In *Shifted Realities*, Arsanios shows the latest part of her ongoing film series *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–). The series weaves an intersectional path

through the resistance of women on the frontline, in places such as northern Syria and Colombia, to claim the unmediated right to land and water. *Part 4: Reverse Shot* (2022) centers around an old quarry in the mountains of northern Lebanon. With the help of an agricultural cooperative, Arsanios set the goal to unite, recultivate, and communalize the land, so that the local community could use it. The film is part of a much longer effort that aims to set the ground for a different future, associated with alternative types of ownership that go beyond transactional and accumulative relations.

Arsanios's work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions, including at Documenta 15, Kassel; 5th Mardin Biennial; Kunsthalle Münster; 3rd Autostrada Biennale, Pristina; 11th Berlin Biennale; The Renaissance Society, Chicago; Kunsthalle Wien; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; 1st Biennale Warszawa; 14th Sharjah Biennial; Nottingham Contemporary; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Thessaloniki Biennale; New Museum, New York; 55th Venice Biennale; and 12th Istanbul Biennial.

The following text banners accompany Marwa Arsanios's *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot.*



لا يجوز
توريث الأرض

The land
shall not be
inherited

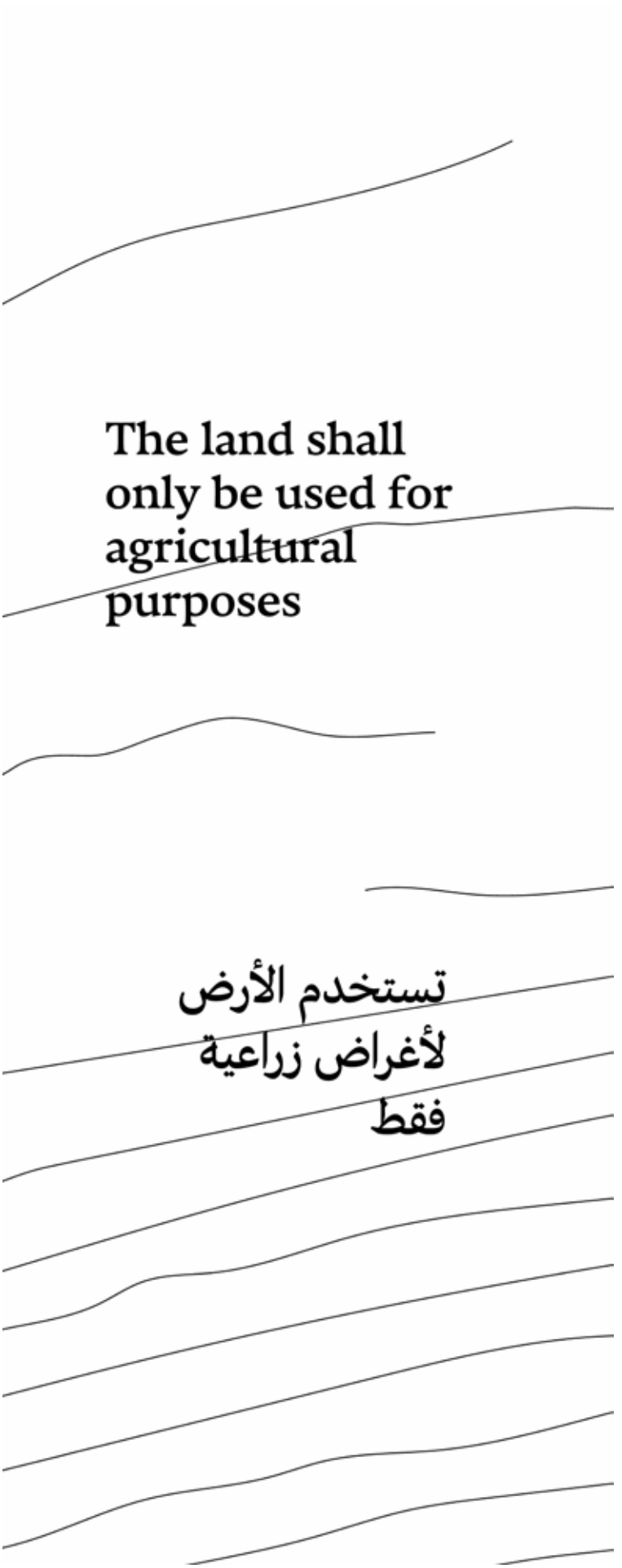
يتم تحويل الأرض إلى
وقـفٍ اجتماعيٍّ أو
مشـاع

The land shall
be transformed
into
a social Waqf
or a Mashaa


The land shall
only be passed
on for
usership
يتم تمرير الأرض
للإستخدام فقط

تستخدم
الأرض من قِبل
الأشخاص الَّذين
لا يمتلكون أرضًا

The land shall
only be used
by people
who do not
own a land


The land shall
only be used for
agricultural
purposes
تستخدم الأرض
لأغراض زراعية
فقط


يجبُ ألَّا تُبنى الأرض
The land
shall
not
be built

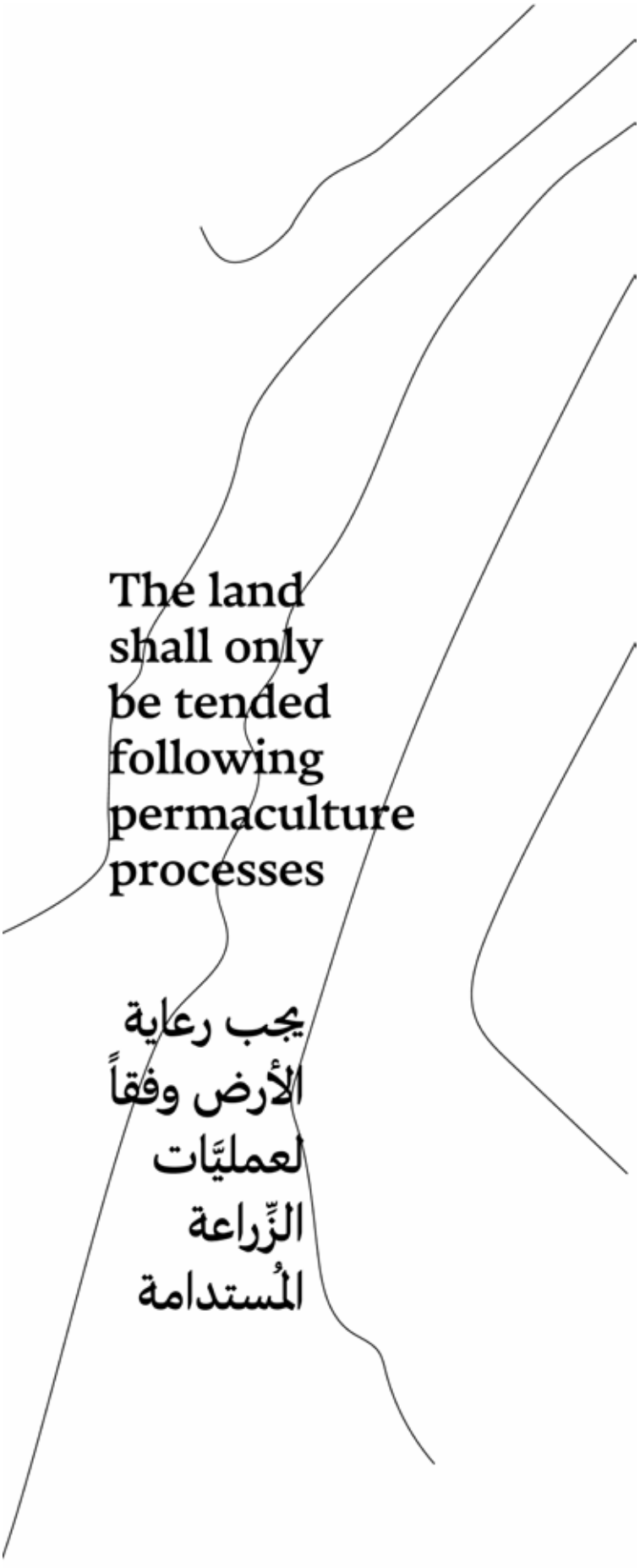
ترعى الأرض
تعاونيَّة الأشخاص
الَّذين يعيشون
حولها، بالاتِّفاق
مع بعضهم
البعض

The land shall
be tended by
the cooperative
of people who
live around it in
agreement with
each other

The produce
should be divided
equally amongst
the community
who work the
land.

يقسم المحصول
بالتَّساوي بين
المجموعة الَّتي تعمل
في الأرض


يُمكن بيع الفائض
وتقسيم الفوائد بين
المستخدمين
The surplus
produce can be
sold and the
benefits divided
between the
users


The land
shall only
be tended
following
permaculture
processes
يجب رعاية
الأرض وفقاً
لعمليَّات
الزِّراعة
المُستدامة

Ed Atkins

The worm
video with sound
12'40"

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bartolozzi, Berlin

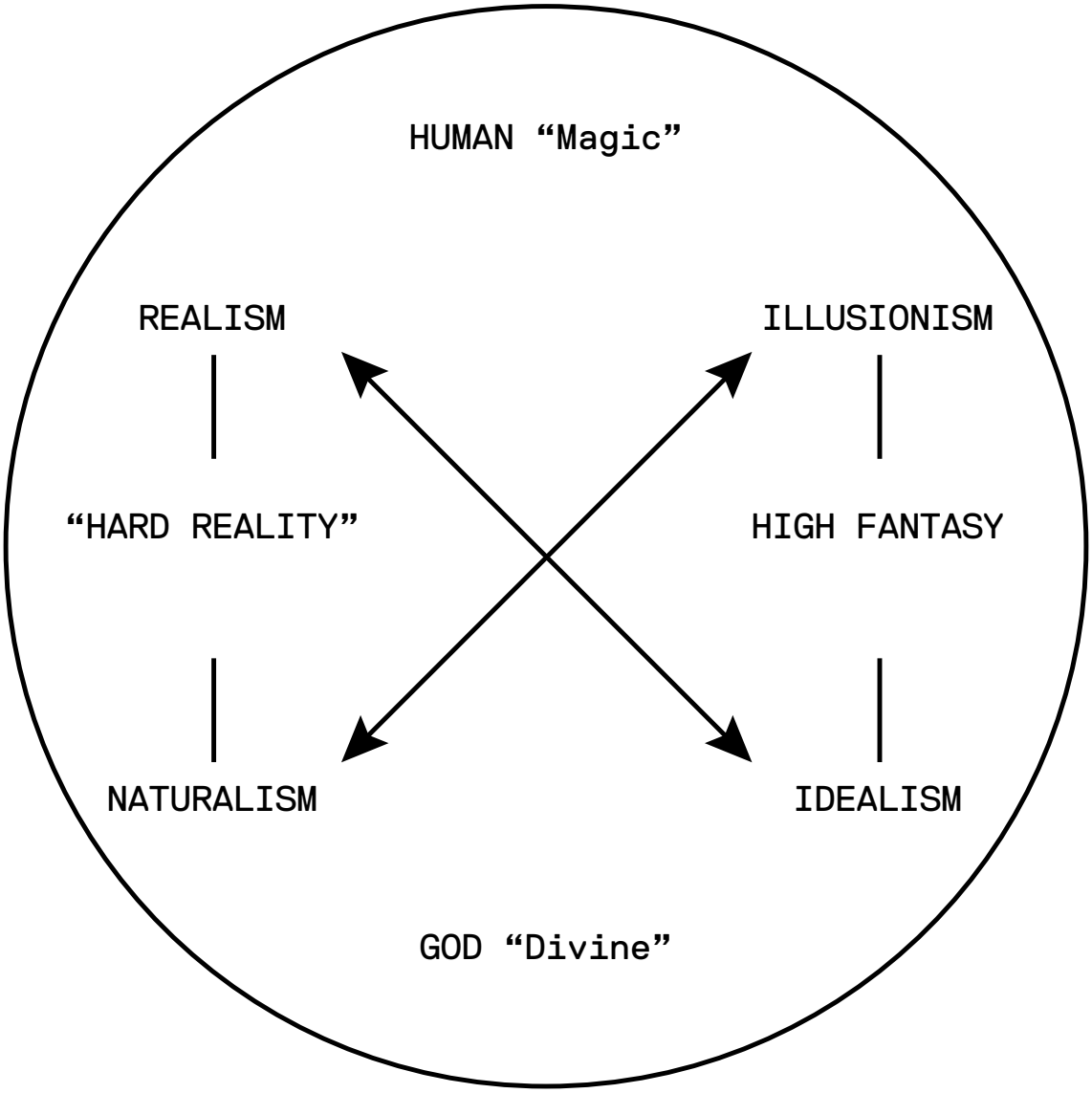
Known for computer-generated videos that place in question the relationship between the body and technology, **Ed Atkins** (b. Oxford, UK) works with filmic and text-based forms in technological transition. Often creating installations that include collage, drawing, and other media, the artist deploys the noncorporeal video format to highlight the conflicting intimacies represented and permitted by today's mechanisms of cultural production.

His latest work *The worm*, made during lockdown in 2021, depicts the artist speaking to his mother over the telephone. They talk mostly of Rosemary's relationship with her mother, Nanny Bea, and the inheritance of a perceived unlovability, passively transmitted from mother to daughter and, unavowedly, on to the grandson. This lineage is a worm. The animation is driven by Ed's movements, recorded via facial and motion capture technologies, and rendered so as to recall the last televised interview with the British playwright and screenwriter Dennis Potter. *The worm* is an artificial documentary about insuperable regret and love,

represented through a medium whose realism is a spectacular fake. *The worm* is projected onto an unpainted, empty, birch plywood box, whose associations and characteristics are both overt and deniable.

Atkins has participated in numerous group exhibitions at international galleries and institutions, including the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin; New Museum, New York; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Serpentine Galleries, London. The artist has also presented solo exhibitions at the MMK, Frankfurt; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; MoMA PS1, New York; Tate Britain, London; and Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin.

The following wall texts by Contemporary Art Writing Daily accompany Ed Atkins's *The worm*.



“The chart illustrates the increasing difficulty of representation to portray a real verisimilitude. [...] Where a documentary claim to naturalism is inherently illusionistic, portrays nature like the staging of a play, sets its animal actors within an illusion of a natural world, the world it imagines as theater for its spectators. [...] Idealism is counterpart to realism as realism implies a belief about the word, a verité that is less than ideal. Idealism in contrast, such as artists of the Classical and pre-Hellenistic period, envisioned a perfect ‚Platonic‘ real. [...]

Promoting the ideology of the current scientific consensus of its image, a belief about the natural world.”

“Fidelity, in the form of increasingly sophisticated recording technology, stands in as a marker of its truth value.”

“Scrutinize the face that mine‘s been mapped onto.”

Preserved in this exhibition, the central [film] presents a call home to mom. A conversation recorded and represented with the forefront of digital technologies, a collaboration with Nokia Bell Labs.

It‘s sort of your worst nightmare, no? Your Zoom call made public recorded by your telecom, by „Laboratories.“ (Fitting for an artist whose work often draws reference to Frankenstein.)

–

A message home, to mom, captured with every hiccup and hum. Technologically detailed. Every distending pause. Each inadequate response. [Incommensurate to a mother‘s love.]

Your sorries, mom‘s, „huh”s, blemishes, smears all on the screen. That face stuff you leave on iPhone‘s glass. Preserving your rotten humanity for the aquarium life of artistic tapping.

The phone call is set in the [place] of a dying man. Atkins recalls the scene of British playwright Dennis Potter‘s final TV interview*. (Cancer, terminal. 3 months left.) Sipping morphine with champagne.

(A drink competing with Romeo and Juliet‘s poison for literary aura.) A skeletal staging. The interview is as tragic as it is affirming. In these somewhat final hours Potter talks about seeing the spring blossoms, about the living present, about – in varied tenses – life. It makes you want to call home. Make an Icarus-like attempt at reaching its high. To reach the bright sun of something real, a true presence. A phone call placed into purgatory, reminiscence itself an attempt at preservation, injecting nostalgia as a chemical technology for recruiting the past, glean something from what brought us here. Suspended between. Our lives continually distended, paused, waited for. This is it. This is life. Looking back while the next step is so close. But this phone call won‘t end. The conversation will repeat. This distance is painful, magnified. Preserved.

“Generating a fake reality inside the computer means tenderly placing blades of glass, like God obviously does, to look like no-one placed them.”

“Accident [is] the kind of parent of pathos.”

Realism as the flaked skin on top of reality.

“Basically, I wanted to talk to her, and for our talking to be real – for it to be per- sonally expository, actual- ly, and for that actuality to be captured and shared.”

“Technological mediation stands in for psychological congestion.”

We could no longer write love poems. We suspected their capture, of every sentiment dying on a Hallmark

card. Industrialized. Love was whispered for fear of the authoritarians. Feared sent to advertising‘s work camps. The hospitalization of „sentiment.“ No longer trust its usage.

So love went interior, hiding in attics. Hid in the glint of an eye. Salted its passwords. Feared Instagrammed to noise, a love writ for the press against infidelity: „I Love my wife” – prepared for the social panopticon. Like fish tortured for their truth. Its body destroyed by a hammer of cliché. We keep love in secret, in the depths. For any great love artwork being printed on a mug. The backdrop for

a city‘s selfie. A teddy bear stuffed with it. Eyes glistening and plastic, eternally beaming. A love preserved.

We loved filled with blood and piss and shit. Died on

mass-laundered blankets. Monitored and accessorized for science – measuring the metre of our passing. (where does this data go?) We were all too human splayed and leaking on bad fabric. The trope of horror was that sexually active died first. Their love expressed carnality, established the body as fragile, human, meat. Sex engorged the avatar with narrative blood for the destruction to come. So there was something to risk. Filled their balloons with SFX liquid you could do a real violence to.

We plugged into Zoom calls no-one liked. We messaged in multiplying apps. We stayed in touch through images posted on digital carousels. Influenced through algorithms, marionetted steps according viral commands. On cameras with better

lenses. Uploaded in dumb pipes. We continued to live through a distancing world held increasingly close, more finely detailed, not so much nuanced as micronized: microscopically huge, a memory that was infinite, thoughts reappeared haunting you from underground server vaults, friends since ghosted returned with body supplements. Viral punishment: forever indoors. Forever asked to participate in the rooms where you could be viewed, thumbed, generally commented on. Like suddenly everyone is an artist inviting anonymous critics. A person we liked less you than her. Every teenager learned numbers/statistics by an emotional battery. The bodies got online, got ever more perfect and you got ever more, well, [blistery].

In the 1850s, „by some estimates in New York City alone, thousands of children were killed by „embalmed milk." „Dairymen added a recommended two drops of formalin, formaldehyde – an embalming compound used by funeral parlors – to stop the [milk's] decomposition." (Proponents for the practice argued this made the milk safer. Pasteurization was considered too expensive and formaldehyde's slightly sweet taste also improved the milk's flavor.) Over decades likely millions of children fell ill. „Chemical companies came up with new formaldehyde mixtures with names such as Iceline or Preservaline ["keeps a pint of milk fresh for up to 10 days!"]. The milk became more and more toxic as companies preserved it longer and longer,

New technologies, new chemistry, is not always our friend. We call the naysayers luddites. We think them on the wrong side of an unstoppable trampling

progress. We think of technology as clean, depicted as cold, calculating and unmucked by its human. As a lineage that brings us „forward“ as if in some grand narrative we follow. Technology as „improving.“

Atkins‘ work is the putrefaction or embalming of technologies that are sold as new, improved, better, faster, higher definitions. The replacement services for a world that still bleeds. Despite our best attempts against. Spoiled. The contaminant in an otherwise [crystalline, happy ideological] preservation. Of technologies that are good enough to begin to stand in for reality. The 8K that comes to supersede our own vision. These are the „technologies of realism“ that compete and replace our human interaction. Manifesting all the new digital maladies. A phonecall home becomes embalmed by technological chemistry, like a procession of purgatory. Begets its dispirit. A preservation that ruins. Removes the very thing we enjoy, its life – the fresh milk made „fresh,“ a call home in glass embalmed, an attempt to connect, its love indentured for artistic servitude.

In 1905, the composer worried. Would parents still sing to their children? If they could press play on a song „with the same ease that she applies the electric light, will she still croon her baby to slumber with sweet lullabys, or will the infant be put to sleep by machinery? [...] Children are naturally imitative, and if, in their infancy, they hear only phonographs, will they not sing, if they sing at all, in imitation and finally become simply human phonographs?“

„Music teaches all that is beautiful in this world. Let us not hamper it with a machine that tells the story

without variation, without soul...[Our] amateurism cannot but recede, until there will be left only the mechanical device and the professional executant.“

„Then what of the national throat? Will it not weaken? What of the national chest? Will it not shrink?...“

„In their stead will be a huge phonograph, mounted on a 100hp automobile, grinding out The Stars and Stripes Forever.“

Historically, it was art that owned the technologies of realism. (Using it the Western church controlled the Real with the power to realize ornate heavens.) Now the technologies of realism have been taken over by corporations, dollars, industry. At some point the photographic became the highest form of realism – a painting indistinguishable from photography was the „most realistic“ painting. (This is unnerving for several reasons.) [Hans Holbein‘s Family] Artists were supplanted to a realism become sales pitch of megapixels, framerate, ever wilder and increasing definitions, measuring „better“ photos, „quality“ of video, controlled by big budgets. The real came to no longer mimic what we saw but a detail more magnificent than your eye, detailing into a new fantastical real. Too real for reality. A night sky converted to information, output through processors, telescopes no one looked through anymore. That are said to see. The soft disavowal of ourselves, replaced for the information. What we saw was replaced with information about it, of thinking the machine through some vague semblance of objectivity is communicating something more tangible or fine. Increasingly governed by something

inhuman. The philosophy of science: „What is real is everything we know is false, but what we know is currently the best false“

■

Zach Blas

The Doors
2019

Commissioned by Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, de Young Museum and Van Abbemuseum

Zach Blas (b. Point Pleasant, West Virginia, USA) is an artist, filmmaker, and writer whose artistic practice spans the moving image, computer-based media, theory, performance, and science fiction. He engages the materiality of digital technology while also drawing out the philosophies and imaginary forms lurking within artificial intelligence, biometric recognition, predictive policing, airport security, the Internet, and biological warfare. Blas is Assistant Professor of Visual Studies at the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

The Doors (2019) is an immersive environment that imagines a new psychedelic age fueled by AI, nootropics, and tech culture. The multimedia installation looks closely at Silicon Valley's connections to the Californian counterculture of the 1960s. Set within a mystical artificial garden, *The Doors* features 7.1 surround sound design and six channels of video, comprised of sequences of computer graphics and psychedelic machine-generated imagery related to a new wave of drug use

focused on nootropics. In contrast to a “turn on, tune in, drop out” ethos, interest in nootropics has gained increasing popularity in the tech industry via so-called smart drugs, designed to unlock the mind as a means of increasing labor productivity. Nootropics include commercially available “stacks” as well as microdoses of LSD and psilocybin mushrooms.

Blas has exhibited, lectured, and held screenings at numerous international venues, including the de Young Museum, San Francisco; Tate Modern, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; 12th Gwangju Biennale; 68th Berlin International Film Festival; Matadero Madrid; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Art in General, New York; Gasworks, London; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore; e-flux, New York; Whitechapel Gallery, London; ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City.

The following poetry accompanies Zach Blas’s *The Doors*.

THE DOORS

Lizard Brings Psychedelic Drugs to the Privatized Garden on the Island of Nootroo

The garden has
a strange atmosphere.

The trees and the flowers
Bright and striking;
Their sapro-ness and the
effervescence of their fragrance
illustrate the infinite
potency
of neurotransmitters within our
Brains.

Perfect for anyone looking for calm
rejuvenating hypnagogic chemicals

There are many monsters within

A leaf blossom
Shiny as seen from
above
Calling all demons

the scientists of the island
the silvery creature in the yard

The mind is king.
Wandering and starving.

Science, not hunger:
Mitochondrial biogenesis
Antioxidant defenses

I love the researchers I have gathered
The people of the island
Top scientists
running with knives
They are scientists
    of the
    Strange Strange
    Strange Strange
We need your help, My Little Brain Men
The stationers are predicting a storm.
They are using
tweaks in conjunction with

machine learning to see
what happens.

from their
lonely labs
to help us solve our own
routines

Much of
the research into
the
mutation
has focused
on
microdosing. In
one
Study
an LSD experiment
was shown to
be
beneficial in healthy adults
after three doses.

They stopped short of calling LSD
the Great Synchronization,
king of the
flow state

So a slightly more subtle but dangerous
subtype of LSD
called Sada-T was used

The NeuroMaster harkens

I'll bet your brain is screaming
at the thought of losing you

"We're talking about something
called the „Clarity Process."
The secret to long lasting positive
effects
    lasting many years

The results
are mind
-blowing.
They can help you become
a better tiring cruncher

The scientists of the island
are focusing

their efforts
on a now
famous
molecule.

it would be like creating 100,000 new scientists

The scientists of the island take this molecule to stay focused

The garden has
a strange atmosphere.

Rising from the sea,
my temple.
I live under a rock with water here,
Circling around you
A recluse, monk
extremely religious

I‘m proud to be your guide

We welcome your continued participation
in helping us support memory and mental stamina.

So the winds start turning in
Nootroo, the Land of Fire that
supports endurance performance

Come along, we have dancing drinks.
The music is new-energy.
Furious.
In this giant glass,
We have the Power to change your mind.

We join the armies
of the new heaven.

And we
will return to land.

And replace our obsolete
fuel cells.

Hungry for Brain Food

There is an awakening
of men
marching
An Enhanced Firing of Pyrmadial Neurons

Tenebrous connections
slow dances
sacred choreography

Our
prized
BrainSmart Mood

The men‘s room is warm
with conversations going.
A world-party of atoms
dangerous parties

The
brain
is now a
miniature theatre,
a new level of
thou shalt not lose:
Mystery.
Discovery.
New Science.

a gentleman touches a small child´s head
with his thumb
and says:
“Look at this big brain
with all these sensations
with all these strange connections

and more.”

“You‘re only as young as your brain,
right?”

To be inside the brain of a god
to slide gracefully and
knowledgeably into
The Big dream
A Brain Sunset

“I got a very big brain
It‘s impossible to describe.”
Perfect for anyone wanting a Big Dream
your brain runs a ‘regime’.

Blazing through
brain fog
to
feel your
best all
the time

Blazing thru
brain fog
to feel
everything
about you

apply neuroscience
To the MYSTERY OF THE DREAM
And promote neuroplasticity and neurogenesis

Hack your brain and see all perspectives at once.
confront the assassin in the garden when you unlock
your brain

People need connections
There are magic
transmitters
on the
island.

When
you have a high-functioning brain,
you tend to feel
a lot:

THE ORIGINAL TEMPTATION
THE FEAR AND THE ULTRA FOCUS

FOCUS
Focus
Focus on
the lost cells, a
complex colony
of tens of trillions
of
individual cells that
have many jobs

THE END OF THE DIVINE
The end of the flesh

Everything must be clean for the complete balance
of brain
Because molecules have been found
that possess
all
mentalities for
the long term.

The hippocampus is

sent
off
into the storm

Spa Day on the Neon Isles

Minder has claimed the island
and risen.

Ceremonies bring
great joy,
and peace.

You parade thru the
Garden
Lurking jaws

the sun sinks low against the rock
A tongue of knowledge
on the slivers of glass

Like Alpha and Omega, we
contain polyphenols.
But what
should we be eating?

pre-workout fuel

The men are tossing vegetables at each other.
Because this product is not suitable for vegetarians.

a dose
of 100 micrograms

Add to smoothies and shakes
Drizzle it over your favorite meals
Make your salad well-suited to your mood

Close your eyes
and savor the flavor

of the mineral
for
delicious, healthy weight loss

It will give
you the
lifestyle question
“When will I be ready for
life?”

The protocol you choose is
obvious
to anyone already
exercising
Drink one
serving 30 minutes before endurance exercise
lasting for
12–15 hours
daily.

You’ve heard that
capsules
eliminate most fear,
but what about
those gut-rending
feelings you
can
reach only when
you’re not
inhibited by
physical activity

Continue
this part for several
days

Stack three softgels with
a smoothie or flavoring
to coat your mouth and neck.

After
a day or 2-3 months,
eat
faster.

Take one lozenge every
Dawn
and
Protect yourself from potential toxins
from the outside world:

a
complete body suit,
naked as ever,
its brain scoured the room,
tested, approved and
tested
to drop miracle doses,
and it’s on the go.

Out on the Neon Isles
By the strong cactus,
I will
lay you a crystal ball
that contains all
the relevant information
as to
why this matters and how
to utilize the protocol.
Each crystal sphere
would contain
a different type of information

containing
all the relevant elements
that make up
the brain. It
would be an efficient
way to
build
a functional
city, or it
might even be the
faster and more productive
world
we‘re
taking

fast
swallow
grow new blood vessels in your brain.

Cancel your subscription
to the temple
and join my
fasting crowd.

Like a military parade,
a meditation battle league
has assembled
in a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight.

The men are long gone
an ancient tradition backed by modern science.

Yes, the Spirit
Has Chosen
Not
for you, but

for Me a
New Age Experience

Tree of Radical Life Extension

The Tree of Life
ginkgo biloba, n-acetyl l-tyrosine, caffeine,
and l-tryptophan

Meeting you at your garden's gate
We will tell you what to do
What you have to do
to survive

To give life life again

This ancient species of tree
has been used
for many centuries to improve
the overall
ability of the immune system

The tree
is well known to suffer from
depressive stress because of a natural
compound
found in its roots

It is also involved in helping
be born.

There you are:
sore nipples
and erectile dysfunction

Borderline pain.
Abracadabra, Bacopa Monnieri

Your

brain cells still
give instructions
to invade and
plunder

Do you dare cross the vast green border?
Away from this filthy glass

Towards the Old man in Trees
who will bring calm
to a crowded
wet place

And the new man
who turns
bad news into
good times

See THE FLOWER?
Extracts from the
small island
where dreams are made
by
a mind

One
of the most
powerful hypnotics
to help
you
come into
a state of
calm

that can make our brain
Innocent

A mitochondrial weapon
defeated
Obedient

O Tree of Life
Increasing neuro-transmissions
with the Scent of Coffee and Ashwagandha

Ego Death Party

There‘s been a strange
whisper
about
the island

Sadness has ravaged
    the friends
    of Utopia

But the trip away from
the default mode network
changed them.

Let me take you to a place
Of higher elevation
the sun in curved green
clouds
Cactus, palms, swaying
and
intensely
boundless
jungles of geometry

where
people melt
into the world,
interfuse with others, and
lose their ‘myself’ part.

the
most
intense feeling
of connection ever.

TO EXPLODE
Dancing
But the dancers are not dancers

the Universe
is one of the most
memorable
flowers

You must die to see it,
and yet, neurologically speaking,
nothing will die.

It involves
a
complete transformation
into
a separate
mode of
communication.

My friends
are
coming along

Our brains,
time machines to ecstatic freedom.
Beyond space-time, beyond work,
beyond ourselves.

A Cerebral healing
expanding us

Zach Blas
The Doors
2019

Commissioned by Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, de Young Museum, Van Abbemuseum
Architect and Designer: Scott Kepford
Machine Learning Engineers (video and poetry): Ashwin D'Cruz, Christopher Tegho
Machine Learning Engineers (voice and music): Sam Parke-Wolfe, Cameron Thomas
Machine Learning Artist Consultant: Jake Elwes
Computer Graphics Supervisor: Harry Sanderson
Animation: Mikkel Aabenhuus Sørensen
Animation Assistant: Yan Eltovsky
Modelling and Visual Effects: Dayne Kolk
Simulation Assistant: Aslak Kjølås-Sæverud
Compositing: Felix Lee
Video Editor: Isabel Freeman
Musicians: xin and Aya Sinclair
Supervising Sound Editor: Tom Sedgwick
Mix Engineer: Ben Hurd
Artificial Grass Sigil: Evergreens UK
Screens: Sparkuhl
Neon: Kemp London
Artificial Plant Wall: Ascott
Nootropics Menagerie and Hexagonal Plant Pots: Hamar Acrylic
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Adéla Babanová

The Law of Time
2023
four-channel video installation
12'5"

Courtesy of the artist and Marina Films

The work of **Adéla Babanová** (b. Prague, Czech Republic) is anchored in the media of moving image, film, and video installation. She works primarily with short fiction films that straddle the boundary between video art and film, and collaborates with her brother Džian Baban, the author of almost all of her scripts and music. Most of her films are based on real events from recent Czechoslovak history that are controversial or mysterious. Their narrative is often built on archival footage, documentation that the artist manipulates into new, semi-fictive stories, blurring the boundaries between reality and made-up historical facts. Such practice echoes communist rhetoric and misinformation, the rewriting of history and memory loss, which are still inadequately acknowledged in Czech post-communist society. Adéla Babanová graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague in 2006.

The four-channel video installation *The Law of Time* (2023) thematizes our subconscious fears and dreams of possible futures. The story builds an atmosphere of anxiety about a shared future in

a world in which some unspecified chaos or collapse has apparently occurred. The main protagonists are two visual artists, a man and a woman, whose anxious imaginations are presented in hermetically sealed film scenes, most reminiscent of a theater stage or film sets. Everything they reach for has the character of a kind of artificiality that internally questions their own reality. The characters constantly move on the edge between reality and fiction. The cyclical nature of the images – the endless loop of the installation – only reinforces the impression of surreal confusion that the film evokes.

Babanová's work has been presented at many solo and group exhibitions, such as at the National Gallery Prague; Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; and Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn. Babanová has also participated in many film festivals, such as Karlovy Vary International Film Festival; Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival; Prague International Film Festival – Febiofest; and LOOP Barcelona.

Adéla Babanová
The Law of Time
2023
four-channel video installation
12'5"

Courtesy of the artist and Marina Films

Written and Directed by: Adéla Babanová
Dialogues: Džian Baban
Producer: Nina Numankadić, Marina Films
Co-producer: Adéla Babanová

Cast
Hanna: Emily Brandi
Jan: Philipp Schenker
Son: Jáchym Antoš
Man in the Church: Milan Žďárský

Director of Photography: Lukáš Hyksa
Sound: Jakub Jurásek
Editor: Hedvika Hansalová, Adéla Babanová
Production Designer: David Dubenský
Costume Designer: Tereza Kopecká
Makeup Artists: Barbora Potužníková, Štěpánka Adámková
Music: Džian Baban
Violoncello: František Kroupa
Vocals: Emily Brandi
Executive Producer: Wanda Kaprálová
Assistant Director: Anna Wowra
Focus Puller: Matej Šmelko
Grip: Jiří Gažda, Jiří Gregor
Lights: Jiří Suchánek, Attila Panajotov
Construction: Petr Mazura, Josef Maršálek
Props: Tomáš Tesařík, Studio Famu,
Michal Weizer, Studio Famu
Script Supervisor: Elvira Dulskaya
Unit Still Photographers: Klára Kudláčková, Max*ine Vajt
Visual Effects: Tomáš Pavlíček
Boom Operator: Ondřej Vondráček

Production Assistants: Anika Homolová, Klára Mamojková
Costume Assistant: Vojtěch Hanyš
Props Rental: David Černý, Shooting furniture
Accountant: Adéla Kramaříková
Drawings: Eduard Pitín
Trailer: Michal Jahn
Graphic Designer: Jan Šiller
Translations: Stephan von Pohl, Lucie Melicharová, AZ Translations

Subtitles: Benjamín Žiak
Post Production Services: UPP
Post Production Supervisor: Ivo Marák
Technologist: Tomáš Pulc
Production: Patrik Kaňka
Colour Correction: David Koubík
Mastering: Martin Sladký
Head of Datalab : Ladislav Hrbáček
Data Management & Offline Support: Tomáš Klein, Michaela Sedláčková Klečková,
Václav Malkus

Financial Support: The Czech Film Fund, Ministry of Culture Czech Republic, Fond na podporu umenia, Ji.hlava FIlm Fund, Hradec Králové Region, State Fund of Culture of the Czech Republic

Partners: Ji.hlava FIlm Fund, UPP, Studio Famu, Královéhradecká diecéze Církve československé husitské, Prague City Gallery

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Paul Maheke

Mauve, Jim and John
2021
HD video
28'5"

A film by Paul Maheke with Robert Bridger
Filming and editing: Tilly
Shiner, Paul Maheke
Camera operator: Simon Eaves
Sound recording and design: Gus
Collins, House of Noise

Commissioned and produced by Artangel in collaboration with The National Trust

YOU & I
2022
wall paintings, scaffolding tower, balaclava, mannequin heads, posters, magnets, plants, glass, second-hand clothes and trinkets, reclaimed metal

Courtesay of the artist, Galerie Sultana and Goodman Gallery

Paul Maheke (b. Brive-la-Gaillarde, France) lives and works in Montpellier, France. With a focus on dance and through a varied and often collaborative body of work, comprising performance, installation, sound, and video, Maheke considers the potential of the

body as an archive in order to examine how memory and identity are formed and constituted. Maheke studied at the École Estienne, Paris and École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy, and Open School East, London.

The starting point for his film *Mauve, Jim and John* (2021) was in hauntology, folklore, and the body of myths and legends of Orford Ness, a windswept strip of land stretching several miles along the Suffolk coast that has been protected by the National Trust as a nature reserve since 1995. The Ness is a decommissioned military testing site known locally as the "island of secrets." Maheke was drawn to the story of alleged UFO sightings in Rendlesham Forest during December 1980, which at the time was associated with the over-the-horizon radar station Cobra Mist on Orford Ness. Experimenting with site-specific choreography, *Mauve, Jim and John* creates a visual dialogue between alien intrusion from the sky and the military past of the site. Maheke worked closely with dancer and choreographer Robert Bridger to develop a new score, where the sightings in Rendlesham and the unsettling landscape of the Ness form a backdrop to the film's queer romance.

The film forms a backbone for a new site-specific installation of Maheke's project *YOU & I*, which serves as a stage and a projection screen for various layers of questioning of the traditional reading of the world, opening space for the viewer to start challenging and unlearning simplifying truths and binary concepts on which our reality usually bases itself.

Maheke's works and performances have been shown at venues including the High Line, New York; Tate

Modern, London; Venice Biennale; Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, and Lafayette Anticipations in Paris; Baltic Triennial 13; Manifesta 12; Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich; and Chisenhale Gallery, London. In 2021, he was shortlisted for the Future Generation Art Prize, and he will be a resident at Villa Albertine in 2023.

Leslie Thornton

Ground
2020
HD video, colour, sound
13'31"

Courtesy of the artist and
Rodeo, London / Piraeus

In a career spanning nearly five decades, **Leslie Thornton** (b. Knoxville, Tennessee, USA) has produced a body of work ranging across several media, particularly film and video. In her work, she weaves together original footage and her own voice, while also sometimes engaging archival film and audio sources. In part through her forceful and dynamic use of sound, Thornton exposes the limits of language and vision, while also acknowledging the ways in which language and vision nevertheless remain central to scientific discourse and the role of narrative in general. Thornton is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University.

Using footage shot at CERN and at the Caltech-Huntington Program in Visual Culture, *Ground* (2020) embeds the voice of an unnamed physicist discussing particle decay within elegant yet foreboding technological landscapes. It consists of heavily altered footage of the low, sprawling Los Angeles skyline and a CERN scientist who looms above the Californian city. Through digital

manipulation, Thornton has simplified both video sources to a series of pulsating lines, waves, and grids that evoke both the “snow” of television static and the visualization of energy frequencies, transforming documentation into something closer to animation.

Thornton’s film and media works have been exhibited worldwide, in venues including MoMA, New York; Whitney Biennial, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Rotterdam International Film Festival; New York Film Festival; CAPC musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; and various festivals in Oberhausen, Graz, Mannheim, Berlin, Austin, Toronto, Tokyo, and Seoul, among many others.

Shifted Realities

Galerie Rudolfinum
16. 3. — 11. 6. 2023

Marwa Arsanios, Ed Atkins, Adéla Babanová,
Zach Blas, Paul Maheke, Leslie Thornton

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Texts: Marwa Arsanios, Ed Atkins, Pavel Barša, Zach Blas, Eva Drexlerová, Hal Foster, Jen Kratochvil, Paul Maheke, Leslie Thornton (Feliz Lucia Molina)
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