

*Bristling at windows:  
Subversion through heterodox  
mythology*

Master's Thesis  
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Tromsø Academy of Arts, 2020

## *The kitchen sink is leaving*

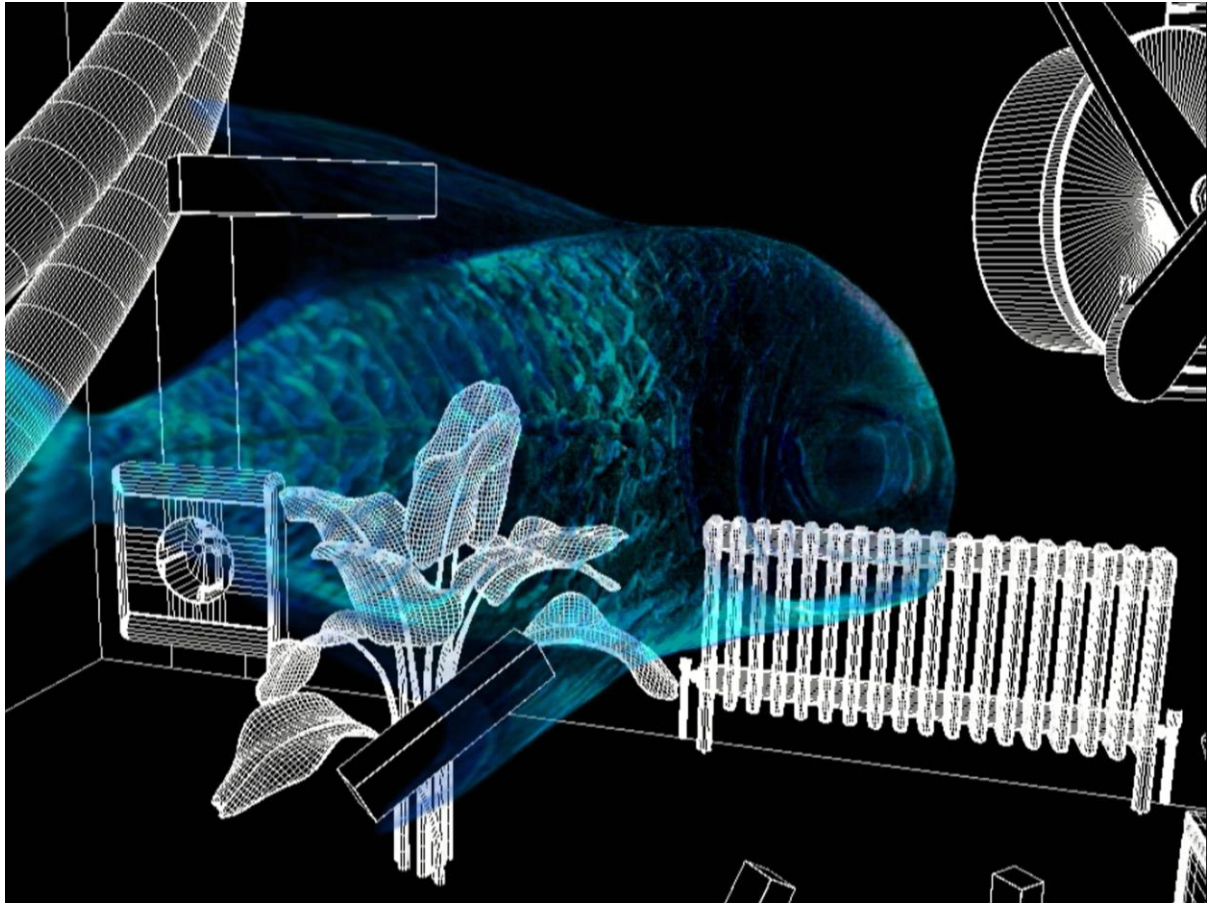
There appeared at one point to be a clear relationship between objects and their titles, but these designated categories, not objects. A wall was a wall, but having spent time looking at it, it drifted uncanny. There was no longer “a” recognisable “wall”, and soon there would be no “w a l l”. In the study of language, the relationship between writing and sound is taken to be arbitrary. No inherent relationship can necessarily be established between the spoken form of this name, or any part of this form, and the object it is identified with. The structures and contents of these names seem as though they are constrained only by the biology of their speakers, so what would a name be outside of any human brain or brain-like apparatus? *The sound of...*<sup>1</sup> emerged from this stream of consciousness.

Where my works had up to this point emphasised the visual disintegration of figures, it now turned to the disintegration of abstract representations; the dissolution of lexical objects, categories, meta-things. The segments comprising the names of the objects that surrounded me were free to go where they pleased, and I obliged them in having their new names read aloud. Some attention had to be paid to the enunciation of these names, so that they would appear as if they were perfectly ordinary. Anything less would be an insult.

While this piece was initially satisfactory, it was clear that the concept behind it had not been fully explored. If categories, and therefore sounds, are generated internally, what then of the grammar of the things we perceive? Conceptualisations of syntactic elements such as space, time, transitivity and roles should rightly be equally internal. Observing a refrigerator, or anything else, for an extended period of time, these objects are revealed to be adhering to a certain mental grid. Once revealed, this grid grows unstable. What does it actually mean for any of these objects to occupy these spaces, hold these roles? This instability had to be reflected, if it was not, then this could only be a failure of its composition. The use of text alone did not seem to allow me to meaningfully interrogate these questions. Interminable rumination on this problem led me to expand the video across multiple axes. Returning to its initial inspiration, I gave *The sound of...* a sense of place, a room with its fundamental properties abstracted into the nonsensical.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/483954296>



*The sound of...*, 2020

In art, the notion of the absurd is most discussed in literature and dramaturgy, with Michael Bennett's recent analysis<sup>2</sup> of post-war plays by figures such as Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco (classically analysed as belonging to the *Theatre of the Absurd*<sup>3</sup>) suggesting that these plays seek to force the audience to make life meaningful (if only temporarily) through confrontation with the contradictions of their world<sup>4</sup>.

This reading draws on Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*<sup>5</sup>, the idea of a space between ordered things in which language breaks down and randomness, or disorder, may occur. This space at the heart of the contradictions is where new meaning can be pursued.

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Esslin coined this term in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1968), describing the eponymous theatre as being marked by a sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness experienced in the failure of meaning and the collapse of all prior meaning-making endeavours.

<sup>4</sup> Esslin's analysis draws from a perception of post-WW2 Europe having a pessimistic or overtly nihilistic zeitgeist. Michael Bennett contradicts this view, arguing that while the era was full of political upheaval and reckoning with atrocities past and present, it was relatively optimistic when compared to the interwar period. Bennett's analysis therefore also skews towards the potentially invigorating possibilities of the absurd play.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault (2012).

Any attempt at a clean resolution in heterotopia would result in plain didactic meaning. I have never been able to say that anything I have made is genuinely complete. It would feel similarly disingenuous to designate their “meaning”, as this is an amorphous, malleable quality that I fear would be fatal if specified, hardened and made concrete<sup>6</sup>.

Albert Camus claimed that meaning can only be constructed individually, which would render didactic meaning invalid, as it would be “philosophical suicide” to accept it<sup>7</sup>. By this philosophy, the audience can only be encouraged to seek meaning on their own if the contradictions in the text remain unresolved. Following this hypothesis to its bitter end, a platonically ideal work may be one that offers absolutely no hope of identifying its intention. In other words, should I make something that offers up its own interpretation, I will in some sense be destroying it. If this is the case, even a slightly too-obvious metaphor may be a metaphorical self-assassination.

## *I can topiary this*

In a series of three short videos, *Canvas*<sup>8</sup>, *Sculpture*, and *Self-portrait*, a similar heterotopian condition arises through dialogue that only intermittently appears to communicate, while the video only occasionally appears to comment on, let alone reflect this dialogue. There are innate contradictions featured here, some more obvious than others. In addition to the clearest dissonances, those within the conversation and between the conversation and the gestures, there is also the structural contradiction between the format of the video and its content. Meanwhile, the music cues, vocal style of narration and body language are, when viewed in isolation, essentially in harmony. On these strata, my approach in these videos is largely congruent with absurdist theatre. One fundamental and obvious distinction must be made: My rejection of overt narrative. This is not rooted in a refutation of narrative forms in general, but rather an estimation of them as unnecessary in my pursuits. As such, I find my position to be inherently at odds with Dada and absurdism in

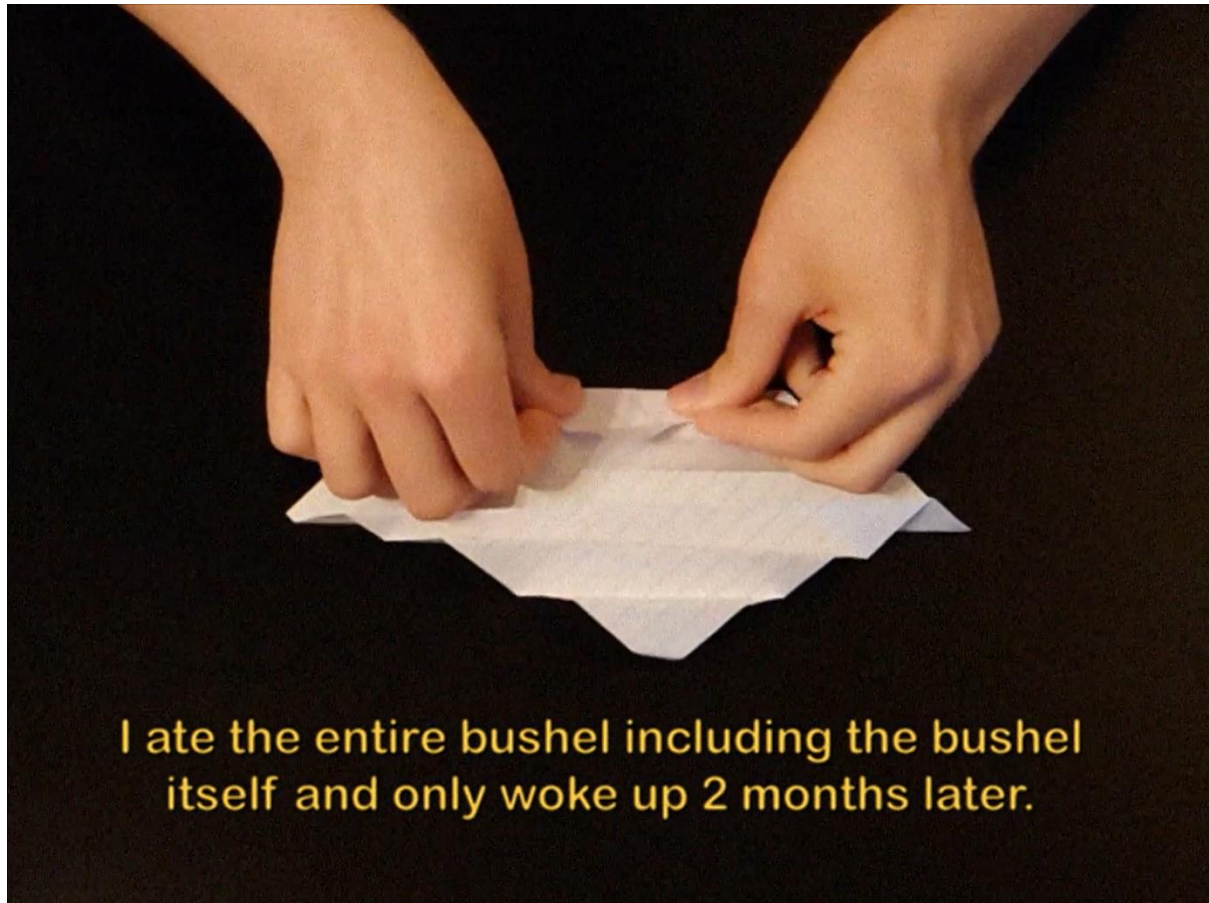
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<sup>6</sup> As I argue here, there may be no distinction between myself declaring a specific interpretation of my work and the work itself doing so.

<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, a necessary simplification of Camus’s philosophy as outlined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2018).

<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/453130113>

the artistic sense<sup>9</sup>. I wish to pull apart my surroundings, local and global, and examine systems that cannot fit into a logical structure.



*Canvas, 2020*

To some extent, I fear that these works may be taken to be nothing other than a piece of comedy. They are not meant as such, but they are not meant to not be funny either. An inherent problem with any manner of structural critique is that it is almost impossible to separate oneself from said structure. In much of what I do, there is an implied criticism of the way art is mediated and digested into a kind of homework assignment to be solved<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, I frolic in these exact systems, taking great joy in all the elements they contain. It is always difficult to maintain the inherently contradictory position of both revelling in a form or structure while simultaneously critiquing it without either position

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<sup>9</sup> As will become clear, I wish to *replace* rather than destroy.

<sup>10</sup> Implicit in this is, of course, an attack on the much broader presence of capitalist hegemony.

appearing disingenuous. It is here that the heterotopian approach is fruitful, allowing diametrically opposed elements to be assembled without actually aligning.

Within the framework of what appears to be an educational video, it would be extremely easy for these works to be read as a kind of generic pastiche of a vaguely defined art world in general, or even as a reaction to such criticisms. Putting words and sentences in sequence, as is being done in the present text, connotes a kind of authority that may seem to deny contradiction. Other forms of production present an additional quandary: How can one ever know if the work is working? These concerns are often dismissed out of hand by slogans and mottos, be yourself, do your best, yet they haunt every decision made.

In more formal genres, a subjective set of experiences and opinions can be revealed to a reasonably sympathetic reader. Of course, writing is not the task of creating a facsimile of one's own mind. Text has the same promises as any other production, ripe for the same clear expression or inherent contradiction as anything else. I previously centred my writing on other artists and their works. For instance, in my article *Immigration and the Irony of a Creative Economy*<sup>11</sup> I discuss two short films as a means of exploring the intersecting hierarchies of class and nationality. At the time, this seemed like I was haphazardly deciphering codes that might only be noise in the first place. Working with video, I became aware of how misguided these fears were. When I refer to an artist or a theorist, I do not do so with the intention of having their words, visions or ideas stand in for my own. Rather, they are symbols<sup>12</sup>. In text, these take the form of references, citations, inspirations. While I do not construct videos from references, I incorporate sets of contradictory and complementary imagery synthesised into a whole, rather like a line of inquiry. My intention is therefore not to beam my subjective thoughts or experiences into the viewer's mind, but rather to use the medium as a geography for the viewer to explore.

The role of audio, or rather the way in which audio coordinates with imagery, remains a source of fascination. My compositional approach thus far has been to assemble the video first, then play the music as pseudo-live accompaniment, somewhat akin to the early days of cinema when music was played live both to provide a soundtrack and to conceal the whirr of the projector. Additionally, an object or symbol evokes something in

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<sup>11</sup> Suyono (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> As everything I am writing here is symbolic.

me, surreptitiously making its connections in a broader matrix of experience and knowledge translucent if not transparent. I am not myself always aware of what these images mean when I first encounter them. Only through iteration can I identify what most faithfully presents the strongest coherence. The videos do not deliver their own meaning easily, not even to their creator. It seems only honest to encourage the viewer to have a similar encounter.

At certain points, events appear to intersect with the dialogue. The degree to which they intersect may depend on the viewer, but every so often, a remark or a statement receives a gesture that may conceivably be taken as confirmatory or figurative to what was said. In early tests for *Canvas*, I noticed how the video would unexpectedly align with the dialogue even where I had randomly reassigned the audio track. For example, the end of a long sentence would correspond to the end of a slow pointing gesture. This suggested I would be able to keep the relationship between these two elements at once both obscure and present.



Scott Walker - *Epizootics!*, 2012

When faced with apparent absurdity, we are tantalised by the possibility of there being a pattern just out of reach. On the album *Bish Bosch*<sup>13</sup>, the musician Scott Walker explores lyrical imagery revolving around aging, disease, religion, insults and bodily functions in sparse, dissonant soundscapes. These concepts slowly start to relate to and comment on each other, eventually revealing their connections<sup>14</sup>. Likewise, in the music video<sup>15</sup> for Walker's song *Epizootics!*, such intersections form between the looping visuals and the content of the music and lyrics. I refer to these intersections as *clicks*, moments at which contradictions temporarily resolve. Upon reflection, I have found this to be eerily reminiscent of Italo Calvino's account of the emergence of myth in his lecture *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, published in *The Uses of Literature* (1986), where the origin of literature (or art in general) is described as someone with an unconscious context combining elements in a structured, organised manner until they "click into place" and provide a haunting resonance that can never be intentionally and directly stated. Finding these clicks in my own work has been one of the factors motivating my emphasis on iteration and repetition in my creative process.

## *In a building with walls*

What are the absurdities I am confronting in my own work? The greatest changes since the 20<sup>th</sup> century appear to have taken place in the deeper mechanics of society as it is mediated by technology. When Debord laid out the structure of the *society of the spectacle*<sup>16</sup>, he could not have imagined how the spectacle would be so physically magnified in the internet<sup>17</sup>. We lead lives of exquisite spectacle, in which we are defined not only by what we possess, but by the representations of these possessions. We have constructed a

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<sup>13</sup> Walker (2012).

<sup>14</sup> The same phenomenon is used to great effect in *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* by video artist Elizabeth Price, in which minute gestures and images recur and resonate through ecclesiastical architecture, sculpture, pop music and ultimately, a disaster.

<sup>15</sup> Dir. Olivier Groulx (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Debord (2005).

<sup>17</sup> To Debord, one would assume, the internet would undergo the same process of recuperation into the spectacle as anything else that appears, at any point, to challenge the order of things. An interesting question here is whether the internet itself was always a spectacular entity (as it exists entirely in the realm of representation), or if there is (or was) revolutionary potential in its structure. The aggressive corporatisation and monopolisation of online media and discussion platforms, as well as the general reduction in the esoteric strangeness of online interactions could speak to the latter.



setting that can largely take us out of the equation, in which communication can be conducted between persons whose existence in a physical sense is entirely secondary to the commodified content they produce. Debord wrote that the signs of the society of the spectacle are at the same time the goal and end product of it. What better example could be found of this today than the interactions that exist on social media?

Bodily forms are here situated on the same level of reality as everything from entirely computer-generated entities to corporations. It is often asked whether there is a difference between an algorithm producing an image, a text, music, and a human being doing so. This implicitly acknowledges something often left unspoken: as human beings, we are not substantially different from algorithms in a virtual space, and it is increasingly difficult to tell the two apart. This is not (only) because such software has become better at mimicking us, but rather because we have become experts at mimicking *it*<sup>18</sup>.



Lawrence Lek - PlayStation, 2017

In *PlayStation* (2017), 3D artist Lawrence Lek uses this unclear distinction of organic and inorganic consciousness to great effect, revealing unsettling and predatory structures in

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<sup>18</sup> In *New Dark Age* (2018), James Bridle gives the disturbing example of human actors performing what is essentially algorithmically directed Dadaist theatre.

the cheerful argot of late capitalism, and I find some kinship in his uneasy utilisation of automation and technology. Mechanical indeterminacy has nonetheless been a continuous source of inspiration. My desire to have non-human instructions guide the composition or structure of a piece initially drew inspiration from John Cage, who used the Chinese divination text *I Ching* to aleatorically make compositional decisions in both music and writing<sup>19</sup>. A contemporary equivalent of this is the use of random number generation to directly produce composition at the macro level or for parametrisation at the micro level<sup>20</sup>. I have used randomised parameters in the software Max/MSP<sup>21</sup> to take myself out of certain decision-making processes. Intention invariably prevails, however. Even purportedly random noise is in some way *intentionalised* through its own creation.

We can draw one potential solution to our condition from Debord and the Situationists, namely *détournement*, the process of editing and modifying expressions of the spectacle to subvert or undermine their propagandistic power. This calls to mind more recent efforts at the same using ironic appropriation, such as those found in the culture jamming subcultures starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Examples of these approaches appear in a fairly broad range of artists, from the esteemed circles of contemporary art to kitsch agitprop.

## *Stick insects at night*

Viewed in our current era, some weaknesses to this method are apparent. No amount of irony or negation is enough to resist the semiotic power of an established brand or label. Rather, *détournement* is easily recuperated. Instead of severing the link between the imagery and the power it represents, it is itself consumed. Interventions are now flash mobs or pranks, easily reconfigured to suit any goal<sup>22</sup>. One needs only to look at pieces by Shepard Fairey or Barbara Kruger to recognise that their entire aesthetic, even the affect

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. *Music of Changes* (1951), a solo piano piece and *Notations* (1969), a book of music scores, both constructed using the *I Ching*.

<sup>20</sup> One could question whether the move from divination as presented in the *I Ching* to divination as presented in mathematics is much of a leap at all.

<sup>21</sup> Max/MSP by Cycling '74 is a visual programming language with an extremely broad range of applications. I have primarily used it to generate visual/video effects and music.

<sup>22</sup> A deeply peculiar example of this in recent memory is the Turkish pogo-stick dance troupe that in 2016 staged a flash mob performance in New York for the purpose of *denying the Armenian genocide*.

they invoke, have been completely skeletonised by their recuperation<sup>23</sup>. Any edge that may have been bleeding has utterly coagulated. How is it possible, then, for me to genuinely engage in any work critical of the status quo? While not overtly political, Michio Fukuoka's career as a sculptor mirrors these frustrations in clear terms. Having spent the better part of his life attempting to transcend the constraints of his medium, he produced the series *Text*<sup>24</sup>, in which phrases to the effect of “[there is] nothing to do” are written onto massive fibre-reinforced plastic blocks<sup>25</sup>.



Michio Fukuoka - *Nothing to do*, 1999

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<sup>23</sup> Fairey in particular repurposed the anarchic nature of street art to the end of producing anodyne and lucrative artistic commodities. This is perhaps the fate of any art form that challenges or even attempts to stand outside a capitalist system.

<sup>24</sup> His career concluded with the sculpture *Shriveled-up Balls* (2004), suggesting he did have some appreciation for the comedy of his situation.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Fukuoka here inadvertently echoes the pessimistic horror author Thomas Ligotti's slogan "*There is nothing to do and there is nowhere to go. There is nothing to be and there is no-one to know*". This line appears most prominently in the short story collection *Teatro Grottesco* (2006), where it is used in part to question whether any artistic pursuit can provide solace or even catharsis amidst existential anguish.

I face this dilemma and this frustration as well. After all, meaningfully contradicting something from within its own ideological framework would presumably require one to transcend the ideological position of their context. It seems intuitively possible to subvert the epistemology of education, specifically educational videos. Irony is of course recuperated here as much as anywhere else, yet a complete negation of coherence should refuse any attempt at assimilation. In turn, however, this leads into another issue: Should such a complete negation be attempted, the original will no longer be recognizable, much less familiar, sabotaging the *détournement* from the outset. As such, I came to suspect that this was not an approach that could succeed under the constraints of my format. What appeared to be a viable path forward in terms of practice and production was the potential to displace and replace<sup>26</sup> value and meaning through imagery. In other words, if it were out of the question to transcend the ideological component of the form, I would need to make deeper adjustments. Here, I realised the incompleteness of my past projects. Where I had sought to integrate text into video, I had not truly assimilated them to the point where either element was a fundamental part of the whole<sup>27</sup>. The linguistic elements were less complete than the images accompanying them. The dissonance between these components was invited, but not as productive as I had hoped.

It is (perhaps) easy to see how this leads to the connection between our objective household goods and their spiritual, hyperreal manifestation in the illuminated realm of branding. As even our social interactions are made virtual, we must thoroughly investigate the virtuality of our surroundings. This should be done with care, as this endeavour carries with it the risk of descending into naïve functionalism<sup>28</sup>. Instead, consider that all objects have multiple presences on different strata of psychological reality. Rather more importantly, the dominance of the virtual-spiritual plane in the reification of ideology in the present day ensures that we must form some degree of virtual-spiritual representation of *things*. I therefore imagine that these are ranked by some order, one assumes the most useful, or the most aesthetically pleasing, indistinguishable from the most heavily reinforced

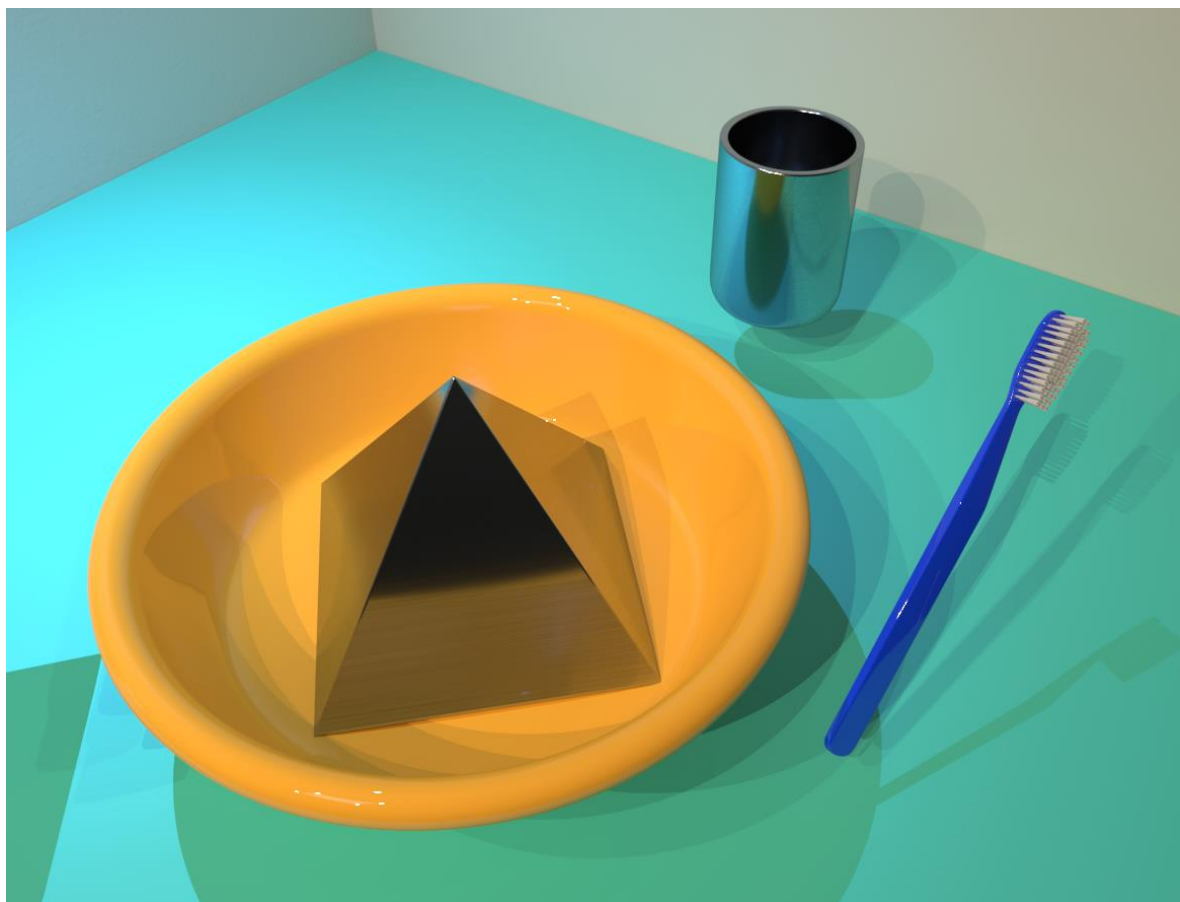
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<sup>26</sup> There is some irony to my choice of verbs here. *Détournement* does literally mean something along the lines of shifting, hijacking or rerouting. What I aim to do is to replace the original image *from the ground up*.

<sup>27</sup> That is, the words and the images were active at different levels of reference. They both needed to sink into the soil, like roots.

<sup>28</sup> There is nothing particularly interesting about the observation that many of us own things we have no particular use for. On its own, this fact does not evince a virtual existence.

by prevailing cultural forces. Religious idols traditionally elevated their subject through simplification and modifications of scale, both on some level conscious of the understanding that the image had to represent but could not entirely encompass their subjects. They thus represent spiritual beings accessible through a tangible intermediary. In coexistence or violent competition with other idols, these figures constitute a spiritual dimension of our conception of the world. What we should seek to do, if we are interested in overturning our situation, is to pull the meaning and value of these deities back from the external, back from the spectacular and the absurd, and into the interior, insulated objects that exist alongside us.



*Untitled work in progress, 2020*

I envision a pantheon of household gods. The toothbrush, for instance, is an inescapable, omnipresent object that we cannot be without. As a matter of ritual and religious certainty, it enters our bodies at least once a day, though the truest believers

achieve a higher frequency. Thus, it is the primary god of this pantheon. All others are subordinate to it. We may profess our belief in lesser deities, yet we are ever suspicious that floss and toothpicks are optional at best. Meaning, spiritual meaning, may be as malleable as any other kind of knowledge. To serve an explanatory purpose, the household pantheon must be viewed as fundamentally being in opposition to competing virtual deities. Among these deities the most obvious are commercial brands and their insignia, but also the more diffuse idols of the contemporary order; in daily life we find the social relations of employment and ownership. In the arts, we have the art market and its subordinates of profitability, value, market appeal and potential, and all the exploitation that follows. It is in this sense that a hermetic, withdrawn approach to art ceases to be a narcissistic affectation and may transform into something revolutionary.

## *Rubber ducks waddling*

Asked to give advice to youths, Andrei Tarkovsky suggested that everyone should become more comfortable with being alone, and that it is quite destructive to need to be around others at all times<sup>29</sup>. Conventional knowledge would have us believe that we are more isolated and introverted than ever, yet we have never been as hyper-connected as we are now. Certainly, we are atomised. There is no traditional sense of community. Lingering on this, as though grieving, leads nowhere but reactionary delusion<sup>30</sup>. As far as the present analysis is concerned, all our condition means is that we are awkwardly yet uniquely positioned to begin digging ourselves out of our graves. The accelerationists helplessly dream of some apocalyptic resolution to our existence. Their apocalypse has already come and gone with nothing new springing from it. It cannot be overemphasised that our ideology has no breaking point. Contradictions can be stacked upon contradictions without triggering any cognitive avalanche. This is precisely where the pantheon shows promise. The ideologies of speeding up or embracing the present are built on the false notion of a singularity, so they are either reincorporated into or directly supplement the conditions they

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<sup>29</sup> Baglivo (1984).

<sup>30</sup> I should stress that it is equally pernicious to view this as some sort of victory for “individual liberty”.

claim to rebel against. The pantheon's aims are to deny its opponent air, consuming its habitat like a gloriously invasive species.



*Tetsuya Ishida – Refuel Meal, 1998*

The painter Tetsuya Ishida exposed the dystopian, totalitarian economy of Japan's "lost decade", when Japanese companies shed all past promises of patronage and benefits for their workers, who became disposable in the midst of an economic collapse. In Ishida's paintings, men with blank expressions are merged with machines and furniture to fit their functions in society. Even medicine seems to exist only to repackage, repair and recycle humans for labour. His figures are anhedonic and affectless, without any libido or dread, personifications of complete surrender. There is nonetheless a certain comedy to the situations he depicts<sup>31</sup>, a gleeful absurdity in which the unmoved subjects are embedded.

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<sup>31</sup> Recall that Kafka would laugh uproariously when writing or reading his own stories. In *Franz Kafka: Pictures of a Life* (1984), Klaus Wagenbach describes the author as considerably more humorous and ironic than his reputation suggests.

Nonetheless, his works are usually read as renderings of a depressive perspective, rather than a call to action.

What is observed here is the dominant theology of our age. It is of course not enough to have spiritual figures as objects of worship. There must be ethics built into this system for it to be invested with any meaning, and these are located in two central principles: wellness and the public. Wellness is significant enough to be restated as the beginning and end of this ideological framework, as it contains within it such a multitude of prohibitions and statutes. Its exact nature seems almost cliché to identify: We are always well. Everything we do and have must make us happy. There is no friction anywhere in the world, all problems are bad dreams resolved by awakening to a new product. But this is the old way<sup>32</sup>. Through its expansion to virtual space and recuperation of all irony and satire, the reformation of this religion has already occurred and supplanted its predecessor. Yet only the language of the chants has changed, not the words themselves. If we as individuals reach a point at which no joy is derived from consumption, the problem is still cast as internal. The exclusive *We* are always happy, while the inclusive *You* are likely to be identified as troublesome, pathological, a failure. As outlined in previous sections of this thesis (and for the same reasons herein), I am hesitant to address this theology directly, as in the form of protest art or culture jamming. My entire approach is therefore one of negation and replacement. I aim to cut its beliefs, its core ideology, out and replace it with something that resists any easily digested message and retracts out of the broader world of popular iconography.

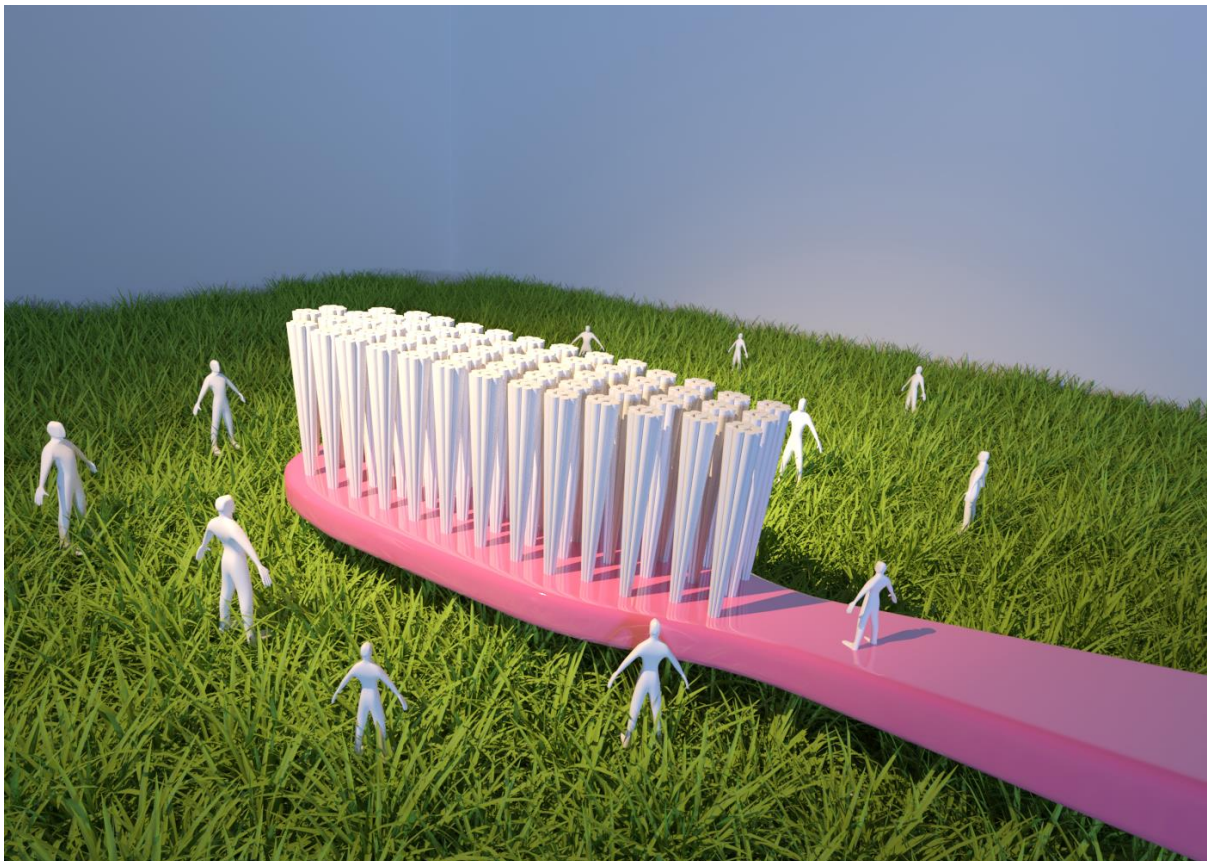
As human beings, we seek to harmonise our views with those that surround us. In a public sphere, it is therefore extremely easy to allow one's private existence to be colonised by the external religion. We come to see spirits as our gods, the machinations of capitalism and austerity as some immutable force of nature, and we reject our own experience to avoid the cognitive dissonance that any combination of these realities would in fact entail. To combat these forces, the mythological imagery I have used in this text will be further iterated, made sharper and placed onto a higher plane. They will be presented in video, as continuous images projecting from screens placed in a type of shrine or altar. From this

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<sup>32</sup> 1950s advertisements, bleached teeth pulled into grins like white picket fences pulled from their posts by synchronised mushroom clouds.



pedestal, they will sing the praises of the images they bear. I will rigorously explore this pantheon to its full extent and find the gods that reside within. Doing so is contingent on a rejection of spectres. It feels pre-ordained that the prior works would in their incomplete and unfinished state lead to the ecstatic potential of the present project.



*Untitled work in progress, 2020*

It is posited, then, that a radical hermeticism is entirely necessary to resist the hyper-connected, ultra-social ideological assault we must face in order to exist. A private life must persist and separate itself from a public life as far as is possible. We can relegate to our public life all that is not private, and vice versa. This entails a separation and a retraction of ethical ideology into objects otherwise held to hold no meaning. The toothbrush stands sublime in a glass cup and all is well in the world.

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