

April 2–9, 2021

2021 UIC MFA Thesis Exhibitions

Oleksandra Chuprina

Jared Christopher Kelley

Graham Livingston & Marina Resende Santos

Julian Van Der Moere

Robert Zant

# Sidelong Glances + Ordinary Horrors

Sonya Bogdanova

Asya Dubrovina

Nick Jackson & Tyner White

Austin McCann

Laleh Motlagh

Anastasia Sitnikova

April 16–23, 2021

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# Sidelong Glances





The artists in **Sidelong Glances** direct your attention to objects overlooked, sites passed by, and histories lying fallow. Extramission was a theory that visual perception was enacted by beams emitted from the eyes. Modern physics has replaced it with intromission, in which the object, through rays of light reflecting off of it, enters into the eyes. Tunnels, portals, and thin places are scattered throughout this exhibition. From the backroom of the gallery, through the floor of the studio, and bouncing between internet servers, previous occupants and new uses are uncovered in the process of the making of these works. This exhibition sings the poetry of the ordinary, finds spirituality in paint chips, stitches relationships across time, and lingers in the points along the way.

**Julian Van Der Moere's** work requires a keen and active viewer; one who can hunt with their eyes across an otherwise normal looking room, one who can find grace in the banal. He aims to "challenge and debase our ever-narrowing modes of perception; believing instead it should be desired to perceive things in multiplicitous, revelatory, and contradicting ways."

**Oleksandra Chuprina** is an archaeologist of the semi-recent, investigating elements both spatially (across her studio floor) and chronologically (delving into the building's past lives). Her concerns are surrounding "time literacy, historical trauma, and the relationship between physical spaces and people."

**Graham Livingston's** periphrastic practice is concerned with electronic image production and consumption, and the resulting distancing. Seemingly ordinary images and objects tremble with glitches, bearing traces of where they've been and what they've been up to.

**Robert Zant's** drawing-based work is identifiable by his warbled mark-making, his embracing of natural (and supernatural) phenomena, and moments out of sync. He aims to "engage with images that leak on both material and conceptual levels," which point to "a precarity and a potential; an aspiration and a treason."

Disabused of his family's religious belief in post-apocalyptic eternal life, **Jared Christopher Kelley's** interests now lie in longevity research and secular transhumanist movements. His heady, vibrantly-hued digital work "contemplates this restless 'space between' as a psychological membrane used to transit freely between the virtual and physical."

# Oleksandra Chuprina











Oleksandra Chuprina (b. 1995, Odesa, Ukraine) is an artist and documentary filmmaker currently dipping her toes into photogrammetry, large format printing, bookmaking, and urban archeology. Whether printing in 3D, molding candles, or stripping the studio floor, her work deals with issues of time literacy, historical trauma, and the relationship between physical spaces and people. She studied Film Direction at the Kyiv National I.K. Karpenko-Kary Theatre, Cinema and Television University. She attended UIC as a Fulbright scholar.

"My work utilizes space as a time machine capable of accessing buried memories. Architecture absorbs the presences of various beings, materials, sounds, and movements. I'm curious about the hidden wonders and disasters of our surroundings. Digging into the history of places and spaces, I hope to make sense of the present."



*The Floor is Yours*, 2019–2020  
**COVER:** matterport documentation

**SPREAD, TOP LEFT:** found artifact: tinfoil tag from Formfit Factory, 1950s

**SPREAD, BOTTOM LEFT:** paint chip removed from the wooden floor

**SPREAD, RIGHT:** unearthed colors, digital photo documentation

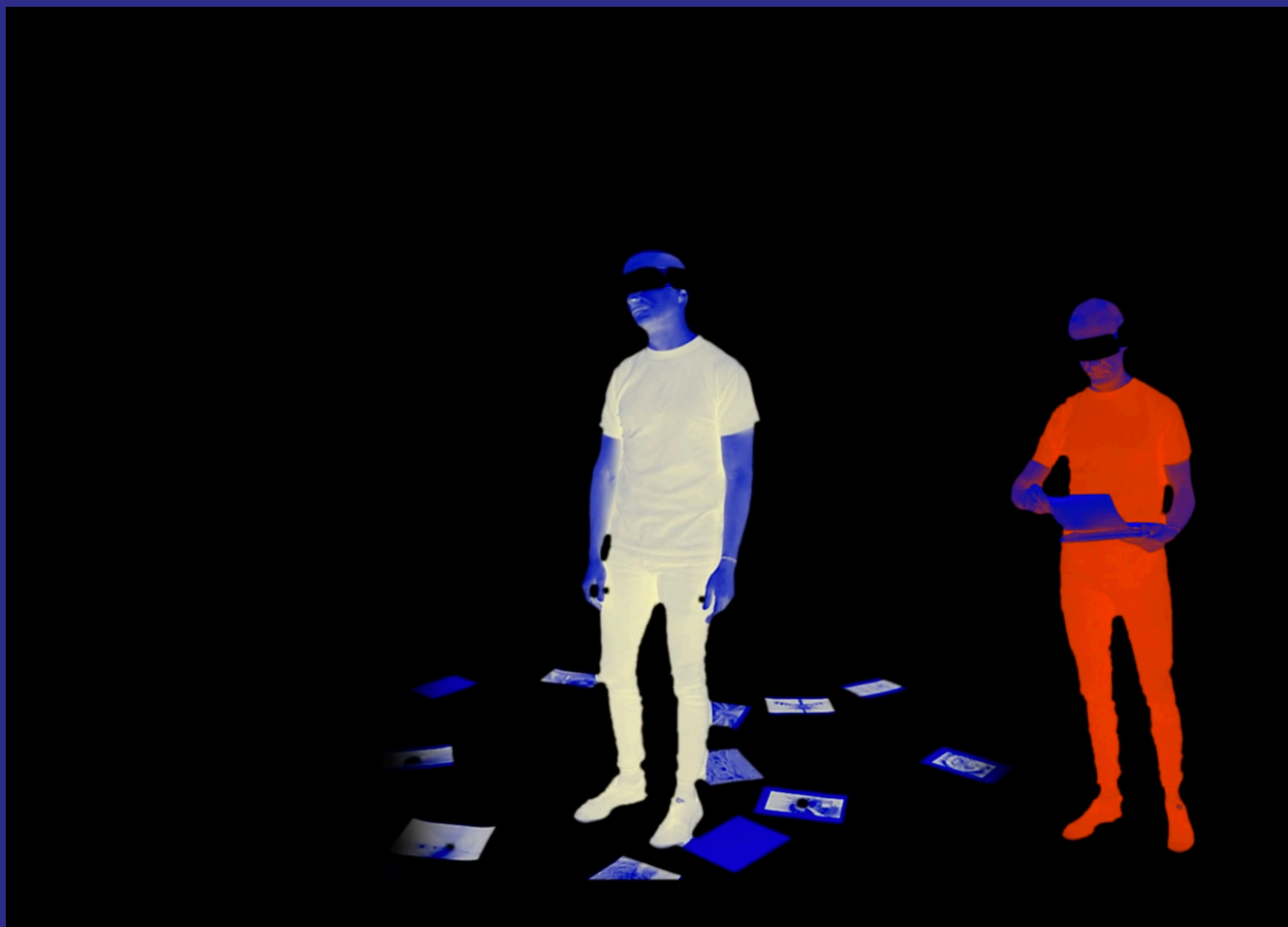
**TOP:** still from the video

*Back to Sand*, 2019  
**BOTTOM:** wax candle molded from a 3D print

# Jared Christopher Kelley







**COVER:** 'Gas Station 415', 2019, Sculpture  
Acrylic, Fishing Line, Fiberboard, Oxygen  
Masks, Video Projection, Electronics,  
Custom Code

'Nikolai, Charles, Raymond, Kenton', 2020,  
Screenshot from Video Game  
Archive Audio, Archive Film, Community  
and Original 3D Models, Custom Code

Jared Christopher Kelley is an artist drawing connections between digital simulations and their physical counterparts. As a child in a fundamentalist millenarian family, he was taught to believe he would live forever after the apocalypse. He has attempted to place the longing restlessness left by this belief into secular historic and contemporary transhumanist movements, using these as a means to sit with the unrealizable expectation of immortality. Utilizing the desire, mechanisms, and far reaching implications of achieving immortality through exponential advances in biotechnology and digital simulation, he creates works that connect, conduct, tunnel, and bridge the space between virtual and physical worlds. His narrative and poetic work contemplates this restless "space between" as a psychological membrane used to transit freely between the virtual and physical. He draws from writing on linguistics and semiotics by Roland Barthes, the films and media theory of Hito Steyerl and Harun Farocki, and historical queer, religious, and transhumanist movements including the Russian Cosmists and the research of biogerontologists Aubrey de Gray and Cynthia Kenyon.

Kelley received his BA in Interdisciplinary Education in the Arts and his MFA with a concentration in New Media, both from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has performed and exhibited work in DIY spaces, small, medium, and large galleries, and regional museums in Atlanta and Chicago, including the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Roman Susan, and Gallery 400, and internationally in Australia and South Korea, including CICA Museum Gimpo.





# Graham Livingston

Sidelong Glances



'Open, Conjure, Pray', 2020, Still from Video  
Original 3D Model from Photogrammetry, Craft Paper, Digital Video

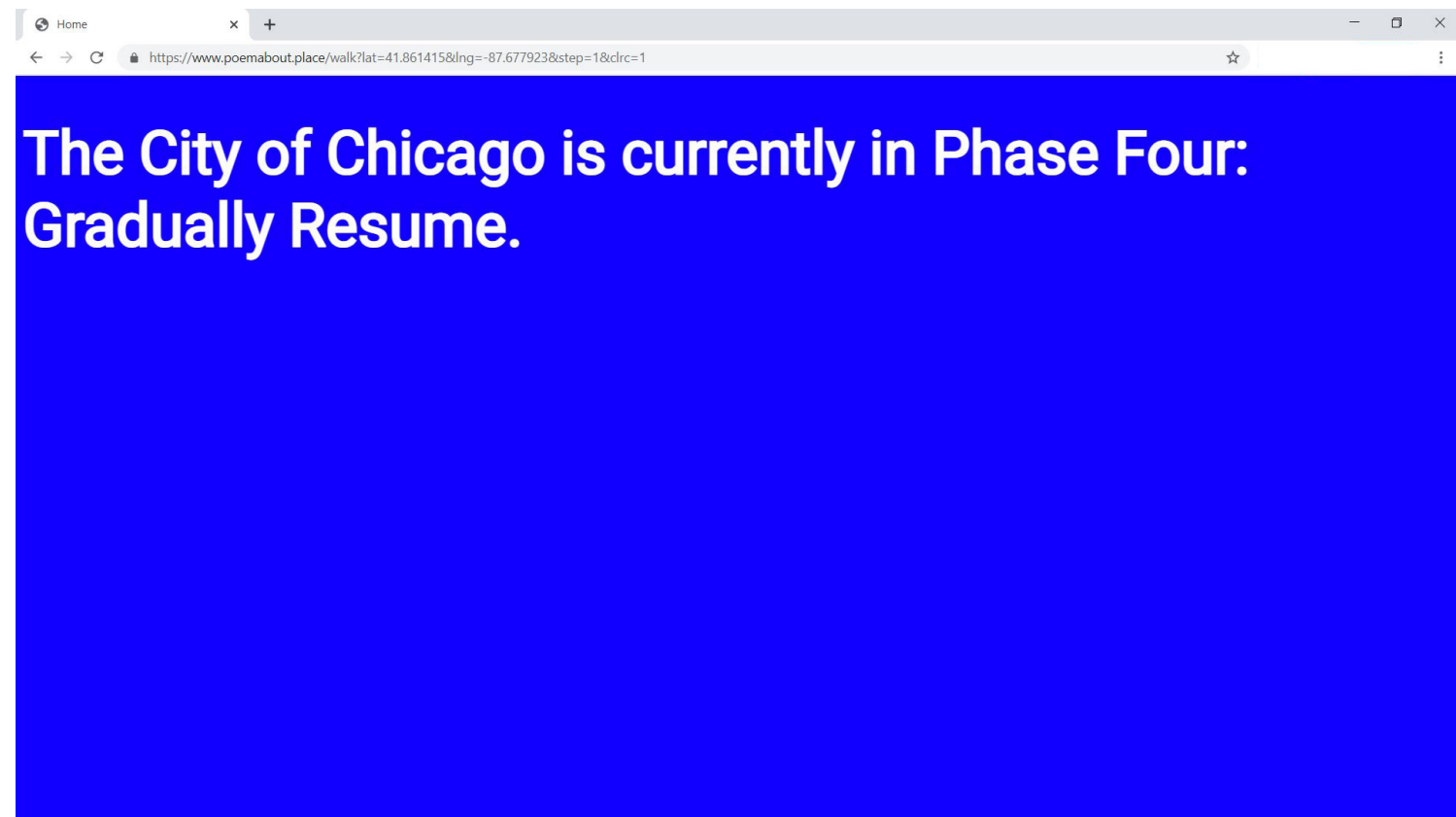
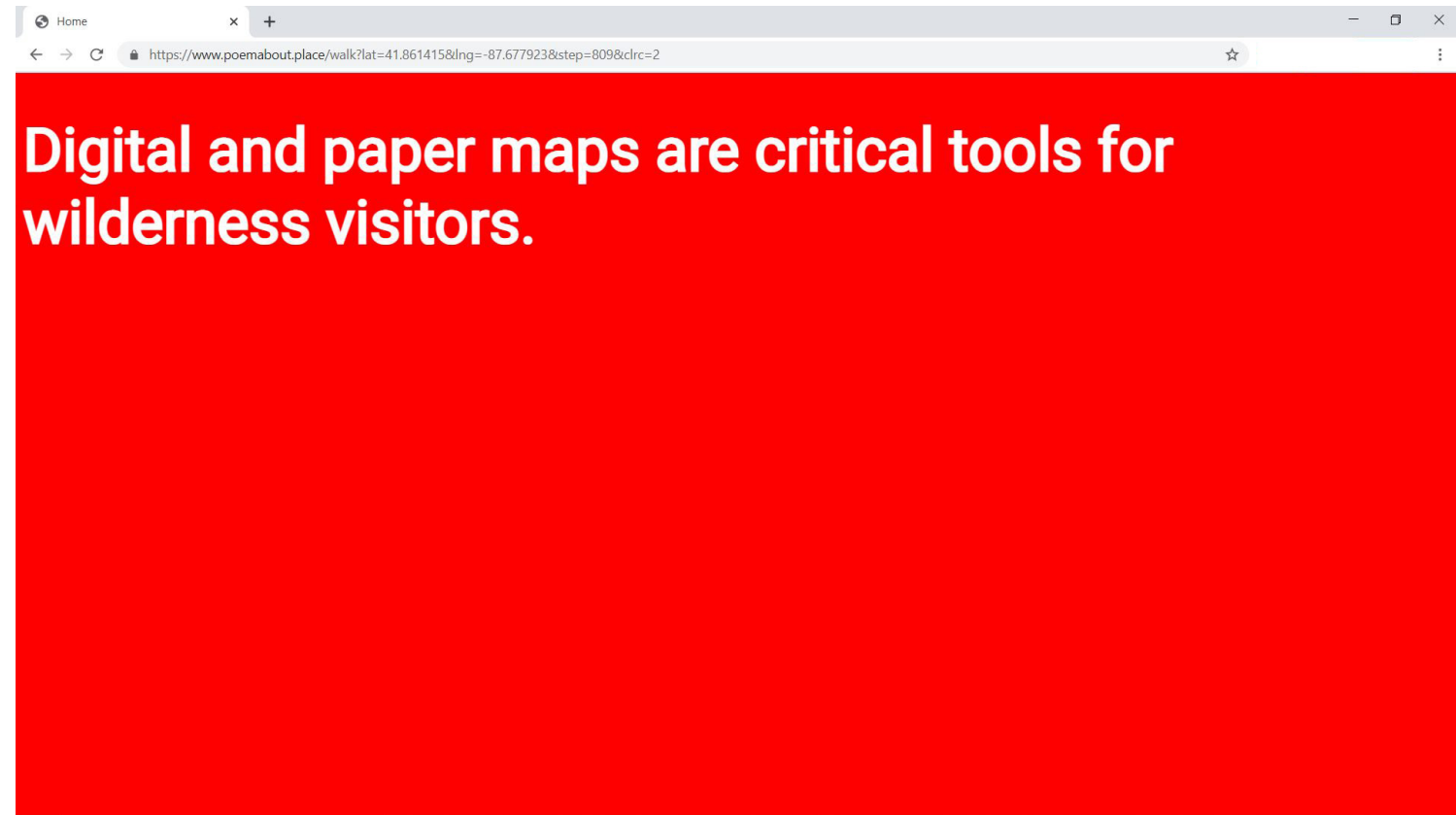




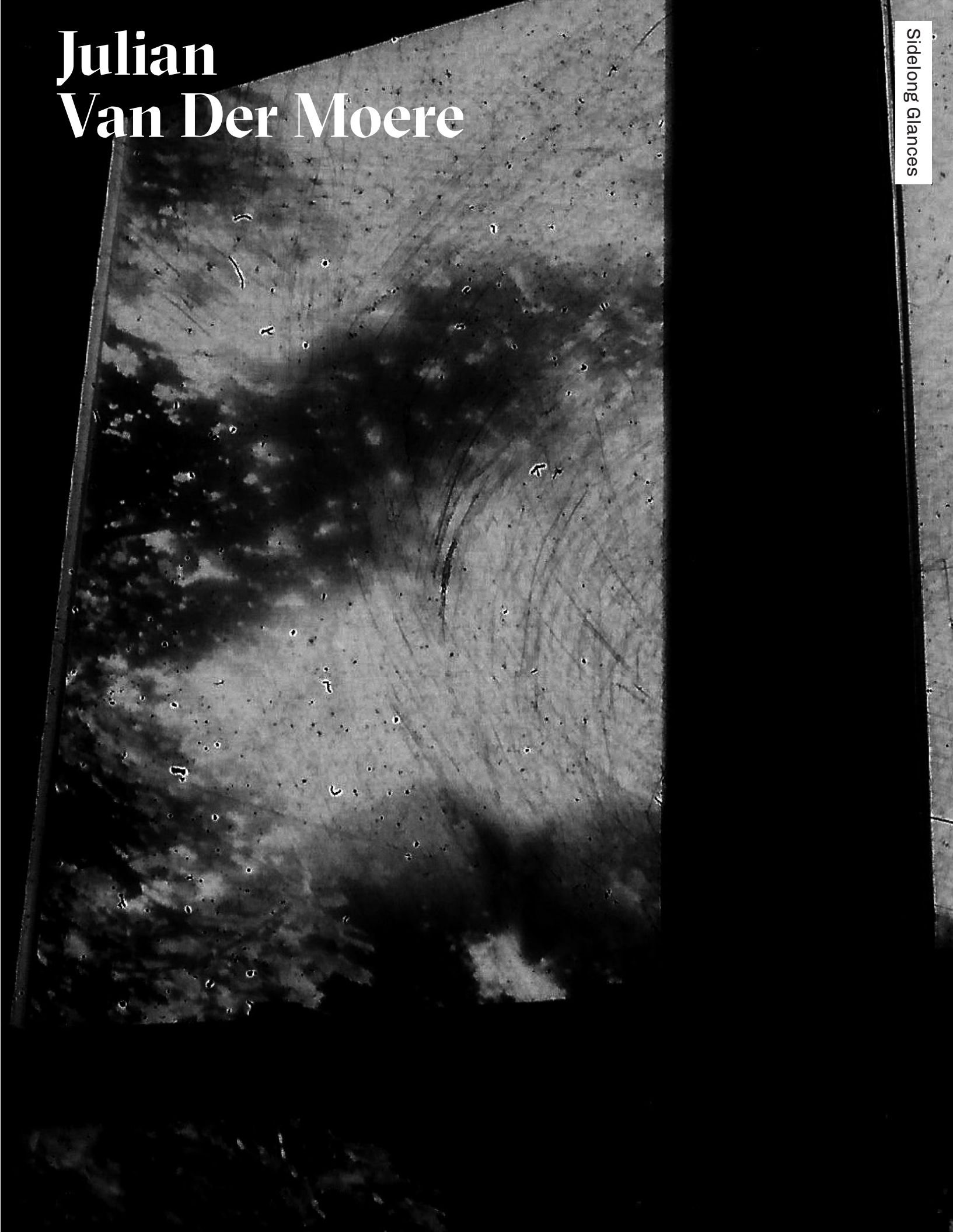
My artistic practice explores how qualities of electronic image production and consumption mediate perceptions of distance, impacting our relationships to civic spaces, ecologies and others. The art objects in my practice utilize a range of mediums to stage contexts where the viewer might glimpse the appearance of a tether between peripatetic and non-peripatetic visions of space. At the threshold of the appearance is an opportunity to reimagine how methods of image production and consumption can create a politics of distance outside the dichotomy of ON/OFF the grid.







# Julian Van Der Moere









# Robert Zant



**COVER:** *we are poor passing facts*,  
epson print, 2021

**SPREAD, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:** *hand of forgetfulness*,  
rolled steel and dust, 2019

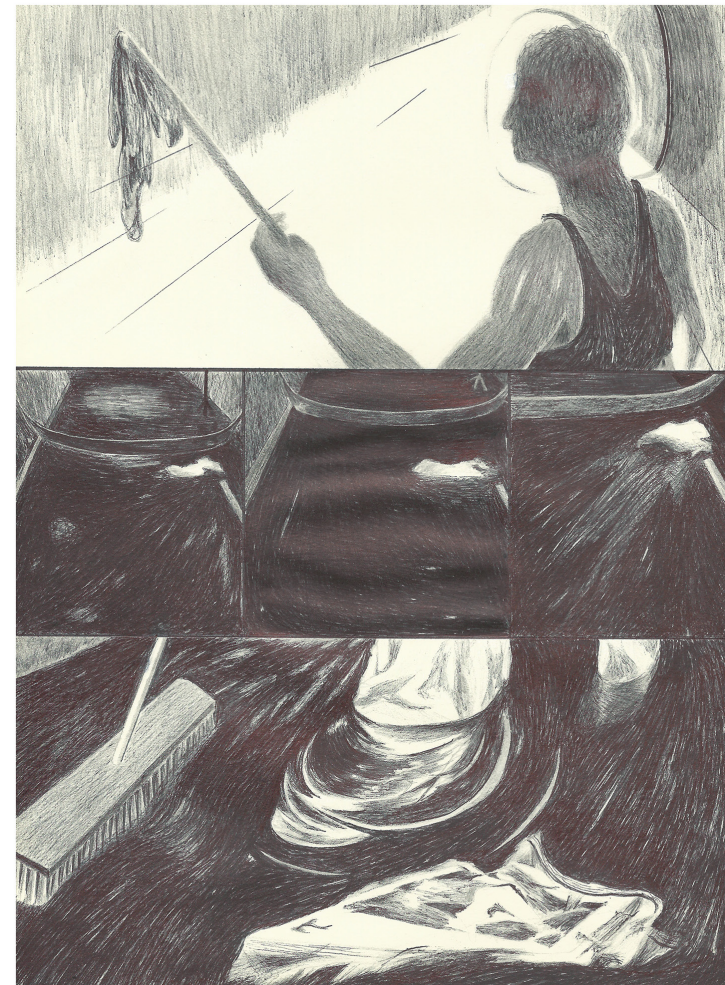
Installation view

*hand of memory*, polaroid, 2019

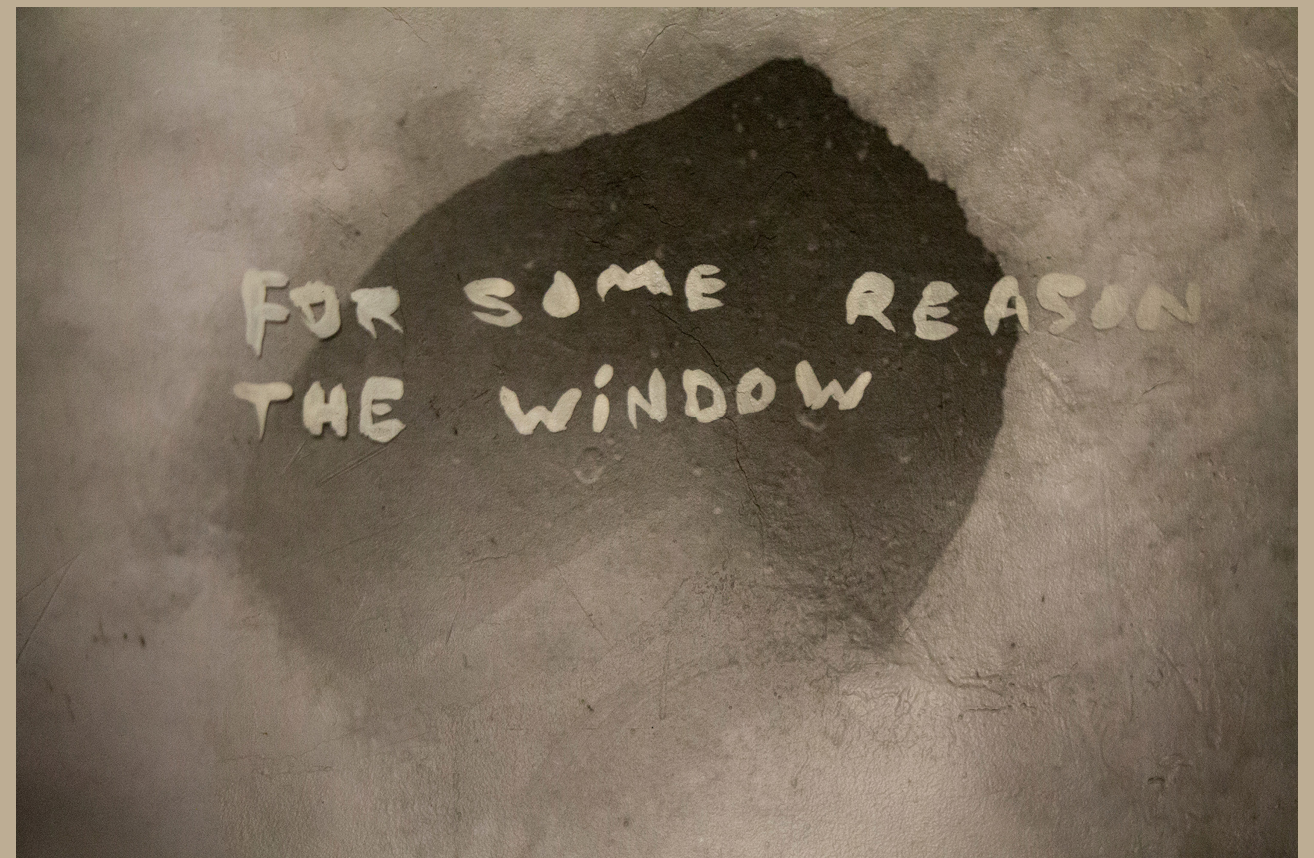
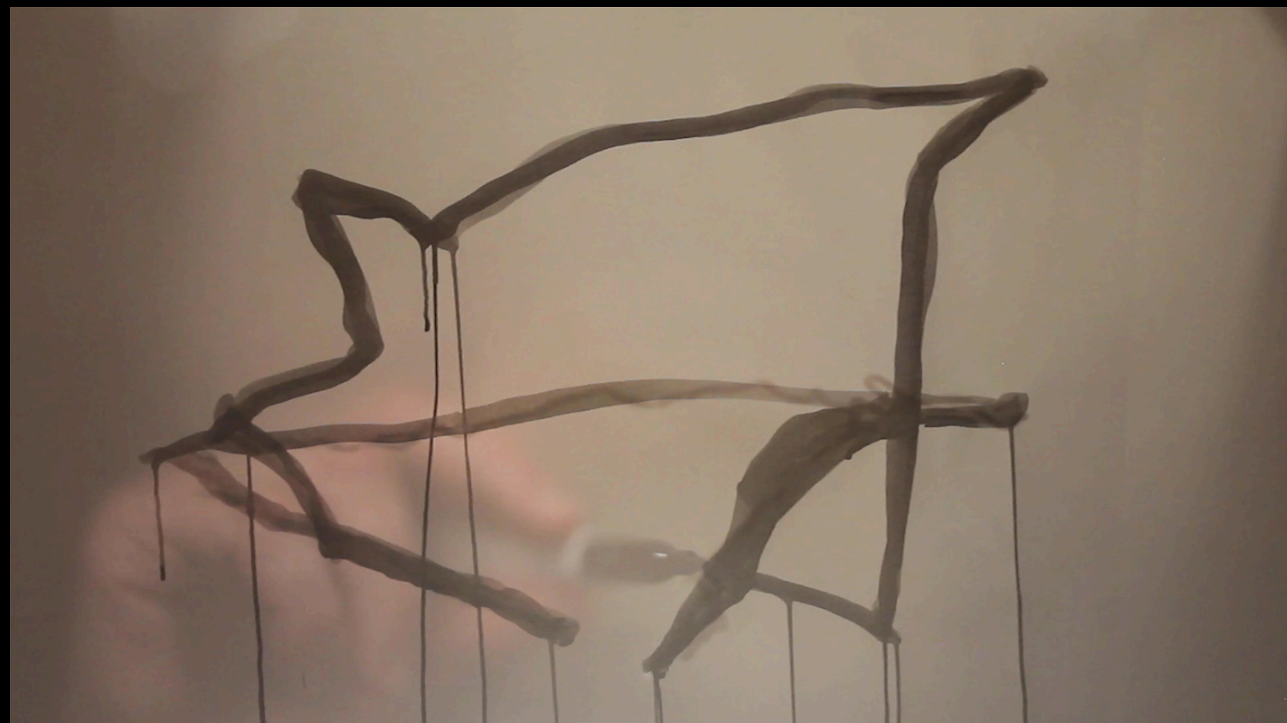
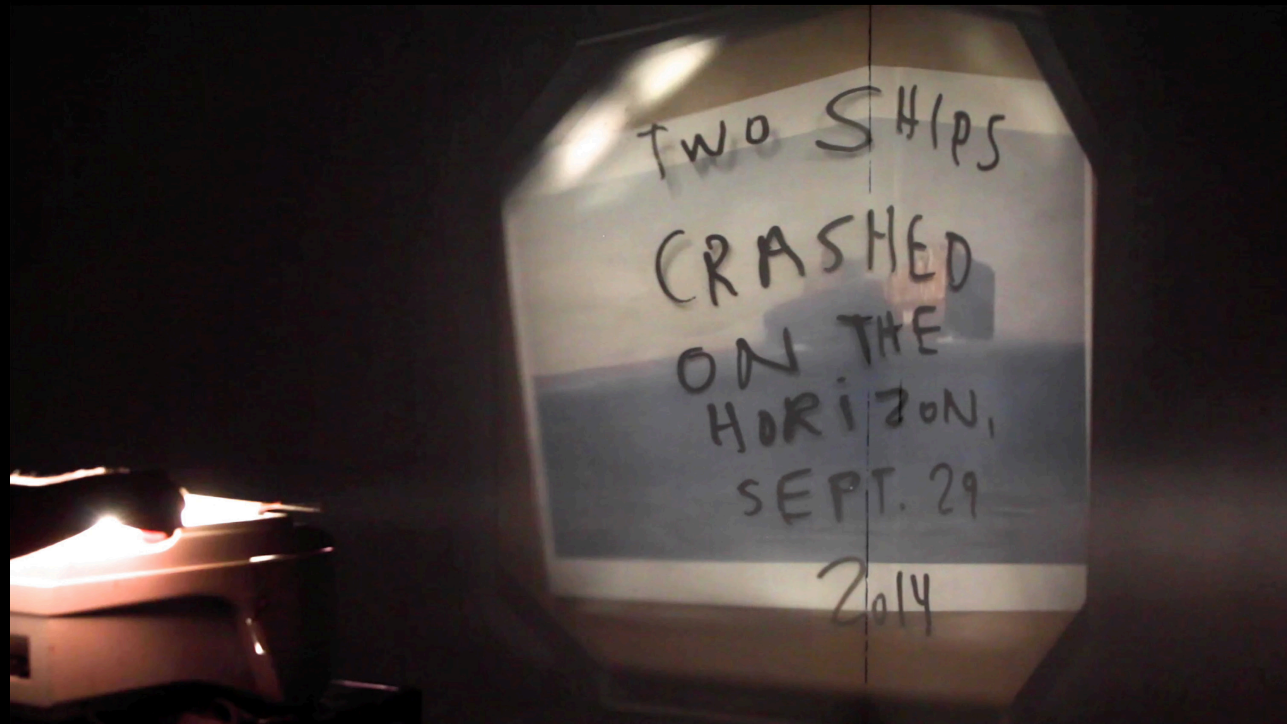
*the bones sang, scattered and shining we are  
glad to be scattered*,  
plywood, staples, projector, extension cords,  
media player, 2019

**ABOVE:** *exhausted and lifegiving*,  
iron and dead tillandsia, 2019

Julian Van Der Moere is an artist working regardless of medium. He believes that everything is always already mediated, and the definition and categorization of gestures is limiting and unhelpful in achieving meaningful engagements. He is interested most in the fissures and cracks of, the dead spaces between, the many colliding and fracturing constellations of, exploring collaborations with, and the poetics between people, sounds, places, gestures, words, thoughts, things, actions, events, time, etc. He is deeply invested in challenging and debasing our ever-narrowing modes of perception; believing instead it should be desired to perceive things in multiplicitous, revelatory, and contradicting ways. Things take time to unfold and unfurl, to decouple from our understandings of them. Looking is an impossible task, to truly look is to defy our perceptive organs. Our organs must ingest, then relay, then digest information in a way that convolutes and dilutes all things. All things become ungraspable, unknowable, unfathomable – too long a jump over the chasm. True looking can only happen for an instant, like a flash of lightning illuminating the familiar into the renewed landscape. True looking cannot be prolonged, because our capacity for information is so miniscule.











Taking drawing as a starting point, my practice aims to engage with images that leak on both material and conceptual levels. Such leakages carry with them a simultaneous *towards* and *away from*; a precarity and a potential; an aspiration and a treason.

Leaks occur on surfaces that are pre-existing and non-neutral, never blank. They come invariably marked, traced, smudged, and erased. What do these leaks skirt, where do they collect, and where do they run off the page? How are they obscured, subsumed, and repelled by what's already been laid down? Can a leak stand on its own? Can it stand for itself?

The movement of the leaking image has led me to work within the time-based mediums of live projection, video, and animation. Sequences of leaking images start to take on a shape of their own. But they're delayed, always on their way. What are the ways we can tap our feet while we wait for meaning's late arrival?

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**COVER: BALLAST**  
2018  
artist book

**SPREAD, TOP LEFT:** What a drill can do  
2020  
live projection

**SPREAD, BOTTOM LEFT:** 10.04/10.15.1585  
2020  
video

**SPREAD, RIGHT:** Thin Places  
2020  
artist book

**ABOVE:** A Pinocchio Story  
2020  
animation  
ongoing collaboration with Austin McCann

# Ordinary Horrors

Sonya Bogdanova

Asya Dubrovina

Nick Jackson & Tyner White

Austin McCann

Laleh Motlagh

Anastasia Sitnikova



**Ordinary Horrors** includes poetry, performance, drawings, installations, sculptures, photos, and moving images set to the thrumming sounds of the eerie and the transcendent. The artists in the exhibition intrepidly traverse relationships, generations, and species; they amplify the stories of others and draft new ones, and they imagine personal utopias. Their works are informed by trauma repeated, catastrophes impending, relentless capitalism and totalitarianism, the forbidden, and the sticky depths of grief and shame. Are we haunted by the past or out of sync with time? Can vulnerabilities become assets? These artists are gathering in kitchens and libraries, washing the salt out of wounds, coping, and plotting their escapes.

**Austin McCann** writes poems, performances, and other works “concerned with forms of radical sociality, emergent and historical, particularly as manifested in language.” His tenor vacillates from ebullient to lacerated, with imagery vast enough to include small critters to the whole of humanity, collisions and convergences.

**Laleh Motlagh**'s performative practice is inspired by living closely with animals and treating them as peers and companions, including the pigs considered taboo during her childhood. “I question my Iranian cultural background, how I was raised and educated, and how these notions have impacted my life and have changed my view on the culture and the Islamic religion of my homeland.”

**Asya Dubrovina**'s moving image work in this exhibition sensitively retraces their grandfather's escape route out of Leningrad and rallies stories of how kitchens have served as radical and communal spaces. Of their observational eye, Dubrovina writes that it “does not merely describe things as they are but offers questions and connections to that which lies outside the frame.”

**Nick Jackson**'s comics-based work is creative reportage, capturing small stories and big feelings in brisk strokes and exuberant writing. Reflecting on his practice, he says: “there’s an acceptance of the knot; the wild tangle of different voices, harmonizing into narrative and falling into dissonance.”

**Tyner White**, as described by Jackson, is “an inventor, drawer, polyglot punster, theorist of alternative futures, militant recycler & master forager, semi-estranged member of a family of means, 79 year-old man in vulnerable circumstances.”

**Sonya Bogdanova** sculpts ragged shapes that represent common enemies and oppressive systems such as capitalism, which she then destroys in a cathartic, oozing mess, recorded for the pleasure of herself and others. “My embodied performance lies somewhere between action painting and a sloppy version of carnivalesque mixed-martial-arts.”

**Anastasia Sitnikova** creates room-sized environments in disarray that speak about trauma, violence, fetish, technology, and contradiction. “As ambitious as it may sound, my artistic research aims to find a cure to the imperfection of human nature and thus access my own peace of mind.”

# Sonya Bogdanova











My practice involves the sculptural-performative enactment of violence against oppressive systems. There are streams of grief and feelings of powerlessness that flow through the collective body in late capitalism. My work embodies a kind of raw artistic revenge against figures and systems that produce this public suffering.

Using neon paint, textiles, foam, and found materials, I create esoteric three-dimensional forms which mimic human physiology: organs, limbs, or knots. These forms are life-sized, and at times, larger. They are internally supported by paint, glue, and plastic refuse, which provides the necessary resistance for my physical attacks against them. A summary of my debasement of these objects would include: binding them together, attaching them to wood and other found objects, destroying their surfaces, penetrating their slits and sags with my hands, and using hand tools on them. I also incorporate altered sounds to reveal the abnormalities within dominant structures. I document my attacks with everyday recording equipment, such as a cell phone, and distribute the videos and images online.

I make work to destroy it. Performing ultraviolence on these forms is physically and mentally pleasurable. My embodied performance lies somewhere between action painting and a sloppy version of carnivalesque mixed-martial-arts, and is acted out for an audience. When my target takes the form of a common enemy, I am able to produce a kind of shared catharsis.

*Bogdanova's piece Your House is Mine is in an upcoming exhibition at Ignition Projects (Chicago), May 2021.*



# Asya Dubrovina

Ordinary Horrors







still image from state (2021)  
digital color video, 8mm, found footage





**COVER:** still image from  
*Now lovers meet at Ladoga* (2020)  
color and b&w 16mm, found footage

**ABOVE:** still image from  
*To speak* (2020)  
color and b&w 16mm, found footage

Asya Dubrovina (b. 1988 St. Petersburg Russia) is an artist working in moving image. Through film and installation, their works investigate the in-betweenness of place and memory. Asya collects stories and images to produce a wider social and historical perspective through a poetic lens. The observational point of view they use does not merely describe things as they are but offers questions and connections to that which lies outside the frame. Asya received a B.A. in Visual Studies and Moving Image from Keene State College in New Hampshire.

# Nick Jackson





My father takes me to see what happened  
at Ft. Story beach - March 1994.

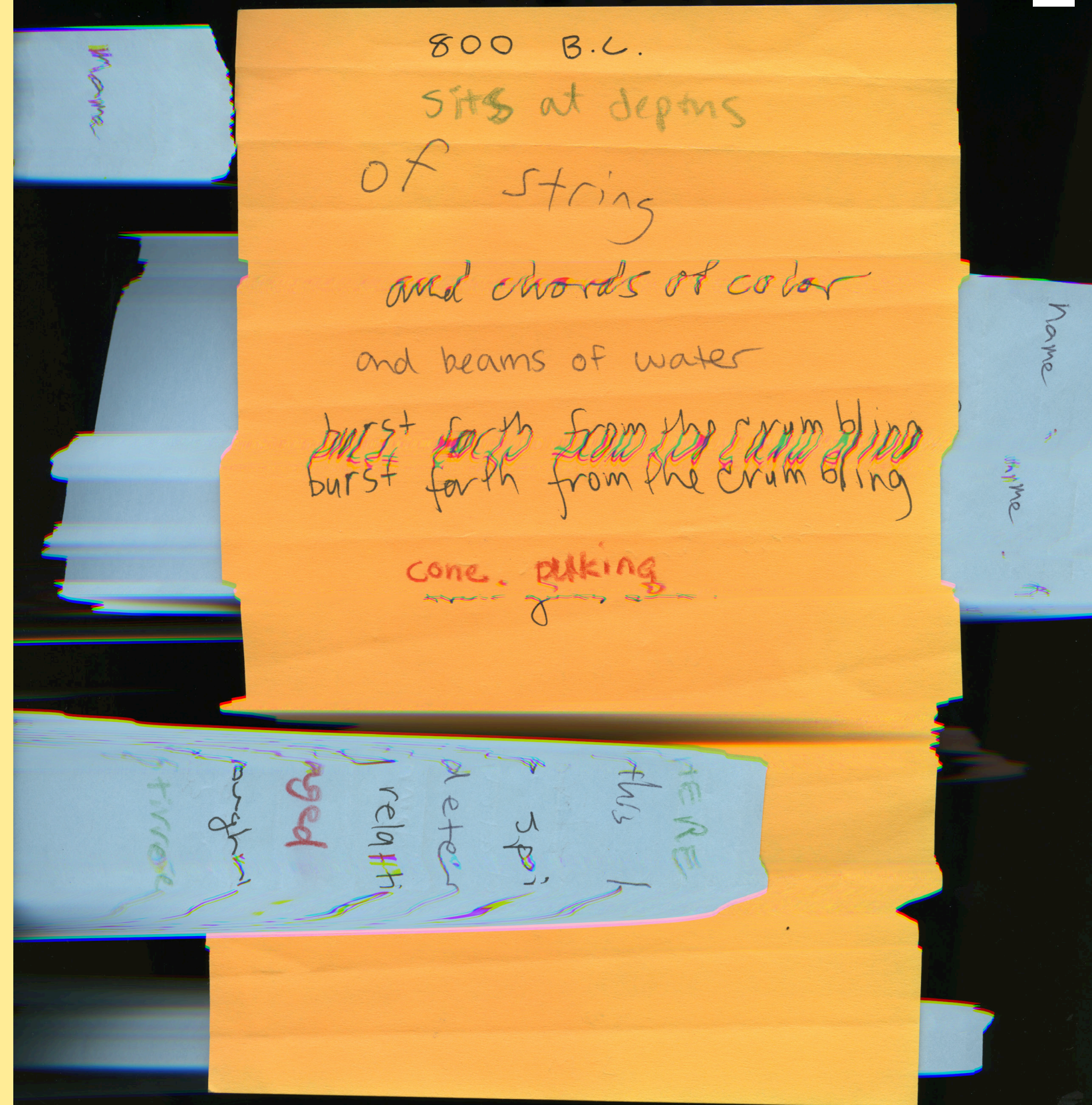




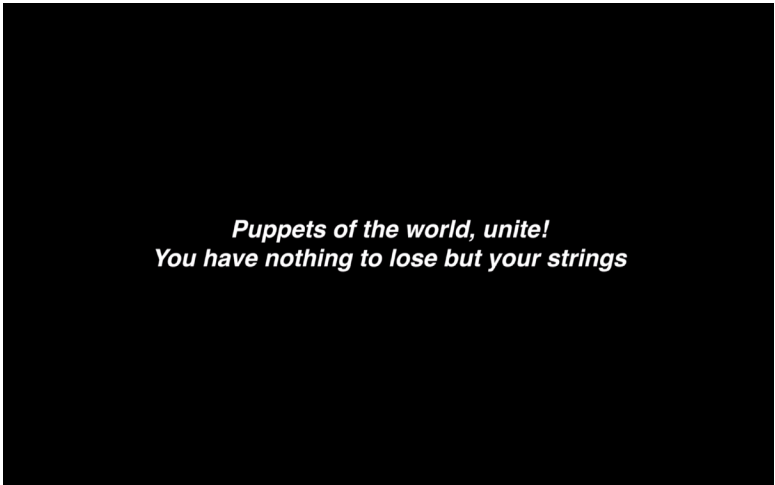
# Austin McCann

I'm a drawer, writer, and investigator. Key questions I ask: What happens when journalistic reportage is shared in a way that's messy, with all the loose wires and jagged edges exposed? How can I tell a story in a way that's accurate and informative, but still bears the bite marks of my own weird imagination? As a drawer, I put the stories I gather through the languages of abstraction and symbol. I want the narratives to bubble beyond their margins, to forge unexpected connections.

Conversation and collaboration are at the heart of the matter. I'm drawn to the lineage of Studs Terkel, that great practitioner of oral history. I collect and interpret experience, lining up accounts of the same moment next to one another, noticing the patterns that emerge, the deviations, the ripples. My format varies between comics, multimedia installation, archiving, and documentary writing. But through all such iterations there's an acceptance of the knot; the wild tangle of different voices, harmonizing into narrative and falling into dissonance. And then there's the knot within myself—a desire to be a reliable informant twisted with an emotive, child-like need to express.





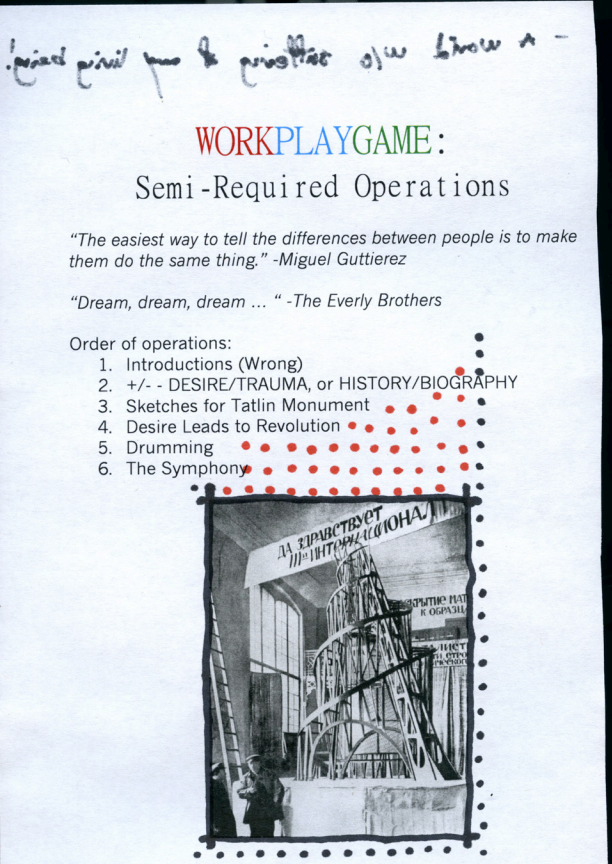


**COVER:** *Untitled* (2020)

**TOP:** Still from *Reading/Fanshen* (2020, performance/video)

**BOTTOM:** Still from *A Pinocchio Story* (2020, single-channel animation, collaboration with Robert Zant)

Austin McCann (b. 1985) is a writer and artist from Florida. His texts, performances, and other works are concerned with forms of radical sociality, emergent and historical, particularly as manifested in language. He has a BA in Performance Studies from New College of Florida. He formerly lived in Champaign-Urbana, where he directed an art-house cinema, led an experimental writing group, taught in prison, and produced theater. He currently lives in Chicago.



*Utopia 3* (2020, performance, materials documentation)

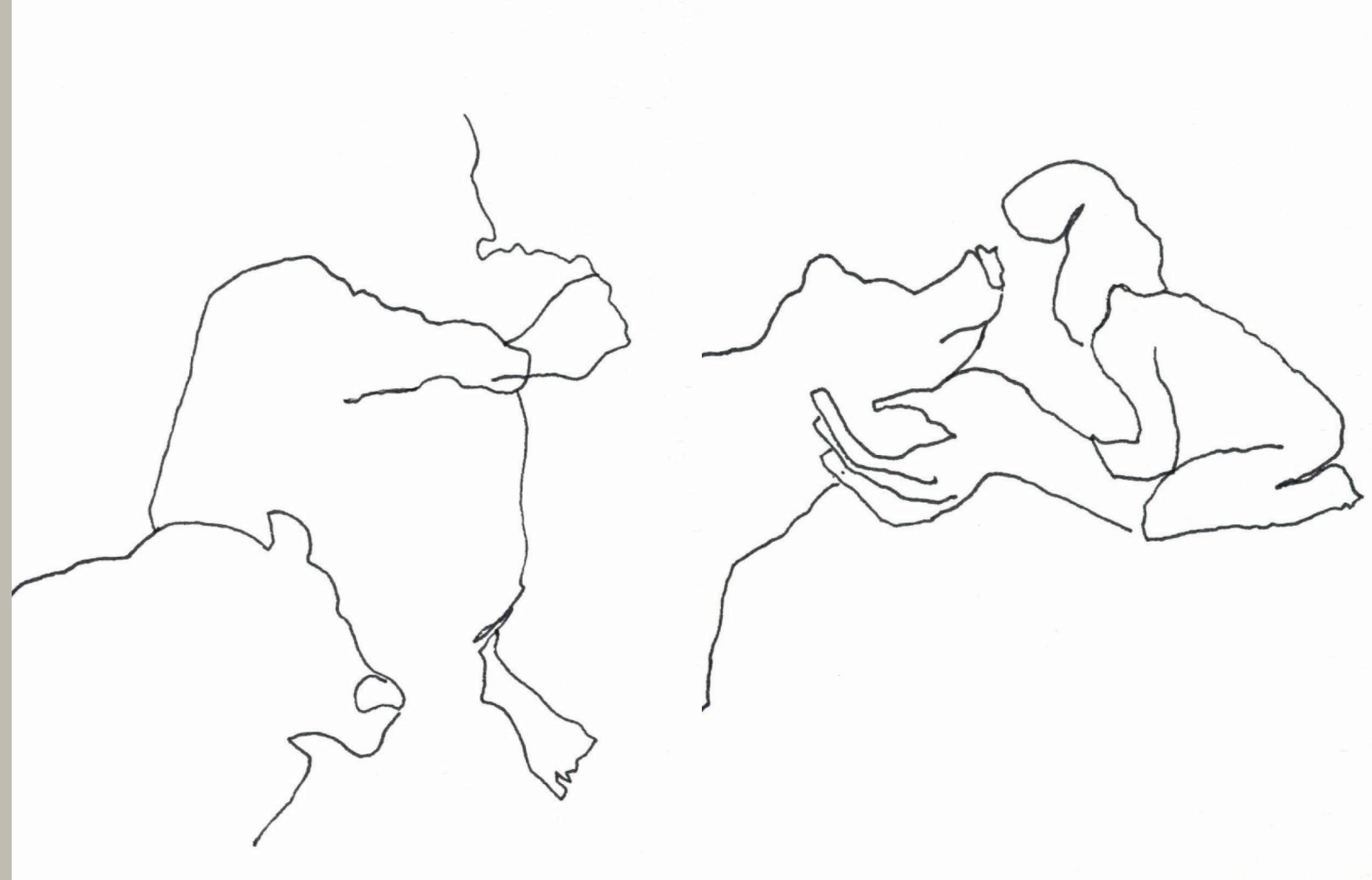


# Laleh Motlagh

Ordinary Horrors



*Untitled (2019)*











**COVER, TOP:** Still from performance *Play*, December 2019

**COVER, BOTTOM LEFT:** *Familiar Strangers*, Black felt pen drawing on white paper, 4.5" x 5.5", October 2020

**COVER, BOTTOM RIGHT:** *Familiar Strangers*, Black felt pen drawing on white paper, 4.5" x 5.5", October 2020

**SPREAD:** Still from performance *Distanced Intimacy*, February 2021

**ABOVE:** Still from performance *Interruption*, March 2020

**LEFT:** Still from performance *The Conversation*, December 2020

I draw plants,

I eat plants,

I perform with animals,

I sleep with animals.

My artwork positions the human being in dynamic and reciprocal relationships with animals. Raised as an Iranian woman, the world of animals remained obscure, indistinct, and unknown to me. Still today, cultural and religious barriers create an invisible wall between me and the non-human species. The connection was alien to me for decades until I began to pull back the veil of confined culture, defined traditions, and conservative religious dogmas. Many years later, after moving to the United States, I started living and performing with my rescued dog, Honey. My relationship with her has persuaded me to research human and animal relationships.

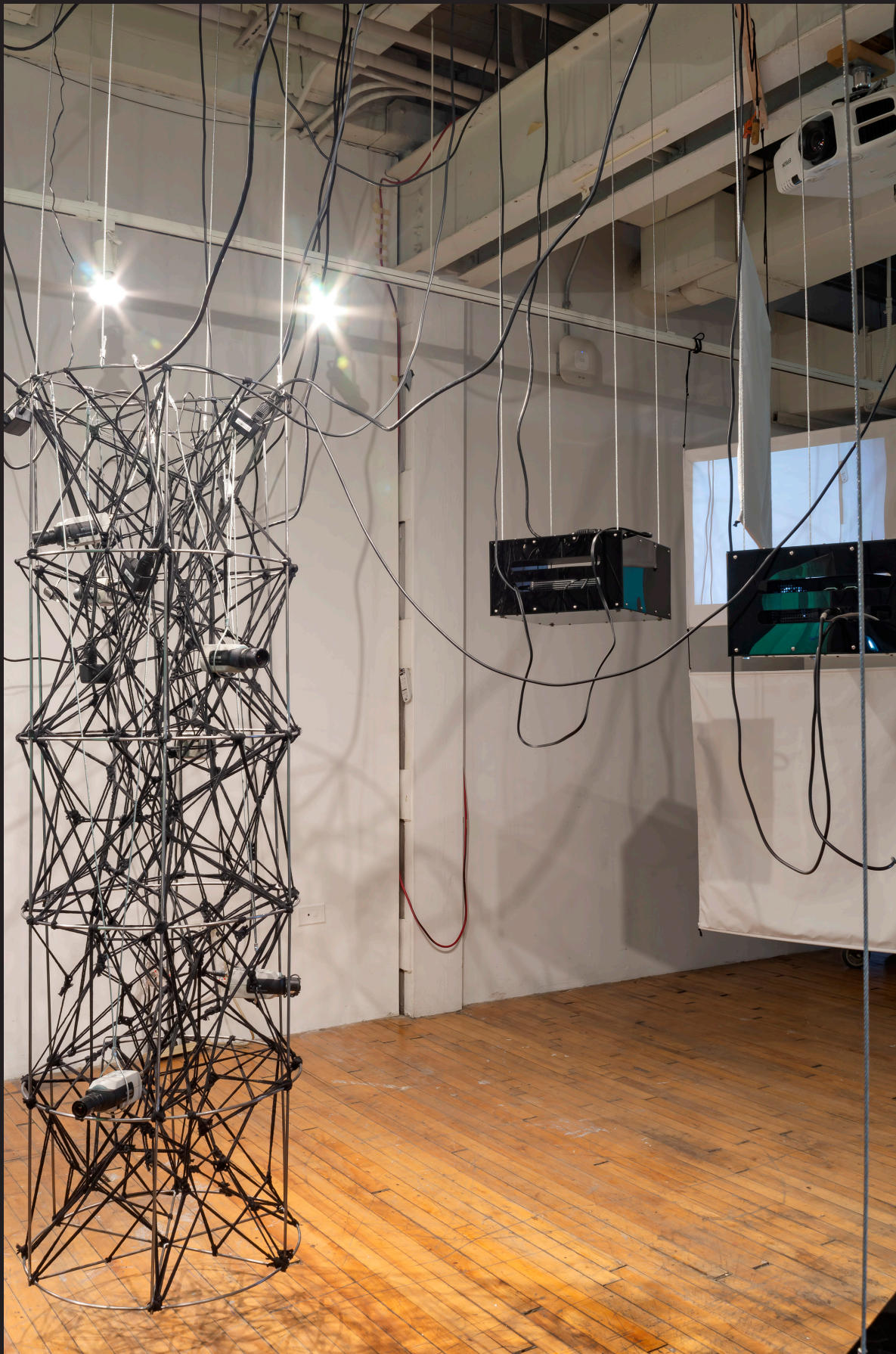
Living with animals, sleeping with them, allowing them to feed me, eating their food, I question notions of power and vulnerability, trust and doubt, and find ways to embrace and explore my inner self in connection to the moments I live, every day. Through research, drawings, and performance, I delve into these relationships. I question my Iranian cultural background, how I was raised and educated, and how these notions have impacted my life and have changed my view on the culture and the Islamic religion of my homeland.

# Anastasia Sitnikova

Ordinary Horrors







Camera Room, 2020 (detail)  
Projectors, security cameras, power and communication  
cords, steel rod, macrame cord, metal cable, plexiglass,  
fabric, hardware, wood.



Camera Room, 2020, Projectors, security cameras, power and communication cords, steel rod,  
macrame cord, metal cable, plexiglass, fabric, hardware, wood.

I am attracted to contradictions. They create tensions charged with creation and destruction. Discrepancy is part of my life experience as a woman, mother, and immigrant, but it is also at the core of human nature—inconsistent and at times self-destructive. People are often traumatized. They live with an internal storm of passion and desire and project it to the external world as violence. As ambitious as it may sound, my artistic research aims to find a cure to the imperfection of human nature and thus access my own peace of mind.

My installations are hybrid environments that weave together space, situation, and memories. I merge imaginary realities of the human mind, constructed realities of technology, and concrete realities of nature. The result is formally minimal yet surreal, detached yet emotional, domestic yet industrial. The content of my work unfolds through the viewer's response to it. This slow discovery mimics the world where things are not what they seem.

I often use materials that have a fetishistic charge. Fetish is a false belief, but it is also a coping mechanism that helps people to withstand life. I use it as a path to our subconscious—to the instincts we are trying to suppress, the experience we are trying to forget. My intention is to take a deeper look into the motivation behind our actions and choices. By re-creating traumatizing memories, I hope to find a relief of their burden. I try to unlearn what I know about this world, and perhaps regain some confidence in it.

**COVER, TOP:**  
Meditation Station, 2020  
LED monitors, looped video  
5:26 min, fabric, plexiglass,  
aluminum, metal cable,  
hardware, wood.  
Installation view, dimensions  
variable

**COVER, BOTTOM:**  
Mediation Station/  
Model, 2020  
Wood, joint compound, paint,  
stain, plexiglass, aluminum,  
fabric, hardware, light, found  
objects.  
16.5x21.5x20.5 inches





**TOP:** Milk, 2019  
Plaster, joint compound, 3D-printed and readymade milk bottle nipples, plexiglass, fiberglass, fabric, feather, wire, hardware, light.

**BOTTOM:** Milk, 2019 (detail)  
Plaster, joint compound, 3D-printed and readymade milk bottle nipples, plexiglass, fiberglass, fabric, feather, wire, hardware, light.



**AUSTIN:** One of the relentless imperatives of the MFA program is *always make work*. That's in a double sense: to make (the) work and to make (it) work. I don't produce a lot of work, as some of you do. It just ain't in my nature to put out nearly as much as I take in. So maybe it's good for me to have to show something at least twice a semester on the occasion of critique, in order to force a material inscription of my study.

**NICK:** The impending doom in foresight / usually not-so-bad in hindsight of critique checkpoints had the advantage of forcing me to stop spinning new threads, and to find the guts to commit to a form.

But it's hard not to resist the imperative at least a little, knowing the sheer level of shit in the world, including. Like, there's so much of everything, possibly enough.

**JULIAN:** If we constantly have this filter up, nothing will be made. I hope that we can make things under the guise of sustainability but without the filter of having to worry about repeating or reiterating.

I'm interested in the art of refusal. Last year, Robert and I had this huge apartment in Pilsen, and I wanted to use the front room as a gallery dedicated to the idea of refusal. It was going to be called BRTLBY & CO after the Vila-Matas book. Then the apartment burned down in March—it refused to participate! Touché. Yet my question remains: how can refusal challenge our perceptions, as art should, perhaps like the hole you put in the barrel to make the whole thing lighter?

**OLEKSANDRA:** You make everything light with a Fresnel lens! It embodies the idea of *highlighting by removing* in a practical, elegant way. Complexity is achieved through elimination; adding by subtracting. To make a Fresnel lens, parts of the lens are removed & rearranged. As a result, a thinner lighter lens with a brighter, steadier beam. Chaotic rays are magnified, redirected, refocused.

**ASYA:** Did we help one another navigate? I like to think of us as chaotic rays of light realigning in the abyss.

This lens is a well-known navigation tool, primarily used in lighthouses. It helps light cover long distances and reach the gaze of seekers at sea. Where's our lighthouse?

CRITIQUE

RESISTANCE

LISTENING

**ROBERT:** The imperative to make work, for me, isn't the point of the MFA. Accumulating traces, images and texts in abundance is my MO. This incessant making, rifling through the already-made (what Austin calls 'raccoon mode') hasn't led me to the Art treasures. I think it has more to do with *making coherent* (even if it's a hermetic or idiosyncratic coherence). The bursts of joy and intensity that I find in the studio are what make art-making worthwhile. But maybe it's the ability to clarify those joys and intensities that lead towards a more engaging, inviting art.

**ANASTASIA:** Is resistance opposed to conformity? One swallows it whole. Another “takes it deeper just to throw it away,” or keep it out, push it back. Resistance determines the self's boundaries. To what degree one can bend, adjust, tolerate, accommodate, understand, dread, respect, appreciate, trust, maybe ignore. Let it through like neutrinos. Don't let it hit the skin, or meat, or bones, or nerves. The external world always wants to shape and reshape us. It expects something from us, demands it, requires, needs, insists, explains, persuades, bribes, threatens, motivates, sometimes even asks politely, in the last instance. How can one refuse? One must comply, cooperate, identify yourself, come with peace, say the codeword, play the game, evangelize, pass it further, for the greater good. How can one object?

**NICK:** What is it we're resisting? The structures, practices, and vocabulary of academic art? I feel like I'm often quick to throw myself in as a conscientious objector during seminars when I feel like a trendy theory doesn't make sense or when there are a lot of buzzwords abounding but the soup seems thin. I also know that calling-out-bullshit can become its own pose—and might leave me blinkered and intellectually malnourished if I'm not careful. I don't want to judge before I digest!

**ASYA:** It started to feel like both sides—if there are sides—were screaming at each another. Pauline Oliveros's directive—“Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears”—became the task at hand. I imagined people walking barefoot, feeling the cold, wet, composting leaves. It's not as if sensory experiences disappeared this past year, but there was more of an active search, and remembering. One way I connect is by touching surfaces and paying attention to textures. It brings me back down to earth. I started thinking about listening with my feet. As new planets and black holes are discovered, people get fascinated by what is *out there*. A continuous fascination to escape. To want to escape. Let's google how far away the most habitable planet is. Let's watch a film about space and pretend we are floating. The mystery is intriguing. I get so seduced by the unknown, I forget to be seduced by what is directly underneath me.



## 2.

**NICK:** In my UIC studio, where much of my input comes through the impoverished world of the screen, my favorite sensory experience is from the big water pipes that stretch from floor to ceiling. Late at night I hear them flow, drip, and rumble. I feel like I'm living inside a heart.

**ASYA:** This reaching above and below was a theme from the beginning of my time as a graduate student. I wanted to film people skydiving in place. They market it: "fly on a cushion of air." I can imagine the feeling of this invisible, forceful cushion. After our first midterm we were exhausted, yet energized. I remember talking to Julian in his studio afterwards; he said *I wonder if animals can hear the wind*.

**JULIAN:** I can't remember my exact phrasing. I think I asked how animals will experience artworks in a future situation of societal collapse. During my first critique, when I stuffed paper pulp into the thin gaps between walls, I remember Sabrina Raaf saying how I gave a home to paper mites.

**AUSTIN:** Later you bought a wasp nest and presented that as work, Julian. I didn't realize the connection between you and Laleh before—you just happen to work with much smaller creatures.

I mentioned my interest in using the paper pulp to force air through a large split in the wall, bringing attention to the room connected to it, behind the gallery. As air came through, the wall began to sing or whistle a tune; faint, yet audible.

**NICK:** I type these words with my left hand alone while my right's wrapped in a splint. While biking home from the studio last night in a peculiar mist of tiny hailstones, I merged over a seam in the concrete, lost control, and flipped onto a muddy snowbank, my wrist taking much of the shock of concrete. I got up, jostled the chain back onto the teeth of the gears, and kept going so that I could write this partial list of disasters, large and small, from the past year or so:

- The west Pilsen apartment shared by Robert & Austin is destroyed in a fire
- Asya falls asleep while biking, crashing & breaking their hand
- Laleh drives her mother's car to the studio, where it gets broken into & everything stolen; this comes after Laleh's two car accidents (a totaled car, then a totaled rental car in place of the original car) & another car robbery, all the previous semester

- Sonya's phone gets stolen from her studio by two strangers whom she invites in after they express curiosity about her work
- Graham's car gets T-boned & totaled in Flagstaff, AZ, at a moment of professional and romantic turmoil, followed by a spell of houselessness
- Oleksandra sees her friends gravely affected in the war in eastern Ukraine, & the uprising in Belarus, trying to stay connected while 5,000 miles away
- Robert & Austin, our house fire survivors, see both of their fathers hospitalized for emergency heart procedures
- Obviously the global disaster of 2020—the gravity of which only dawned on me in the dead-of-night on March 6. There I was, sleepless, doom-scrolling, nursing the throbbing thumb that I'd smashed in a car door that day, in front of my parent's house, where I'd relocated for several months because of an incident a month prior, in which my mom and dad were struck from behind at 60mph by a drunk driver. My parents suffered internal injuries and an aggregate 11 broken bones, and were forced to convalesce at home, with my wife and I as caretakers, just before stay-at-home became the norm.
- Common complaints of romantic tragedy, sexual frustration, & other private catastrophes too numerous to mention

If we could quantify this partial selection of disasters, would it exceed the standard rate of personal disasters? Or is it just the standard ill fortune, aggravated when filtered through the year's doom-colored spectacles?

**AUSTIN:** Like those 2020 NYE glasses, only they black out all light.

**ROBERT:** Sometimes in the past, when I was emotionally distraught, I'd obsess over bad things that could happen to me or to my family and friends. I'd watch the imaginary wheels fall off as I became unable to cope with the disasters spiraling in my head. As Nick shows, our cohort faced its fair share of disaster last year, but we survived, luckily. But, turning the cliché on its head, I'd argue that whatever doesn't kill you leaves an indelible mark. Things might cool down as time passes, but nothing is ever the same after a disaster. To me, disaster no longer looms on the horizon as a future threat. It's present, it has happened. It's scary to think about, but this is not the last global disaster of our lifetimes. In the midst of the disastrous, how can we appreciate what hasn't been taken away? How can we be marked, but still move forward? How can we band together in care and togetherness as we face the inevitable?



**NICK:** When I finally came back to the studios after caring for my parents for six months, everything had changed. New restrictions had created silence, and long stretches of hallway were veiled in shadow. Tomb vibes. But this dark ground only accentuated the bright flashes of the weird and joyful. In the center of a big empty room, a loud, neon extraterrestrial pod, left by Sonya. Seven hours without human contact, followed by a chance encounter with Robert at the 5th floor Xerox; the catharsis of sharing our vulnerability (behind N95 masks). From the depths of a dark corridor, I hear the scamper of feet; Honey, Laleh's dog and collaborator, bursts into the light, careening around tables, barking, passionately chasing her tail in a circle.

**LALEH:** So many things disappeared last year, but not our presence. Presence is “*the state or fact of existing, occurring, or being present in a place or thing.*” The world went silent, people disappeared, yet our presence sustained. Not only did none of us disappear, but we also added Nick to the cohort. We emphasized our existing, we kept on occurring, and we remained present in our studios in the Art & Exhibition Hall building, 400 S. Peoria. We made art. I kept drawing pigs and performing with pigs. I started talking to them, first in English, then Farsi. Honey kept everyone entertained and happy despite everything happening around us. I brought a fish tank to the studio with five fish and two water plants.

**AUSTIN:** All of us are interested in collaboration to various degrees, but, from Honey to those fish, the visiting pigeons, now pigs and plants, Laleh's practice depends most essentially on myriad other beings.

Speaking of plants, my collection is going strong. There's now 63 of them, and their presence is essential to the studio, to my thinking, to my making.

**OLEKSANDRA:** A lucky accident brought me to my studio. “Get the key from the person sitting on your right. Go to their studio and write about it.” That was the prompt. The class was Between Life and Art, with Claudia Weber. Room #4102. Red door. Gray wooden floor. Thank you, Larsen, for letting me in. I guess you didn't have a choice, but I'm still glad to be here. A lot of stuff! Oh, what a shame—Julian will see how empty my studio is—laptop, seven hard drives and an orange sofa recently scavenged from the alley. One year later, I'm in #4102 again. Larsen is here too, handing me the key. It's my studio now. Well, at least for the next year. “How about removing all the paint instead of putting another layer?” I ask. He gives his blessing: “The floor is yours!” Chisels, heatguns, hammers, nails, staples,

# 3.

needles, screws. Paint, paint, paint. Dust, dust, dust. Excavating, digging, unearthing. I turn the studio floor into an archeological dig. I'm facilitating access to the portal. (To the tunnel, Jared?) The studio-as-time machine, as-magnet, as-community-building-form. Who was here before me? Did you leave a message? A trace on this floor that can teach me something? I know someone who worked in this studio the year I was born. Sewing machine needles from no later than the 1960s are still sharp. The floor was installed a century ago, in 1920, when the building was constructed. Are those times still present in this room?

**ANASTASIA:** I wonder how we would perceive the world if we didn't have words to describe it. What would it feel to experience the physical realm directly without the mediation of language? I guess we need language to share our understanding of the world with each other, although we cannot be sure that we perceive it the same way, even if we use the same words to describe it (or signify it, if you like). Thus, language is an abstraction of the physical world.

**ASYA:** I remember this text from Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* about what comes before language. This is why I love film: its ability to break language apart. I guess duration can pull anything apart inside its container: “*Imagine an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the beginning was the word.*”

**ANASTASIA:** These days, we spend more time in the digital realm. The digital world is encoded (all programs are just blocks of text); that is, literally visualized language. We use code to translate language's abstraction back to visual (sometimes tactile) experience. Like Graham constructing a memory of an event that never happened. Programming language adds another layer of abstraction, creating an alternative reality in the same physical setting.

**ROBERT:** Is language a vehicle that takes us toward truth, or the Real, or something that connects us to this material world? Are there other footpaths that meander towards these things? How much



of this traveling has to do with abstracting what we find in order to understand? Can we understand by observing what remains unintelligible? I lost someone important in 2020. The last thing he sent me was a quote by Shab-Parak: *“Listen! If you only knew how many false fantasies of the imagination were closer to the Truth than the careful conclusions made by the prudent ones. And how those truths aren't useful until the imaginative person, having exhausted all of their imaginations, becomes less imaginative.”*

**ASYA:** If we are creating the world we want to live in, this is how we gather and commune in space-by asking questions and ruminating in ideas. We let the questions drift from our mouths into the ether only to land on the page later on.

**SONYA:** I really fuckin’ hate writing.

**ROBERT:** What if we record ourselves talking and transcribe it afterwards?

**NICK:** Of course Robert suggests that. He was the first person in my life to use phone memos. When my hand was dinged up for a week, and I had to hunt and peck with my left, I tried using dictation software to communicate, but saying everything out loud made me paralyzed with self-consciousness!

**ROBERT:** Nick, Vila-Matas writes, *“Was it so infuriating to live in a time of ‘babble’? Perhaps we were in a moment in which we were recovering speech ... underneath it all, this dead time was still a more than positive place, a laboratory in a state of ferment ...”*

**JARED:** Robert, I like this idea of transcription. The original thing—the spoken word—would leave our heads and reverberate through space before making it back to a recording device where you (or whoever) would listen & intently type, accompanied by quiet ‘mhms’ and ‘yes, I recall’s until the tape runs out. Or maybe an AI could transcribe for us, like how Zoom and YouTube add subtitles algorithmically (*AI Gore mythically*, it might say).

**NICK:** The final additional member of our cohort, after Laleh’s dog Honey and myself, was Jared’s AI, which shared cryptic stories in our group chats, and wrote an algorithmically-generated recipe for pecan pie, which Oleksandra baked, to mixed results.

**ANASTASIA:** English is not my first language; it comes on top of Russian. This doesn’t present a simple issue of translation for me. It is about the entire cultural and historical memory embedded

in a native language. When I switch to English, this memory is absent. Laleh talking to pigs in English and Farsi are two completely different situations due to the context the language comes with (or misses). In that sense, the second/third/etc. (foreign) language adds a layer of abstraction, just like a programming language does. Lately, I’ve been reading how traumatic collective experiences affect societies, the survivors and their descendants. It is generally accepted that traumatic experience is unspeakable, meaning language fails to describe it in any tangible or meaningful way. I’m not into programming, but I found the double abstraction of English allows me to formulate things and thoughts that I cannot approach in Russian. I’m curious, can an immediate physical experience be an alternative to the double abstraction? Can it be the reason why Sonya hates writing and prefers recreating traumatic experiences directly through a physical action?

**JULIAN:** I guess actually I do not want to invent anything and am not interested in self-analysis. What I am interested in is an effort to articulate the interest, that’s the work. The Isa Genzken death mask—living (distracted, contemplative, forgetting, remembrance, nostalgia, etc)/(dream). Completely empty and close in proximity, I will try to describe it concisely. Infinite proximity. I felt numbers wash over my vision. I have never felt so close to something in my life. It was like vertigo but from being so impossibly close.

**ANONYMOUS:** I’ve felt this sensation before. I wrote about it once: “my teeth scattered around / the metal gleam of a southbound train / is a tongue too big for my mouth.”.

RUPTURE

**JARED:** A rupture is an inversion. When a star that radiates outward dies, burns out (has pushed its supply of life away from itself) and the energy that kept its extraordinary mass aloft has totally abated (ablated?), it collapses but conserves what’s left. *It de-rupts*. It is the totality of the opposite of a rupture, and to such a magnitude that it becomes an inversion (which, ahem, is just a *true and total rupture*). Well, we are all de-rupting. We’ve inverted and we’re emerging from the singularity, our own energy pushing us back out, aloft and radiant, on the other side.

**ANASTASIA:** I am struggling to translate the word “rupture” into Russian. It seems it’s something that breaks or bursts not by accident, but by pressure of circumstance, releasing a potential (negative or positive) that has accumulated there over a long period. This is a rare opportunity we have, to live through a time of rupture, or a rupture of time. Digital technologies have been accumulating for decades, waiting for their chance to explode. With COVID lockdowns



this big opportunity had arrived—the whole world was suddenly handcuffed to the screen—from kids in daycare to nursing home residents. When the old “norm” ruptured and technology exploded, just like the star Jared talks about, the physical world shrinks to the size of an apartment. Remote work, online learning, Zoom birthday parties are here to stay, no matter how many people get vaccinated. We’ve come back to the time when the common man never leaves his village. According to Zuckerberg, by 2030 people will use smart glasses to “teleport” to any location, where they can sight-see, meet with colleagues, or “visit” family and friends. This will eliminate travel, save fossil fuel, and stop global warming. The physical world is becoming a luxury available only to the wealthy. In just a couple of decades, everyone will be able to afford virtual reality, but only the very few skin-to-skin touch.

Interlude

**GRAHAM:** I’m at this old diner an hour or so outside San Bernardino, famous for being featured in *Kill Bill Vol 2*. The town was just on the cover of the *New York Times* as a global COVID-19 hotspot, & when I walk in, I’m the only one wearing a mask. Like, nobody in this place is wearing a mask but me. I sit down and take it off to breathe in the palpably tense atmosphere. The whole place is vaguely stale, everyone is consciously breaking the mask mandate, but no one is really enjoying themselves that much. It’s a truly interior space, hermetically sealed from any exterior, temporal influence. The food’s pretty good. The booths and stools are made out of light-blue vinyl that sighs whenever someone gets up or down. There’s an old man who quietly strikes up a conversation with a waitress bored out of her skull. She doesn’t care. But the old man is getting more emphatic about whatever he’s saying. He stands up and motions to her to wait. He moves as though he’s deeply affected by osteoarthritis. He walks to a gleaming silver Ford F150 with an extended cab and climbs in, then comes out with a wooden shadow box about 20”x16”. I’m charmed to death. He wants to show it to her, this box he made. He turns it around, and inside is a red, white, and blue American flag mosaic made from shotgun shells. Best thing I could imagine being in there. I’m thrilled. The whole diner crowd is attentive, the waitress still doesn’t give a fuck, and this arthritic man behind the window with the folksy shotgun shell mosaic is beaming ear-to-ear.

4. GERMANS

**AUSTIN:** How strange that we spent the month before Chicago’s lockdown hosting a large group of artists from Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig. One last blast of conviviality and cooperation beyond borders before the epidemiological side of interdependence reared its ugly head. I feel lucky to have performed my theater piece *Utopia 3* with the Germans’ participation. My last in-person work, formed in the wilderness of (necessarily in-person, embodied, always political) sociality.

**JULIAN:** A brief dalliance of days that would act as a crescendo, a plateau, a solemn summit. A reminder of what transpires when two foreign bodies are placed within proximity. I have a memory of doing karaoke with the students from Leipzig. Asya and I were about to sing ABBA, but I had to leave because Kelsey was in a car accident (she was OK). Instead of singing I remember the pre-singing. Pre-visualizing the words, pre-performance.

**ASYA:** It was the most competitive round of karaoke I’ve ever taken part in at a party.

**JARED:** On the subject of Germans, how many times can I reference Hito Steyerl? I said to a friend & mentor recently that I don’t think Steyerl makes Art, she makes something better. Art is, after all, totally *b-o-r-i-n-g*.

**ASYA:** If art is boring or dead, I call for an investigation of sunbeams and blades of grass.

Maybe asking what art is, at least big-A/Art, is the oldest, most mundane question. I argued Steyerl wasn’t making Art because her work requires so much explanation. It feels like all we do now is explicate, expound, explain, like Hito Steyerl does, minus her dancing mania, podium, and goofy alien headphones. On the internet, we’re all talking heads that describe things, our validation coming only as a border gilding (10 pt. yellow stroke, speaker view, you know). When center framed no one can hear us scream (because we’re muted—“Hey, sorry X, you’re muted”). With such a profusion of images in the world (both our own, our heads multiplied 20x or more with every zoom-Zoom-zooming gathering we attend [truly post-conceptual Mazda commercials], and of course the images we create to enhance the reputations of these heads), we’re really just the codex & concordance. *Yes, I have studied cross referencing. No, I am not a librarian (a library scientist—can you imagine? White coat and everything!)*. We’d imagine that librarians don’t blow things up, yet Vannevar Bush (director of the Manhattan



Project, inventor of the memex, a proto-internet) might be the most important, pre-eminent, prophetic librarian I can think of, and he helped us nearly blow up the world (or did we actually succeed?). Big-A Art is not in a position to blow up the world. a/art is, though, & that's why I refuse to make it.

**JULIAN:** We're interested in events, moments, objects, and images that thrive in the weak spots of systems; whether actively, passively, or unknowingly. We are interested in the fissures that these things create. Stray dogs, leaking fountains, abandoned newspaper piles, drug deals, artists like Valie Export, Pierre Huyghe, Laurie Parsons—fugitives from prescription. Instead of barbed wire puncturing the skin of delinquents, we look to those who vaporize the spikes. The idea of Art is so limited and so narrowing that I can feel the walls around me. What is the desire to name something art: perceived recognition or hoped-for framework? I think it's much more important to *do* and to *unlearn*. To do something *regardless* of medium, name, or perception. To be an amateur in everything one does, in order not to professionalize or stagnate. To always remain lying in wait. To let someone name what you've done is to lose a sense of urgency and immediacy. It's to let that thing be placed into a lineage, a history, a before & after, a tradition or an avant-garde. Fuck the avant-garde, how can I inhabit immediacy, namelessness, mediumlessness, rootlessness?

**AUSTIN:** Our cohort forged a collectivity under a patchwork banner. Like this desultory group text. I believe it was our mutual respect for each other's independence and difference that enabled this intimacy. We avoided forced consensus, learned from disagreements like the Quakers do, and advocated for one another relentlessly. This isn't to say we never talked shit, sometimes, guiltily, behind closed doors, as all families do. But there is an art to forging close relationships, which demands that we sit in the tension of a suspended chord, knowing that it may never resolve ...

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