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What Is It Like to Be a PNG?

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts
by Research in Music Composition

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Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss my recent compositions from the perspective of contemporary strands within philosophical realism. In particular, I focus on the realist theme of the autonomous existence of objects, an existence independent of human awareness. I propose that while we cannot directly or fully access objects outside human perception, it is fruitful to speculate on their autonomous existence, especially within the realm of aesthetics. My objective as an artist is to inspire speculation on this autonomous existence or what I refer to as "objects performing their own existence." I have attempted to accomplish this objective by using common, found, and simple objects and by integrating minimal aesthetic cues within an ecological context – one in which objects and spectators engage as they normally would outside an institutionalized art context. I begin this discourse by laying the theoretical framework for my practice, focusing on certain principles of realism. I then survey pieces from other artists that I believe engage these realist principles. Lastly, I discuss four of my own compositions in relation to the notion of an objects' autonomy and irreducibility.

Definitions

Is speculating on the "thing-in-itself" worthwhile?

The underlying principle of philosophical realism is that "the external world exists independent of human awareness."[1] As philosopher Graham Harman notes, "However bland and commonsensical this point may sound, it cuts against the grain of the past century of continental philosophy."[2] Far from realism, the past century of continental philosophy has instead endorsed the antirealist notion that the world is dependent on the human mind.[3]

Among antirealists there are a range of philosophies that more or less undermine the autonomous existence of objects. A philosopher oft-cited as an example of an extreme idealist is George Berkeley (1685 -1753) who denies all material existence and claims that all objects, from apples to rocks, are only ideas in the minds of perceivers. Reality only exists as "an image in some mind, whether it be God's or our own."[4] While there are few literal followers of Berkeley today, there are more recent strands of idealism that can be found in the works of J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), W. J. von Schelling (1775-1854), G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), and Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949).[5]

Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda also consider Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) to be antirealists, even though these two philosophers and their followers "claim to occupy a sophisticated middle ground 'beyond' realism and idealism."[6] According to this group, the question of whether there exists a world outside of our minds is a "pseudoproblem," since mind and world do not exist in isolation from one another and, instead, exist as a pair in "mutual correlation."[7] This position Quentin

1. Graham Harman, *Object-oriented ontology: A new theory of everything* (UK: Penguin, 2018), 10.

2. Harman, *A new theory*, 10.

3. Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, *The rise of realism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 37.

4. Harman, *A new theory,* 49.

5. Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 3.

6. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 3.

7. Ibid.

Meillassoux has attacked and classified as "correlationism," a term later adopted by Harman and other realists.[8]

Regardless of these recent critiques, it is this Husserelian and Heideggerian notion that the realism-versus-idealism question is a pseudoproblem, "unworthy of serious philosophical attention," that the continental thought continues to "almost unanimously" adopt.[9] If we trace these lines of thought further in the history of philosophy, we quickly approach an even greater philosophical giant, akin to the Beethoven of philosophy, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

According to Kant, the gap between the *phenomena* of our conscious experience and that which exists independent of the mind, known as the *noumena* or "things-in-themselves," is "unbridgeable."[10] Kant supports this notion by arguing that we cannot make any claims about the existence of a thing-in-itself beyond thought, for any claim would itself be a thought.[11] "Do space and time really exist in themselves? Are they perceived in the same way by God, superior alien races, dolphins, crows, bees and amoebas? Or are they operative only for finite human beings? Kant thinks there is no way this question can ever be answered."[12] Given that "things-in-themselves" are, by definition, impossible for the human mind to fathom directly, Kant and his followers essentially conclude that "things-in-themselves" are not worthy of discussion, not even of speculation or imagination. In this post-Kantian era, the only thing we are left with is to preoccupy ourselves with the phenomenological experience of humans, or said more succinctly, to preoccupy ourselves with ourselves. This Kantian ontology still defines the horizon for contemporary philosophy, but it is important to distinguish the two independent claims that are made: (1) "things-in-themselves" cannot be directly accessed through human perception, and (2) given the inaccessibility of "things-in-themselves," it is not *worth* speculation.

I agree more or less with the first claim regarding the inaccessibility of things as they exist outside human perception. This claim was famously made by Thomas Nagel in "What Is it

8. Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, London; New York: Continuum, 2009, 7.

9. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 4.

10. Ibid, 81.

11. Ibid.

12. Harman, *A new theory*, 67-68.

Like to Be a Bat?*" (1974), where he points out that even if we as humans were to try to imagine what it is like to be a bat, we would ultimately only get as close as imagining what it is like for *ourselves* to be bats:

> It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves.[13]

Nagel then proceeds with the claim that even if we could transform into a bat, *we* would still not know what it is like to be a bat because *we* wouldn't be *we* anymore, we would lose ourselves in the process:

> Even if I could by gradual degrees be transformed into a bat, nothing in my present constitution enables me to imagine what the experiences of such a future stage of myself thus metamorphosed would be like.[14]

Even the contemporary realists who I have been referencing agree that things-in-themselves are not directly accessible, albeit they don't all agree on the terms for this inaccessibility. Harman uses the terms "withdrawal" and "withhold" to describe the inaccessibility of "things-in-themselves," what he calls the "real objects." According to his notion of withdrawal, "a form can exist in only one place; it cannot be moved into a mind or anywhere else without being translated into something different from what it was."[15] DeLanda agrees with Harman that objects, including humans, do not have direct access to each other, instead "only 'sensing' the outer surfaces of other objects."[16] However, DeLanda considers Harman's determination that all objects consist of a "real object" impossible to access to be unnecessarily establishing fundamental limits of our knowledge. According to DeLanda, the aspects of objects that are possible or impossible for us to access can change over time with advances in our cognitive tools. In other words, the *full* knowledge of an object is highly unlikely not because of a "fundamental withdrawal of the object" but because the "open-ended nature" of the world makes it very unlikely that,

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13. Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?," The philosophical review 83, no. 4 (1974): 439.

14. Nagel, "What is it like," 439.

15. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 105-106.

16. DeLanda and Harman, *The rise of realism*, 101.

for instance, we will know the entire history of an object, not to mention the limits of our perception (we can only see a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, we only hear a portion of all frequencies, etc).[17]

This difference in perspective between Harman and DeLanda represents a common binary division amongst scholars on the subject of the inaccessibility of "things-in-themselves." On one side, there are those, like Harman, who emphasize that there is something *fundamentally* inaccessible about all objects, even human interior objects, such as our own thoughts. On the other side, there are those, like DeLanda who believe that what is inaccessible now could be accessible later through cognitive and technological advances. However, both camps generally agree that we humans currently lack direct access to and knowledge of objects as they exist outside of human perception (with Harman emphasizing that we don't even have direct access to our own thoughts and sensations).

As stated above, I agree with this principle. I do not believe we have direct access to objects as they exist outside our perception. However, it is the second claim commonly established by antirealists that I do not agree with, namely that the nature of an object's existence outside human perception is not *worth* speculation. This validity of this latter claim depends on what type of knowledge and access is desirable. If one intends to only gain *accurate, literal* knowledge on a object as it exists outside of human perception then yes, I would agree that it is likely not worth pursuing. For that matter, though, I do not believe that any effort that requires exact, one-to-one mapping between an object and its characterization is worth pursuing. I would also find it useless, for instance, to translate text from one language to another if the only objective is an exact, one-to-one mapping between terms, an outcome that is likely impossible.

The question then becomes, "Is knowledge or at least literal knowledge the only object of cognition worth pursuing?" According to Harman, when you are asked what something is, you are likely to answer by either saying what the thing is made of or what it does. What is a mechanical clock? It is an instrument consisting of gears that move hands around a display and that tells you the time. Harman claims that these are the two primary types of knowledge we have about objects, neither of which exhaust an account of the object.[18]

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17. Ibid.
18. Harman, *A new theory*, 43.

There isn't a problem with these forms of knowledge *per se,* just that "we humans sometimes convince ourselves that knowledge is the only kind of cognitive activity worth pursuing."[19]

In this respect, art stands out as an obvious cognitive activity arguably worth pursuing that, for ages, has not only defied literal translation and accurate knowledge but has embraced such ambiguities and inaccuracies that result from the nonliteral. Music psychologist Ian Cross supports this point with his conception of music as essentially "polyvalent," prone to embodying a multiplicity of meanings, a defining tendency of music that he has termed *floating intentionality*. "Music has transposable meanings, floating intentionality; music and language inhabit opposite poles on a continuum of specificity of meaning." Language, as used in daily, pragmatic affairs, is located at the pole of specificity, while music is located at the opposite pole of ambiguity or multiplicity in meaning.[20]

José Ortega y Gasset, a philosopher of significant inspiration to Harman, also makes the connection between the efficacy and meaning of art and its capacity to transcend the literal, knowledge-oriented goals of language. In addition, though, Ortega believes that art has the capacity to provide us with a sense of the "thing-in-itself," what he phrases as their "act of executing themselves" or their "executant reality":

> Now then, imagine the importance of a language or system of expressive signs whose function was not to tell us about things but to present them to us in the act of executing themselves. Art is just such a language; this is what art does.[21]

Ortega later clarifies that art does not actually give us direct access to this "executant reality" of objects but that it gives us the impression of such access:

> Notice I am not saying that a work of art reveals the secret of life and being to us; what I do say is that a work of art affords the peculiar pleasure we call esthetic by making it seem that the inwardness of things, their executant reality, is opened to us.[22]

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19. Ibid.

20. Ian Cross. "Musicality and the Human Capacity for Culture," *Musicae Scientiae* 12, no. 1_suppl (March 2008), 160.

21. Harman, *A new theory*, 70.

22. Ibid, 81.

Harman, having integrated much of Ortega's account of aesthetics, calls this special capacity of art, "a touching without touching" or an "indirect allusion" to the thing-in-itself.[23]

Even with the aid of aesthetics, the thing-in-itself still maintains its inaccessibility. As Harman says in reference to the metaphor 'the cypress is a flame,' "not even the vastest army of beautiful metaphors could exhaustively allude to the cypress in its inwardness."[24] This resonates with the Buddhist axiom, "A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon."[25] This saying is a reminder not to confuse the teachings of Buddha with truth itself and to remember that the Buddha's teachings are only "a vehicle to describe the truth."[26] Likewise, art can be thought of as a vehicle to describe objects, as the finger pointing towards to the moon. The claim that Harman seems to be making, therefore, is that even though there is a portion of all objects that are inaccessible, the aesthetic domain, nonetheless, can help us point to the *real* moon, the moon independent of phenomenological perception. Moreover, aesthetics is more suited for the task in comparison to other domains, such as science, which rely strongly on specificity of knowledge, replicability, and verifiability.

But, wait, are we not just back at where we started? Antirealists often claim that this metaphysical realm of things-in-themselves is not worthy of speculation because it will never provide any more access to the things-in-themselves than we already have. Here I seem to be endorsing the view that even with the imaginative domain of aesthetics it is likely that we will not gain anymore access to the autonomous existence of a thing than we had before. We are still left pointing to the moon. This appears to be a rather weak defense. I can imagine a phenomenologist asking the person pointing to the moon, "Why are you pointing to the moon, if the only thing you'll ever be able to do is point to the moon?" The only appropriate response I can imagine is, "I am pointing to the moon, because I'll only ever be able to point to the moon." The idea here being that pointing to the moon, in itself, has value. Alluding to the moon - the moon that existed 4.53 billions

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23. Ibid, 82, 63.

24. Ibid, 82.

25. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha,* (Sydney, N.S.W.: ReadHowYouWant, 2013), 384.

26. Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 384.

years before I was born and will continue to exist after I die - has value, and is better than not alluding to it at all. Now, I realize that I have to defend my position.

First off, I will reiterate a defense for aesthetics as an appropriate domain for investigating such ontological inquiries. One may not agree with the worthiness of devoting attention to the ontological nature of existence outside of human perception. However, one would be hard-pressed to explain why it is not worthy of *aesthetic* attention. Who can easily defend the claim that an artist should not waste their time imagining the incredulous or because such speculation will never generate true knowledge? Imagining the unimaginable and basking in the ocean of ambiguity, far away from the laboratories of specific knowledge and meaning, are the hallmarks of art. Secondly, as an artist, I have personally found value in speculating the nature of objects as they exist outside of my awareness. In particular, I found that when I create art inspired by this type of speculation, my experience of the art and the process underlying its creation has fostered in me a deeper engagement with nonanthropocentrist perspectives. Given the subjectivity of this outcome, I cannot claim nonanthropocentrism is a value that anyone can expect to extract from speculation on the "thing-in-itself." I make this point primarily to justify my own efforts and time spent on the aesthetic experiments I present in this thesis. Moreover, this engagement with nonanthropocentrism has served as a guiding principle underlying the criteria I used to make fundamental artistic decisions on content and context. Therefore, it is worth elaborating on my conception of this principle and how it has motivated my work.

Nonanthropocentrist Art or Flattened Aesthetics

Anthropocentrism literally means "human-centeredness" and became a key term in the emerging environmental ethics movement of the 1970s to denote the belief that humans alone possess moral value and that nonhuman entities have value only insofar as they serve human interests.[27] In colloquial usage, anthropocentrism tends to have a less specific yet similar connotation, and is used to refer to the viewpoint that "humans are the central or most important entity in the world."[28] Conversely, nonanthropocentrism is the denial of this belief, arguing that "the non-human world has value in itself" and that we

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27. Trond Gansmo Jakobsen, "Environmental Ethics: Anthropocentrism and Non-Anthropocentrism Revised in the Light of Critical Realism," Journal of Critical Realism 16, no. 2 (2017): 184.

must extend moral standing to nonhuman entities as well, such as (but not exclusively) animals, plants and landscapes.[29]

One of the main objections current realist philosophers have to Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy is its almost exclusive attention on the ontology of humans, which they believe extends from and perpetuates anthropocentrism. As a result, several new realist philosophies have emerged in the past decade as a response against anthropocentrism and have focused on developing a philosophy which promotes nonanthropocentric thoughts and perspectives. In 2006, DeLanda coined the term 'flat ontology' in his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* as an anti-reductionist term to mean that objects as different as elephants, humans, atoms, and cities may all be equally real.[30] Since then, flat ontology has been adopted by Harman, claiming to use it in a similar sense as DeLanda to refer to an "ontology that initially treats all objects in the same way."[31] This is not to say that flat ontology claims there are no differences between objects, such as a human and a rock, but only that they both *equally* exist. It appears that in practical usage, the term flat ontology is used to argue that nonhuman objects deserve greater ontological attention. This is made clear when Harman says,

> If it strikes you as implausible that human beings – however interesting we may be to ourselves– deserve to fill up a full half of philosophy, then you are already on board with OOO's critique of modern thought. It is true that humans are a remarkable species of living creature....But all these amazing achievements, even if we assume that animals cannot do anything nearly as complex, and even though we as a species are obviously of special interest to ourselves, do not automatically make human beings worthy of filling up fifty per cent of ontology.[32]

This is the basic principle of flat ontology; an ontology becomes flattened when it extends past the human realm and spreads its wings to cover a greater diversity of objects. Regardless of what appears to be its egalitarian intentions, flat ontology has been met with

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28. Sarah E. Boslaugh, "Anthropocentrism," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 30, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism.

29. Gansmo Jakobsen, "Environmental Ethics," 186.

30. Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy,* Bloomsbury Revelations, London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 51.

31. Harman, *A new theory*, 54.

32. Ibid, 56.

much contention and confusion within mainstream philosophy and humanities circles. Harman relates that since "Speculative Realism is supposed to be about the world independent of humans, people assume that we want to talk about a world *without* humans. Thus I am sometimes asked questions such as 'What would an art without humans look like?' Harman responds by saying that "...we don't need to talk about art in a post-apocalyptic world where humans are extinct; we only need to talk about art as not being exhausted by any particular human interpretation of it."[33]

These arguments have inspired me to transpose this idea to art and ask, "What would a flat aesthetics or flattened aesthetics look like?" It certainly seems that, like philosophy, at least fifty percent of art has been filled up with humans in some way or another, either by using humans as the subject of art or using nonhuman objects to represent the human condition. This is not to mention creating art that is not particularly preoccupied with the human condition but that requires commentary to specify the human artists' intentions or the inclusion of such commentary even when the art doesn't appear to need any. It seems we always need to attach the human to the art, we can't just let the tin can sit there without an artist label. In addition, artists seldom ask how their art affects the nonhuman realm. There are, of course, exceptions.

Lynne Hull since 1985 has been engaged in what she calls "trans-species art" or art created for animals. This does not involve art that animals are meant to perceive as art, but rather sculptures that may be perceived as art by humans, but are designed specifically to provide animals with wildlife habitats. She has made "safe roosts for raptors in Wyoming, butterfly hibernation sculptures in Montana, salmon-spawning pools in Ireland, and nesting sites for wild ducks and geese in the Grizedale Forest Sculpture Park in England. Carved hydroglyphs capture water for desert wildlife, and floating art islands offer an inviting habitat for all sorts of aquatic species, from turtles and frogs to ducks and herons, to songbirds, swallows, and insects."[34] In 1993, she made perches for frogs, toads, and newts who were having trouble climbing out of their pool. In an interview, she spoke of her sculptures as "eco-atonement."[35] One can argue that her practice is still

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33. DeLanda and Harman, *Rise of realism*, 40.

34. Lynne Hull and R. J. Preece, "Lynne Hull Interview: Heart and Soul (2009)," Accessed December 30, 2019. https://www.artdesigncafe.com/lynne-hull-art-interview.

35. Hull and Preece, "Interview."

anthropocentric in that it helped established her career, but it appears as if she mostly works behind the scenes. There is little documentation of her work online even though she has collaborated with federal and state wildlife departments across the globe for the past 30 years. Moreover, it appears that most of her works are not even accessible to humans or would rarely be viewed by them. Park rangers and scientists going about their jobs seem to be the most likely human spectators of her work. At the same time, based on interviews and documentation that is available, it is obvious that, apart from providing habitats for animals, she is equally concerned with the aesthetics of her sculptures even if no human will ever see them.

This represents one approach to art that is concerned with de-centering the human. It does so by prioritizing nonhuman over human engagement with the work. Another approach which I believe can be equally effective at de-centering the human is one that I have been hinting at throughout this thesis: inviting the human to engage with the nonhuman. This is the approach that I take in the works presented in this thesis. Specifically, I am interested in the act of speculation itself as a means of fostering nonanthropocentrism.

I am framing this act of speculation as essentially a heightening of attention towards objects performing their own existence. My role as an artist has been, in part, to create a context that facilitates and invites this type of speculation. What do I mean by "objects performing their own existence?" Here, I mean the "thing-in-itself" as it exists through time. In the philosophical background presented earlier, the "thing-in-itself" was referred to as whatever it is about the object that exists independent of human awareness. This is not to say that the "thing-in-itself" exists independent of human existence, as of course, we cannot deny that the mug we use to drink our coffee is affected by our use of it. This is just to say that our use and understanding of the mug does not exhaust the existence of the mug and that the mug has an existence apart from us, just as we have an existence apart from the mug. The antirealist versus realist debate is so focused on simply establishing whether or not the mug has its own existence apart from us that how the mug exists *through* time is side-stepped. In this philosophical debate, the existence of objects independent of human awareness appears to emphasize existence as a *noun*, not a *verb*, existence as the simple indication that the object is *present* but not that the object is *presenting*.

This is where composition can play a role. Composition, in its preoccupation with time and performance, can foreground not just the existence of the mug, but the mug *existing*. My proposal, therefore, is to think of existence itself as performative or "existence as performance." Again, I will emphasize that "foregrounding objects performing their own existence" does not mean that I intend to present unmediated objects existing autonomously but that I invite human spectators to *imagine* objects existing autonomously. In order to make this clearer, I will use a human example to demonstrate that this imaginative venture happens all the time in the social realm.

Imagine a scenario in which you go towards the front of the bus to get off at your stop but then realize that you are still a couple stops away. Not wanting to stand the rest of the way, you sit down on a seat directly facing the bus driver. Immediately, you notice the bus driver's smooth handling of the steering wheel and the way her eyes seem calm and focused on an imaginary distant point up ahead. All the sudden, within that very minute, it is as if you are seeing the bus driver for the first time. You begin to wonder how many hours she has been driving this bus, how it is possible for her to stay awake, how does she feel about her job, how does she feel, period. The bus driver who you knew was the person responsible for moving the vehicle that you were in and taking you to where you wanted to go, is now imbued with autonomous existence.

This experience of *seeing as if for the first time* is not just relegated to individuals of society who normally appear anonymous to us. It happens amongst even those closest to us. At some point while growing up, it is quite normal for people in their adolescence or early adulthood to begin to wonder things about their parents they never wondered before. What was my father like before I was born? What is it really like for my mom when she goes to work; what does she do out there for 8 hours a day? All the sudden it is as if you are seeing them for the first time and wondering about the multiple layers of their being. They immediately become extremely complex beings. "Who are these people I call my parents?" The question feels absurd but also frightening as you realize that the people who have raised you are not transparent, but rather a great mystery. Your parents, the bus driver, the garden plants in your neighborhood that you have just learned to identify by name, the small rock in your shoe, your car that is stalling on you unpredictably on the highway - these are all objects whose autonomous existence has been foregrounded.

Throughout years gradually or quickly within one moment, you notice these objects performing their own existence.

The *seeing as if for the first time* experience is essentially what I am after when I attempt to foreground objects performing their existence within my own works. However, my objects, unlike bus drivers and parents, are nonhuman and some of the most unrelatable of nonhumans. I have a piece, for instance, that is simply an untitled folder, like the very ones that are most likely spread out in various locations of your computer that you never think about. It appears natural to adopt the "what is it like to be" mentality for the bus driver or for your parents, but what about the untitled folder on a computer? The question, "What is it like to be an untitled folder?" sounds ridiculous because the first thing that comes to mind is the thought of us as humans trying to be like an untitled folder. However, remember that Nagel's "What is It Like to Be a Bat?" is not about what is like for *me* to be a bat, but what is like for a *bat* to be a *bat.* So, the question is really, "What is like for an *untitled folder* to be an *untitled folder*?" For many, this may still seem like a ridiculous question, because the infinitive phrase in the question, *to be*, implies *being*, and *being* is often associated with entities possessing consciousness. One might argue, therefore, that it is not possible for the untitled folder to *be* anything, not even itself, because it does not possess consciousness, a necessary condition for being.

This argument is supported by Nagel's "What it is like to be a Bat," and it is the reason Nagel chose the bat as his subject, as opposed to a plant or bacterium - both living beings but ones that are commonly believed to lack consciousness. Nagel's idea is that if we presume that all animals, including bats, possess consciousness then that means there is "something that it is like to *be* that organism - something it is like *for* the organism."[36] However, rather than narrow the definitions of "being" and "be" by relating them only to conscious entities, I use the expanded, more common definitions for "being" and "be," provided by the Cambridge Dictionary:

> *being:* a person or thing that exists

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36. Although Nagel does not provide any justification for this extension of consciousness, we can assume that his justification has to do with that fact that humans are more evolutionarily and genetically similar to animals than any other kingdom.

be: to exist[37]

Here, existence is the only criteria for "being" and "be", with "be" emphasizing the *real time* action or performativity of existing and "being" emphasizing the state of one's existence. Throughout the thesis, I will use "being" and "be" for any object that exists, which, in my view, is every object, including fictional and imaginary objects. With these definitions in mind, we can rephrase the question, "What is it like for an untitled folder *to be* an untitled folder?" into "What is it like for an untitled folder *to exist* as an untitled folder?" By replacing "being" with "exist" the question might sound more scientific, as if I am implying that we investigate how an untitled folder exists exclusively from the standpoint of electrical engineering or computer programming, but, while this knowledge is relevant, as an artist, it is not the only cognitive approach I would like to invoke. Here, I believe a quote by Ortega cited by Harman is especially useful as it approaches this very same notion of being as existence but through a poetic style of expression.

> "Just as there is an I-John Doe, there is also an I-red, an I-water, and an I-star. Everything, from a point of view within itself, is an I."[38]

Harman later clarifies the meaning of this phrase by saying, "Of course, Ortega does not wish to claim that inanimate objects can feel and think. Rather, he anticipates and refutes this objection in advance by saying that an object is an 'I' not because it is conscious, but simply because it *is.*"[39] Adopting Ortega's conception of being as the 'I' of something, the question regarding the untitled folder can also be rephrased as, "What is the I-untitled folder?" Lastly, if none of these aforementioned questions feel natural or comfortable to ask, we can ask a more conservative question, but one which I believe would achieve similar perspectival outcomes. Embedded within "What is it like to be?" is the phrase "What is it." If we simply ask, "What is it?," as in "What is an untitled folder?," I believe we will shortly find that even the most thorough technical, socio-politico, and cultural description of the folder does not exhaust what that folder actually *is*. There will be still some mystery unexhausted by our phenomenological experience of the folder that will invite us to speculate about the folder as it exists independent of our perspective, the folder as it is regardless of whether any one is looking at it, so to speak.

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37. "BEING | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary," Accessed December 30, 2019, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/being.

38. Harman, *A new theory*, 7.

39. Harman, *A new theory*, 77.

To summarize, as an artist, I am interested in foregrounding objects performing their own existence. This is to say that I would like my work to facilitate a shift in perspective (or, at least, to establish conditions that would be amenable to such a shift), wherein one speculates the "what, when, where, and how" of objects existing independent of human awareness. I believe that such a perspectival shift is likely to be associated with the feeling of *seeing something as if for the first time* and I believe it will motivate or be motivated by any one of the following questions, where *x* is any object: "What is it like for *x* to be *x*?," "What is it like for *x* to exist as *x*?," What is I-*x*?," and "What is *x*?" In addition, we might also include these simplified versions: "What is it like for *x* to be itself?" and "What is it like for *x* to exist as itself?" Lastly, I believe that like Lynn Hull's trans-species art, my art has the potential to foster nonanthropocentrism by inviting us humans to direct our attention outside ourselves, and, in so doing, to acknowledge that we represent only one of an infinite number of forms and ways of existing, of performing existence.

Thus far, I've outlined the research questions, motivations, and principles underlying the work presented in this thesis, but I have yet to address the pragmatic "how" question regarding the execution of my work. How, as an artist, have I chosen to "foreground objects performing their existence?" The following discussion will address this question by focusing on themes behind my work, all of which were arrived at more through retrospective analysis than through pre-determined criteria, but which construct a sense of coherency when looking at my portfolio, as a whole.

Aesthetic Practice

My general intention behind the pieces presented in this thesis was to foreground objects performing their own existence or existence as performance. As I was composing the works, this intention manifested itself mainly through intuitive choices made on a piece-by-piece basis. Apart from my research on realism and ontology, these choices were informed by long-standing aesthetic influences, particularly the genres of Conceptual Art and Experimental Composition, the subgenres of Wandelweiser Collective, Arte Povera, Fluxus, Net Art, and the *found music* practices of composer Tom Johnson. As a result of my piece-by-piece approach and my divergent aesthetic influences there is a certain

diversity in the design, medium, and general character of the portfolio. Through retrospective analysis, though, I have identified the following two majors strands of decision-making that unify these pieces and which I now identify as the methodology or criteria I used to foreground *objects performing existence*: (1) use of common, found, or simple objects presented with minimal alterations, if any, and (2) integration of aesthetic cues within an ecological context, one in which objects exist and perform idiomatically in their "native habitat." This criteria will be elaborated below.

Use of common, found, or simple objects presented with minimal alterations

For most of my pieces, I direct focus on one basic object. Each object I have chosen clearly consists of objects within itself, and this multi-layered reality of objects is highlighted in some pieces more than others. However, there is usually one main object that represents the attentional nucleus of the piece. In my untitled folder piece, the attentional nucleus is the untitled folder, in another piece, *for web browser,* the attentional nucleus is, as one can guess, a web browser, and so on.

Apart from directing attention to one basic object, I intentionally chose objects that were common, found, or simple, or that possessed of a combination of these attributes. Each of these attributes has potential in facilitating a "what-is-it-like" encounter with objects. A object that appears simple, like an untitled folder, assists in focusing attention on the basic object, as opposed to diverting attention to the relations between the object's intricate components or the dynamics of an object, which might be the case with an object that at least *appears* more complex, like a running car motor. Meanwhile, common and found objects, like untitled folders and web browsers, usually evoke strong associations with the utility and normal human mode of interaction with the objects. These strong pragmatic associations have the capacity to intensify our perceptual transformation from a preliminary, routine blindness towards the object to a seeing the object as if for the first time, and then seeing (in the sense of discovering) that object everywhere in our lives. Use of common objects, therefore, provides especially ripe opportunities for alluding to a mysterious autonomous existence happening everywhere, just under our nose; it is the pillow we sleep on, the tea kettle we use every morning, and the web browser with which we interact, sometimes more than with any other person or thing. In my pieces, I present objects like these with little to no alterations in the actual material or appearance of the

object. This, I believe, only further invites attention towards the object performing itself, as opposed to the human, artistic shaping of the object.

Integration of aesthetic cues within an ecological context

Ecological context here is used in the same way as in psychology to refer to a context in which things happen in the manner in which they are most likely to happen. For example, let's consider a scientific experiment that investigates whether mothers singing lullabies to their babies decreases stress levels for their babies. For this experiment, a laboratory setting at a university or a hospital would not be considered an ecological context as this is not where the mothers normally sing lullabies to their infants. An ecological context could be established if the research, instead, was conducted at the homes of the mothers with an unobtrusive, digital recorder and heart-rate monitoring devices capturing the relevant data while the mother sings lullabies to her baby at the usual time with no researchers present, as if it were a normal day.

For my goal of presenting "objects performing themselves," I find it important to keep the context as ecological as possible for all parties involved, spectators and art objects included. An untitled folder, for instance, is within an ecological context when it is on someone's computer not really doing much. Likewise, an ecological context for the spectator may be one in which the spectator encounters the untitled folder on their computer at home, at work, or in transit. I find that keeping the context ecological facilitates the *seeing for the first time* experience in which you begin to speculate on the real life of the object. For that reason, I also avoid presenting my pieces at or associating my pieces with highly fabricated or institutionalized aesthetic contexts, as these are often the antithesis of an ecological context for common, simple objects.

Duchamp's *Fountain*, for instance, is not about the power of the urinal as an object existing whether we look at it or not, but rather about the power of the aesthetic context to transform the urinal into something completely different. It seems that the greatest achievement of Conceptual Art is proving to the world that any object can be turned into art when presented within the "artworld." I use artworld as defined by George Dickie in his 1974 essay "What is art? An institutional analysis," to refer to the "bundle of systems" (e.g. "theater, painting, sculpture, literature, music,"etc) and all the agents involved in the systems (e.g. artists, curators, producers, museum directors, museum-goers, art critics, art

educators, art historians, art theorists, etc) who are involved with conferring the status of art upon objects and with keeping "the machinery of the artworld working."[40] Within the framework of an "institutional theory of art," neither Duchamp, his colleagues, nor his predecessors invented the "conferring of the status of art; they simply used an existing institutional device."[41] Harnessing the power of the artworld to trigger our aesthetic stance towards objects has proven to be effective. However, turning everything into art is celebrated at the expense of losing the object that once was, the object before it was turned into art. After 100 plus years of canonization, how many people see a urinal when they see the *Fountain*? Even if you were to try hard, is it even possible to see it as a urinal? The *Fountain* is reminiscent of those visual illusions, where once you see the hidden face in the drawing you can't unsee it. The face in the *Fountain* is that of Marcel Duchamp. As you stare at the object, the artist stares back at you. Therefore, in regards to foregrounding objects' autonomous existence, there are two related challenges posed by a highly manufactured or institutional art context: (1) in the process of being transformed into "art" our perception of the original, pre-artworld (or non-artworld) object is lost, and (2) it can be difficult or impossible to regain perception and appreciation of the original object.

The latter point is simply that institutionalized aesthetic contexts promote *irreversible* perceptual transformations of objects from "non-art" to "art." The concepts of irreversible and reversible aesthetic perspectives are central to my idea of ecological contexts and the ways in which the autonomous existence of objects can be foregrounded. In order to explain them as clearly as possible I will use metaphors within the field of chemistry that I find particularly effective. Organic and inorganic life is replete with examples of both irreversible and reversible chemical reactions. Take the example of combustion, which occurs when an organic compound, like a hydrocarbon, reacts with oxygen to produce carbon dioxide and water:

$$CxHy+O2 \rightarrow CO2+H2O^{42}$$

_____
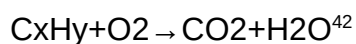
40. George Dickie, "What is art? An institutional analysis," Art and the Aesthetic: an institutional analysis (1974): 430-431.

41. Dickie, "What is art?", 430.

42. Heather Yee and Mandeep Sohal, "Reversible vs. Irreversible Reactions," Libretexts: Chemistry, last modified June 5, 2019,
https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry_Textbook_Maps/
Supplemental_Modules_(Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry)/Equilibria/Dynamic_Equilibria/
Reversible_vs._Irreversible_Reactions.

What makes this reaction irreversible is that the products of the reaction, the carbon dioxide and the water, cannot react with each other to convert back into the starting reactants, hydrocarbon and oxygen.

In contrast, *reversible* reactions are those in which products of the reaction convert back into the reactants and so forth. As this chemistry text beautifully puts it,

> In reversible reactions, the reactants and products are never fully consumed; they are each constantly reacting and being produced...These two reactions are occurring *simultaneously*, which means that the reactants are reacting to yield the products, as the products are reacting to produce the reactants.[43]

An example of a reversible reaction is one in which salt (sodium chloride) reacts with limestone (calcium carbonate) to produce salt crystals (sodium carbonate) and calcium chloride. This reaction happens all the time in salt lakes around the world, in which the salt in the lake reacts with limestone to form salt crystals around the edges of the lake, while at the same time the salt crystals react with calcium chloride and are converted back into salt and limestone.[44]

$$2NaCl + CaCO_3 \leftrightarrows Na_2CO_3 + CaCl_2 \text{[45]}$$
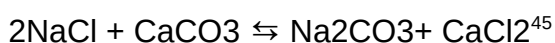
The forward and backward reactions can happen at different rates, but when they occur at the same rate (the salt is converted into crystals at the same rate that the crystals are converted into salt), it is said that the reaction is at *chemical equilibrium*.[46]

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43. Ibid.

44. "Napoleon and the Scientific Expedition to Egypt | Linda Hall Library." Accessed December 31, 2019. https://napoleon.lindahall.org/soda_lakes.shtml.

45. Chemistry LibreTexts. "Principles of Chemical Equilibrium," October 2, 2013. https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry_Textbook_Maps/ Supplemental_Modules_(Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry)/Equilibria/Chemical_Equilibria/ Principles_of_Chemical_Equilibria/Principles_of_Chemical_Equilibrium.

46. Ibid.

The irreversible reaction of combustion I liken to the irreversible transformation of our perception of an object after its integration into the "artworld," from "non-art object" to "art object. I represent this below, appropriating the form of a chemical equation:

$$\text{everyday perspective} + \text{object} \rightarrow \text{aesthetic perspective} + \text{object}$$

The everyday perspective is one that the ecological context invites, namely one that views the object as it normally would with the object itself in an environment where it is typically found, performing its existence as it typically does (e.g. a spectator viewing an untitled folder as a non-descript, trivial folder sitting in some random location on one's computer, without the spectator remembering or caring about how it got there). The aesthetic perspective is a bit harder to define and depends on the cultural context, but, at least within Western cultures, it has been associated with prolonged attention and interest towards objects,[47] distance from everyday practical concerns,[48] a sense of access to the interiority of objects (a "touching without touching"),[49] and a greater appreciation of objects as things-in-themselves as opposed to merely tools. Meanwhile, the object in this equation is the "real object,"[50] the one that is independent of our human perception of it and is therefore represented the same on either side of the equation.

A reversible transformation in aesthetic perception can be represented similarly, but while using the chemical symbol, $\leftrightarrows$, to indicate reversibility:

$$\text{everyday perspective} + \text{object} \leftrightarrows \text{aesthetic perspective} + \text{object}$$

It is easy enough to imagine how the irreversible transformation in perception occurs and I have already given examples with regards to Duchamp's *Fountain*, but how does the reversible one occur? First, I would like to establish that the "everyday perspective" and "aesthetic perspective" are not strict, non-overlapping categories, but, instead, can be

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47. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 1917, in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader,* 2nd Edition edition, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997), 24.

48. Yuriko Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics," Philosophy and Literature 25, no. 1 (2001), 91.

49. Harman, *A new theory*, 82.

50. Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object,* Reprint edition, Winchester, U.K. Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2011, 48.

thought of as idealized poles on a spectrum mapping out a tendency in perception to view an object either as a means-towards-an-end, ordinary tool of human daily consumption or as an aesthetic entity appreciated as an end-in-itself. Our actual perception of an object is likely to lie somewhere in a complex, non-linear middle of the spectrum, with aesthetic and pragmatic perspectives intertwined. For example, the pragmatic effort of environmentalists to protect species and ecosystems is shaped largely by what the general public finds to be the most aesthetically pleasing entities in nature, "such as pandas, whales, seals, and redwoods, but *not* cod, insects, prairies, and wetlands, which may be in more dire need of protection."[51] Yuriko Saito uses this example to argue that "the aesthetic and the practical cannot be neatly separated."[52] Based on the simultaneity and inseparability of aesthetic and practical dimensions, it may seem that my reversible equation above is merely a representation of how we normally perceive everyday objects. If this were the case, one might ask why it is necessary for an artist, such as myself, to proactively contribute anything aesthetic to the ecological context given that we spontaneously aestheticize everyday objects all the time. I do, indeed, consider the reversible equation to be a representation of how we normally perceive objects within an ecological context, but, within this context, our aesthetic perspective is often subconscious. This can be thought of as a side effect, in part, of our cultural attempts to isolate the "artworld" from the practical world of "eating, clothing, dwelling, cleaning, and dealing with natural elements."[53] We are trained to believe that the aesthetic perspective belongs here, in the museum, and not there, in the kitchen. For this reason, we tend to think of everyday objects and activities as "created, used, or performed first and foremost for nonaesthetic purposes. We clean our kitchen and bathroom for hygiene, cook and eat food for nutrition, and select our clothes for protection and comfort. Utensils and furniture are created, used, and appreciated for their respective use."[54] Saiko points out that this is characteristic of Western industrialized cultures, and that other cultures, including Balinese and Inuit cultures, "lack the Western notion of art and artist because they embrace the aesthetic concerns in everything they do and make."[55] Therefore, I believe that, at least within Western industrialized cultures, I can contribute something novel to the normal "everyday perspective ⇆ aesthetic perspective"

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51. Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics," 94.

52. Ibid, 92.

53. Ibid, 88.

54. Ibid, 91.

55. Ibid, 88.

equation; I can promote increased *awareness* and development of one's aesthetic perspective towards everyday objects *as* everyday objects (not specifically art objects). This point is captured nicely by Saiko when she uses the example of aestheticizing a knife while using the knife as it normally would be used:

> At this point, those who advocate an art-based aesthetic theory may remind us that if we distance ourselves from everyday practical concerns, if we adopt a disinterested attitude, we can attend to the aesthetic values of everyday objects and activities. I have no doubt we can and sometimes do just that. I can, for example, contemplate on my knife as if it were a piece of sculpture. However, doing so would compromise its aesthetic value by unduly limiting various sensory inputs which are all integrated into our everyday experience of the object. The aesthetic value of a knife consists not only of its visual qualities and its feel in my hand, determined by its surface texture, weight, and balance but, most importantly, by how smoothly and effortlessly I can cut an object with it.[56]

Saiko here focuses on how aestheticizing the everyday knife involves appreciation of all its phenomenological qualities and functions. However, I believe that in addition to appreciating the phenomenological aspects of objects, aestheticizing everyday objects as they perform their "executant reality" invites us to wonder about the objects outside our use of them.[57]

The perspective we adopt in strong, institutionalized aesthetic contexts is associated with habitual behaviors, such as prolonged attention towards objects, that can be triggered by even the slightest aesthetic cues (simply associating an object with an art title regardless of the setting). In "Art as Technique " (1917), Viktor Shklovsky famously remarked that the "technique of art is to...increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." This is corroborated by the last ten years of research in neuroaesthetics and art psychology, which demonstrates that spectators spend a significant amount of time viewing artworks, with mean viewing durations of 10 to 40 seconds according to museum and laboratory studies in which "viewers are allowed to view art at their own pace." Meanwhile, research indicates that it only takes a fraction of a second to perceive objective features of an art piece (The actual content, such as the geometric forms in art, can be processed within 10 ms, while the style

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56. Ibid, 92.

57. Harman, *A new theory*, 81.

of art pieces can be recognized within 50 ms). [58] Based, in part, on this fact that viewers spend far more time viewing the artwork than is needed to process its basic features, Helmut and Nadal (2014) have proposed that "what makes a experience aesthetic is its long extension in time, which allows for several cycles of feedback and feedforward influence among processes related to perception, cognition and emotion." They clarify that "this does not just mean that aesthetic episodes can last longer, but that the nature of an aesthetic episode is, precisely, an extended time devoted to perception-cognition-emotion interactions."[59] In addition, dramatic shifts in perception and emotional valence related to the "aesthetic episode" is observed not just in museum contexts, but in laboratory contexts in which participants are presented with photographs of realistic events and are simply told that the photographs are art.[60] In fact, for several laboratory experiments investigating the effect of an "art context" versus "non-art context," this is the common protocol: use one set of stimuli that can be viewed as art as easily as it can viewed as non-art, tell one group of participants that the stimuli is art and the other group of participants that the stimuli is not art, and record differences in their processing of and response to the stimuli.

Based on this empirical research and my intuition, I am confident that even the barest of artistic cues can trigger the attributes of aesthetic perspective, particularly that of prolonged attention and interest. This is important because I believe that prolonged attention is central to facilitating the "what is it" and "what is it like to be" questions directed towards objects. The aesthetic cues I provide when presenting my pieces are not as blatant as the laboratory experiments in which participants are simply told "this is art," and they vary depending on the piece. For the untitled folder piece, for instance, I have simply uploaded an empty, untitled folder on my account on archive.org, which provides my full name, and I allow the folder to be downloaded accompanied by the following text, "This is an empty folder that I found on my hard-drive."[61] In this case, the presence of my name alone may serve as a strong aesthetic cue, as any one interested in looking me up will soon discover from my website (and most likely from posts by others) that I am an artist.

58. Helmut Leder and Marcos Nadal, "Ten Years of a Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments : The Aesthetic Episode - Developments and Challenges in Empirical Aesthetics." *British Journal of Psychology* 105, no. 4 (November 2014): 448.

59. Leder and Nadal, " Ten Years of a Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments," 449.

60. Valentin Wagner, Winfried Menninghaus, Julian Hanich, and Thomas Jacobsen. "Art Schema Effects on Affective Experience: The Case of Disgusting Images," Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts 8, no. 2 (May 2014): 120–29.

61. This is just one realization of the piece, and, as such, this text is not part of a score for the piece. The piece does not have a score.

Even if my name isn't searched, though, the fact that this is an empty, untitled folder which has been assigned no explicit use, but which I believed to be valuable enough to offer as a download, invites people to consider the untitled folder more aesthetically than they did before. At the very least, spectators might wonder why someone else values the folder enough to share it with the world when ordinarily it doesn't seem to have much value. They might look at the folder more than they would otherwise, even if it is just to double-check that it is indeed just an empty folder. Already, they begin wondering about this folder more than they have ever wondered about an empty, untitled folder (either that or they immediately think I am crazy and continue wandering the web).

There are other pieces that will provide somewhat more aesthetic cues. For *jorge.png*, I plan on uploading an image in PNG format. The text accompanying the piece will say that the image is a photograph taken by composer Mark So of a page in his notebook, and that the photo was originally a JPG file but has been converted to a PNG file. This, obviously, provides plentiful aesthetic cues, from the naming of an artist Mark So as the photographer to the identification of the image as a page in a composer's notebook. In this case, the aesthetic cues may very well trigger the common effect of "prolonged" viewing time (e.g. 10 - 40 seconds). Spectators might closely compare the JPG to PNG photos to see if they can tell the difference and if they cannot they might wonder perhaps, for the first time, what *is* the real difference between a JPG and a PNG? What is this object that we call jpeg and that we call png?

However, regardless of how dominant the aesthetic cue, I believe the ecological context in which my pieces are presented (e.g. an untitled folder as a domestic download as opposed to a projection on a gallery wall) is strong enough to maintain some degree of attention towards the everyday object, the object as it exists *at home*, so to speak. Moreover, the presentation of the object in an ecological context helps ensure that the natural, reversible manner in which our everyday and aesthetic perspectives form and interact will be maintained, even while we become more aware and intentional in our aestheticization of the object. In this sense, the beneficial attributes of the aesthetic perspective with the strong practical associations of everyday objects in their everyday context presents a promising opportunity for aesthetic perspectives to be consciously developed and integrated into our everyday perspective of objects. A crude take-home motto for my aesthetic goal, therefore, may be "to see the object as an end-in-itself while

continuing to use it as a means-towards-an-end." Let's still use the untitled folder, download it out of curiosity, fill it up with files, rename it, and delete it; but, let's also wonder about the untitled folder, about what it is, what it means for it to exist, let's *see it as if for the first time.*

Returning for one last time to the metaphor of the reversible chemical equation, the salt lake is an environment that consists of a combination of both salt crystals and salt at varying proportions depending on the rate at which salt crystals are formed versus salt. Both salt crystals and salt are simultaneously reacting with other compounds to convert into the form of the other. I'd like to think that our psyche is like this salt lake, a flexible, dynamic environment in which at any moment our perception reacts with objects to form more or less aesthetic or everyday perspectives. At any moment, this psyche can be dominated by a perspective that is more aesthetic or more everyday, or it may even attain an equilibrium in which aesthetic perspectives are formed as often as everyday perspectives, but the overall conditions of the context is such that the reaction always maintains this reversibility. Throughout the thesis, I will integrate the aforementioned principles of realism and aesthetic reversibility in the analysis of my pieces.

Precedents

In this section, I will discuss a handful of pieces by other artists that I believe can be easily interpreted with regards to objects performing their own existence, even when such an interpretation is not the dominant interpretation or the one presented by the artists themselves.

Comedian

Comedian (2019) by Cattelan consisted of a single ripe banana duct-taped to a wall. Three limited-editions of the installation were sold at Art Basel Miami, each for $120,000 to $150,000.[62] The buyers purchased the "concept of the piece, which comes with a certificate of authenticity from the artist, along with installation instructions."[63] The instructions gives ironically specific instructions on how to tape the banana to the wall, at what height to tape it, and suggests that the banana be changed "depending on aesthetic appearance, every 7 - 10 days."[64]

Apparently, Cattelan first conceived of the work as a sculpture of a banana, and experimented with renditions using resin, bronze, and painted bronze. Not having decided yet on its final realization, he hung a banana in his hotel room 'to find inspriation,' finally deciding to use a real banana instead.[65] This proved to be an adequate choice, with New York Times reporting in its headlines that "The $120,000 Banana Wins Art Basel." The success of the piece was appraised by the exorbitant degree of interest that it attracted. Huge crowds were flocking to the see and take pictures of the banana each day of the fair, so much so that, at one point, Miami Beach officers were enlisted to "guard the banana."[66] Eventually, the "Mona Lisa-like" attention the banana was attracting prompted gallery administrators to take down the banana before the fair even ended, issuing in a statement that "the installation caused several uncontrollable crowd movements and the placement of the work on our booth compromised the safety of the artwork around us, including that of our neighbors."[67] Even after the installation was removed, though, the piece lived on. The banana now has its own Instagram account and has inspired several takeoff postings

62. Neil Vigdor, "A $120,000 Banana Is Peeled From an Art Exhibition and Eaten," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2019, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/07/arts/art-basel-banana-eaten.html.

63. Robin Pogrebin. "Banana Splits: Spoiled by Its Own Success, the $120,000 Fruit Is Gone." *The New York Times*, December 8, 2019, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/08/arts/design/banana-removed-art-basel.html.

64. Robin Pogrebin. "That Banana on the Wall? At Art Basel Miami It'll Cost You $120,000." *The New York Times*, December 6, 2019, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/arts/design/banana-art-basel-miami.html.

65. Pogrebin, "That Banana on the Wall?"

66. Vigdor, "A $120,000 Banana Is Peeled."

67. Pogrebin, "Banana Splits."

of people duct-taping mundane objects to the wall, such as a piece of bread and an apple.[68] Some articles have even called the piece the "most talked-about artwork of 2019."[69]

There are has been a barrage of conflicting opinions published by art critics, with some calling it genius and others calling it bad art, their argument being that "there is nothing at stake in the statement it makes" given the 100 plus years of Conceptual Art that has already passed. [70][71] However, even if we agree that this piece does not disrupt the "status quo" of Conceptual Art in any way, there is still something to be said about the fact that this unaltered, simple, common, found object attracted so much attention. If indeed, the piece was just a concept as even Cattelan's assistant Perrotin has stated, then why did so many people push through the crowds and wait for hours in a line to see it live?[72] Even if the primary objective in seeing the banana live is to take an Instagram photo and prove to the world that *you* were there, the point remains that you having a live confrontation with the real banana was significant. Therefore, while the piece can be interpreted in regards to the financial value we place on goods or the absurdity of high art, it can also be interpreted as the power of a single object *existing*. Here, existence was performance quite literally.

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68. Ibid.

69. artnet News. "Maurizio Cattelan's 'Comedian,' Explained: Here's Everything We Published on the Viral Banana Art, All in One Place," December 17, 2019. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/maurizio-cattelan-banana-explained-1732773.

70. Luke O'Neil, "One Banana, What Could It Cost? $120,000 – If It's Art," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2019, sec. Art and design, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/06/maurizio-cattelan-banana-duct-tape-comedian-art-basel-miami.

71. Alec Recinos, "A Banana Taped to a Wall Sold for $120,000 at a Miami Art Fair. Here's Why It Wasn't Good," Insider. Accessed December 31, 2019, https://www.insider.com/the-120000-art-basel-banana-actually-wasnt-good-art-2019-12.

72. Pogrebin, "That Banana on the Wall?"

Figure 1: *Comedian* (2019) by Maurizio Cattelan.

Sealed Computers

Bolognini's *Sealed Computers* are groups of computers interconnected with cables, many still on display on gallery floors and which have been continuously generating random images since 1992. What makes them "sealed" is that the monitor buses of the computers are closed, meaning that no human can actually see the images that the computers generate. This piece relates to several aforementioned themes, not least of which is the general notion behind realism. In this work, computers generate images, which by definition are objects to be seen, but which, in a sense, only the computers 'see.' The images generated by the computers exist whether the humans see them or not. The artist states that flow of images the computers have been generating "without interruption for

twenty years" is "real" and "has an existence independent of the observer."[73] Bolognini suggests that the work is designed to shift the "barycentre from the artist who imagines things to the devices that create them autonomously," and that it is for this reason that he leaves the "machines working indefinitely."[74]

One reoccurring impression echoed by art critics regards the sense of inaccessibility when confronting the work. Faust from NY Arts Magazine writes that "Bolognini's cryptic universe is silent and inaccessible as a galaxy."[75] This inaccessibility resonates with Harman's concept of the withdrawal of all "real objects"[76] and DeLanda's notion of the impracticability of ever achieving *full* knowledge of an object. The work as a whole seems to parallel nicely Harman's claim that we humans can only ever allude to an object as it exists independent of our awareness, but that aesthetics is particularly effective at such allusions. In this sense, the glaring inaccessibility of the piece becomes itself an invitation to access the object through imagination. This is what I have previously suggested as the potential for nonanthropocentric art to invite speculation on the autonomous existence of objects. Bolognini himself implies that this is precisely what he enjoys about the piece, stating that "even when I think of the parallel (not visible) information universe of signs drawn by my sealed machines, it pleases me more to know that a complex and intricate landscape is being created," an intricate landscape which he also refers to as "parallel universes."[77] For Bolognini, imagining these parallel universes is valuable, stimulating, and a motivation for creating these works.

Creative media practitioner Garfield Benjamin perhaps makes an even more direct statement with regards to the invitation for speculation motivated by the computers' inaccessibility or "void," stating that "the process by which we speculatively engage with the unrepresentable and inaccessible void is the creation of limit, staging a similar conceptual space against which the antagonism of denied direct engagement forces the

73. Maurizio Bolognini, "Computer Sigillati/Sealed Computers," Accessed December 31, 2019, https://www.bolognini.org/foto/index.htm.

74. Maurizio Bolognini, "Programmed Machines: Infinity and Identity" Accessed December 31, 2019. https://www.bolognini.org/lectures/GA04.htm.

75. Bolognini, "Computer Sigillati/Sealed Computers."

76. Harman, Quadruple Object, 46.

77. Bolognini, "Programmed Machines".

spectator to examine the relation of the surface of the work and of their own parallax position to what might lie beneath."[78] It is, therefore, our human engagement with what appears to be an unrepresentable and inaccessible void that pushes us to speculate on what "might lie beneath." In this case, I conceive Bolognini's effort to "present" as opposed to "represent" as a technique that effectively foregrounds objects performing their own existence.[79]

Figure 2: Bolognini's Sealed Computers on display. "Maurizio Bolognini: Computer Sigillati/Sealed Computers." Accessed January 5, 2020. https://www.bolognini.org/foto/.

Internet Soul Portraits

Internet Soul Portraits (2005) is a series of altered images that depict well-known homepages devoid of their text-based content. When you encounter the project online, it feels as if you are flipping through an eerie photo gallery of ghost towns from cyberspace. The characteristic layout, color-scheme, and style of graphical icons from homepages, such as Google, Yahoo, Amazon, BestBuy and eBay, remain intact, but all they form are empty icons and empty boxes within boxes. One immediately is impressed by how these basic surface features of the pages' web design reveal the identity of the website. Upon viewing an image of a white background with one long, white slender icon in the center of the page and two smaller white icons below it, you know immediately that you are staring at the ghost of Google's homepage. Yet, not only does it feel you are confronting the vestige of Google, but that you are staring at the "soul" of Google, hence Callahan's title. The text-less containers that compose this site are the site itself, in the sense that they

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78. Bolognini, "Computer Sigillati/Sealed Computers."

79. Ibid.

capture the site's character immediately, even though normally we never pay attention to these icons apart from our use of them. We know these icons at the autonomic level; we are so familiar with them that we are blind to them. They form the psychic cyber-waters that we swim through on a daily-basis. By laying bare these "functionless" icons, we are confronted with the graphical objects themselves. Containers of information are themselves information. The void they present when stripped of text transmits a new type of content or meaning and, as mentioned in relation to Bolognini's *Sealed Computers,* this void invites viewers to speculate on the surface layers of the web that always lie beneath our perception and daily use but that are staring at us all the time. In this piece, in particular, there is a sense that the invisible surface layers of the web are made visible, and in making them visible we realize that they had been performing themselves all along, regardless of whether we were "looking."
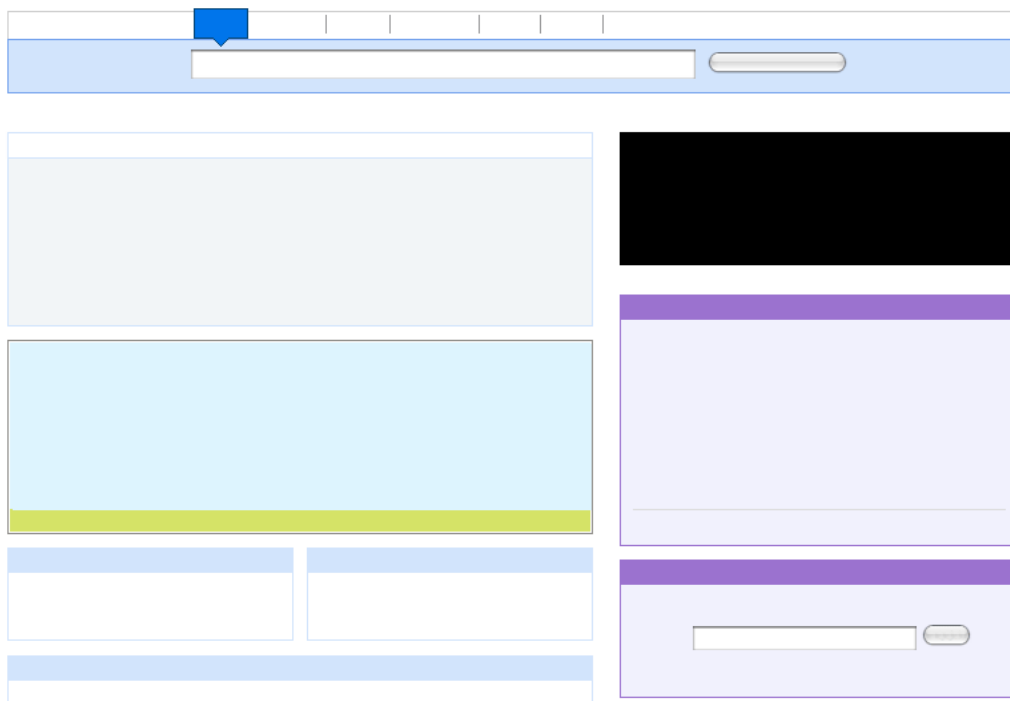
Figure 3: A screenshot of Internet Soul Portraits (Yahoo) "Internet Soul Portraits." Accessed January 4, 2020. http://mazamedia.com/isp/index.html.

Figure 4: A screenshot of Internet Soul Portraits (Best Buy) "Internet Soul Portraits."
Accessed January 4, 2020. http://mazamedia.com/isp/bestbuy.htm.

observing objects

The piece *observing objects* was co-composed by Eva-Maria Houben, Rebecca Lane, and
Samuel E. Dunscombe. This piece presents five six-note chords separated by breath
marks. Analyzed using Allen Forte's nomenclature the chords are 6-Z50, 6-Z25, 6-30, 6-
Z24, and 6-Z50, respectively. There does not seem to be any significant relation amongst
the five chords besides the fact that they are all hexachords. Houben's excerpt from the
performance notes states the following:

> we did not feel time passing by, we got lost. then we wished to do this again and
> again. we like to be busy with a few sounds; then we had a pause; then we
> were busy with other sounds… and so on. in each case we observed this
> assembly of sounds by playing and listening-and recognized that we truly met
> each other.

Figure 5: The five chords in *observing objects*. Houben, Eva-Maria. *observing objects*, Haan: Edition WandelweiserGmbH, 2017.

It may initially appear counter-intuitive to use this piece as an example for foregrounding the autonomous existence of objects. After all, the sounds that make up the chords and the notion of the chord itself requires human performative action and perception, respectively. However, there are several aspects of the piece that allude to the autonomy of these auditory objects, with an obvious one being the title itself, *observing objects*. Observing denotes noticing something about an entity particularly through paying careful attention to it. Moreover, *observing* connotates *discovery*. The title suggests, therefore, that these auditory objects demonstrate at least some degree of independence from our thoughts, otherwise why would we observe them carefully from the outside, expecting to notice or discover something from within? In addition, the fact that the title is *observing objects* and not *observing chords* implies that we are observing something that is not simply a correlate of the musical human mind. An object can be anything, whereas a "chord" depend on our human perception. In addition, the piece separates these objects with breath marks, only adding to their sense of distinctiveness or autonomy, not only in relation to our perception, but in relation to each other. From a compositional standpoint, this characterization of chords as distinct objects is atypical. Historically, chords have been depicted as ephemeral smears of tone-objects or, when they have been object-like, they are often simply links in a chain, whether that chain be narrative or non-narrative. Hence, chords tend to be either connective tissue or a verticalized web of sound within which we can loose ourselves. It is more of an exception to treat chords as distinct units in space - units that transcend their linear relationships with one another and the density of their sonic mass individually. Lastly, although Houben's performance notes focuses on human perception of the objects, she highlights the existence of objects first and then performance and perception of objects secondarily. For instance, instead of saying that

"we played this assembly of sounds and then listened to and observed them," she says "we observed this assembly of sounds by playing and listening." These objects outside our immediate control is the focus on the piece. "Playing and listening" are simply framed as the means through which we can get at these objects. This resonates with a quote by sound artist Francisco Lopez in reference to frog calls, "As soon as the call is in the air, it doesn't belong to the frog that produced it anymore."[80] Likewise, based on Houben's reversed order of operations (observing objects first, playing and listening second), we might say that as soon as the chord is in the air, it doesn't belong to the performer who produced it anymore.

20170 (20abril2018)

Werder's *20abril2018* is one among many pieces in his ongoing work "20170." The work began when Werder acquired a large stack of old paper in a flea market in 2017 and will continue until Werder has used up all the pages for his typewritten scores. Werder considers the creation of each score an "actualization" of the score. As Werder says of this work, "writing a score is its performance, and it doesn't need to be performed again. Because at the end it's all about engaging with something."[81] The score for *20abril2018* consists of a single line of text: separa un silenzio dal silenzio ("separate a silence from silence"). Given that the piece doesn't need to be performed again and that there are indeed no instructions for how to do so, any actualization outside of Werder's creation of this score is open to interpretation. In contemplating the text "separate a silence from silence," an act which in itself I may consider to be an actualization of the score, I am drawn towards the ontology of silence and, in particular, the haecceity or "thisness" of silence. The text "separate a silence from silence" seems to point towards a silence that is itself a multi-dimensional, autonomous object. We can, for instance, speculate that an object (a silence) exists within a larger object (the silence) and that both consists of enough autonomy to be, at the same time, separate from one another. The strangeness of

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80. Daniele V., "Francisco López [Essays // Environmental Sound Matter]," Accessed December 31, 2019, http://www.franciscolopez.net/env.html.

81. Manfred Werder and Andrew C. Smith, "Their Interference Is Actually Their Realization: Manfred Werder & Andrew C. Smith," Medium, February 1, 2019, https://medium.com/@anindexofmusic/their-interference-is-actually-their-realization-manfred-werder-andrew-c-smith-f977001570a6.

such a multidimensional approach to silence embues the object with great mystery. Biguenet captures this mystery of silence when he says,

> So though an object with which most of us feel intimately acquainted, silence is, in fact, a domain about which we can hazard only guesses, guesses our scientists sometimes validate, while its former kingdom, the ineffable, continues to contract. But even if silence remains forever beyond our reach, the notion of such a supposed emptiness is, like the placeholder zero, an object whose utility is inexhaustible--and whose value in a clamorous world soars.[82]

Werder's piece presents this familiar object of silence while at the same time highlighting its mysterious nature that no amount of human interpretation or characterization can exhaust. As objects, both a silence and the silence within Werder's text are irreducible placeholders, with the ambiguity of the fragmentary text leaving us to speculate what they are placeholders for.

Practice

In this section, I will discuss pieces of mine that I believe are particularly relevant in regards to foregrounding objects performing their own existence and the notion of existence as performance. The first three pieces focus on digital objects, while the last work presents scores for open instrumentation. In addition to their common medium of the digital, the first three pieces are unified by my intention to make visible the normally invisible layers or realities of a digital object, what I refer to as *daylighting the digital.*

I borrow the term "daylighting" from ecology, which uses the term to refer to the process of "removing obstructions which are covering a river, creek, or drainage way and restoring them to their previous condition."[83] In essence, daylighting a stream does exactly what it says, it brings daylight to the stream by removing the human structures, such as the parking lots, buildings, or roads, that are built on top of it. Apart from benefiting the stream's ecosystem, daylighting a stream contributes enormously to our aesthetic

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82. John Biguenet, *Silence,* 01 edition, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 6.

83. Naturally Resilient Communities, "Daylighting Rivers and Streams – Naturally Resilient Communities." Accessed December 31, 2019. http://nrcsolutions.org/daylighting-rivers/.

appreciation of the stream, with most people not even knowing about the stream's existence until the pavement that covers it is removed. All the sudden a stream that had been flowing for decades below a gigantic parking lot in your local neighborhood is now flowing in broad daylight. I apply a similar idea to *daylighting the digital*. There is a multiplicity of digital objects, digital streams, if you will, whose ongoing 'flow' is covered from our perception. Digital objects are often perceived as flat, one-dimensional objects, like pavement forming a surface, with no hidden streams underneath. With the next few pieces, I have attempted to daylight the existence of digital objects that are normally hidden by our one-dimensional, abstracted representations of them and by our proclivity to approach digital objects exclusively as tools rendering even their most visible aspects, invisible.

untitled_folder

> *The UNIX philosophy is often quoted as 'everything is a file', but that really means 'everything is a stream of bytes.'*

> - Linus Torvalds

This piece is realized by any empty, untitled folder performing its existence on any device, anywhere. The UNIX philosophy behind Linux software describes every object on an operating system as a file, including device drivers, directories, and folders themselves. From this perspective, a folder is simply a type of file, one designed to store other files. Linus Torvalds, creator of the Linux kernel, expands upon this seemingly simplistic philosophy that 'everything is a file,' by emphasizing that every file is in fact a unique stream of bytes or a collection of zeros and ones. However, most users only consciously interact with a text-based title or graphical icon for a file, the virtual outer-most surface of the file. The text "Untitled folder" and a visual icon of an empty folder is the object that we ordinarily perceive when we confront an empty, untitled folder.

Typically, when we create an empty, untitled folder, we immediately rename it and fill it up with other files. If not, we often forget about it. If we notice it again, we look inside it to remind ourselves of whether this is a folder with data that we forgot to name or whether it really is empty. If it is empty, we often delete it so that we don't become distracted by it again. Sometimes, we keep the empty, untitled folder because we've grown accustomed to it being where it is; perhaps it is providing a unexplicable sense of comfort. There are also

those empty, untitled folders that we never re-discover; they are sitting in mysterious places on our operating system, simply existing.

The folder as a stream of bytes and the folder as our file holder represent what Harman considers to be the two primary types of knowledge: what an object is made of and its effects in the world. However, Harman would also argue that no object can be reduced "downward" to its constituent components or "upwards" to its effects in the world. In other words, the untitled folder is more than its stream of bytes and more than its use by humans and computers. A description of the untitled folder from either of these two perspectives would not provide full knowledge on or access to the folder itself. The irreducible existence of the empty, untitled folder is as mysterious as any object existing in the world and may seem even more so given how strange it is to even think of a folder or any digital object as existing. Yuk Hui echoes this sentiment by describing the digital object as "highly enigmatic," "an object neither of experience nor of intuition."[84]

The mystery behind digital existence stems from the fact that digital objects from the "user's point of view" are abstractions.[85] A digital file is virtual. The bits that compose a file are "brought together in real time" when the user engages with it and those bits are often derived from other files, which themselves may not be singular.[86] Therefore, at "the interface between the user and the system," the stream of bytes that we think of as the smallest constituent units of the empty, untitled folder are brought together at the moment of interaction to form the impression of a unitary object that users can interact with as if the folder "had properties similar to a corporeal file."[87] In other words, our ordinary notion of the untitled folder is one that the computer creates for us every single point at which we engage with the folder. Is this virtual existence real? Is there any point in speculating the existence of an untitled folder outside our perception of it? We know that the software on our computer has been specifically designed to create the impression of a unitary container when the folder is in fact a composite object, composed of streams and bundles of binary code and of possibly other single and composite files. The folder therefore does

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84. Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects,* Electronic Mediations 48, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, xi.

85. Richard Harper, Siân Lindley, Eno Thereska, Richard Banks, Philip Gosset, Gavin Smyth, William Odom, and Eryn Whitworth, "What is a File?"ACM, 2013, 1132.

86. Harper et. al, "What is a File?," 1129.

87. Ibid.

not appear or function like a unitary folder without a human or programmable computer interfacing with it and, therefore, one might argue that the existence of the folder is dependent on the human mind.

However, we can argue that all reality has some element of the virtual. A human being is composed of streams of atoms, bundles of molecules and interconnected organs, including our outer layer of skin. When we interact with other humans we do not perceive all the overlapping streams of atoms from which they are constituted. Instead our brains are designed to form a cohesive, unitary image of the human based on the outer layer of heterogeneous "bits" with which we are confronted. Although we know that our perception of the human as a unitary entity does not accurately reflect the multi-layered, dynamic interplay of all the constituent parts of the human, we still believe that the human exists. Moreover, other humans have an existence independent of our awareness of them. Similarly, although the representation of the untitled folder we are confronted with does not capture the hidden layer of zeros and ones that form its underlying code, both the folder-as-seen-by-the-user and its stream of bytes are connected to something that actually exists. As DeLanda notes, every object consists of an "associated possibility space" whose points, "representing ordinary possibilities, are not mind-independent," but "the structure of the space...does exist independently of our minds."[88] In other words, we may not be able to know the nature of the untitled folder outside of our minds, but our perception of the untitled folder is constrained by a structure in space that does exist independent of our awareness. If I abandon my computer in a desert, the untitled folder on my home drive will exist in some way indefinitely. If I retrieve the unscathed computer from the desert I can interact once again with the untitled folder because some structure of space definitively associated with the folder persisted through its days in the desert.

As mentioned earlier, my intention, as an artist, is to foreground that autonomous existence of objects, that structure in space which persists regardless of our mind's content. For this reason, I have chosen specifically to present an *empty*, untitled folder as I believe this appearance of emptiness facilitates speculation on the object's autonomous existence. The style of *untitled_folder* is informed by a strong compositional, literary, and artistic tradition of works that focus attention on what, at least initially, appears to be a void.

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88. DeLanda and Harman, *Rise of realism*, 65.

I have nicknamed these works "nothing pieces" and provide a self-curated list of some of them below.

Table 1: Nothing Pieces

Artist	Work	Year
Larry Bell	Untitled	1967
George Brecht	Void Stone	1987
Mark Callahan	Internet Soul Portraits	2005
Bruno Munari	Little White Riding Hood	2004
Yves Klein	The Void	1958
Gabriel Orozco	Empty Shoe Box	1993
Ceal Floyer	Auto Focus	2002
George Brecht	Two Elimination Events	1963
Marcel Duchamp	Air de Paris	1919
Martin Creed	Work No. 916	2008
Kazimir Malevich	White on White	1918
John Cage	4'33"	1952
Ansh Patel	Encore	2015
Eugen Gomringer	silencio	1953
Tom Friedman	1000 Hours of Staring	1992-97
Peter Ablinger	Weiss/Weisslich 25	1996
Joseph Beuys	The Silence	1973
George Brecht	Tea Event	1961

As mentioned in reference to Bolognini's *Sealed Computers*, the strong sense of a "void" we initially encounter in these works invites speculation on that which lies beyond our ordinary perception of the object. In this act of speculation and focused attention on the object, we notice that void is a form in itself, sketching the boundaries around a rich, autonomous existence. As Cage has remarked, "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. Sounds occur whether intended or not."[89] The empty, untitled folder, therefore, is similar to Cage's *4'33"* in that it directs attention to its own 'sounds' and 'sights' waiting for us to 'hear' and 'see' it. This is echoed by Wolfgang

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89. Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book,* MIT Press, 2009, 263.

Staehle when he says, "I am interested in what happens when nothing happens." For Staehle and for artists in Table 1, "nothing" is an ideal or a guiding star on the horizon. The actual outcome of reaching towards nothing is a minimization of the human mediation between object and spectator - a reduction in pre-determined, goal-oriented narratives and alterations made to the object or to its natural context. Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler captures this sentiment when saying in relation to his practice that "the world is full of objects, more or less interesting," "I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place."[90]

In a sense, the goal of "nothing pieces" is actually "nothing added." In the case of *untitled_folder*, what is normally added to a composition, a "narrative," is replaced by an empty folder existing. It is not to say that the folder's performance of existence is not filtered through our anthropomorphic perceptual lens. Naturally, this is the case in every encounter with an object. The question is how do we perceive the folder's existence differently depending on the degree to which the artist mediates the encounter between spectator and folder? How does the encounter change when we attempt to add nothing? In *untitled_folder*, I have attempted to "add nothing" by presenting the empty, untitled folder unaltered, without instructions, without suggested symbolism, and, as mentioned earlier, by presenting the folder as an actual usable untitled folder in its ecological context - that is, wherever it is normally found. I have carefully chosen just a few aesthetic cues to provide when presenting the work so as to keep attention directed to the folder as it exists "idiomatically." As mentioned in the previous section, my identity as an artist in association with my presentation of the untitled folder provides already plenty of aesthetic context. Perhaps, even more so, simply my act in presenting and sharing with the world an object that is normally considered to possess little to no value (even less value than a penny) facilitates aestheticization of the folder. This intensified aesthetic perspective may involve prolonged interest and attention directed towards the folder, and, in regards to an empty, untitled folder, any interest or attention given, even if just for a second, would be more than what most people give the folder in a lifetime. It is this integration of subtle aesthetic cues in a largely everyday context that I believe has the potential of leading spectators to *see the folder as if for the first time* and to wonder (even if not quite consciously) "What is the untitled folder?" and "What it is like for the untitled folder to exist?"

90. Eldritch Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 49.

Figure 6: A screenshot showing an untitled folder on Tristan Murail's laptop.

Murail, Tristan. "- « OpenMusic in my life » (mon expérience et pratique de la CAO)" Feb. 28, 2018. Video, 02:29:45. https://medias.ircam.fr/x8ec0a8

jorge.png

Similarity connotates both sameness and difference.[91]

- Antoine Beuger

This piece is an image resulting from the conversion of a JPG file to a PNG file. The context for this piece began when composer Mark So mailed a page of writing from his notebook to my friend Robert Blatt and me in 2017. Robert realized his "instance of Mark So's notebook" by creating 8 "transcriptions, at different times and places."[92] Each transcription features a selection of Mark's words rewritten in ink and erased pencil and scattered across two double-sided sheets of paper and translucent vellum. I initially realized Mark's page by silently reading it to myself while at a concert. Like Robert, though, I also wanted to create some sort of transcription, but before I could get started, I lost the page.

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91. James Saunders and Antoine Beuger. "Antoine Beuger," in The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music, 1 edition. Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009, 241.

92. Robert Blatt, "Robert Blatt | Transcripts (26 Iv 17 Los Angeles - 1 v from Notebook/Reading List by Mark So)," Accessed January 5, 2020. http://robertblatt.ricercata.org/pieces/Transcripts-mark.html.

This year, I realized that I had a JPG image of the page that Mark had previously emailed to me. It is then that I thought of a machinic transcription of the page's image, one in which the computer performs the transcription by converting the photograph of the page from JPG to PNG format. My interest in transcribing the JPG instead of the forms captured by the image was based on the idea that the JPG is an object in its own right, as opposed to simply a tool for visual representation, and that the JPG was itself a transcription of the original page. Therefore, although I was initially disappointed that the analogue page was lost, I decided to interpret Mark's photograph as a camera/human transcription of the page, an initiation of a transcription process that I could continue.

I was reminded by G. Douglas Barret's *Derivations* series (2006-2010), in which software uses spectral and rhythmic analyses to transcribe a recording of a performance into a musical score for a subsequent performance. This "photocopy-of-a-photocopy" recursive process is repeated for each piece in the series, so that you have "a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a performance" and so on, with the chain of derivation lengthening after each subsequent piece.[93] Through errors in the software's translation of recording to score and the performers' translation of score to performance, the pieces throughout the series evolve into something widely different from the original artifact. I was inspired by this recursive approach but was interested in transcription with minimal perceptible effects. I asked myself, "How can I create a transcription that on the face of it looks as if almost nothing has changed?" Converting Mark So's original image from JPG to PNG format was the solution I chose. This approach to transcription raises questions as to the meaning of transcription. Typically, transcription is defined either as "a copy," as in written words from a speech, or "translation," in the sense of turning something from one language into another language or from one set of symbols into another.[94]

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93. David Pocknee, "Better Know A Weisslich: G Douglas Barrett," *WEISSLICH* (blog), April 22, 2016, https://weisslich.com/2016/04/22/better-know-a-weisslich-g-douglas-barrett/. ; Barrett, G. Douglas. "Derivation XIII b." Musical Score, 2009. https://gdouglasbarrett.com/music/derivation_XIII_b/Derivation_XIII_B.pdf.

94. "Definition of TRANSLATE." Accessed January 6, 2020. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/translate.

Certainly, by comparing the images, the eye would be tempted to conclude that this transcription functions as a copy. However, a comparison of the code for the JPG and PNG files points to their differences and to the artefacts of translation. Below is the first ten lines of a hexadecimal representation of the binary code for the JPG and the PNG files. This type of output, known as a hex dump, is a sort of shorthand for binary code in that each hexadecimal digit represents four bits of data. Therefore, the differences in the lines of code for the JPG versus PNG represent differences in the binary code of the files, what can be considered the file's lowest-level code:

jorge.JPG:

    0000000 d8ff e0ff 1000 464a 4649 0100 0101 4800
    0000010 4800 0000 e1ff fc9f 7845 6669 0000 4949
    0000020 002a 0008 0000 000c 010f 0002 0009 0000
    0000030 009e 0000 0110 0002 000e 0000 00a8 0000
    0000040 0112 0003 0001 0000 0006 0000 011a 0005
    0000050 0001 0000 00b6 0000 011b 0005 0001 0000
    0000060 00be 0000 0128 0003 0001 0000 0002 0000
    0000070 0131 0002 0025 0000 00c6 0000 0132 0002
    0000080 0014 0000 00ec 0000 0213 0003 0001 0000
    0000090 0002 0000 8298 0002 0005 0000 0100 0000

jorge.png:

    0000000 5089 474e 0a0d 0a1a 0000 0d00 4849 5244
    0000010 0000 900c 0000 c010 0208 0000 0900 736e
    0000020 0011 0000 6704 4d41 0041 b100 0b8f 61fc
    0000030 0005 0000 6320 5248 004d 7a00 0026 8000
    0000040 0084 fa00 0000 8000 00e8 7500 0030 ea00
    0000050 0060 3a00 0098 1700 9c70 51ba 003c 0000
    0000060 6206 474b 0044 00ff 00ff a0ff a7bd 0093
    0000070 0000 7009 5948 0073 0b00 0012 0b00 0112
    0000080 ddd2 fc7e 0000 0700 4974 454d e307 050b
    0000090 2e0d 5425 4cd1 0097 0000 6f01 4e72 0654

As can be seen, the code of the JPG and PNG files are quite different. We now have two phenomenological accounts of the JPG and PNG files: one in the form of visual images representing what the camera originally captured and the other in the form of binary code that is read by the computer to produce the images in pixels. Clearly, our perception of the image does not provide us with full knowledge on the JPG versus PNG as we would probably not be able to distinguish between their images without other information, such as their file extension names. However, treating a collection of 0s and 1s as the "foundation of being" for the JPG and the PNG is just as reductionistic as understanding these digital objects exclusively by their "user-level" appearance as photographs.[95] This is the point that philosopher Yuk Hui makes when he says that bits can be thought of as "the atomic representation" of data, but that just as the world cannot be fully understood in terms of atoms, neither can data be fully understood in terms of bits.[96] In fact, Hui's point is that no amount of searching downwards into the digital object will ever uncover its "essence:"

> Digital objects appear to human users as colourful and visible beings. At the level of programming they are text files; further down the operating system they are binary codes; finally, at the level of circuit boards they are nothing but signals generated by the values of voltage and the operation of logic gates... Searching downward we may end up with the mediation of silicon and metal. And finally we could go into particles and fields. But this kind of reductionism doesn't tell us much about the world.[97]

The Buddhist allegory reminds us that while the finger points to the moon, the finger is not the moon. The hex dump representing the PNG's binary code is like the finger pointing to the moon. The binary code points to the PNG, but it is not the PNG. Likewise, the image points to the PNG, but it is not the PNG. If the finger-pointing-to-the-moon analogy seems to lose its intuitive appeal when replaced with digital objects, you are not alone. Even those well-informed in computer science grapple with the seemingly strange concept of data just existing. In an interview with Hui, the Founding Director of The Institute of

95. "Digital Objects and Metadata Schemes - Journal #78 December 2016 - e-Flux." Accessed January 5, 2020. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/82706/digital-objects-and-metadata-schemes/.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.

Network Cultures, Geert Lovink, implied that such a notion might appear to some as "intolerable,"

> You have said that 'the digital is the capacity to process data.'... This 'dynamic' approach presumes that there is also a static view, of zeros and ones, in which the digital merely *is*. Is it an intolerable thought that data can just exist, without any context—data as such?[98]

Hui's response is essentially "yes." He explains by pointing out that beyond static and dynamic views of data, there are "different orders of magnitude" of a digital object. The 0 and 1 level is one order of magnitude, while the object the you the user can click, drag, and delete is another order of magnitude. Most importantly, Hui argues that "each of these orders of magnitude can be seen as a reality in itself."[99] The colorful, interactive objects, the text-files, the stream of bytes, the signals generated by the circuit board, the mediation of silicon and metal, and the interaction of particles and fields are all real. They exist regardless of whether humans are aware of them of not.

In order to tolerate the idea of data "just existing," it should be re-iterated that mind-independence is not independence from the existence of the mind. The existence of digital objects are highly dependent on the existence of human minds as is evidenced by our ability to "rewrite the whole code of a digital object, change its identity, and delete it in a second."[100] As DeLanda reminds us, mind-independence signifies "independence from *the content of our minds*," not from the existence of our minds.[101] The piece *jorge.png* resonates with Harman and DeLanda's realism in that it creates a cognitive dissonance between different phenomenological perspectives of the same object, rendering the phenomenological incapable of providing a cohesive account of the objects at hand: when comparing the files jorge.jpg and jorge.png, the images appear the same while the data that underlies the images does not. We are left with a sense that the phenomenological accounts, neither exclusively nor together, provide an exhaustive account of the actual existence of the object. We still don't really know the answer to, "What is a PNG?,"

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98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. DeLanda and Harman, *Rise of realism*, 39.

although I believe the piece, by focusing on the PNG-status of the object, invites such speculation. As Hui argues, phenomenologists have been "eager to find the structure of consciousness that would allow it to know the object, but there is among them less investigation into the object's own existence, and how its existence conditions the process of knowing and being itself."[102]

For *jorge.png*, I have used methods similar to the *untitled_folder* in order to foreground the PNG's own existence, the "intolerable" notion of data "just existing." I have used a common, found, and simple object and intend on presenting it in its ecological context. I will provide a digital download of the PNG on my account on archive.org with accompanying text stating that this is a PNG photograph converted from a JPG taken by composer Mark So. The context is ecological in the sense that the file appears and functions like an ordinary image file, as something that can easily be downloaded within the comfort of one's home on one's personal device with no instructions for what to do with the photo other than look at it. At the same time, the context is aestheticized in that I have associated myself as an artist with the piece, the photographer Mark So is a composer as well, and I have mysteriously implied that there is some value to converting the JPG to PNG.

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102. Yuk Hui, "What Is a Digital Object?," *Metaphilosophy* 43, no. 4 (July 2012): 380–95.

2 v 17 los angeles
THAT NOISE,
and the only one left is me.
sweethearts in eternity.
4 v
in my notebook's lines
all are not mine
SOME TIME
a margin of mirror
calm little flowers.
before the ripe flank of the day.
birds of air generate first sublimation
remember the days
that come and go with the wind
without you nothing emerges into the shining
    sunlit world
In this evil hour of my country's history, I
    cannot pursue my task with a mind at ease,
5 v
your timeless time.
June,
more two than ever.
the lightless love, the skyless, xk
the most stone, most nothing,
The juridical plumbing.
'raw material', or 'generative bodies' or 'seeds'
'primary particles',
voyaged in the mind
what can be and what cannot:
level with the skies.
unfading memory, as appearing
phantasms that strike upon our minds
The poverty of our language
our delightful friendship
to stay awake through the quiet of the night,
by choice of words and the poet's art I can display
    before your mind a clear light by which you g
    can gaze into the heart of hidden things.
nothing can be created
made out of nothing,
multiplying indiscriminately,
cultivated and waste lands alike.
in specific objects.
drifted together at their own proper time
into the sunlit world.
in order that things might grow,
many elements are common to many things, as letters
    are to words,
the unresisting air
great improvements arising spontaneously
Four just humanities together!
in this peace of a single line,
so you may satiate my corners.

Figure 7: jorge.JPG

2 v 17 los angeles
THAT NOISE,
and the only one left is me.
sweethearts in eternity.
4 v
in my notebook's lines
all are not mine
SOME TIME
a margin of mirror
calm little flowers.
before the ripe flank of the day.
birds of air give the first sublimation
remember the days
that come and go with the wind
without you nothing emerges into the shining
    sunlit world
In this evil hour of my country's history, I
    cannot pursue my task with a mind at ease,
5 v
your timeless time.
June,
more two than ever.
the lightless love, the skyless, th
the most stone, most nothing,
The juridical plumbing.
'raw material', or 'generative bodies' or 'seeds'
'primary particles',
voyaged in the mind
what can be and what cannot:
level with the skies.
unfading memory, as appearing
phantasms that strike upon our minds
The poverty of our language
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to stay awake through the quiet of the night,
by choice of words and the poet's art I can display
    before your mind a clear light by which you
    can gaze into the heart of hidden things.
nothing can be created
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cultivated and waste lands alike.
in specific objects.
drifted together at their own proper time
into the sunlit world.
in order that things might grow,
many elements are common to many things, as letters
    are to words,
the unresisting air
great improvements arising spontaneously
Four just humanities together!
in this peace of a single line,
so you may satiate my corners.

Figure 8: jorge.png

for web browser

The piece *for web browser* is any web browser with javascript disabled. JavaScript is the main programming language used in web browsers. One of the main reasons it was integrated into the web in the 1990s was to make websites more interactive, transforming them from archival storage sites to programs capable of satisfying countless social functions in society. The issue with javascript used in the web now is that most of it is proprietary; it is hidden from users and it is used by companies, including Facebook, Google, and others, to capture personal information and browsing behaviors - an activity known as life-mining or data-mining. This has led Richard Stallman, director of the Free Software Foundation, to advise users to disable proprietary javascript in web browsers, a task that every user can accomplish rather easily but one that most users don't even know about.

Richard Stallman recounts some of the dangers of javascript in his article "The Javascript Trap":

> JavaScript ... was once used for minor frills in web pages, such as cute but inessential navigation and display features. It was acceptable to consider these as mere extensions of HTML markup, rather than as true software, and disregard the issue.
>
> Some sites still use JavaScript that way, but many use it for major programs that do large jobs. For instance, Google Docs tries to install into your browser a JavaScript program which measures half a megabyte, in a compacted form that we could call Obfuscript. This compacted form is made from the source code, by deleting the extra spaces that make the code readable and the explanatory remarks that make it comprehensible, and replacing each meaningful name in the code with an arbitrary short name so we can't tell what it is supposed to mean.[103]

Javascript code as it is used in the browser, then, is intentionally made unreadable. Consequently, companies and "cyber criminals" alike are capable of browser attacks with countless documented examples of "drive-by-downloads, pop-up ads, and phishing

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103. Richard Stallman, "The Javascript Trap," Accessed January 5, 2020.

https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/javascript-trap.en.html.

attacks."[104] Disabling javascript, therefore, is a much safer way of browsing the web. However, as the screenshots below demonstrate, disabling javascript interferes significantly with the function and usability of major websites.
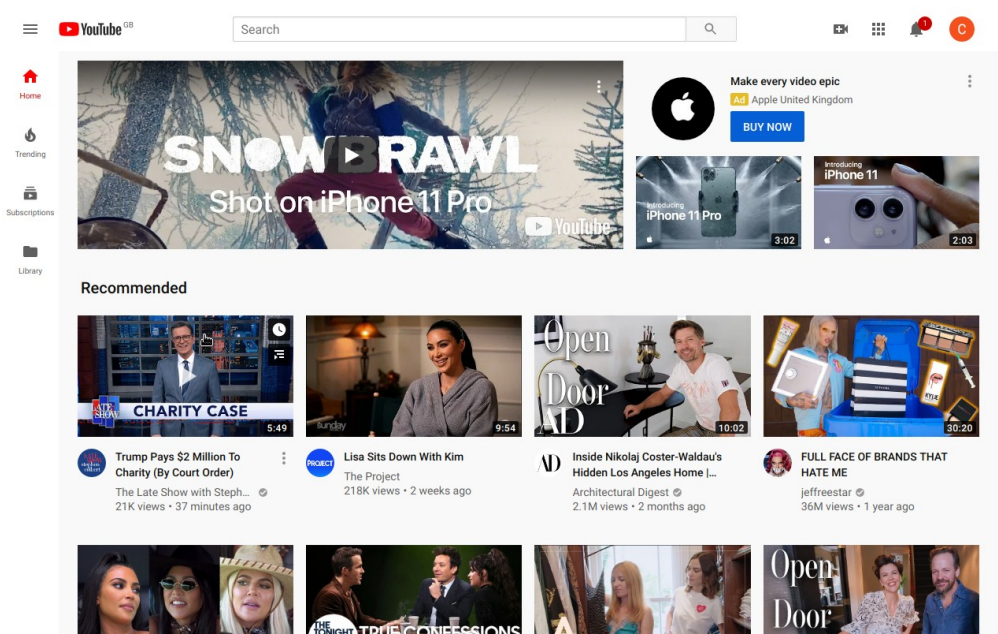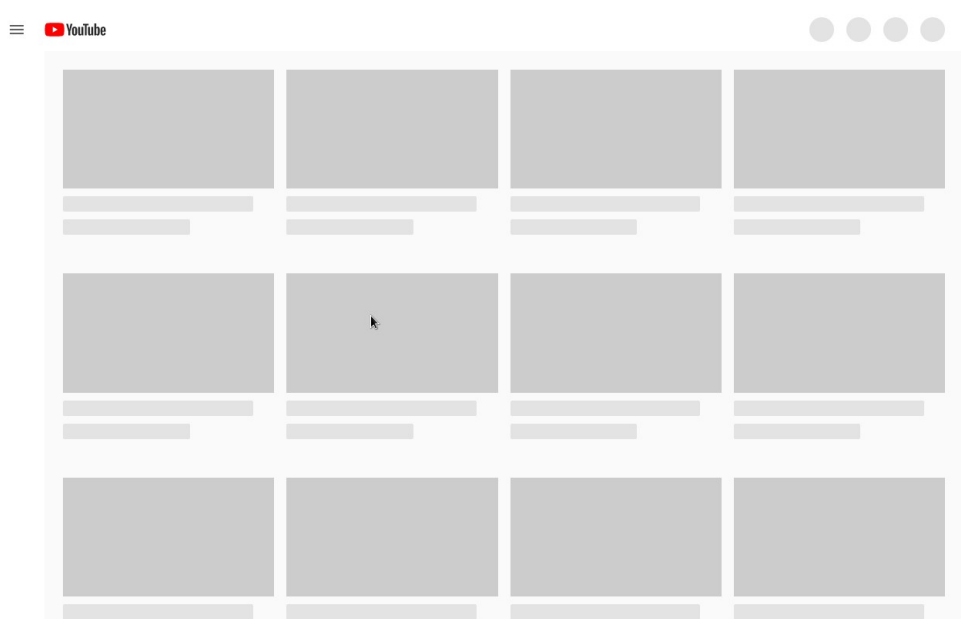

Figure 9: YouTube.com with javascript enabled

Figure 10: YouTube.com with javascript disabled

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104. Samuel Ndichu, Sangwook Kim, Seiichi Ozawa, Takeshi Misu, and Kazuo Makishima, "A Machine Learning Approach to Detection of JavaScript-Based Attacks Using AST Features and Paragraph Vectors," *Applied Soft Computing* 84 (November 2019): 1. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asoc.2019.105721.
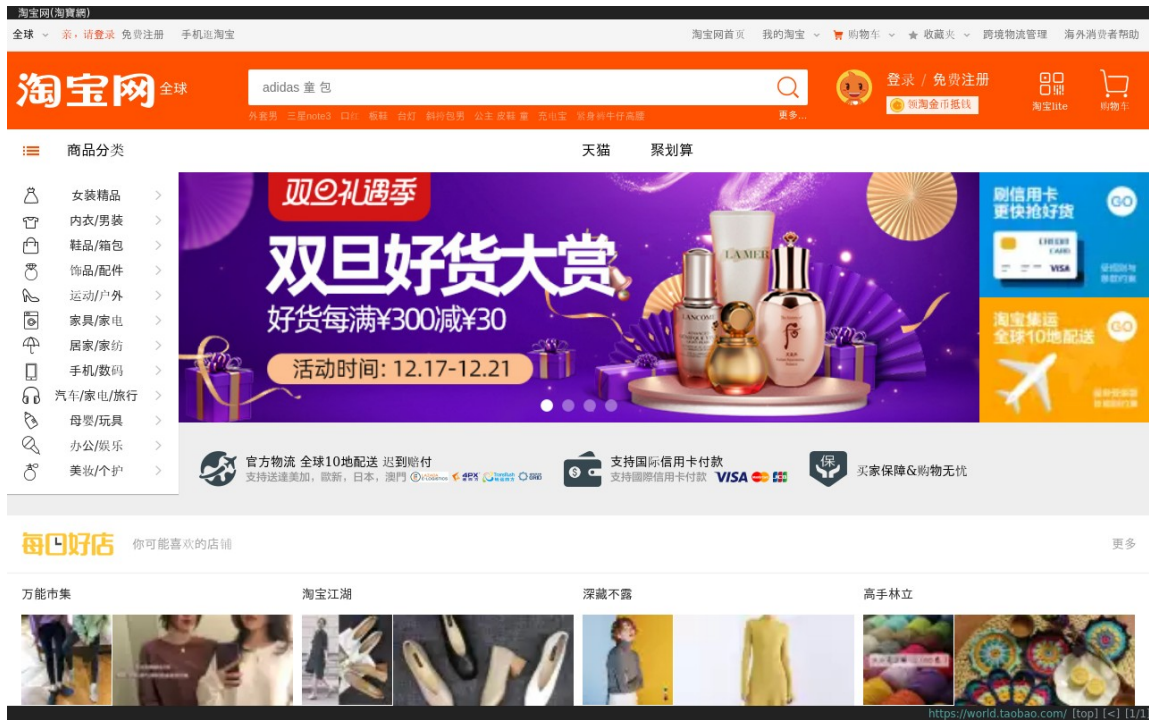
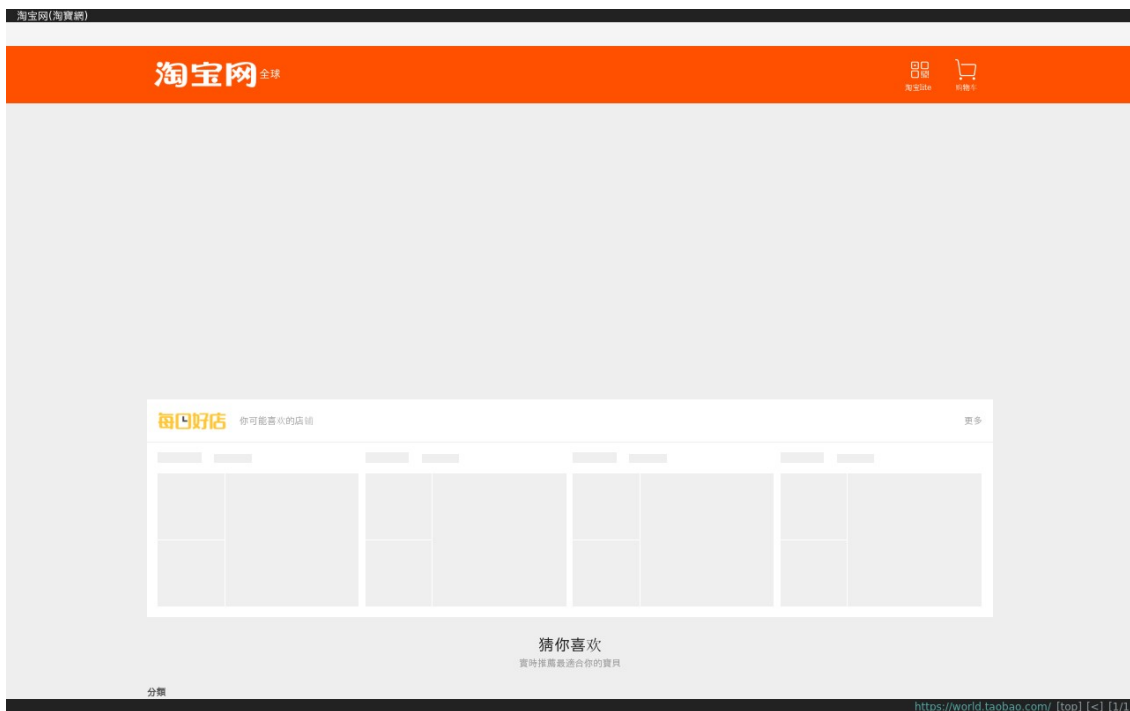Figure 11: world.taobao.com with javascript enabled

Figure 12: world.taobao.com with javascript disabled

With javascript disabled, Youtube becomes a ghost town with empty unclickable video frames, Amazon appears similar initially but breaks at the point that you actually try to purchase an item, and Twitter redirects you automatically to a page asking you to enable javascript, preventing you from even entering the app. Richard Stallman advises users to disable proprietary javascript but goes through great lengths himself to avoid it in his daily life, going out of his way to pay in cash for several routine online transactions. For most people whose work is not engulfed in free software activism, the sacrifice of disabling javascript is too high.

From the aesthetic perspective, though, disabling javascript is appreciated precisely for its manner of rendering websites quasi- or non-functional. It is another means of arriving at the empty graphical user interfaces found in Mark Callahan's *Internet Soul Portraits*. In *for web browser*, what is foregrounded is the web browser performing its existence, one that we normally take for granted. Kenneth Goldsmith reiterates this point, comparing our use of the browser to breathing.

> When we use an apparatus extensively, it becomes invisible, as we become completely subsumed by content....we still take the apparatus for granted, the way we might take breathing or our body's circulatory system for granted...[105]

In this sense, the breaking of the web allows us to see the vehicle of content, the browser itself. This notion of an object becoming visible upon breaking was famously developed by Heiddeger within his tool-analysis in *Being and Time* (1927). Harman has adopted this tool-analysis in his philosophy of Object-oriented Ontology and popularized a particular interpretation of it. According to Harman, Heidegger showed that "for the most part, dealing with things consciously is a relatively rare and derivative scenario. More common is the experience of simply taking things for granted, not noticing them until they go wrong."[106] To demonstrate this point, Heidegger uses the example of a hammer as a tool that we normally do not notice "until it fails to function and is suddenly exposed to our conscious gaze."[107] It is only when the hammer breaks that we see it. This is the case with the browser, as well, but what results when the browser breaks may be a bit stranger as

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105. Goldsmith, *Wasting Time*, 61-62.

106. Harman, *A new theory*, 152.

107. Ibid, 153.

the browser, unlike the hammer, consists of many virtual layers that can appear, disappear, and meld into one another instantaneously. Imagine a hammer that at the moment of breaking immediately transforms its whole constitution into something else, this is the virtual hammer. It is not only the web browser itself that becomes visible upon breaking, but its multilayered complexity. This multi-layeredness is captured by Goldsmith when he likens the web to conscious and unconscious domains.

> We could say that the mechanics that runs the web— from the code to the server farms—are the web's subconscious, while the software—the graphical user interface and all the activities that happen there, on the surface—is the web's consciousness. The unconscious, which is pure apparatus, is all hung on a grid, starting with binary code, moving to the pixel, and resulting in GUIs (graphical user interfaces).[108]

By disabling javascript, we can think of ourselves entering a zone between the web's consciousness (its user interface) and the web's subconsciousness (its code). In this liminal zone, that aspect of the web browser that is likely to become most apparent is its grid-like structure. As Goldsmith says, "All of the image archiving interfaces— Pinterest, Flickr, Instagram, Google Images—are gridded, from the rectangular format of the images to the lattices on which they are hung. While the images themselves may proffer organic subject matter, the interface and apparatus is entirely industrial."[109]

The disabled-javascript browser, then, reveals different layers of the site's gridded, industrial structure. Some of gridded layers are visible without javascript disabled such as the industrial, block-like display of a normally functioning Youtube site, but given our focus on the content of the site we are normally blind to the display - blind to the performance of the browser. By disabling javascript, therefore, one may achieve the sense of seeing the browser as if for the first time.

Just as was argued for *untitled_folder* and *jorge.png*, though, this "seeing for the first time" does not mean that the autonomous existence of the web browser "becomes nakedly present before us," but that the phenomenological form of the web browser becomes

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108. Goldsmith, *Wasting Time*, 61-62.

109. Ibid.

consciously visible - a first step towards speculating on what the web browser is and how it performs its autonomous existence.[110]

The piece itself is realized by all the javascript-disabled web browsers existing in the world now and the in future. There is no score for the piece, but there are ways to document it. For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to take screenshots of popular homepages with javascript disabled as a type of sampling or collecting of artifacts. As there is no score, there is also no specified way to engage with the browser. However, I envision one realizing the piece by casually browsing the web as they would normally, discovering the newness of a web that does not function solely for human ends. I imagine this realm to be an exciting new frontier in which browser and user become more equal players.

series of long-range polyrhythms

five against three hundred and thirty-three & seventeen against one thousand four hundred and thirty-three

The following work is a series of long-range polyrhythms that are so stretched out in time as to escape human perception. I will discuss two pieces within the series: *five against three-hundred and thirty-three* and *seventeen against one-thousand four-hundred and thirty-three.* The pieces are simply the polyrhythms in the title and are realized not only by performers who intentionally carry out the polyrhythms, but by objects and events in the world juxaposed against each other. This topic of interpretation will be returned to shortly. For now, I would like to briefly outline three influences for the work: (1) Elliot Carter's long-range polyrhythms, (2) Timothy Morton's hyperobjects, and (3) Tom Johnson's found music.

Beginning with *Night Fantasies* for piano (1980), Elliott Carter structured entire compositions based on long-range polyrhythms. In *Night Fantasies*, the underlying rhythmic skeleton of this 20 minute piece is a polyrhythm of 216 against 175.[111] Above this macro structure are different micro layers of rhythm and melody. Given the extended

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110. Harman, *A new theory*, 153.

111 . John F. Link, "Long-range polyrhythms in Elliott Carter's recent music," PhD diss., City University of
     New York, 1994.

duration of this polyrhythm and the use of musical layering, it is not possible to hear the polyrhythm as such nor is it the point of the piece. The long-range polyrhythm is being used principally as a structural, pre-compositional device.

My pieces are similar to *Night Fantasies* in the sense that the long-range polyrhythms are too long to be perceived, but they differ in that the form of the pieces are encapsulated in the polyrhythms themselves, with no additional musical layers. The form of the piece is the content and vice versa. In this work, we are confronted simply with a proportional relationship between the repetitive cycle of one object juxtaposed against another. In order to exaggerate the imperceptibility of the polyrhythms I have specifically chosen values far apart from each other. There are only five events that occur within three-hundred and thirty-three. An event repeating itself three-hundred and thirty-three times is already outside the realm of our human perceptibility. You do not really know what it sounds like for an event to repeat 333 times, as evidenced by the fact that if that event was repeated 311 times instead you would probably not be able to tell the difference. After a certain point, we loose track of time and are unable to hold the object in our mind's eye. If you then consider that a value as small as 5 is spread out in the span of 333, the overall event becomes even less discernible. After the first iteration of the five events, so much time passes that once the second iteration occurs it comes as a sort of nostalgic surprise, a moment of "Oh ya, I almost forgot about that thing happening 5 times." We are stuck in the flexible yet small frame of the human present, while the polyrhythm marches on in an extended present.

Timothy Morton would consider this polyrhythm to be a "hyperobject," since it is 'hyper' relative to our present sense of time. Morton's hyperobject is, in fact, anything "massively distributed in time and space relative" to some other entity.[112] Below, Morton provides examples of hyperobjects relative to humans.

> A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all

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112. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World,* Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013, 1.

the whirring machinery of capitalism. Hyperobjects, then, are "hyper" in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not.[113]

This list demonstrates that some hyperobjects are massive primarily in time, others in space, and yet others in both time and space. Styrofoam, for instance, occupies an incredulous amount of space when considering all styrofoam on Earth and its infinite uses. At the same time, one styrofoam cup "will take about five hundred years to biodegrade," occupying an equally incredulous amount of time.[114] Given the open instrumentation of these pieces and the fact they can be "found" in the world, these polyrhythms have the potential to be hyperobjects in space and time.

The idea of finding the polyrhythm in the world is inspired in part by Tom Johnson's notion of *found music*. An example would be Johnson's *Chord Catalogue*, which consists of "all the chords possible in one octave, played one after the other."[115] Johnson mentions that this was the first composition he produced that he hesitated to call his own. Later, he unabashedly, embraced the process of finding music, saying "I too like to find music that exists outside myself, rather than to compose something that is inside myself".[116] Johnson finds music most often in mathematical models, including "a logical sequence of number, or a set of permutations, or Pascal's triangle, or a logical sequence of geometric turns, or with the paper-folding formula."[117] This is similar to my process, given that I am also finding mathematical models, although mine are simply ratios. There are, though, an infinite number of ways of finding a model or form.

For *five against three-hundred and thirty-three*, I chose the numbers intuitively and organized performances of the polyrhythm, but I also found and imagined the polyrhythm as it could exist in the world. Here is a list of realizations, some of which were organized and others which were "found."

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113. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

114. Ibid, 140.

115. Tom Johnson, "I Want to Find the Music, Not to Compose It," self-published, n.d., 3-4.

116. Johnson, "I want to find the music," 3.

117. Ibid.

- 5 cracked eggs against 333 repeated mbira tones (realized by Federico Pozzer and Carla Cao)
- 5 on/off electric fan switches against 333 mbira tones (realized by David Zed and Carla Cao)
- 5 cell phone notifications against 333 cell phone notifications (ongoing realization as of this writing by Samuel Howard)
- 5 string harmonics/multiphonics against 333 trampoline jumps
- 5 unknown events against 333 traffic light changes
- 5 read words against 333 freely uttered words
- 5 pictures taken of a ukulele player against 333 chords strummed by the ukulele player.

In addition to 5 against 333, my other long-range polyrhythm, *seventeen against one-thousand four-hundred and thirty-three,* might be considered even more "found" in that not only do I encourage "found realizations" of the polyrhythm but the values for the polyrhythm themselves were "found." In this case, the value 1433 is the number of words in Donald Trump's inaugural speech while 17 represents the year he gave the inaugural address. One possible realization for this polyrhythm is to read all the words of Donald Trump's inaugural address in alphabetical order[118] against 17 events, noises, or tones. At the same time, this polyrhythm can be realized in ways that have nothing to do with the Trump's inaugural address.

The point is that these polyrhythms can be realized intentionally and that at the same time they are already existing everywhere whether we are aware of it or not. As we speak there are five events happening within the space of three-hundred and thirty-three. It is simply up to us to notice these juxtaposed events, to begin speculating the infinite number of 5-against-333s that are occurring within all time scales possible. Selective attention is necessary to imagine or find these polyrhythms, but selective attention does not create the polyrhythm. The polyrhythm exists regardless of whether we perceive it or not. This harkens back to the old question of whether the tree falling in the woods makes a sound even if no one is around to hear it. My answer would be yes. However, I understand that given the human-centered definition of rhythm, the term polyrhythm is counterintuitive

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118. https://archive.org/details/1433words

when speculating on its existence outside human perception. If we replace the term polyrhythm with "whatever happens when *x* is repeated proportionally in the space of *y*," we allow for a more extended notion of polyrhythm and perhaps one that is less anthropocentric. Johnson alludes to the potential of *found music* to de-center the human when he says, "Is this not a search to find a kind of music that existed, or could have existed, before the advent of human beings on the earth?".[119]
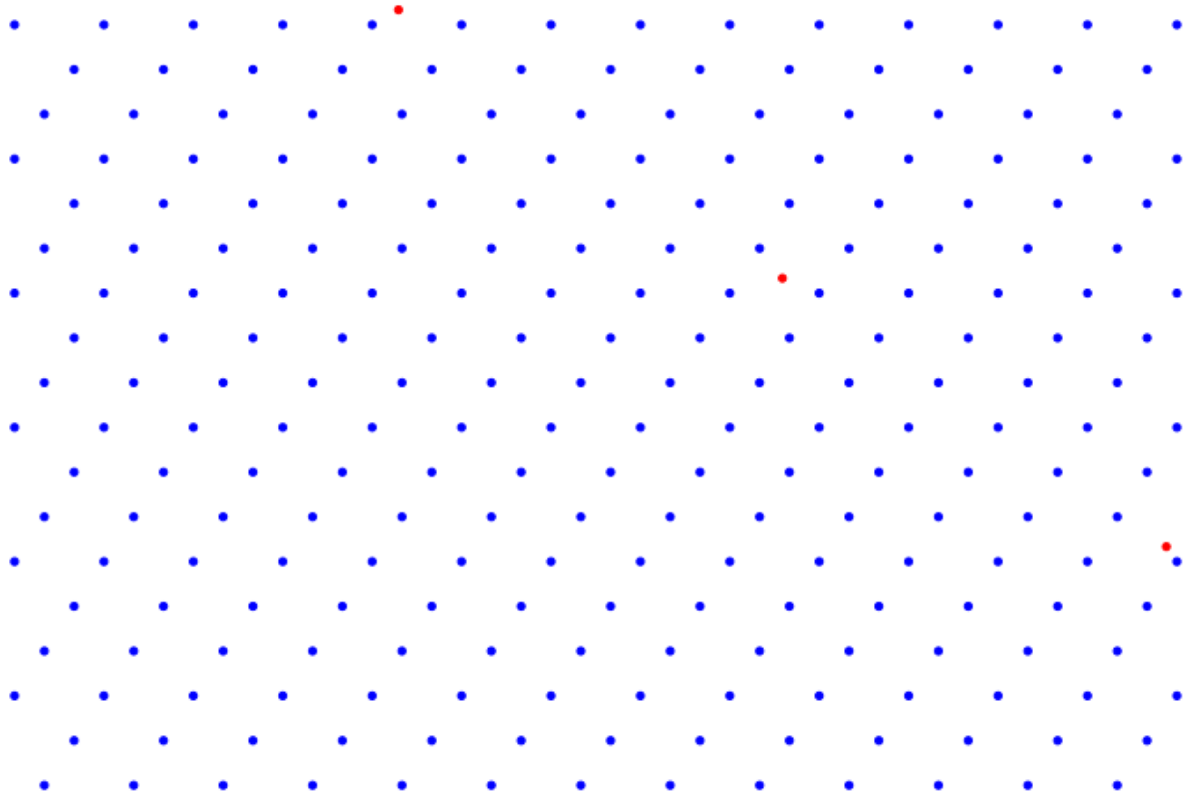

Figure 13: Excerpt of *seventeen against one thousand four hundred and thirty-three* showing events 2/17:1433, 3/17:1433, and 4/17:1433.

119. Johnson, "I want to find the music," 3.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented works that are intended to foreground objects performing their own existence, supporting the notion of existence as performance. Central to my methodology is the minimalism of content and aesthetic context. This includes the use of common, found, and simple objects with little to no alterations and the presentation of these objects in their ecological context - where they are mostly likely to be found and doing what they most often do. For u*ntitled_folder* and *jorge.png*, the respective objects are presented as downloads online with no further instructions and are likely to be downloaded by people in a domestic setting or somewhere outside the institutionalized art context. The pieces *for web browser* and the long-range polyrhythms feature objects existing in the world already and I have simply chosen to present certain artifacts of their existence in the form of screenshots and graphical representations.

However, I do incorporate aesthetic cues into the ecological context to increase conscious engagement of our otherwise spontaneous aesthetic perception of everyday objects. Based on psychological literature and aesthetic theory, I have reason to believe that aesthetic perspective, at least as it is exercised in Western industrialized culture, is likely to be accompanied by prolonged attention and contemplation on the object existing, in addition to a greater openness towards the object as an end-in-itself as opposed to simply a tool. The function of the ecological context, then, is to counterbalance the distancing, distorting effect of aesthetic perception with a focus on the everyday object, the object as it exists "at home," so to speak.

I argue that the methodology underlying my work facilitates the sense of *seeing the object as if for the first time* and the speculation of the autonomous existence of objects - objects existing independent of the *content* of our minds. This speculation may spark questions regarding the objects in the pieces, such as "What does it mean for the untitled folder to exist?," "What is like for the PNG to be itself as opposed to being a JPG?,"What is a web browser, really?," and "How does a polyrhythm exist when it extends outside the limits of human perception?" In regards to the digital pieces, the notion of digital objects as virtualized tools is strongly ingrained, making the idea of data "simply existing" particularly strange. Therefore, an additional objective of mine has been to point to the

multidimensionality of digital objects and their status as irreducible objects whose existence or know-ability is inexhausted by our use or phenomenological account of them. I have referred to this objective as *daylighting the digital* as a comparison to ecological daylighting - the act of removing concrete and pavement to reveal rivers underneath our feet that have been flowing outside of our awareness.

My hope is that upon speculation on the object's autonomous existence, not only will the performative aspect of an object's existence be highlighted (e.g. an object dynamically existing as opposed to an object's static existence) but also that one's engagement with the object will be ongoing. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai links the ongoing nature of aesthetic experience with works belonging to the aesthetic category of "interesting." Ngai associates the 'merely interesting' conceptual art of the 1960s with the artists' compulsive desire to "exchange information".[120] That along with an increasingly intimate link between the interesting and "a kind of everydayness" led to an explosion of art from the 20th century that appeared to communicate information of the most mundane type, like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Weather* (2005), which "transcribes a year's worth of daily weather reports" from a New York radio station.[121] According to Ngai, in regards to everyday conceptual art, in which 'what you see is what you see,' aesthetic perception toggles between the boring and the interesting.[122] It can be said that the untitled folder, the PNG, the web browser, and the long-range polyrhythms all have an element of the interesting and boring or an element of "toggling between the boring and the interesting".[123] While this type of art may not inspire the feeling of sublime , "a kind of thunderbolt" or an instantaneous, sudden "once-and-for-allness," interesting/boring art, as Ngai argues, inspires an "extended time frame" with the object.[124] Ngai says, "What we find interesting is typically something we compulsively come back to, as if to verify to ourselves that it is still interesting and thus potentially to find it interesting again".[125] This leads to "a second and

120. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting,* Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015, 13.

121. Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century,* Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 147.

122. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 135.

123. Ibid.

124. Ibid, 134.

125. Ibid, 133.

possibly third, fourth, or nth+1 encounter" with the interesting.[126] Ngai suggests that our recursive returning to the object is based on a 'feeling of incompleteness' that is not exhausted by any number of encounters with it.[127]

I consider this sense of incompleteness to be the result of our inability to fully know or access the object. We run headlong against the limits of our perception when we reach towards the objects as it *is*. At the same time, our engagement with the object is not in vain. Through ongoing engagement with the object we are likely to gain greater knowledge and familiarity with the object, as well as a greater sense of intimacy. Perhaps, most importantly from my perspective, though, is that we are likely to be more and more impressed by the irreducible mystery of the object. As Aristotle's axiom goes, "the more you know, the more you realize you don't know." If there is any goal of aesthetic experience that I would prioritize it would be a confrontation with the mystery of an object as it exists in the world. The context of my pieces have been designed to promote this sense of mystery, one that inspires a return to the object and speculation on the nature of its existence.

I would like to conclude this thesis with two points to keep in mind. One is that, although I have made efforts to facilitate a particular experience and interpretation of my work, I understand that my mediation as an artist between the object and the spectator is in no way definitive enough to steer away alternative interpretations. I am allowing both the objects and the spectators a great deal of freedom in how they interpret the works and even whether they interpret them aesthetically or not. As mentioned from the onset, I have embraced the notion of a context that does not irreversibly transform an object into art, but that rather allows for a continually reversible perception of an object as more art-like or less art-like. In other words, I recognize that the perception of my pieces, at any one given moment, are likely to lie on a spectrum between what we can consider as idealized "art" and "non-art" (or "everyday") poles of perception. Given this freedom, a spectator could very well completely anthropomorphize the untitled folder and exclusively perceive it as as symbol for the human, epidemic sense of meaninglessness haunting the 21st century. This interpretation is welcomed just as much as my favored interpretation of an object

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126. Ibid.

127. Ibid, 134.

autonomously existing in the world. Again, as Francisco Lopez said in relation to sound, "As soon as the call is in the air, it doesn't belong to the frog that produced it anymore".[128] I believe that whether I blatantly infuse my intentions within my art or avoid leaving any traces of myself as the artist, the object and its reception does not belong to me either way. Therefore, beyond my desired interpretation of these pieces as objects existing autonomously, I value the freedom with which the objects can exist as they normally would and the freedom with which spectators can choose how they engage and perceive the pieces, with only enough aesthetic cues to serve as an *open* invitation for an aestheticized perspective of the objects.

Lastly, I would like to consider what initially appears to be a paradoxical relationship between my work and the defining principles of Conceptual Art. Paul Mann echoes a common rhetoric when he says that in conceptual art 'the art object as such need not...even exist; only its representation needs to circulate. A description will suffice: that is the lesson of conceptual art' [129] If this "lesson" is taken at face value, it appears that the lesson of my work is the complete opposite: the concept of my work is precisely that the object *needs* to exist and that its representation or description will *not* suffice. The paradox is that my work is in the style of Conceptual Art, yet, in my work, the concept behind the 'art object' is not a sufficient replacement for the object because the concept is precisely that the object *exists* outside of any concept of it and that no concept can provide an exhaustive account of the object's existence. Therefore, while conceptual artists may embrace the notion that "a description will suffice," I insist that only the existence of the objects themselves will suffice. We don't fully know how the objects exist within or outside our phenomenological perception, which might lead us to speculate on this subject. However, this speculation is not the work itself. My work is the objects *existing*, regardless of how they are perceived and whether or not they are perceived as art. This is not to say that the concept of objects existing autonomously is not important, but only that the concept of objects existing is *not* objects existing. Again, the finger points to the moon, but the finger is not the moon.

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128. Lopez, "Environmental Sound Matter."

129. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 13.

Appendix: Source Code for untitled_folder

Mcron Script

```scheme
;; This code repeatedly copies an untitled folder to a random
;; directory on a user's file system once every minute.

(job '(next-minute) "sudo cp -v untitled_folder `find / -type d 2>/dev/null \
|  shuf | tail -n 1`")
```

Bash Script

```bash
#!/bin/bash env

# This code generates a hexdump of the untitled_folder existing on the ext2
# and ext4 filesystem followed by a diff of the two hexdumps.

dd if=/dev/zero of=testfs bs=1 count=100000
mkfs.ext2 testfs
hexdump testfs > testfs-dump-01
mkdir testfs-dir
sudo mount ./testfs testfs-dir/
sudo mkdir testfs-dir/untitled_folder
sync
hexdump testfs > testfs-dump-02
diff testfs-dump-01 testfs-dump-02
```

Portfolio Media on USB Flash Drive

1. jorge.png (2019)

PNG

- jorge.png

2. untitled_folder (2019)

FILE

- untitled_folder

3. for web browser (2019)

PNG

- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-18-16.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-18-28.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-18-40.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-18-55.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-02.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-22.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-28.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-34.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-40.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-45.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-19-50.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-20-01.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-21-22.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-21-29.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-23-47.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-25-11.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-28-22.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-29-37.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-29-44.png

- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-30-20.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-30-50.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-31-46.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-33-23.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-33-29.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-33-34.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-33-49.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-33-55.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-34-00.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-34-05.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-35-08.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-35-33.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-35-38.png
- Screenshot_2019-11-19_03-35-47.png
- ali_express_no_js.png
- ali_express_no_js_2.png
- cnnojs.png
- hudnojs.png
- instagram_nojs_chromium.png
- qutebrowser_youtube_nojs.png
- qutebrowser_youtube_nojs2.png
- taobao_no_js_chromium.png
- taobao_nojs_chromium.png
- youtube_google_chromium_nojs.png
- ytnojs.png

4. five against three hundred and thirty-three (2019)

PDF

- five_against_three_hundred_and_thirty_three.pdf

5. seventeen against one thousand four hundred and thirty-three (2019)

PDF

- seventeen_against_one_thousand_four_hundred_and_thirty_three.pdf

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