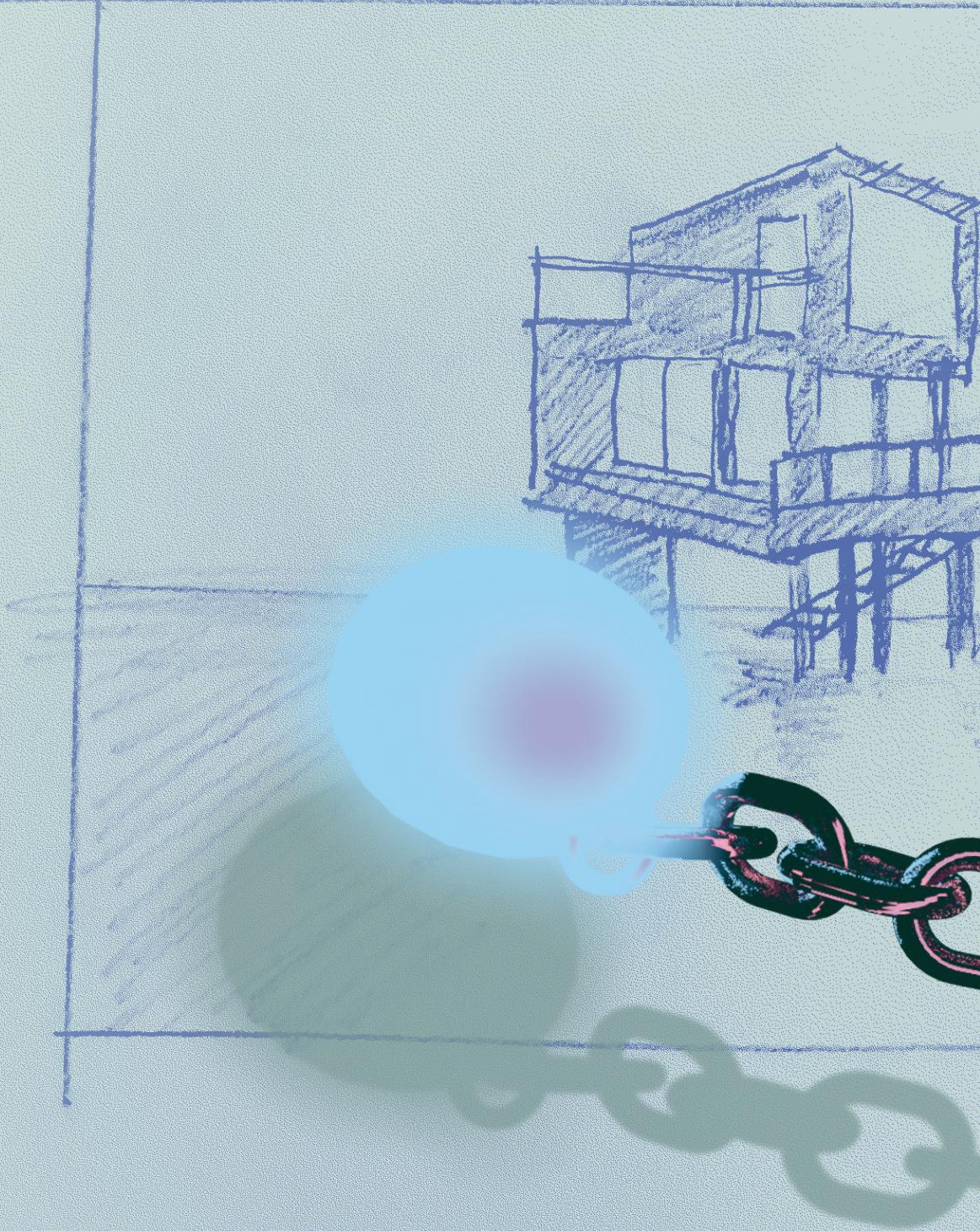




STALKING  
THE TRAIL

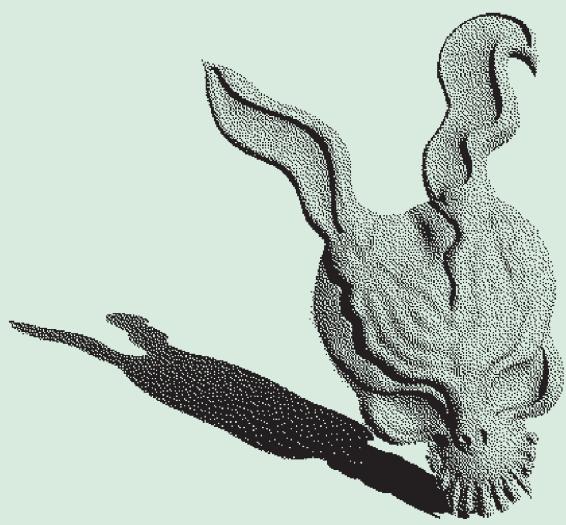
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# Rachel Rossin: Stalking the Trace

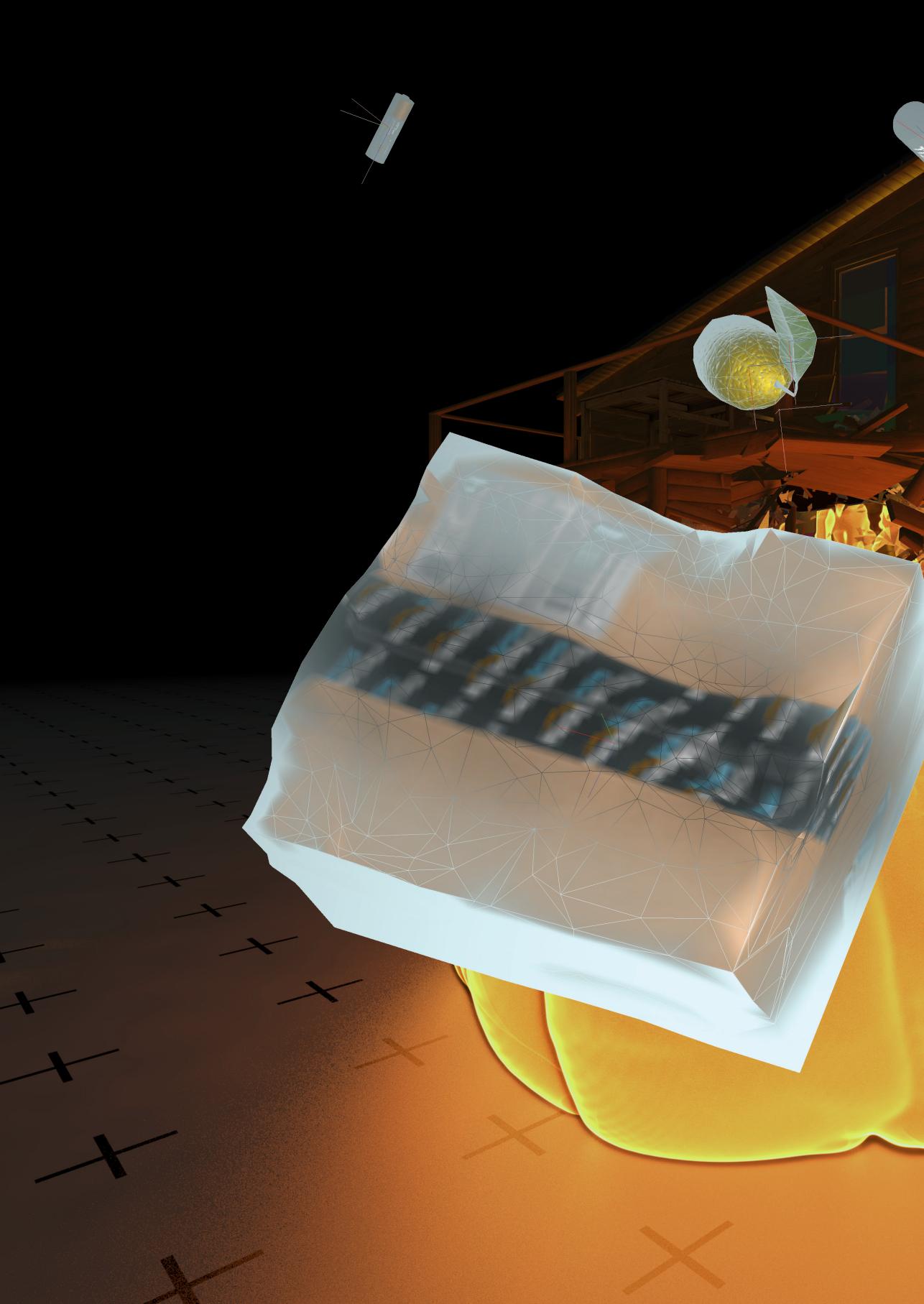
## Introduction Maitreyi Maheshwari

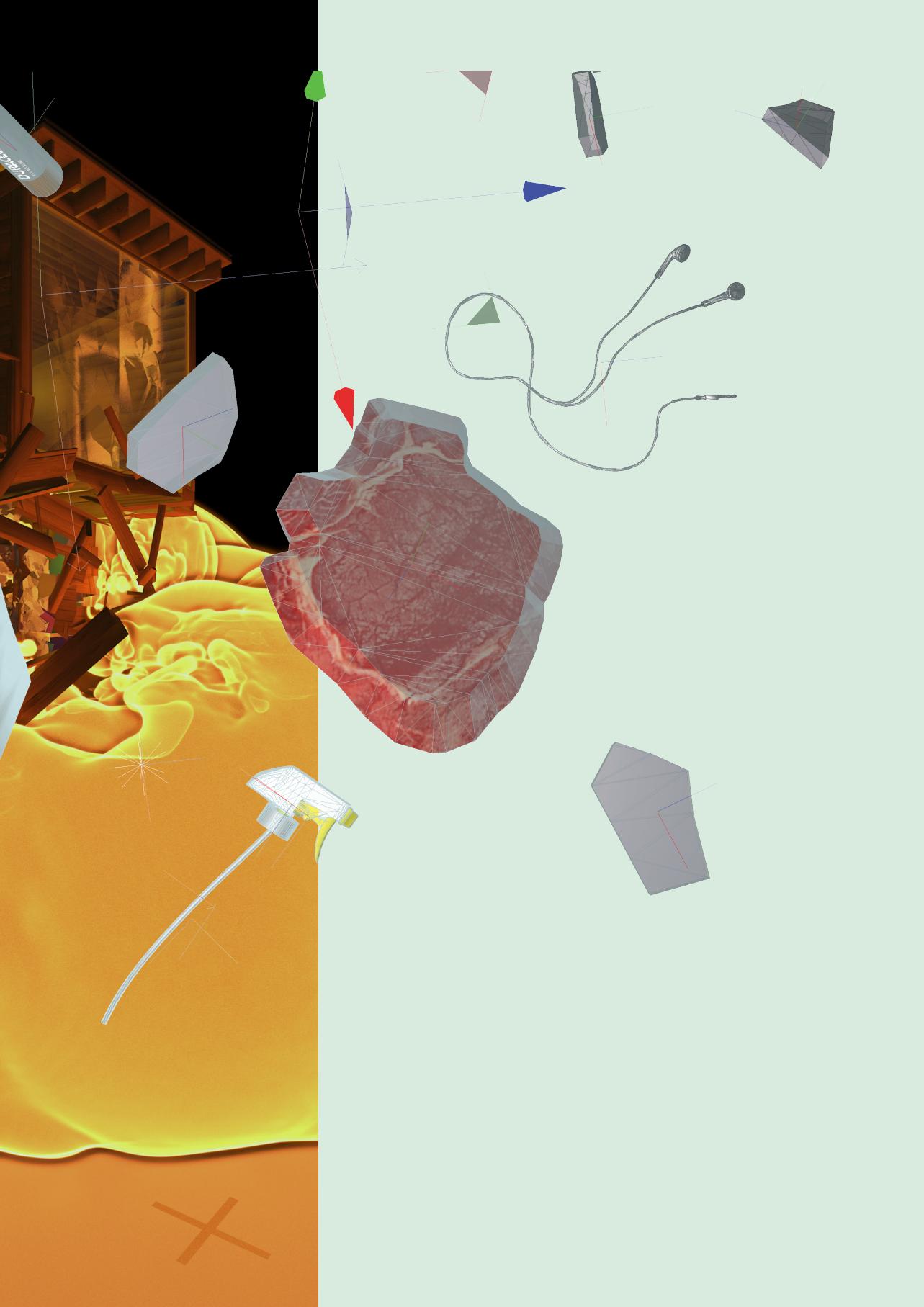
'Well, they say it right when they flood the house and they tear it to shreds, that destruction is a form of creation. So the fact that they burn the money is ironic. They just want to see what happens when they tear the world apart. They want to change things.'

*Donnie Darko*, 2001

You are standing in an open field. Bright grass sways in the breeze and birds chirp in the distance. Around you, objects hover, suspended in the air like dust or pollen. Yet these aren't objects that would ordinarily float or fly: the spray nozzle from a cleaning liquid bottle, a box marked with Amazon Prime stickers, a rabbit mask like the one worn by Frank in the film *Donnie Darko*, flesh-coloured rocks that could be broken bricks or body parts. You reach out and bat these floating objects away, noticing your too-short arms are padded out in military fatigues, telescoping out from your body. You look down and see the hollowed-out form of a flak jacket encasing the space where your torso would be. A digitalised female voice greets you, encouraging you to take deep breaths before she informs you that this is like a video game, but also an act from a play or a story in seven chapters. 'Your body is a stylus that scrubs time forward. Complicit.' You step forward and a dotted line extending from your body guides you towards a target – a light switch suspended in the middle distance. As you approach it, the lighting fades from broad daylight to storm-grey night, and something explodes on the hill that you can see in the distance. A ball of fire and smoke rises into the sky as you raise your hand to flick the switch. Suddenly the debris around you starts to make sense, just as the scene changes.

This is the on-boarding sequence for Rachel Rossin's *The Sky is a Gap*, a virtual reality (VR) work that she has been developing since 2016, a version of which was premiered in the New Frontiers section of the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. While the work has grown and changed since that first iteration, its basic structural device has remained the same: to map time with space, using the movement of the body to manipulate the





flow of time forwards or back. In this current, most developed version, the work invites you to walk through explosion after explosion, taking your time to forensically examine each scene – to pause, rewind and replay each moment. The experience prompts an uncanny satisfaction as your sense of agency within this virtual environment increases, heightened by a soundtrack that speeds up and slows down in time with your body. Snippets of songs that could easily sit within the *Grand Theft Auto*-verse encourage you to ‘Lose Yourself’ (Eminem) or feel like a ‘Rockstar’ (Post Malone). The work draws on an innate human fascination with disaster and the cinematic language of the explosion. You appear to trigger chaos as you walk through the varied landscapes – a Modernist house, a domestic library, a Second World War battlefield lifted from the video game *Call of Duty*, one-to-one combat, a fridge tumbling down a hill, a gaming den where perhaps all of these simulations originated. You finally emerge in a white void, floating alongside the debris you encountered at the start, like any other mote of dust.

Each chapter exists independently, connected through time rather than



space, an association of ideas rather than a coherent narrative. Each detonation becomes a provocation to understand how such a thing could happen and how such a thing might be controlled, knowing full well that the ending here is already written. It opens up the possibility for a kind of magical thinking. Yet the question of whether there is free will

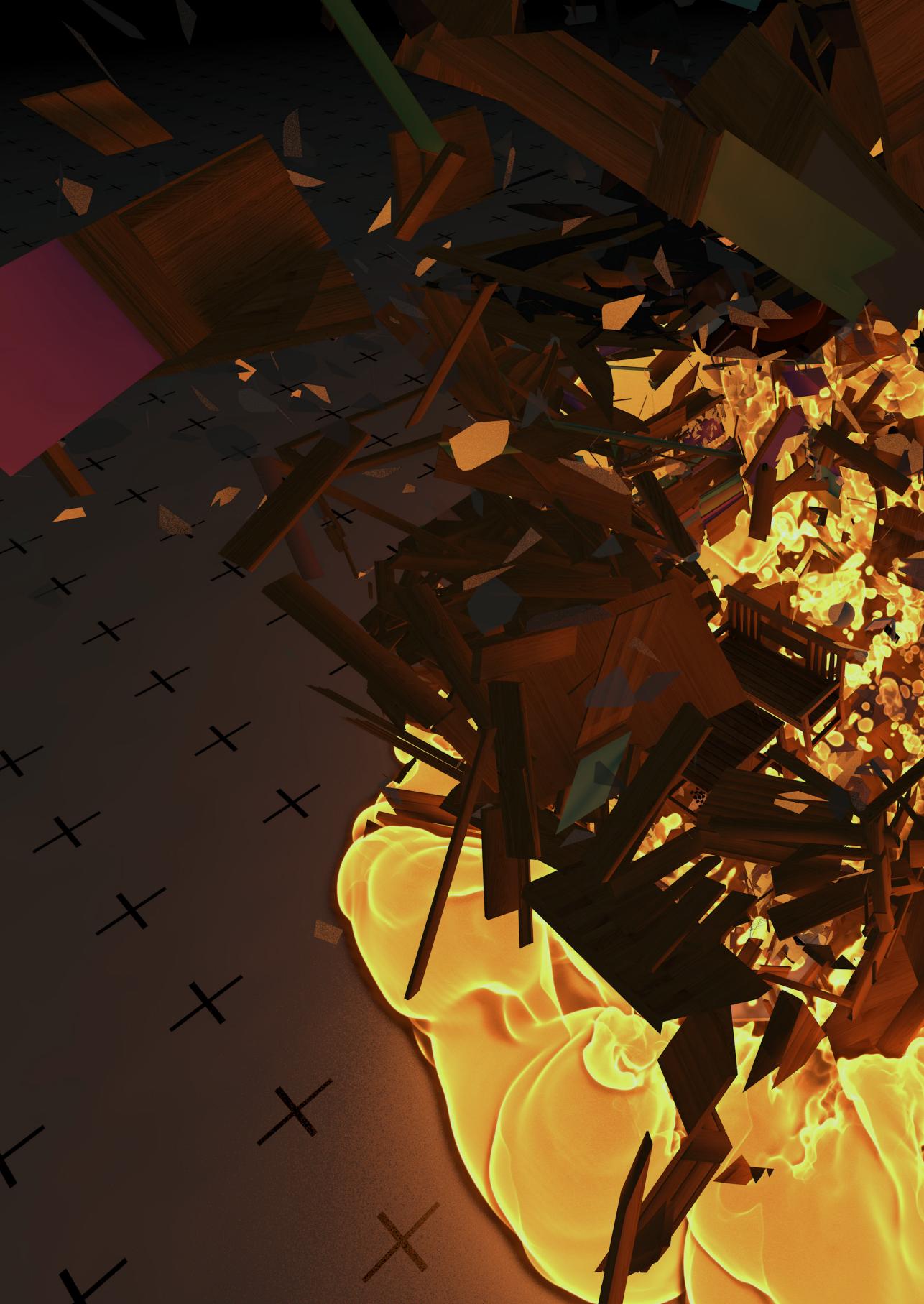
in a universe where everything seems beyond control is never far from mind. Rather than claiming any agency, do you instead merely observe, with ever greater attention, the increasing entropy and the decline into randomness and ruin?

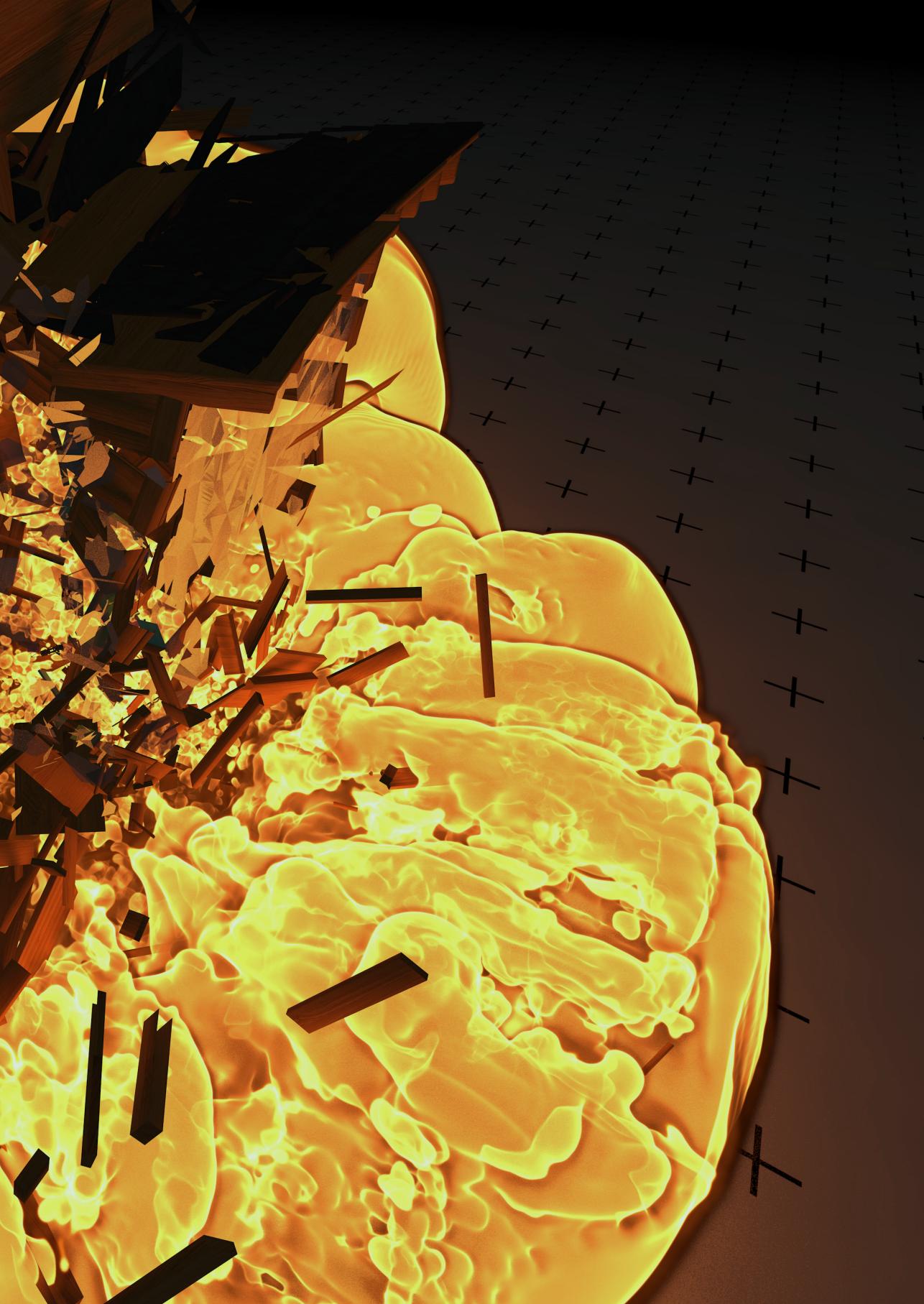
The tension between active and passive, participant and observer is underscored by the specifics of the installation. The VR set-up here is theatrical – four stations staged in parallel arcades on either side of what feels like a large piazza. You are tethered to a cable, suspended from a rail that guides you as you physically march up and down these passages and negotiate a series of virtual cataclysms. The rolling scrape and clatter of the pulley as you move echoes the audio scrub within the VR. Only as you step away and observe others through the arches of the arcade do you realise that you have become a marionette whose cords are pulled to perform certain actions, believing all the while you are the protagonist of the scenes you have been immersed in. From a distance, the narrow arches of the arcade resemble the slits of a zoetrope – the VR users are the objects that appear to be animated.

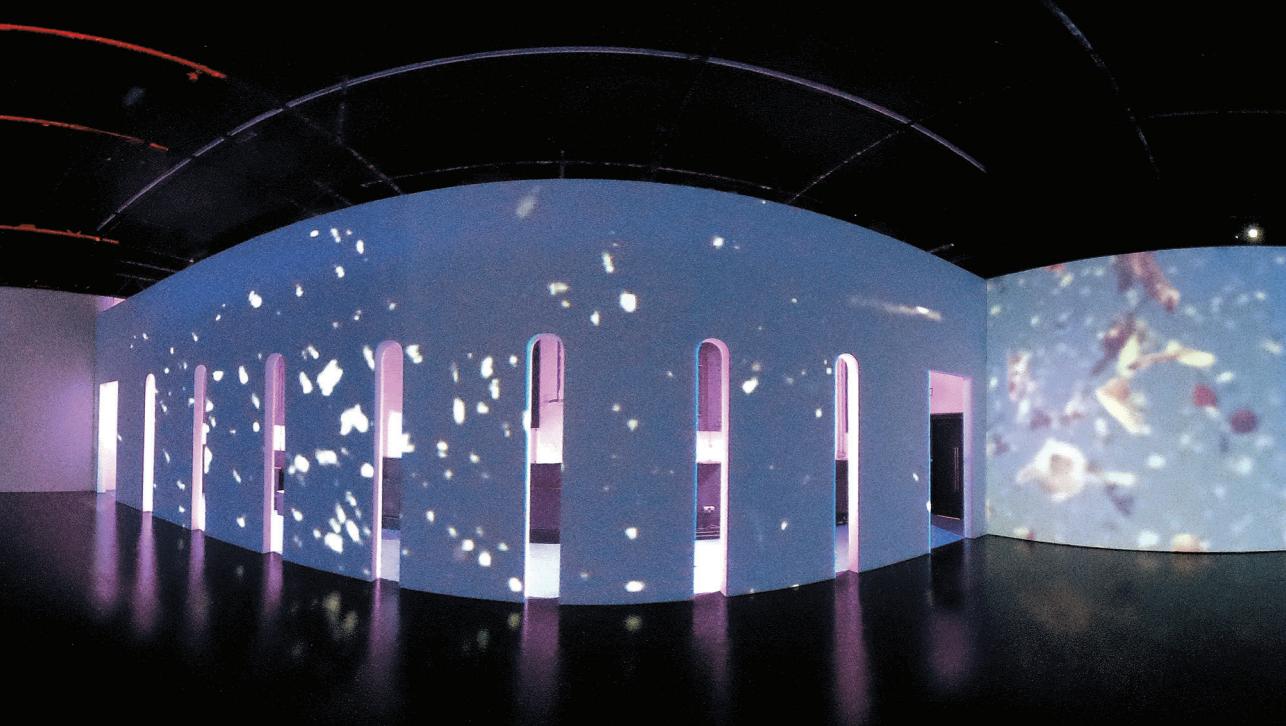
Projected around the inner walls of the piazza is an immersive film installation, *Psychology Today*, which Rossin describes as a tone poem. It draws on the visuals she made for the VR, foregrounding the wire frames, photogrammetry and spatial mapping before expanding on them, tangentially and referentially, with a panoply of found material. A six-channel work, it has been edited so that the images appear at times disparate and at times contiguous.

The closing sequence from the VR is rendered in full cinematic scale as objects floating in an intense white fog amid a low rustle of wind. Each moves with its own intelligent logic that seems to defy gravity. This floating debris reimagines the sequence of detonations at the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*. Each collection of household desirables is exploded into a perfect blue sky in slow-motion elegance: a rail of clothing, shards of glass from a television, fruit from inside a fridge, pages from hundreds of books held in perpetual suspension, while animated flames and wisps of smoke engulf the rest of the room. These images of a quiet chaos repeat intermittently throughout the 15-minute loop.

A ball with a chain tethering it stretches along the sides of the piazza, while in front appear NASA simulations of a hurricane vortex seen from

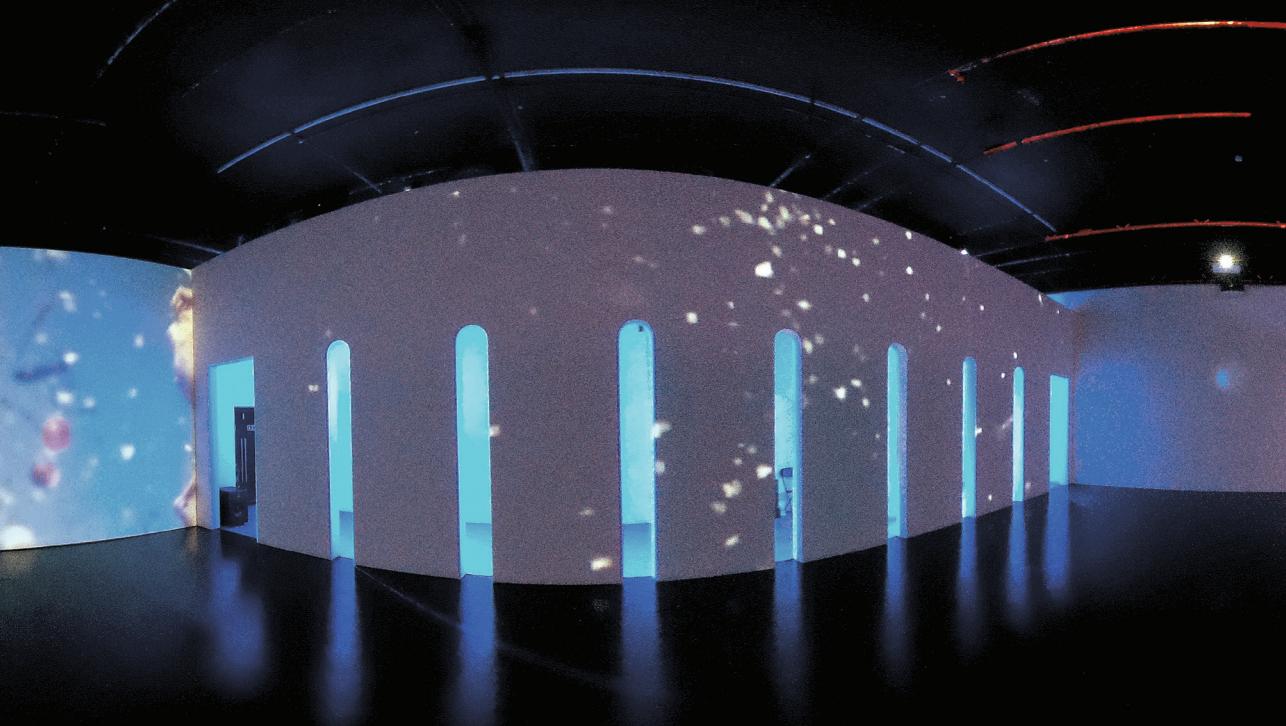






space, overlaid with a small winged blue-faced figure whispering words written by Bertolt Brecht in a digital female voice ('Truly, I live in dark times'). A hail of flaming meteors descends through an apocalyptic sky, and the storm seen from above is accompanied by the incoherent roar of angry men, extracted from news clips of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017. A time-lapsed pan through a digitally rendered alpine forest provides a moment of serenity before a candle blows out and we return to destruction: game footage from *Call of Duty*, an endless toppling of dominos that perfectly align with the room's architecture, luxury interiors and yachts morphing into each other, simulations of anticipated disasters from weather reports, inserted vignettes of guns from first-person shooter games, explosions from action films, crop-dusters, a man testing a giant mech suit, a baton passed from hand to hand around the room to the sounds of a tennis match.

This seemingly random array of images, accompanied by a melancholy instrumental score – drawn from film soundtracks (*Donnie Darko*) or songs with titles that invoke regret ('Te Arrepentiras') or existential uncertainty ('Don't Exist After All') – creates an atmosphere of impending doom. The ubiquity of disaster simulations in popular entertainment and factual broadcasts alike normalises this fear of losing everything and the inability to do anything about it. As Bing Crosby intones the Great Depression-era classic, 'Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?', overdubbed



with a piano rendition of Linkin Park's teen-angst anthem 'Numb', the collision of past and recent present accentuates the timelessness of a sense of ruin and shattered hopes. The expectation that your labour entitles you to a particular kind of life and future is the myth of the American Dream, built on the capitalist consumption of things that aren't meant to last. As the dominos finally stop falling, a snippet of dialogue from the film *The Fifth Element* hints at a prior instant when the villain Zorg declares 'Life, which you so nobly serve, comes from destruction, disorder and chaos.' Confronted by spectres of all that seems wrong in the world, *Psychology Today* implores a kind of letting go, finding harmony in the chaos as everything disperses to nothing, like the motes of digital dust that swirl in perfect Brownian motion around the room.

Much like the works in the exhibition, which are composed of intersecting images and provocations, this publication collates extracts from a number of texts, creating a constellation of ideas that has informed, and adds context to, Rossin's work. The influence of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics<sup>1</sup> far exceeds the realm of physics; it is the reason time itself exists and why we understand time as an endless flow in a single direction. The extracts reproduced here, from Robert Smithson's meditations on material decay in art and culture to the temporal discussions among Tom Stoppard's characters in the play *Arcadia*, reveal how entropy has become an apt explanation for the tendency towards

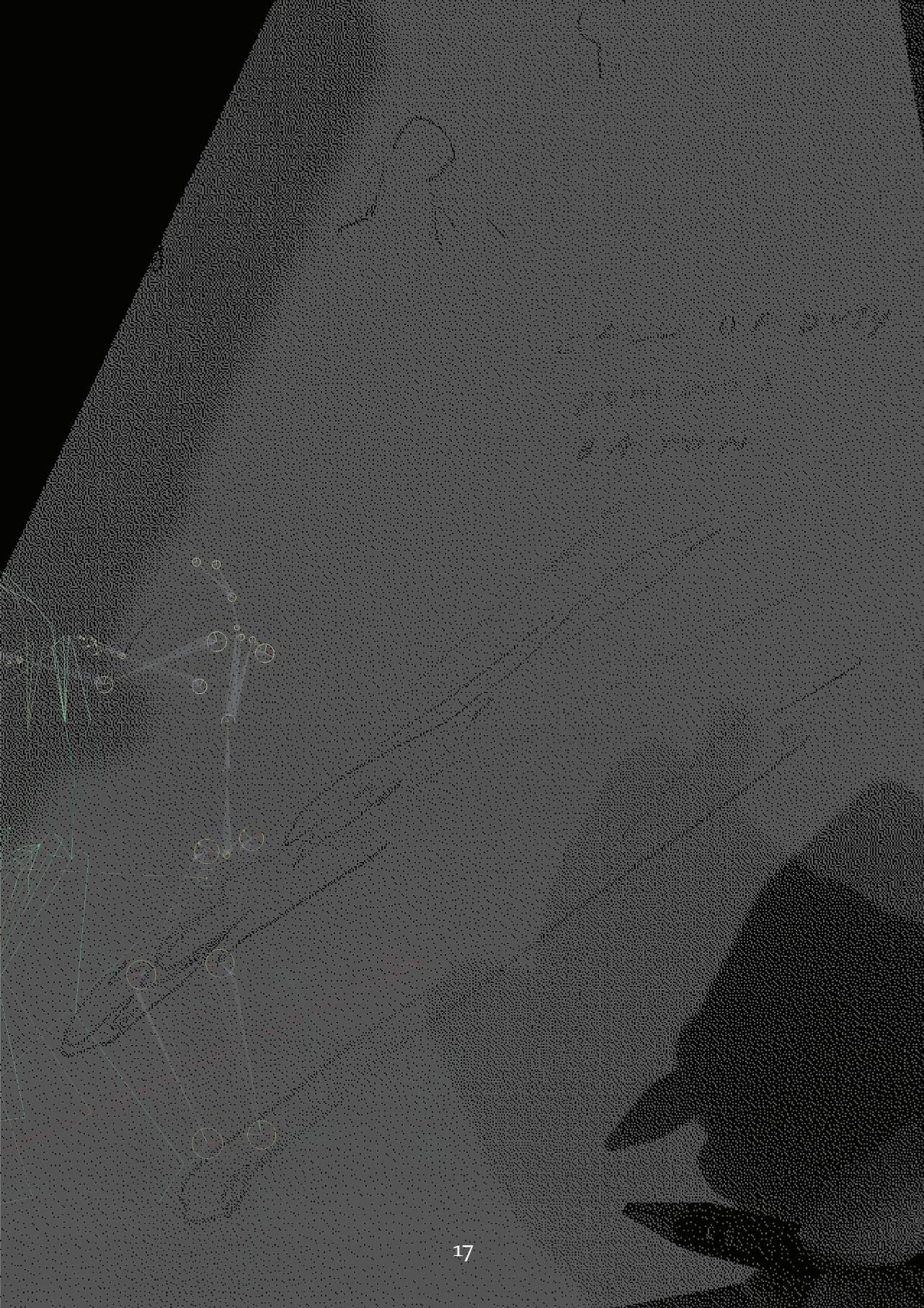
chaos in all aspects of lived experience. In Nicolas Bourriaud's *Altermodern* manifesto, he discusses the advent of the postmodern era as due to a destabilisation of historical narratives connected to energy and physical resources, with objects being replaced by endless representations.

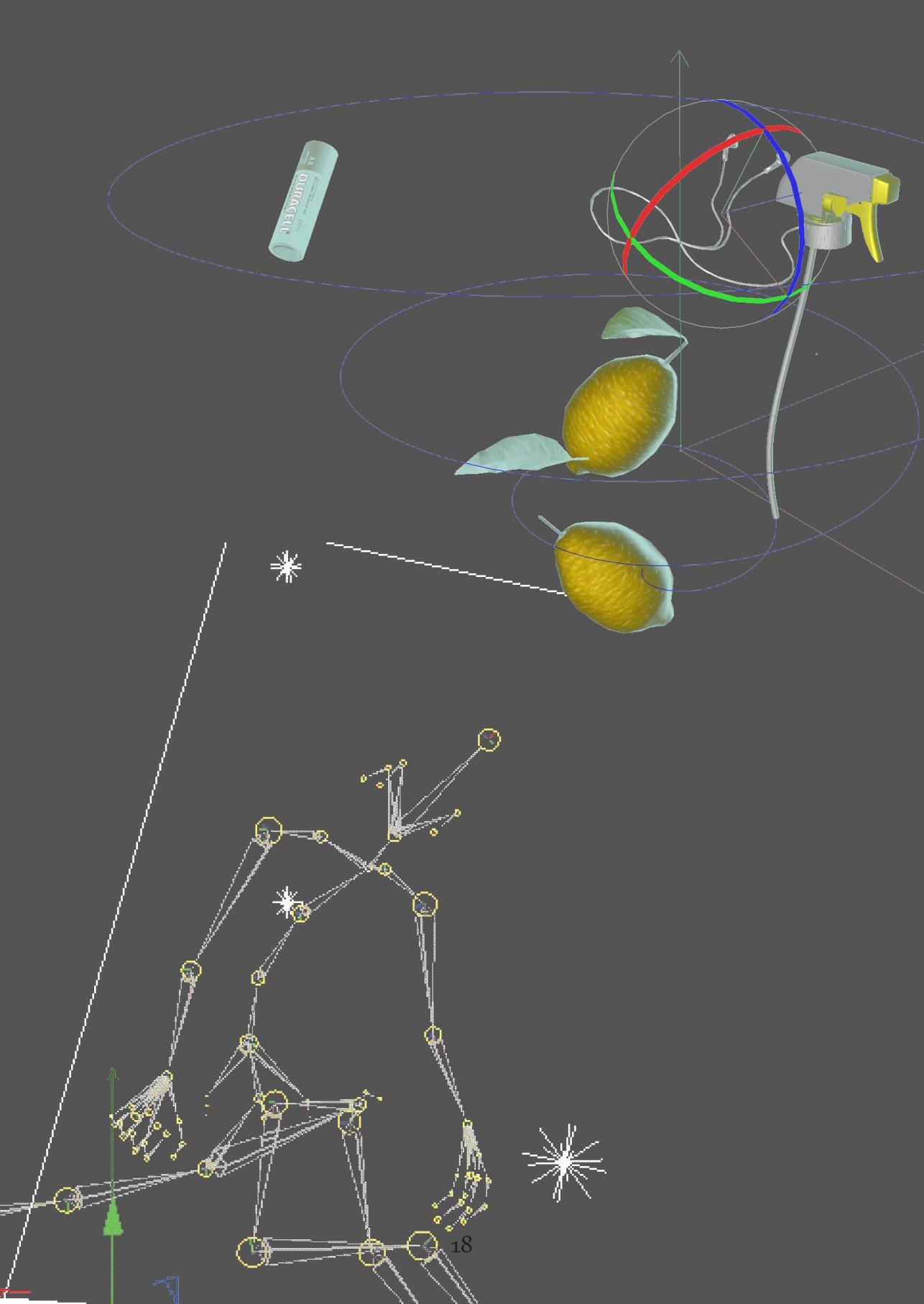
Rossin has also actively been working with forms of artificial intelligence (AI). Still largely in its infancy, AI is a useful mirror for humanity, coded as it is using the same languages and biases that we are. Ted Chiang's short story about an encounter with an alien species offers the possibility of a different kind of syntax in which grammar, and consequently time, is not linear but rather simultaneous. As it is, Hannah Arendt, in discussing a short story by Franz Kafka, recognises that the past and the future only exist because we, by our very presence, create a gap in the flow of time, breaking it into tenses. Bertolt Brecht's wartime poem, 'To Those Born After', which features in Rossin's work, strives to overcome the devastation of the present. For while we live in an age of violence we cannot control, we are able to see the beauty in things that are broken as they become opportunities to rebuild, remake, renew.

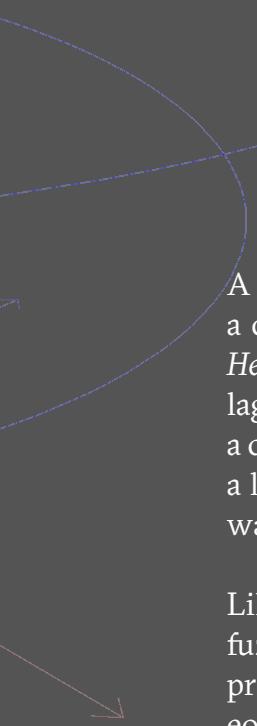
A newly commissioned essay by Mikkel Rosengaard discusses the trajectory of Rossin's practice and its explorations of the slippages and loops between the real and the digital, the authentic and the artificial, accelerationism and agency. *The Sky is a Gap* and *Psychology Today* make use of advances in digital technology to examine who has control of our person, and how we embody time.

*Stalking the Trace* is Rossin's most ambitious exhibition to date, and it is only possible because of her tenacity and vision for the work. The spectacular presentation of the works is thanks to a dedicated team led by Henry Eigenheer with Marco Filippini and Kenji Takahashi. We also give our grateful thanks to Oculus for supporting the exhibition. As ever, none of this would be possible without the ongoing support and enthusiasm of Anita and Poju Zabludowicz, as well as their daughter Tiffany, who first brought Rossin's work to our attention.

<sup>1</sup> The second law of thermodynamics states that the total entropy of an isolated system can never decrease over time. The total entropy of a system and its surroundings can remain constant in ideal cases where the system is in thermodynamic equilibrium, or is undergoing a (fictive) reversible process. In all processes that occur, including spontaneous processes, the total entropy of the system and its surroundings increases and the process is irreversible in the thermodynamic sense. The increase in entropy accounts for the irreversibility of natural processes, and the asymmetry between future and past.







# Rachel Rossin: Tlönning the Canary

## By Mikkel Rosengaard

A spectre is haunting our new century – the spectre of simulation. In a corner of Rachel Rossin's breakthrough exhibition *N=7 / The Wake in Heat of Collapse* (2015), hidden among the algorithmically generated collages and images hacked from video games, the spectre took the form of a canary's song. Perched in a metal cage above a microphone, strung up in a landscape of house plants, fake grass and shiny LED lighting, the bird was singing in a strangely familiar rhythm.

Like most of Rossin's work, *N=7 / The Wake in Heat of Collapse* traces the fuzzy border where physical reality blends into digital simulation. In a practice oscillating between digital and traditional media – from video game mods to painting, from installation to virtual reality – Rossin outlines the deformations and perversions that emerge when the real becomes simulated and the simulated becomes real.

The belief that the real and the simulated are discrete entities in binary opposition has been a central tenet of the Western cultural canon. In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Nightingale* (1843), an emperor prefers the tinkling of a bejewelled mechanical bird to the song of the real nightingale. Soon, the mechanical bird breaks down. And when the emperor falls ill, it is the real nightingale's song that saves him. Such is the moral of many of our culture's most familiar narratives: the authentic is good, the artificial dangerous. Simulation is a sin, the God-given reality virtuous.

To Andersen, the problem of simulation was a simple one. The biological nightingale was authentic. The mechanical bird was artificial. There was no middle ground. In the 21st century, however, reality and simulation have become murkier concepts. Figures and forms fluctuate between the digital and the physical, glitching, entwining, until it is no longer possible to tell one from another. In Rachel Rossin's universe, a bird's song

is neither mechanical tinkling nor authentic canary warble. In the lonely months of preparing her debut show, Rossin played a digital dubstep track on repeat to a canary hatchling, infecting the bird with the simulated sounds of the computer until it was singing in dubstep rhythms. By streaming the dubstep track through the bird's syrinx, the electronic sounds deformed, got entangled with the physical reality of a tiny feathered body. Rossin's song is a birdily distorted dubstep.

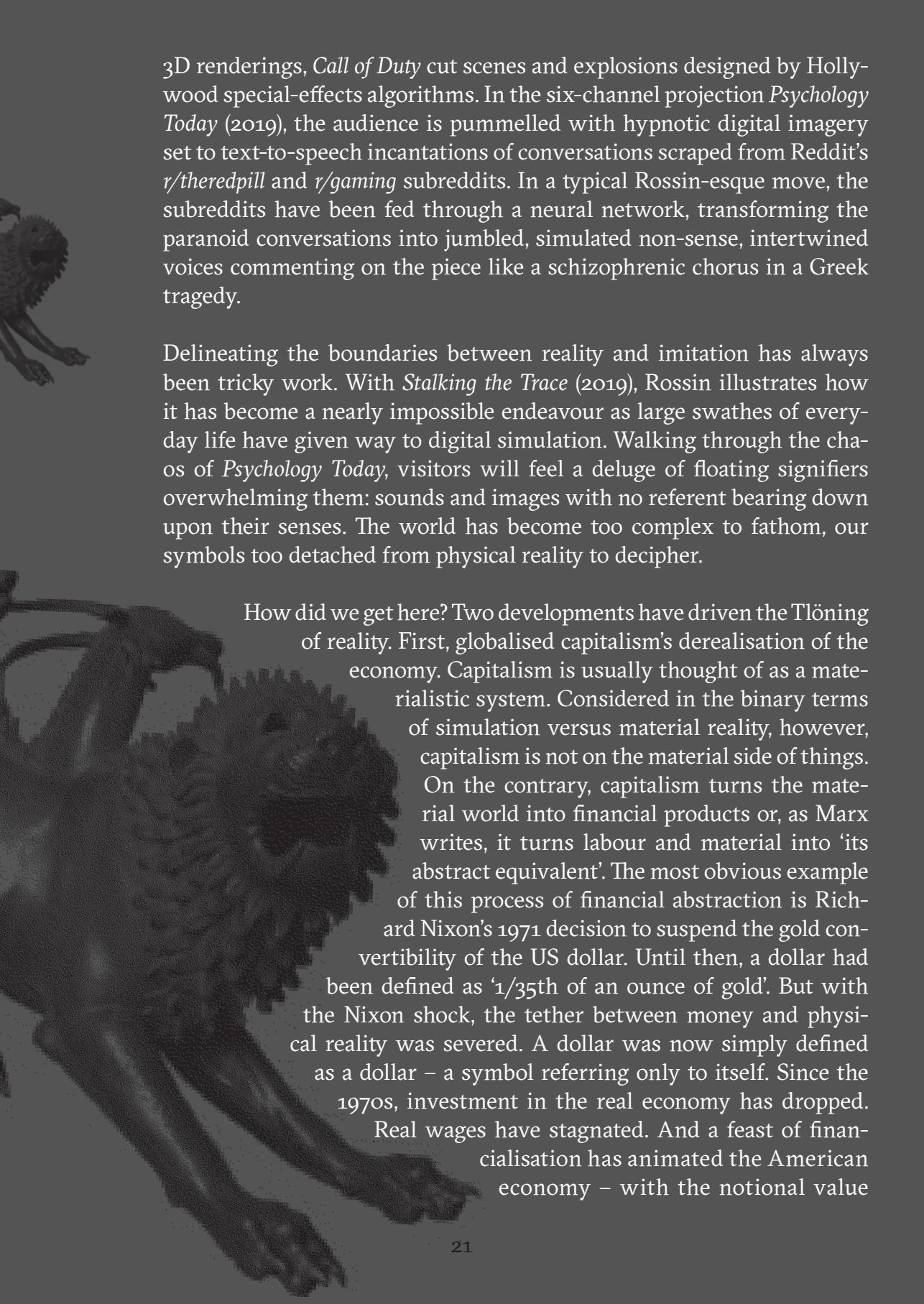
Listening to the avian dubstep, we hear life imitating art. Elsewhere in Rossin's practice, the pendulum swings the other way, but with similar misshapen effects. In the painting *Roses in a Vase*, Rossin streamed a bouquet of roses through photo scanning and virtual reality software. In the process of becoming simulated, the roses flattened; the simulated gravitational forces twisted them out of shape. And when Rossin re-translated the flowers back to physical reality in the form of a painting of a screen-grab, the flowers carried the marks of their digital transformation. They had become digitally distorted roses.

For Rossin, the real and the imitated are not fixed categories but a process; a constant looping motion. The question is not, what is real and what is simulated? But rather, what is lost in the process when the real becomes simulated and the simulated becomes real?

## ***Things we lost in the loop***

In Jorge Luis Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940), an obscure academic society invents the fictional world Tlön. In secret, they publish a vast encyclopaedia describing the languages, sciences, history, geography and belief systems of Tlön. The narrator of the story is first confused, then fascinated by this detailed imaginary world. But soon concepts, ideas and even physical objects from the fabricated realm of Tlön start to invade the real, physical world. At the close of the story, the narrator is worried that our entire civilisation will give way to the simulation of Tlön.

Like Borges' narrator, Rossin's work outlines how a simulated realm is invading our physical reality. In *Stalking the Trace* (2019), Rossin's most ambitious exhibition to date, the audience is plunged into a series of immersive landscapes haunted by the phantom of simulation. In the virtual reality work *The Sky is a Gap* (2017–19), visitors move through layered simulated worlds made up of boilerplate video game landscapes, real estate



3D renderings, *Call of Duty* cut scenes and explosions designed by Hollywood special-effects algorithms. In the six-channel projection *Psychology Today* (2019), the audience is pummelled with hypnotic digital imagery set to text-to-speech incantations of conversations scraped from Reddit's *r/theredpill* and *r/gaming* subreddits. In a typical Rossin-esque move, the subreddits have been fed through a neural network, transforming the paranoid conversations into jumbled, simulated non-sense, intertwined voices commenting on the piece like a schizophrenic chorus in a Greek tragedy.

Delineating the boundaries between reality and imitation has always been tricky work. With *Stalking the Trace* (2019), Rossin illustrates how it has become a nearly impossible endeavour as large swathes of everyday life have given way to digital simulation. Walking through the chaos of *Psychology Today*, visitors will feel a deluge of floating signifiers overwhelming them: sounds and images with no referent bearing down upon their senses. The world has become too complex to fathom, our symbols too detached from physical reality to decipher.

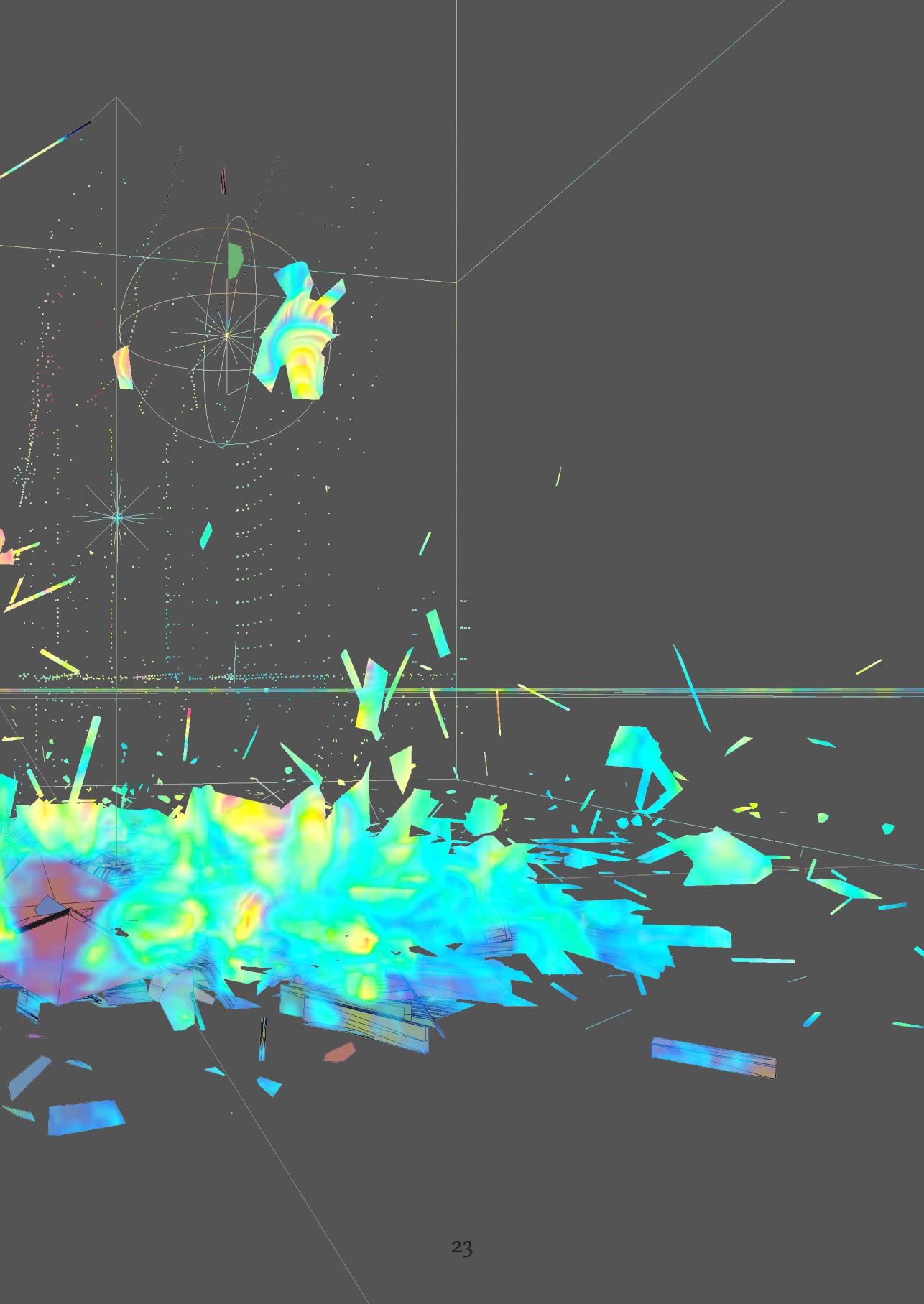
How did we get here? Two developments have driven the Tlöning of reality. First, globalised capitalism's derealisation of the economy. Capitalism is usually thought of as a materialistic system. Considered in the binary terms of simulation versus material reality, however, capitalism is not on the material side of things. On the contrary, capitalism turns the material world into financial products or, as Marx writes, it turns labour and material into 'its abstract equivalent'. The most obvious example of this process of financial abstraction is Richard Nixon's 1971 decision to suspend the gold convertibility of the US dollar. Until then, a dollar had been defined as '1/35th of an ounce of gold'. But with the Nixon shock, the tether between money and physical reality was severed. A dollar was now simply defined as a dollar – a symbol referring only to itself. Since the 1970s, investment in the real economy has dropped. Real wages have stagnated. And a feast of financialisation has animated the American economy – with the notional value

of derivatives at times swelling to several times the value of global GDP.

Second, the smartphoning of everyday life. In the early days of the internet, many online users had a binary perception of the web. Either you were in front of your computer in the digital, artificial world of the internet where you could take on a series of avatars and pretend to be someone else, or else you were IRL – away from the computer, out in the real physical world where you were confined to the identity of your body. Over the past decade, as the time we spend online has grown exponentially, this binary online–offline perception has eroded. With the introduction of the first smartphones in 2007, stationary, desktop-based internet technology was transformed into an omnipresent, all-pervading part of our lives. And with that, the clear distinction between online and offline quickly faded. Today, the average American spends 10 hours a day immersed in screens of one kind or another. More waking hours are spent looking at simulations than *not* looking at simulations. When we carry the internet in our pockets and seamlessly slip in and out of our online lives, it no longer makes sense to distinguish between our online and offline lives. The avatars we cultivate online bleed into our physical selves.

The curator and writer Legacy Russell refers to this circular dynamic as the ‘online/offline loop’. According to Russell, our online lives are neither fantasy nor true one-to-one representations of our physical reality. Rather, they should be seen as sites of creative experimentation where people can cultivate and experiment with avatars or ‘new selves’. These new selves then journey offline, out into the world at large where they rub off on our physical selves beyond the screen. Through the online/offline loop we become our avatars.

Few artists working today have a more intuitive understanding of the online/offline loop than Rachel Rossin. Growing up two hours from Walt Disney World in the hyperreal suburbia of West Palm Beach, Rossin spent her adolescence creating mods for *Call of Duty*, programming simple computer games, playing hours of *Counter Strike* and saving up for college by designing websites. Seeing her web-design services advertised on AOL forums, potential clients would reach out to the teenage Rossin. But once they realised they were about to do business with a high-school girl, many of them balked.



Rossin knew her web-designing prowess wasn't the problem. Rather, it was her identity: her age, her two X chromosomes. As a remedy, Rossin created a new email account, pretended to be 35-year-old Robert rather than 15-year-old Rachel. And with just a few identity-bending clicks, the jobs started to trickle in.

Taking its starting point in online culture, Rossin's work asks what we lose when we scramble and reassemble ourselves and our society in the online/offline loop. In the *Lossy* series, Rossin took cues from the concept of lossy data compression. When compressing image files using the widespread lossy technique, non-essential parts of an image file are irreversibly altered. In *Self-Portrait* (2015), Rossin lifted an image of herself onto a 3D simulation, then overlaid the image with a scanned JPEG of an older self-portrait. In the process, both self-portraits deformed, became misshapen by the 3D software's gravitational forces. It was this distorted self – looking more like a melting, sprinkled soft-serve than a person – that Rossin rendered in oil on canvas.

In *I Came and Went as a Ghost Hand* (2015), Rossin elegantly let the gaze of her audience function as the driver of this digital entropy. As the audience floated, phantom-like, through a virtual reality simulation of Rossin's studio and apartment, their gaze softened and evaporated the objects they were looking at. The closer they looked, the more content was lost. By the end of the show, nothing was left of the digital world but pixilated, fragmented forms.

Entropy is the idea that – in any process – it's easier to lose than obtain order and energy. For Rossin, this is as true for thermodynamics as it is for advanced human society. In the churning of the online/offline loop, images glitch. Identities fragment. Information dissolves. And complex symbolic systems invariably fall back into their constituent parts. This digital entropy is at the centre of Rossin's practice. Like Robert Smithson before her, Rossin does not envision entropy as a process of decay. Rather, digital entropy is a fundamental force; a dynamic that pushes society, culture and individual identities to mutate and evolve. In *Lossy* (2015), a bouquet of roses, video game sunsets and childhood cat-drawings were deformed into new, unrecognisable figures. In *The Sky is a Gap*, a Post Malone song atrophied into autotuned non-sense as the words of the *Call of Duty*-gaming rapper were streamed through a neural network. With each pendulum swing from reality to simulation and

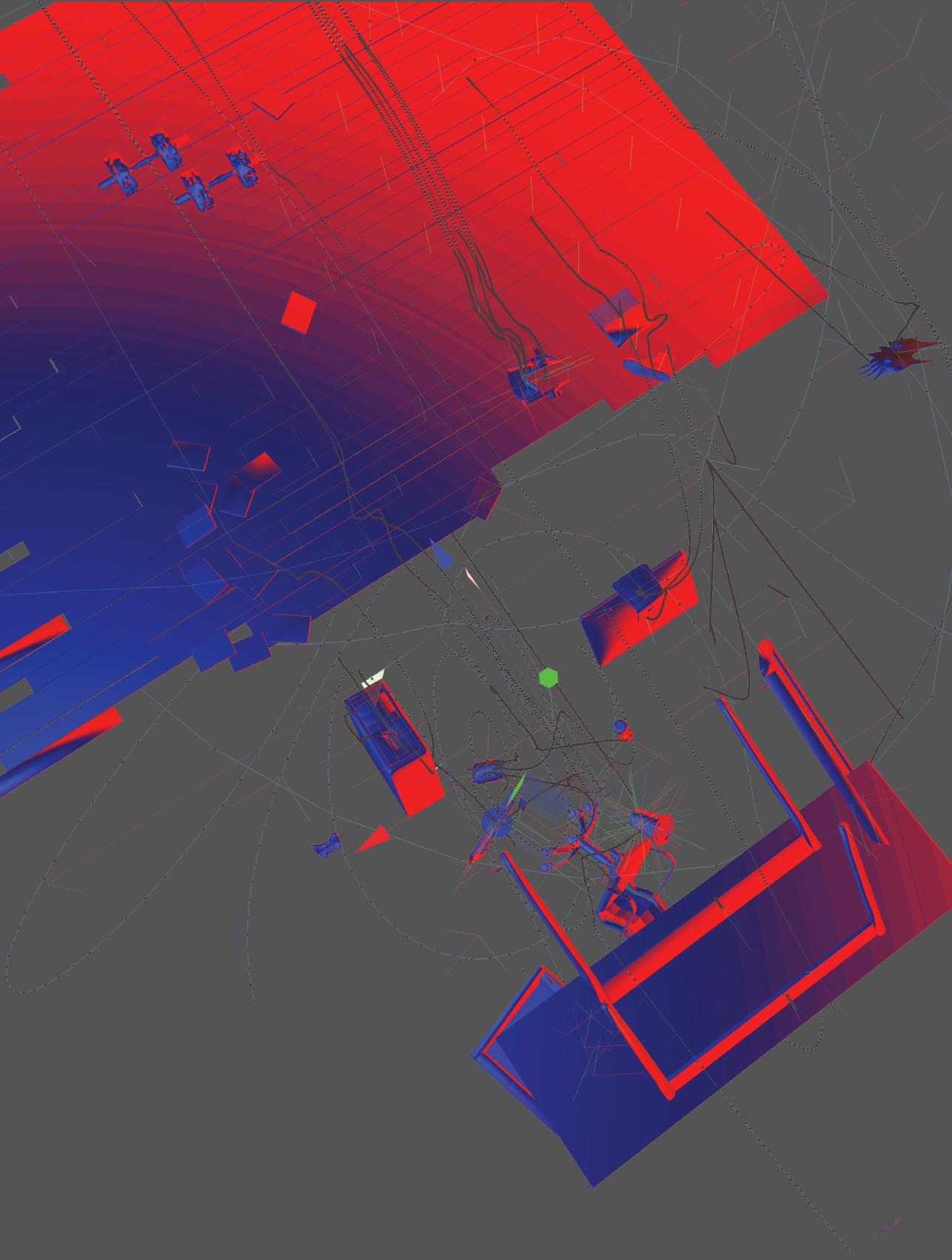
back to reality, bits of information deform, glitch. Get lost in the loop.

## *Delusions of control*

The cultural landscape we are currently living in – made up of floating signifiers, distorted by simulations, fragmented by digital entropy – is nearly impossible for any individual to comprehend. Even the institutions and individuals who have traditionally made it their job to interpret the world seem to have given up on painting a bigger picture. Politicians are no longer guiding the way forward, but are either guarding the neoliberal status quo or retreating into nationalist nostalgia. Literary fiction is withdrawing from society into autofiction as writers seem unable to narrate a coherent story of our culture. Only our own story is left to tell.

With no credible authorities guiding us through today's increasingly complex society, many citizens are left feeling that they are not in control of their own lives. This loss of agency is not just a by-product of digital technology or economic precariousness. Often, it is politically engineered. To uphold their model of managed democracy, Vladimir Putin's Russia supports fringe activist groups on both the political left and right to sow a sense of confusion in its electorate. As is now well documented, this strategy of 'the digital spectacle' was used in the 2016 US presidential election to spread misinformation on everything from Californian secessionism to Black Lives Matter activism. Gone is the propaganda of the 20th century where regimes presented themselves as model societies and painted their enemies as morally bankrupt dictatorships. Instead, a digital spectacle is unleashed on the population. A barrage of emotionally charged information and misinformation is disseminated to keep the majority of the electorate preoccupied with internal conflicts, racial and religious strife, and the particulars of small disasters. Meanwhile, the fundamental economic structure of society stays unchanged, unchallenged, and in favour of the moneyed elite.

In the coming decades, technologies such as machine learning, artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality will bring about simulated spectacles that are more intelligent, seductive and entertaining than anything we have experienced so far. Seeing is believing – and seeing these immersive spectacles play out before us will leave us open to further manipulations. How do we reclaim a sense of agency and control in a world like that? The total entanglement of physical reality and digital simulation means



that we cannot oppose the manipulating simulations by turning them off. Any critique must pass through them.

Elegantly, this is exactly what Rossin does when she co-opts digital technologies such as virtual reality, machine learning and, most powerfully, video game mechanics. Capitalism has a way of coming up with marketable plasters for its own ailments. And it is no coincidence that the video game has become the best-selling medium of the early 21st century. Studies of video game players suggest that the interactive nature of the medium let gamers gain a cathartic kind of pleasure. The catharsis comes not only from acting out taboos and violent desires oppressed by society, but also from endowing the player with a sense of power and control over an ordered environment. Video games are ruled by algorithms that reward players for doing the right thing. Once you learn the simple causality of the rules, there are no or few surprises. A always leads to B.

In several of her strongest pieces, Rossin subverts immersive technologies to give agency and control back to the audience. In *RSNBL PRSN* (2016), for example, Rossin used the structure of the first-person shooter game to empower viewers to control the narrative. Walking through a soothing, tender landscape of house plants and marbled pastel colours, the viewer felt like the protagonist of a video game as characters lifted from *Call of Duty* and *Life is Strange* were activated only when the viewer looked at them, setting in motion an elaborate chain of consequences.

Rossin's interest in video games is most deftly on display in *The Sky is a Gap*. Half installation, half video game, the piece functions as an embodiment of the gaming experience. *The Sky is a Gap* is constructed so the viewer's physical position in the gallery functions as the scrubber or the cursor in a YouTube video. As you move forward in space, so does time in the simulation. As you move backward, the simulation rewinds. By moving faster or slower, you can control and manipulate the passage of time and the speed of the scenes playing out around you.

By turning the viewer into the scrubber, Rossin illustrates how Western society is coping with the information overload, complexity and overwhelming speed of the early 21st century: through delusions of control. If you can't control any of the convoluted, fast-changing dynamics affecting your life, at least you can exert some influence by commanding the simplified worlds of *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*. If the hyper-financialised economy is preventing you

from living the life you desire, at least you can project an image of that life through tightly curated social media. If you can't decipher the complexities of a globalised geopolitics, at least you can make up a simple conspiracy to explain it all.

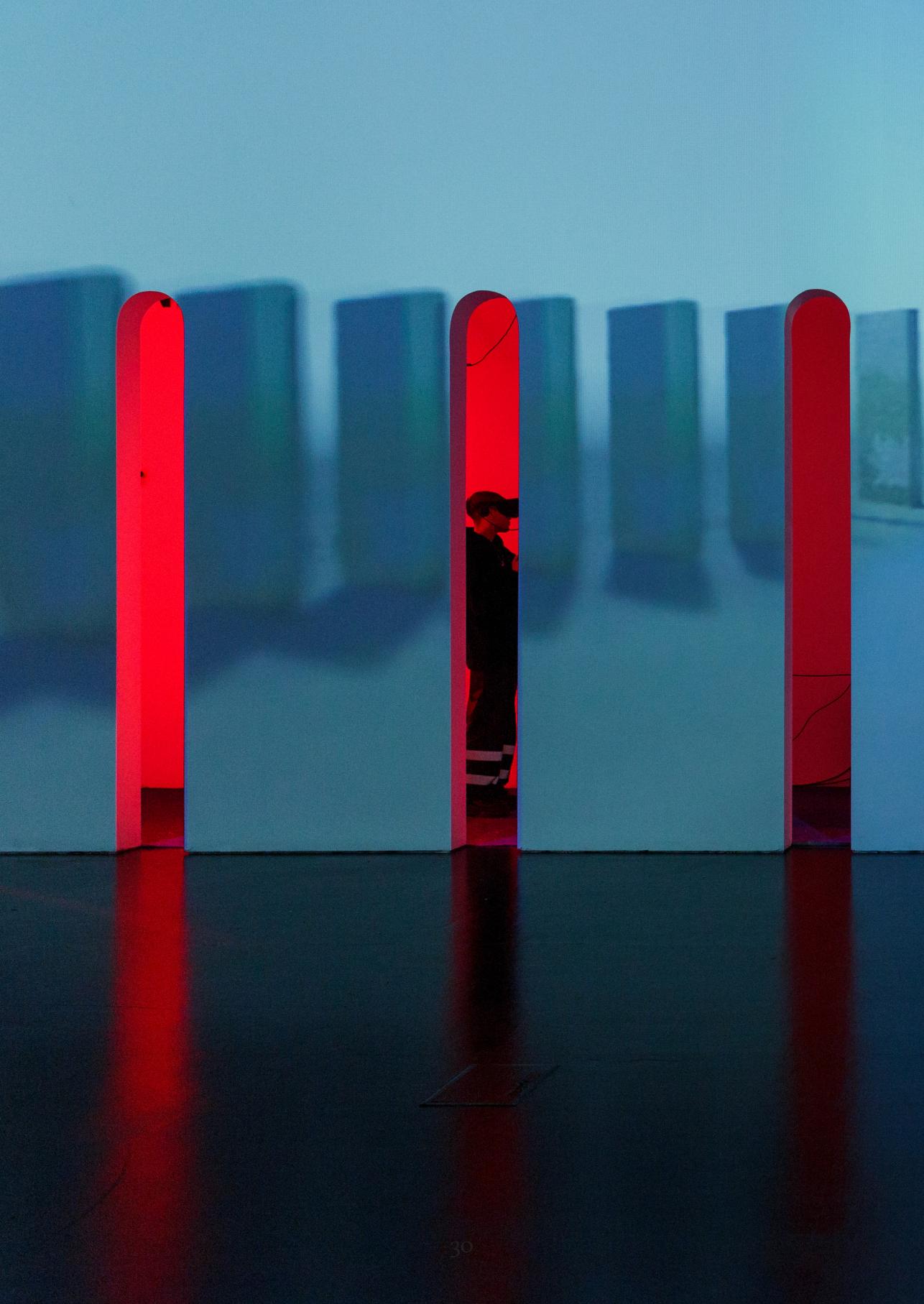
*Stalking the Trace* can be read as a metaphor for how humanity deals with the uncertainties of an increasingly precarious moment. But Rossin's exhibition goes further than merely mirroring an age inundated with digital media. In *The Sky is a Gap*, visitors gain a sense of agency as they make their way through a series of disasters. At the end of each scenario, much like in a video game, the visitor can swipe to the next scene, in this case by flipping a switch. Instead of passively watching a narrative unfold, Rossin's audience controls the speed and form of the narrative as they drill down through the nested, simulated catastrophes. Visitors are allowed a glimpse into the internal mechanics of the digital age. By letting the viewer control time, and by allowing them to determine how the calamity around them unravels, the work calls attention to the fakeness of the digital spectacle. As the viewer, you are in control of the chaos and confusion churning around you. You can always just flick the switch. Turn off the disaster on your screen.

Of course, turning off the manipulations of the digital age is no simple task. In 1843, Hans Christian Andersen could clearly distinguish between a nightingale and a mechanical bird. For the citizens of the 21st century, that boundary has long since collapsed. Our society is dominated visually, economically and politically by digital simulations to which well-known forms of opposition – the march, the campaign, the strike – seem virtually impotent. Rossin addresses this impasse by co-opting the most manipulating forms of simulations – virtual reality and video games – and using their suggestive powers to shake us awake.

By taking the viewer on a ride through hypnotic, immersive simulations, Rossin shows us how the entropy of the digital age is destabilising society. Her art dredges the murky delta that is emerging where the simulated meets the real, and asks, what do we lose when we stream the spectre of simulation through our lives? And what do we gain?

What, exactly, is hard to put into words. But you can feel it in the flutter of a thousand garbled Reddit voices. You can see it in a deformed, flattened rose. You can hear it from a feathered yellow breast, pumping in a dubstep beat.

















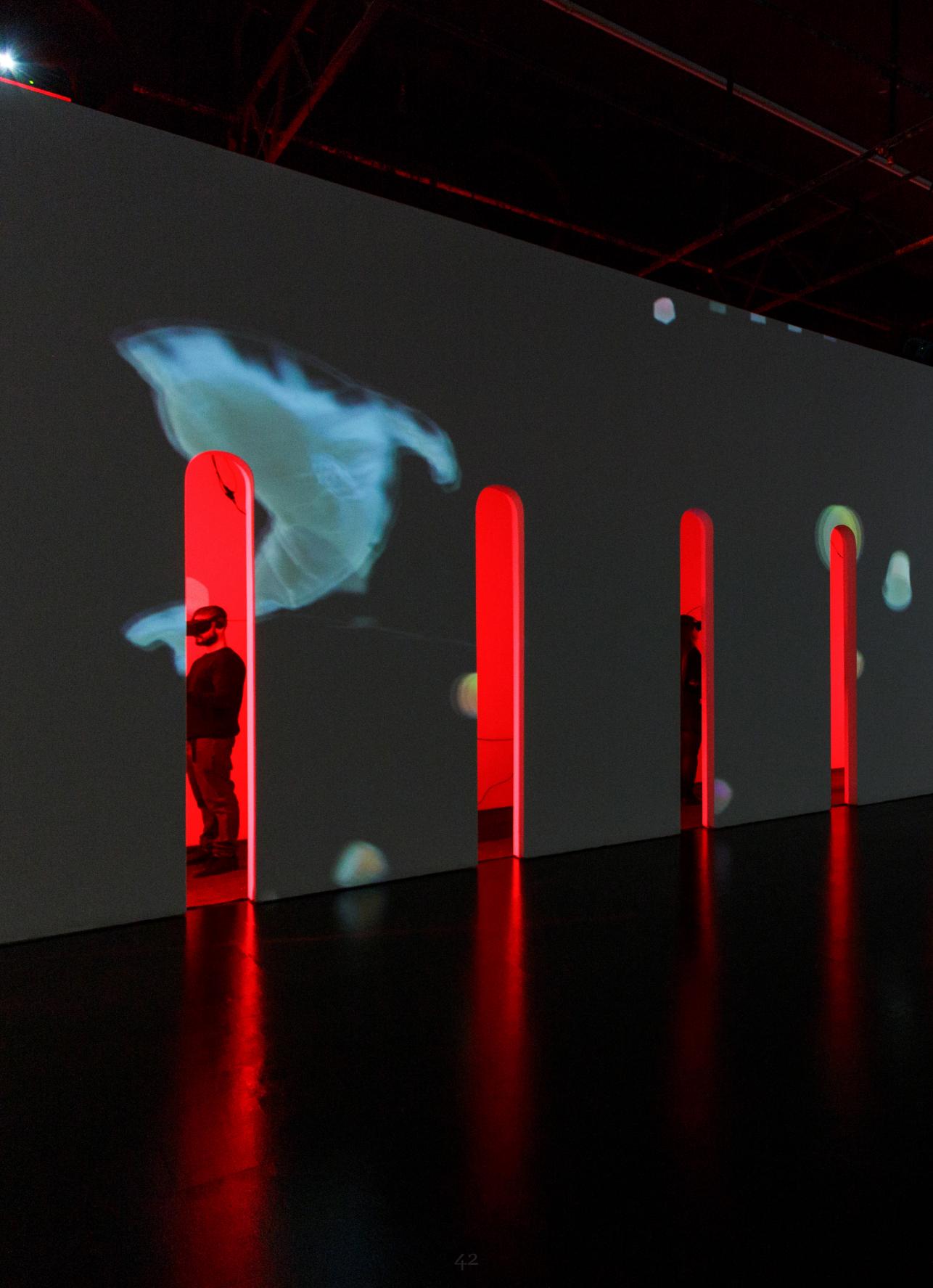


















# Tom Stoppard

*Arcadia, 1993*

Act 2 Scene 3

...

Valentine: It's heat.

Hannah: Are you tight, Val?

Valentine: It's a diagram of heat exchange.

Septimus: So, we are all doomed!

Thomasina: (Cheerfully) Yes.

Valentine: Like a steam engine, you see - (*Hannah fills Septimus's glass from the same decanter, and sips from it.*) She didn't have the maths, not remotely.

She saw what things meant, way ahead, like seeing a picture.

Septimus: This is not science. This is story-telling.

Thomasina: Is it a waltz now?

Septimus: No.

(*The music is still modern.*)

Valentine: Like a film.

Hannah: What did she see?

Valentine: That you can't run the film backwards. Heat was the first thing which didn't work that way. Not like Newton. A film of a pendulum, or a ball falling through the air - backwards, it looks the same.

Hannah: The ball would be going the wrong way.

Valentine: You'd have to know that. But with heat - friction - a ball breaking a window -

Hannah: Yes.

Valentine: It won't work backwards.

Hannah: Who thought it did?

Valentine: She saw why. You can put back the bits of glass but you can't collect up the heat of the smash. It's gone.

Septimus: So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow



cold. Dear me.

Valentine: The heat goes into the mix.

(He gestures to indicate the air in the room, in the universe.)

Thomasina: Yes, we must hurry if we are going to dance.

Valentine: And everything is mixing the same way, all the time, irreversibly.

Septimus: Oh, we have time, I think.

Valentine: ... till there's no time left. That's what time means.

Septimus: When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.

Thomasina: Then we will dance. Is this a waltz?

Septimus: It will serve. (He stands up.)

Thomasina: (Jumping up) Goody!

# Hannah Arendt

## BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

### Six Exercises in Political Thought, 1961

'Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future'

Kafka's parable reads as follows<sup>1</sup>:

*He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.*

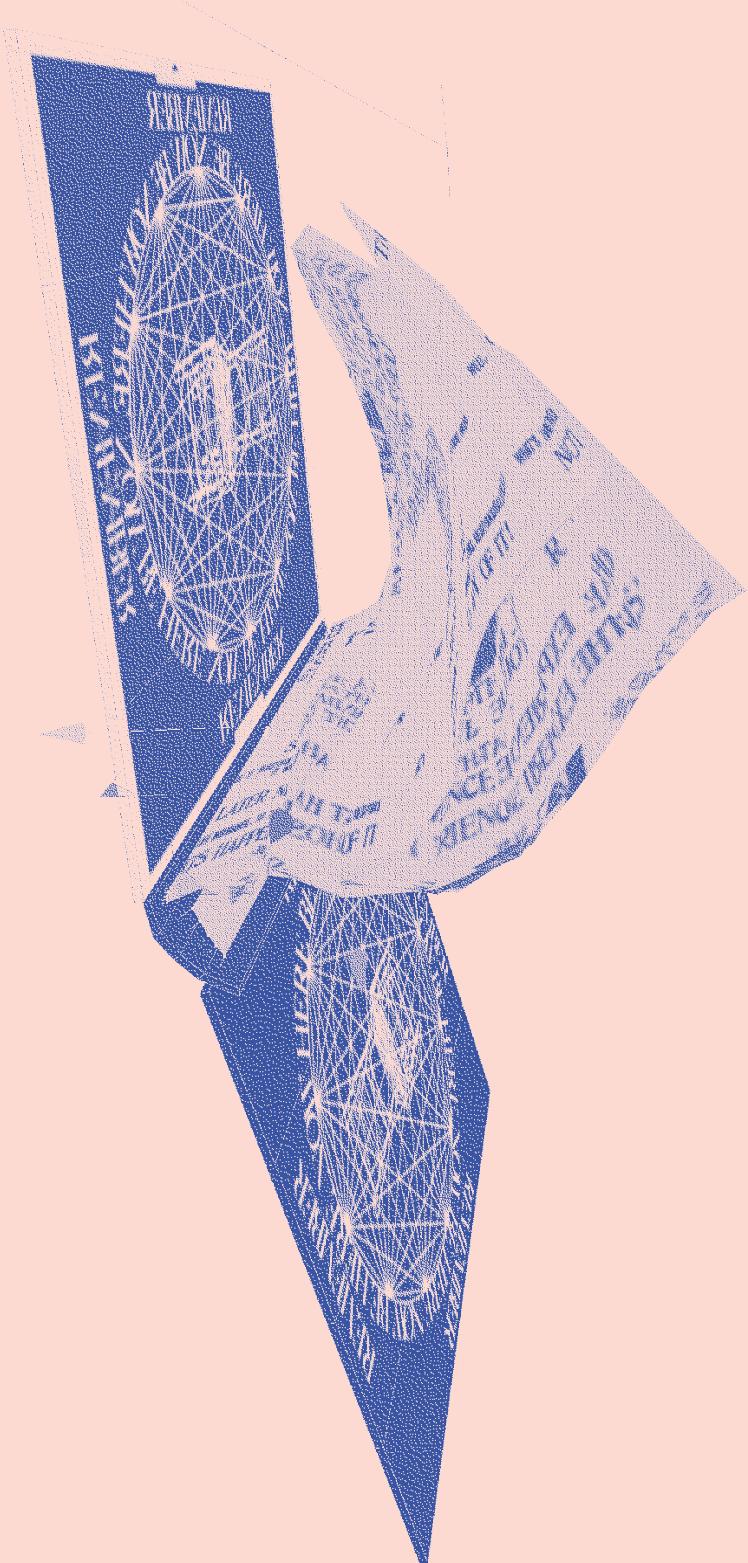
[...]

The first thing to be noticed is that not only the future "the wave of the future" but also the past is seen as a force, and not, as in nearly all our metaphors, as a burden man has to shoulder and of whose dead weight the living can or even must get rid in their march into the future. In the words of Faulkner, "the past is never dead, it is not even past." This past, moreover, reaching all the way back into the origin, does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future which drives us back into the past. Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where "he" stands; and "his" standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which "his" constant fighting, "his" making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence. Only because man is inserted into time and only to the extent that he stands his ground does the flow of indifferent time break up into tenses; it is this insertion the beginning of a beginning, to put it into Augustinian terms which splits up the time continuum into forces which then, because they are focused on the particle or body that gives them their direction, begin fighting with each other and acting upon man in the way Kafka describes.

[...]

Only insofar as he thinks, and that is insofar as he is ageless a "he" as Kafka so rightly calls him, and not a "somebody" does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time between past and future. The gap, I suspect, is not a modern phenomenon, it is perhaps not even a historical datum but is coeval with the existence of man on earth. It may well be the region of the spirit or, rather, the path paved by thinking, this small track of non-time which the activity of thought beats within the time-space of mortal men and into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipation, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and biographical time. This small non-time-space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past; each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.

<sup>1</sup> The story is the last of a series of "Notes from the year 1920," under the title "HE." Translated from the German by Willa and Edwin Muir, they appeared in this country in *The Great Wall of China*, New York, 1946. I followed the English translation except in a few places where a more literal translation was needed for my purposes. The German original in vol. 5 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, New York, 1946 reads as follows:  
Er hat zwei Gegner: Der erste bedrängt ihn von hinten, vom Ursprung her. Der zweite verwehrt ihm den Weg nach vorn. Er kämpft mit beiden. Eigentlich unterstützt ihn der erste im Kampf mit dem Zweiten, denn er will ihn nach vorn drängen und ebenso unterstützt ihn der zweite im Kampf mit dem Ersten; denn er treibt ihn doch zurück. So ist es aber nur theoretisch. Denn es sind ja nicht nur die zwei Gegner da, sondern auch noch er selbst, und wer kennt eigentlich seine Absichten? Immerhin ist es sein Traum, dass er einmal in einem unbewachten Augenblick dazu gehört allerdings eine Nacht, so finster me noch war aus der Kampflinie ausspringt und wegen seiner Kampferfahrung zum Richter über seine miteinander kämpfenden Gegner erhoben wird.





# Robert Smithson

## *Entropy Made Visible, 1973*

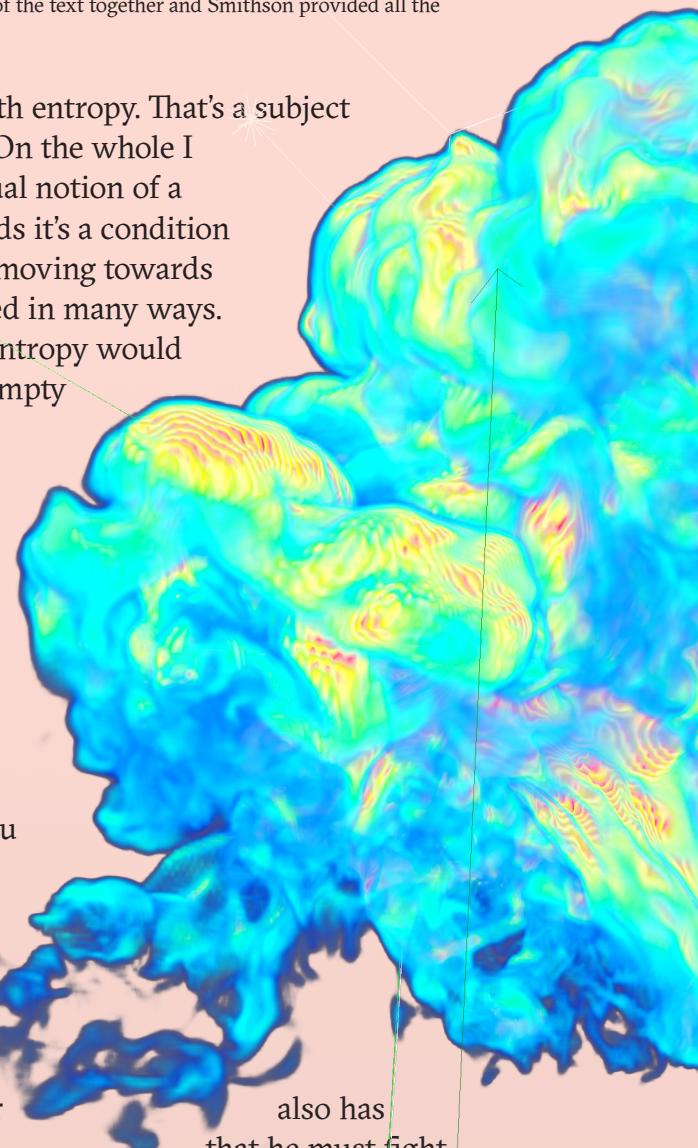
### Interview with Alison Sky

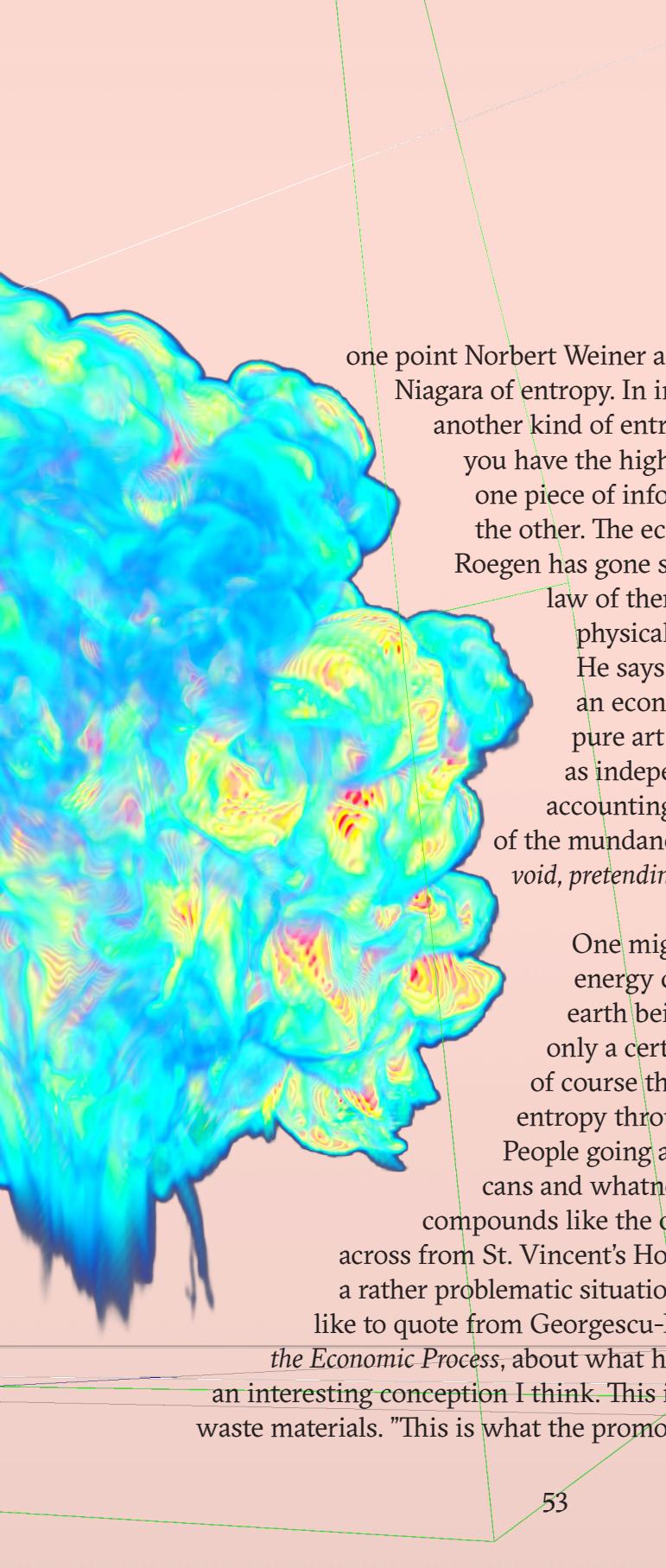
On Site #4, 1973. This interview took place about two months before Smithson's death. Although published posthumously, Smithson and Sky completed the editing of the text together and Smithson provided all the illustrations.

**Robert Smithson:** O.K. we'll begin with entropy. That's a subject that's preoccupied me for some time. On the whole I would say entropy contradicts the usual notion of a mechanistic world view. In other words it's a condition that's irreversible, it's a condition that's moving towards a gradual equilibrium and it's suggested in many ways. Perhaps a nice succinct definition of entropy would be Humpty Dumpty. Like Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. There is a tendency to treat closed systems in such a way. One might even say that the current Watergate situation is an example of entropy. You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back together again. Another example might be the shattering of Marcel Duchamp's Glass, and his attempt to put all the pieces back together again attempting to overcome entropy. Buckminster Fuller a notion of entropy as a kind of devil against and recycle. Norbert Weiner in *The Human Use of Human Beings* also postulates that entropy is a devil, but unlike the Christian devil which is simply a rational devil with a very simple morality of good and bad, the entropic devil is more Manichean in that you really can't tell the good from the bad, there's no clear cut distinction. And I think at

also has

that he must fight





one point Norbert Weiner also refers to modern art as one Niagara of entropy. In information theory you have another kind of entropy. The more information you have the higher degree of entropy, so that one piece of information tends to cancel out the other. The economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen has gone so far as to say that the second law of thermodynamics is not only a physical law but linked to economics. He says Sadi Carnot could be called an econometrician. Pure science, like pure art tends to view abstraction as independent of nature, there's no accounting for change or the temporality of the mundane world. *Abstraction rules in a void, pretending to be free of time.*

One might even say that the whole energy crisis is a form of entropy. The earth being the closed system, there's only a certain amount of resources and of course there's an attempt to reverse entropy through the recycling of garbage. People going around collecting bottles and tin cans and whatnot and placing them in certain compounds like the one over on Greenwich Avenue across from St. Vincent's Hospitals. Well this seems to be a rather problematic situation. Actually right now I would like to quote from Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, about what he calls entropic bootlegging. It's an interesting conception I think. This is what he says about recycling waste materials. "This is what the promoters of entropy bootlegging

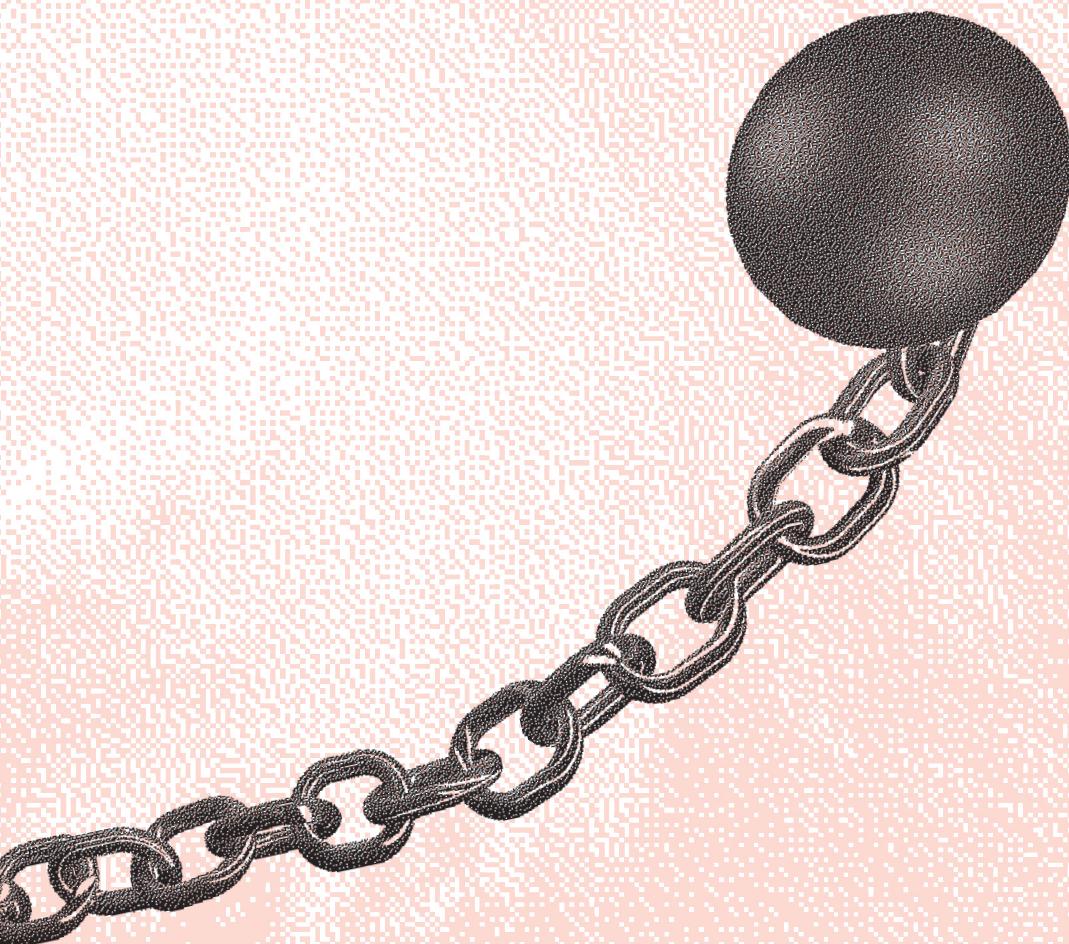
fail to understand. To be sure, one can cite numberless scrap campaigns aimed at saving low entropy [low entropy in his definition is raw materials before they're processed into refined materials. In other words raw ore would be low entropy and high entropy would be the refined material such as steel]... by sorting waste. They have been successful only because in *given circumstances* the sorting of, say, scrap copper required a smaller consumption of low entropy than the alternative way of obtaining the same amount of metal. It is equally true that the advance of technological knowledge may change the balance sheet of any scrap campaign, although history shows that past progress has benefited ordinary production rather than scrap saving. However, to sort out the scrap molecules scattered all over the land and at the bottom of the sea, would require such a long time that the entire low entropy of our environment would not suffice to keep alive the numberless generations of Maxwell's demons needed for the completed project." In other words he's giving us the indication that recycling is like looking for needles in haystacks.

Now, I would like to get into an area of, let's say, the problems of waste. It seems that when one is talking about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling one inevitably gets to the question of waste and I would postulate actually that waste and enjoyment are in a sense coupled. There's a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of preoccupation with waste. Like if we want a bigger and better car we are going to have bigger and better waster productions. So there's a kind of equation there between the enjoyment of life and waste. Probably the opposite of waste is luxury. Both waste and luxury tend to be useless. Then other's kind of middle class notion of luxury which is often called "quality." And quality is sort of based on taste and sensibility. Sartre says Genet produces neither spit or diamonds. I guess that's what I'm talking about.

**Alison Sky:** Isn't entropy actually metamorphosis, or a continual process in which elements are undergoing change, but in an evolutionary sense?

**Smithson:** Yes and no. In other words, if we consider the earth in terms of geologic time we end up with what we call fluvial entropy. Geology has its entropy too, where everything is gradually wearing

down. Now there may be a point where the earth's surface will collapse and break apart, so that the irreversible process will be in a sense metamorphosized, it is evolutionary, but it's not evolutionary in terms of any idealism. There is still the heat death of the sun. It may be that human beings are just different from dinosaurs rather than better. In other words there just might be a different situation. There's this need to try to transcend one's condition. I'm not a transcendentalist, so I just see things going towards a... well it's very hard to predict anything; anyway all predictions tend to be wrong. I mean even planning. I mean planning and chance almost seem to be the same thing.



# Bertolt Brecht

## *To those born after, 1940*

1

Truly I live in dark times!

A trusting word is folly. A smooth brow  
A sign of insensitivity. The man who laughs  
Has simply not yet heard  
The terrifying news

What times are these, when  
A conversation about trees is almost a crime  
Because it entails silence about so many misdeeds!  
That man calmly crossing the street  
Is he not beyond the reach of his friends  
Who are in need?

It's true: I still earn a living  
But believe me: that is just good fortune. Nothing  
That I do gives me the right to eat my fill.  
By chance I am spared. (If my luck runs out  
I am lost.)

They say to me: eat and drink! Be glad that you have the means!  
But how can I eat and drink when  
It is from the starving that I wrest my food and  
My glass of water is snatched from the thirsty?  
Yet I do eat and I drink.

I would like to be wise  
In ancient books it says what it means to be wise:  
To hold yourself above the strife of the world and to live out  
That brief compass without fear  
And to make your way without violence  
To repay evil with good  
Not to fulfil your desires, but to forget them



Such things are accounted wise.  
But all of this I cannot do:  
Truly, I live in dark times!

## 2

I came into the cities at a time of disorder  
When hunger was ascendant.  
I came amongst mankind at a time of uprising  
And I rose up with them.  
Thus the days passed  
Granted to me on this earth.

I ate my meals between battles  
I laid myself down to sleep with the murderers  
I made love heedlessly  
And I looked upon nature with impatience.  
Thus the days passed  
Granted to me on this earth.

All roads led into the mire in my time  
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers  
There was little I could do. But the powerful  
Would sit more securely without me, that was my hope.  
Thus the days passed  
Granted to me on this earth.

Our powers were feeble. The goal  
Lay far in the distance  
It was clearly visible even if, for me  
Hardly attainable.  
Thus the days passed  
Granted to me on this earth.

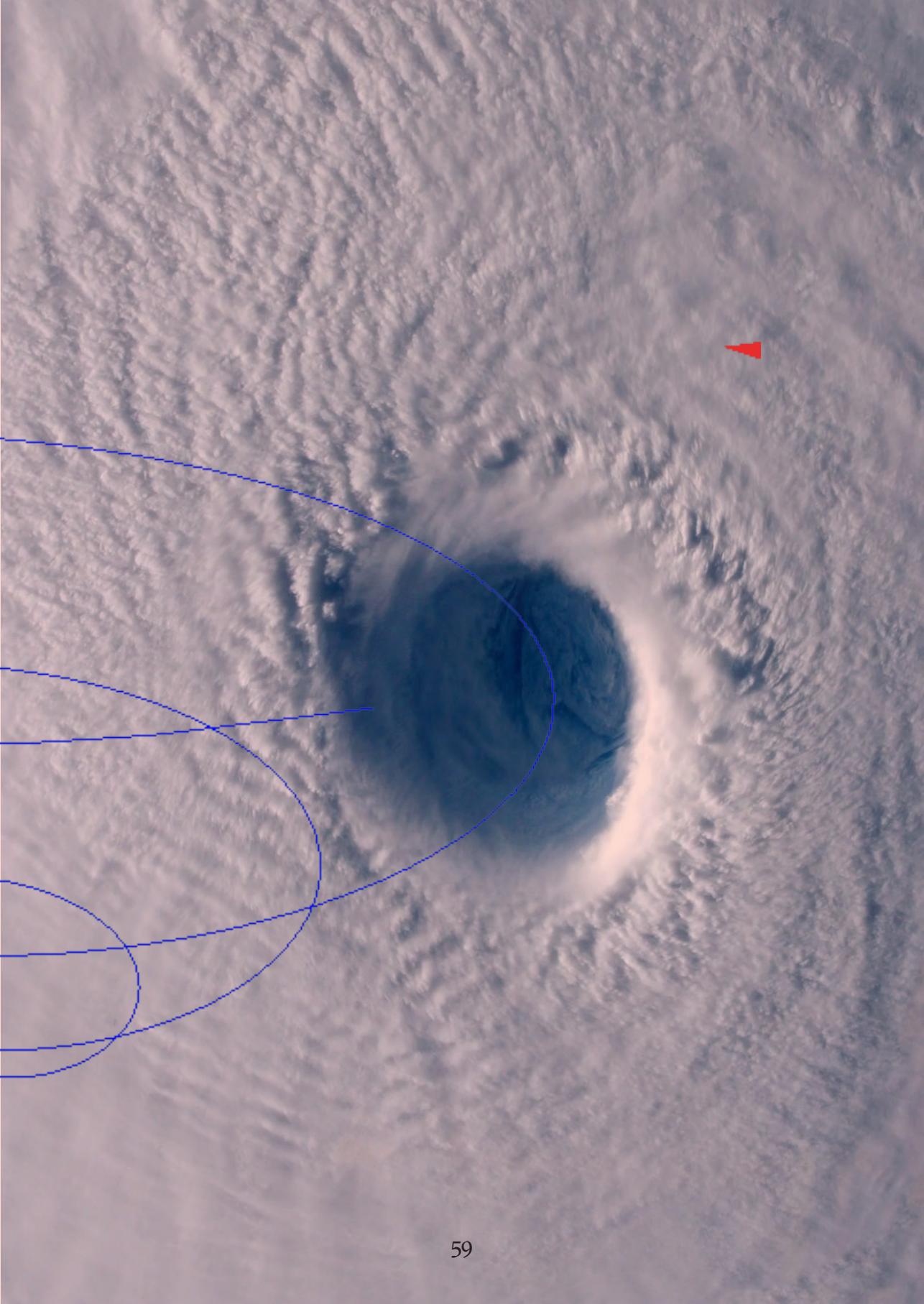
### 3

You who will emerge again from the flood  
In which we have gone under  
Think  
When you speak of our faults  
Of the dark times  
Which you have escaped.

For we went, changing countries more often than our shoes  
Through the wars of the classes, despairing  
When there was injustice only, and no indignation.

And yet we know:  
Hatred, even of meanness  
Makes you ugly.  
Anger, even at injustice  
Makes your voice hoarse. Oh, we  
Who wanted to prepare the land for friendliness  
Could not ourselves be friendly.

You, however, when the time comes  
When mankind is a helper unto mankind  
Think on us  
With forbearance.



# Ted Chiang

## *Story of Your Life, 2000*

Consider the sentence “The rabbit is ready to eat.”

Interpret “rabbit” to be the object of “eat,” and the sentence was an announcement that dinner would be served shortly. Interpret “rabbit” to be the subject of “eat,” and it was a hint, such as a young girl might give her mother so she’ll open a bag of Purina Bunny Chow. Two very different utterances; in fact, they were probably mutually exclusive within a single household. Yet either was a valid interpretation; only context could determine what the sentence meant.

Consider the phenomenon of light hitting water at one angle, and traveling through it at a different angle. Explain it by saying that a difference in the index of refraction caused the light to change direction, and one saw the world as humans saw it. Explain it by saying that light minimized the time needed to travel to its destination, and one saw the world as the heptapods saw it. Two very different interpretations. The physical universe was a language with a perfectly ambiguous grammar. Every physical event was an utterance that could be parsed in two entirely different ways, one causal and the other teleological, both valid, neither one disqualifiable no matter how much context was available.

When the ancestors of humans and heptapods first acquired the spark of consciousness, they both perceived the same physical world, but they parsed their perceptions differently; the world-views that ultimately across were the end result of that divergence. Humans had developed a sequential mode of awareness, while heptapods had developed a simultaneous mode of awareness. We experienced events in an order, and perceived their relationship as cause and effect. They experienced all events at once, and perceived a purpose underlying them all. A minimizing, maximizing purpose.



# Nicolas Bourriaud

*Altermodern, 2009*

THE TERMS ‘MODERN’, ‘POSTMODERN’ OR ‘ALTERMODERN’ do not define styles (save as ways of thinking), but here represent tools allowing us to attribute time-scales to cultural eras. In order to understand why the collapse of the globalised financial system in Autumn 2008 appears to mark a definite turning-point in history, it is necessary to re-examine modernism from the point of view of world energy consumption.

In an enlightening text published in 2004, Peter Sloterdijk defined the modern way of living as a ‘fast-burn culture’, a specific condition of civilisation in the era of a ‘superabundance of energy. ‘Today’, he continues, ‘our lifestyle still depends upon being able to squander stocks of fossil fuels. In other words, we have gambled on a sort of explosion. We are all fanatical believers in this explosion, worshippers of this rapid liberation of a massive quantity of energy. I get the impression that the focal point of today’s adventure films – “action movies” – is that other primitive symbol of modern civilisation: the explosion of a car or a plane. Or rather, of a huge fuel tank that is the archetype of the religious movement of our times.’ This relationship between modern life and the explosion appears both literally and metaphorically throughout the twentieth century, from the Futurist eulogising of war to the ‘sudden liberations of great quantities of energy’ in the performances of the Gutai group or the Viennese Actionists, not to mention the fragmented forms of Dadaism, the self-destructive machines of Jean Tinguely or the ‘blown-up’ imagery of pop art.

It is significant that the appearance of the term ‘postmodern’ coincided exactly with the 1973 oil crisis, the event that caused the entire world, for the first time, to realise that reserves of fossil fuels were limited: the end of Sloterdijk’s ‘superabundance’. In other words, our future was all of a sudden mortgaged. It is also no accident that the term ‘postmodern’ became current in the second half of the 1970s, popularised first by the architect Charles Jencks and then by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. Jencks’s ideas constituted a criticism

of modernism in architecture, notably the functionalism of the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier, whilst Lyotard sought to lay down a new paradigm (essentially epistemological) that would extend the life of modernism. Postmodernism thus developed in the wake of the energy crisis and the ending of the boom that the French call the 'thirty glorious years' (1945-75), just as a fit of depression succeeds a traumatic loss: that of the ideologies of care-free superabundance and progress, technical, political or cultural. The oil crisis of 1973 could well represent the 'primitive scene' of postmodernism in the same way as, according to Sloterdijk, oil gushing from a well symbolises twentieth-century modernism. The latter was the fateful moment when the economy was founded on an unlimited confidence in the availability of energy, and culture on an infinite projection into the future. These were the two principles swept away by the oil crisis, and whose disappearance gave birth to what we call the postmodern.

Since the crisis of 1973, the economy has never again been based on the exploitation of raw materials. Capitalism has since disconnected from natural resources, reorienting itself towards techno-logical innovation - the choice of Japan—or 'financiarisation', the route adopted at the time by the United States. And now, when the economy is cutting its ties with concrete geography, culture for its part is divorcing from history; two parallel processes tending towards the abstract.

In the view of Bernard Stiegler, here resuming the essential thread of Jean-Francois Lyotard's theories on the 'libidinal economy', capitalism functions through the channelling of desires; yet, he adds, 'desire underwent a downward tendency', forcing the system to 'exploit instinctive impulses', all real passions having disappeared among alienated individuals who had lost control of their own lives. After exhausting the consumer's desires, capitalism was thereafter reduced to exploiting his reflexes and gut reactions; sustainable sources of energy had dried up, just as with the oil crisis. In art, this assault upon our instincts was translated as a rapid rotation of works and the ascendancy of the sensational and the spectacular: those aimed simply at releasing a vast quantity of (non-renewable) energy at first sight[...]

[...]I wrote earlier that postmodern culture had its roots in the idea of the end of history; more precisely, it posits the end of history considered as a linear narrative. In this respect, Lyotard defines the postmodern as the end of 'grand narratives', future scenarios that

history is fated to fulfil, like a film-maker following a pre-defined script. The disappearance of these ‘metanarratives’ (Marxism, in particular) ushers in a culture of improvisation and time-loops: if there is no more script, we have henceforth to react to a ‘context’, or deal in short-term measures. Forms are no longer indexed to a narrative defining them as belonging to precise historical moments, but rather embedded in the ‘text’ of culture, with no reference save to themselves. Palimpsests, pastiches, textuality... Signs have lost all contact with human history and are self-generating in an infinite Brownian motion, a labyrinth of signs.

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Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*. Faber and Faber: London, 1993. © Tom Stoppard, 1993, 2009

## Biographies

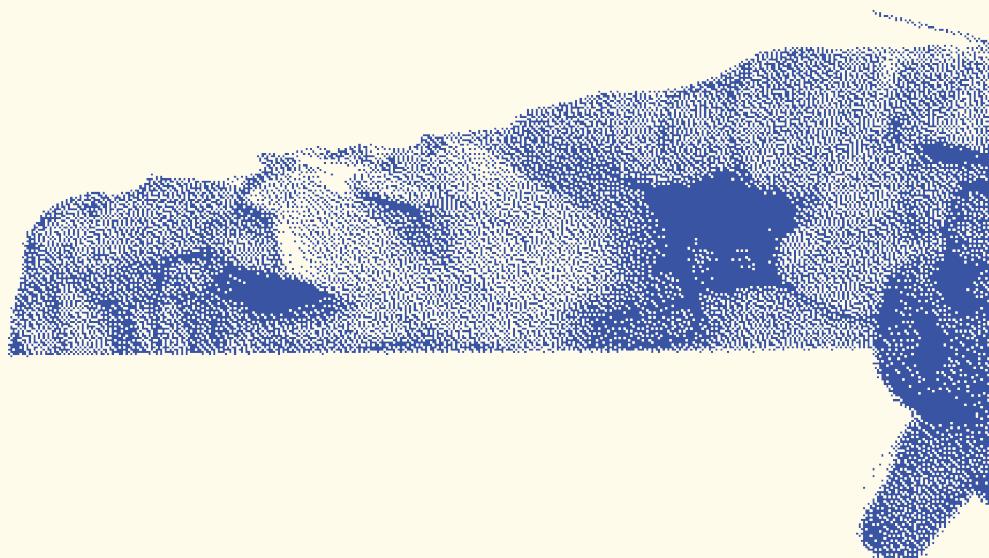
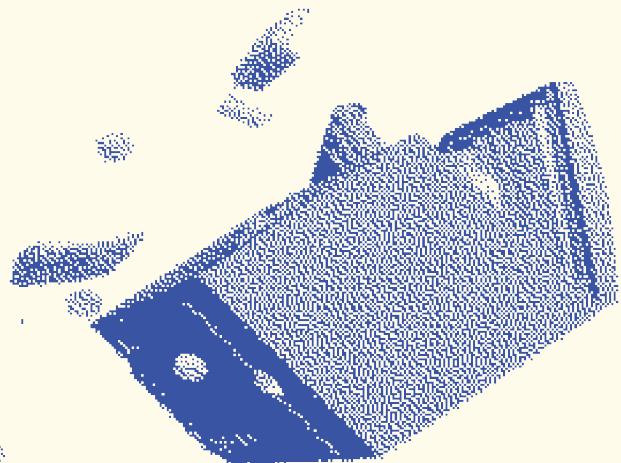
Rachel Rossin (b. 1987, Florida, USA. Lives and works in New York) selected solo exhibitions include *Peak Performance*, Signal Gallery, New York, 2017; *My Little Green Leaf*, Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2016; *Lossy*, Zieher Smith & Horton, New York, 2015. *Greasy Light*, 14a, Hamburg, Germany, 2019. Selected group exhibitions include *Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century*, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, 2018; *After Us*, K11 Art Museum, Shanghai, 2017; *ARS17*, Kiasma Museum, Helsinki, 2017; *First Look*, co-presented by Rhizome, The New Museum, New York, 2017. Rossin received a Fellowship in Virtual Reality Research and Development from New Museum's incubator in 2015-2016.

Mikkel Rosengaard is the author of *The Invention of Ana* (HarperCollins, 2018). His fiction has been published in five languages and has been featured in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, *BOMB*, *Guernica*, among others. He is an art critic with the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen* and his art writing has appeared in *The Architectural Review*, *Cultured*, *Hyperallergic*, and PBS' *Art21*. He was born in Elsinore, Denmark, and now lives in New York City.

## List of works

*The Sky is a Gap*, 2017-19  
Virtual Reality Installation

*Psychology Today*, 2019  
Six-channel digital video projection,  
5.1 surround sound, 15 min  
Courtesy of the artist



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