STATE MACHINE, Alienation and Utopia:
An Interview with J.G.
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It's great to have you here, finally. [laughs] How are you today?

This project started out as an attempt to conceive a contemporary idea of
utopia through art and media. In times of crisis, utopia as a radical
(im)possibility has to be invoked, as reform and compromise seem more and
more like desperate measures, more indicative of impotence than anything
else. But after some contemplation on the matter, as well as looking back
on historic attempts at this, including in the actual political dimension,
it became clear that to arrive at the right kind of model for utopia, one
first has to go through another process. As if utopia were a country, one
would also have to go through the proper immigration procedure and border
control to get into. The dream of a strictly limitless utopia is ultimately
what limits us from ever thinking about utopia in a way that is not bound
by our finite sense of place, which alienation exposes as a failure, a
fundamental displacedness. So instead of thinking utopia as a hypothetical
place, that is completely free of alienation, what if we imagined it as an
alien-nation, which is not a nation of aliens, but a nation that fully
embraces that it is alien to itself. Almost all major historical utopian
experiments have tried to avoid the issue of alienation to some capacity.

But in what sense is Veritania a utopian state? It seems quite intimidating
and totalitarian, does it not?

In the most basic sense, Veritania is a utopian state, because it does not
structurally discriminate against any particular identity or set thereof.
Everyone gets in, because the state recognizes all subjects as already
alienated from their symbolic identity. It reinforces this through a
bureaucratic process, which is essentially STAGEd, as there is no
enforcement of the law that proceeds it. The failure of bureaucracy is
demonstrated through the very excess of staging it as pure ritual, that is,
a system that is more invested in the idea of functioning, rather than
actually effectively functioning. What makes the state inseparable from
alienation and thus utopia, is this cold and empty function as a
bureaucratic mechanism, that serves as a symbolic point of reference,
through which we are able to recognize ourselves as free subjects who are
nonetheless dependent on the public. We like to idealise the state, either
as the protector of the nation, the provider of safety and security or the
regulator of capital. STATE MACHINE is a proposal of this more
contradictory role of the state. Some may call it a "negative utopia",
which would contrast with a kind of "positive dystopia", an almost

fetishistic attraction to dystopian aesthetics, which is becoming more and more prevalent in popular media today.

We are at a point in history where the upcoming generations, who will take the helm at shaping our world and political sphere, will have grown up with and been shaped by the internet and all the popular media that have, via new technologies and networks of communication, been able to spread all around the world. It might seem that after almost three decades, we have been able to curb the worst effects of this form of widespread mass communication, but in reality we are just now beginning to witness its real consequences. And it is precisely within the context of the internet and its media environment, that we have once again been confronted with the issue of alienation on a larger scale. This time, instead of the worker who is alienated from their labour, it is the online user who is alienated from their existence beyond their virtual screen presence within a digital social space. And as we are also existing at a time of heightened excesses of capitalism, this medium provides us with plenty promises of escaping said alienation, be that via the formation of online communities centered around certain cultural or political identities, so called "safe spaces", the endless possibilities for consumption steadily resupplied by the emerging mechanisms of technofeudalism, or even the more passive channels of escapism, like music and streaming services. It is through principles like Retro-Gardism, Cyber-Brutalism and Deutsch-Japanische Freundschaft that Veritania aims to establish a virtual space where people otherwise trapped in the cycle of trying to overcome their alienation can gain a proper distance to their symbolic determinations and consequently recognize their own subjectivity.

Cyber-Brutalism brings the anti-nostalgic sentiment of the brutalist movement into the present day of digital cyberspace. It is a first humble gesture, a reminder that the internet is not a natural plane of contemporary existence that provides room for an unprecedented degree of free self-expression, but a deeply political arena where power can more effectively be asserted than even in physical reality today. The internet is just as much of a territory that can be conquered and controlled as any other, primarily by governments and private tech companies that work in coordination with certain governments. With regard to emancipatory politics, ever since the very public success of Wikileaks, there has been a baffling drought of impactful cyber operations that attempt to disrupt the balance of power within the public digital space. Perhaps that is because governments and big tech companies seem to consolidate their direct control

over these spaces more and more efficiently, but if anything, that should
be a sign that counteraction is now even more necessary than ever.
Otherwise the common people will be left behind as a new class of
techno-serfs. Cyber-Brutalism serves as a visual motif for STATE MACHINE,
insofar as it avoids any depiction of the digital space as an organic
entity with customs and conventions that would place the user "at home".
The ultimate distillation of this idea is the sun cross, which serves as
the conceptual and symbolic foundation of Veritania.
As for Retro-Gardism, it is a borrowed — and for the purposes of STATE
MACHINE re-appropriated — artistic practice of NSK (Neue Slowenische
Kunst), which was itself inspired by artists like John Heartfield. It is a
way of recycling past visual material and rearranging it in order to create
new alienating structures, or as NSK call it "new originals". STATE MACHINE
utilizes this method in order to reveal the phantasmatic underpinnings of
popular online identities. Acquiring the proper distance to one's symbolic
identity has become increasingly difficult in the age of the virtual public
screen, where it is not so much the clear structural coercion of the system
assigning you a specific identity, but rather you yourself, who is
constantly encouraged to choose freely and discover yourself so that you
can, through social media, project that identity out into the world in
search for some form of validation. And with emerging AI technologies, that
are specifically engineered to always feed you what (you think) you want,
this phenomenon will only become more streamlined and naturalized. This is
problematic because the more we use the screen to act out our innermost
fantasies, the less we are able to recognize our fundamental alienation and
thus our subjective freedom. But that doesn't mean that the practice of
constructing an identity on the internet is in itself a bad thing, as long
as it is done to demonstrate the failure of this identity. Alienation
doesn't deny the existence of identity as such, it merely requires the
recognition of its impossibility.

I can see how these concepts informed the creation of STAGE1 and STAGE3. So
STAGE2 revolves around the idea of Deutsch-Japanische Freundschaft then?

Not exclusively, but yes. 百花斉放, the national anthem of Veritania,
celebrates the possibility of shared alienation between different cultures.
The long-standing close relationship between the west and Japan appears
like a natural blend of shared societal interests, which hides an
underlying distance, a distance between those cultures and towards
themselves. Online Spaces that concern themselves with Japanese media like
video games, anime and manga tend to be scenes of both experienced
alienation, the odd enjoyment of and fascination with a faraway foreign
culture as opposed to one's own, and the immediate promise of escape from
alienation via the formation of dozens of insider communities within an
all-too-connected digital space. This concealment of distance serves the
westerner as an escape from their typically overbearing and confused
national politics while the Japanese can simultaneously revel in a newfound
reputation, which isn't the refusal to properly face its horrific past.

Instead of cultivating these online spaces with certain identities tied to media products, what should be emphasized is precisely this gap that is left open between these cultures through the confrontation with their hauntological pasts, the possibility of cultural exchange and the universal potency of art to bring people together in their common alienation. The national anthem of Veritania is thus the anthem of a country that exists between two countries, one that perhaps sits right on the border itself, between Deutschland and 日本. In a way the title also makes reference to this country in-between.

So in order to immigrate into the utopian state of Veritania, one has to embrace all these forms of alienation. But what happens next, once you have become a citizen of Veritania?

Well, becoming a citizen of any state typically means gaining access to an exclusive set of rights granted by that state. The state of Veritania doesn't grant any rights other than the right to be confused. Veritanian citizenship is, if anything, an indicator of non-belonging. What happens after one has successfully entered Veritania may at first seem macabre, but that is the moment when freedom can be the most tangible. For one, you don't have to be in front of your screen. You don't have to participate in the schemes of multibillionaire tech CEOs. You don't have to keep yourself superficially engaged in your own or other people's virtual narratives. You don't have to spectate an ongoing genocide. But you also don't have to detach in order to meet some notion of living a "healthy life". You are never just free, you are always only free within a certain objective situation, be that in the "real world" or the internet. One first has to come to terms with this fundamental constraint in order to actually enact any kind of subjective freedom. In this sense, someone engaged in a cause to change the objective situation from the perspective of the situation itself may actually be the most free person one can be. That's why, in Veritania, freedom doesn't just mean being able to do whatever you want, it is your duty.

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