





*UNTITLED*, 2015. Wolf urine on copper plates. 100 x 120 cm. Christian Bang Jensen



*UNTITLED*, 2014. Bronze cast of wolf skull. 32 x 13 x 18 cm. Christian Bang Jensen

# *An Attempt at an Allegorical Contemplation; Or, how I would rather be sailing*

“Allegorical contemplation aims at the ruination of things so that it can, in its redemptive moment, construct [*baun*] a new whole out of the elements of the old. The character of this construction distinguishes it from the creative invention of fantasy, since it manipulates and rearranges pre-existing material. To leave an imprint or impression of this construction [*Konstruktion*] is one of its aims.”—Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles<sup>1</sup>

## **Inquiry into Understanding**

What is it that has driven me to commit (to) art? This question is one I often ask myself, and every time I try to answer, I get a new reply or at least different versions of the same response—and this leads my thoughts to Gilles Deleuze and his thoughts on repetition and the inherent displacement within repetition itself. Following my own train of thought might lead to an answer, but as the previous sentence reveals, this is both true and false. False in the assumption that the path carved out of the rock of matter always leads to a centre of zero gravity, where one’s motivations can be grasped, and true in the sense that in any attempt of self-awareness or knowledge, the inevitable confrontation and beginning are with the world outside one’s own thoughts.

The adjective “driven” suggests a compulsion of sorts, a form of desire, almost pathological. Self-analysis—staring into the darkness of one’s own proverbial belly button, that is, having a more than normal interest in one’s own thoughts—is in some ways part of being an artist. “Committing” indicates a transgression, be it a crime or the breaking of a taboo, and in the case of art it is most likely the latter. “Committing to” something is about an investment—time, energy, etc.—but also staying with this commitment and maintaining it. It seems the artists I like the most have all been immersed in their work to such a degree that I wonder if it is a specific pathology I am drawn to.<sup>2</sup> There is a split, a double bind<sup>3</sup> that stimulates my artistic impulses and that is the philosophical

and critical part of my practice, since it is primarily focused on bodily immersion and confrontation with rationality and thus provides intellectual stimulus. This is not to be viewed simply in opposition to a more direct artistic drive, but it does provide me with an image of a snake eating its own tail, and serves to explain my continuing engagement, or rather struggle, with art and critical thought.

An answer to my initial question could be that I have always been searching for something, something I have yet to find. To some extent I know that I have looked for the unintelligible, that which was somehow out of place. A part of searching for the unknown entails developing a sensitivity to chance and coincidence: browsing the local antiquarian bookstore and finding just that one book that sparks the imagination, or the unexpected encounters in revisiting my childhood memories, wandering the time spent alone or playing with my brothers, imagining monsters, ghosts, and phantasms living in the forest close to where we grew up. I would look out at the trees outside our windows, envision them coming alive, and see anthropomorphic faces in the tree trunks, and a sudden gust of wind would animate the branches with a will of their own as dendritic nervous tissue.

## **Ephemeral Knowledge**

I remember having a strong fever and lying in bed looking at the white sawdust textures on the wall and seeing vivid white mindscapes of strange creatures in it. Later, when trying to fall asleep, I would be able



*Mantic Conjunctions*, 2015. Mixed materials. Installation view. Christian Bang Jensen

to recall some of these constellations of texture and recognise the specific configurations of gnomonic entities again. The fights with the other children on our small suburban street assumed epic proportions. When I was later taught the systems, laws, and empirical facts of the rational world, the disappointment and loss felt was immense. It is partly this sense of loss that made me look for something that would turn everything inside out again, restoring the world of adolescent fantasy. I have looked for it in books, in states of intoxication, and in other phenomena, but it was not until a visit to the Jorn Museum in Denmark that I decided to terminate my studies in ethnography and commit to art, of which I had the naive notion as being a way to re-enchant the world. Perhaps in art, instead of consuming reality, one would be able to add to this reality in a very palpable way and even create an alternative world to inhabit. I know now that art too is a contested field and not the safe haven for outsiders and ecstasies I had imagined; yet it remains intertwined with reality in many remarkable and less remarkable ways. Art can be an instrument for looking and interacting with the world, of trying to secure a place for non-instrumentalised irrational thought, in what seems to

me the hypertrophy of an abstract and mathematical rationality. The knowledge that can be gleaned<sup>4</sup> from the artistic process is a certain kind of knowledge, one that does not need to verify itself. It can be a stage where the dead can return to life, where the Dionysian chorus is heard in the background while taboos are performed at the pulpit of a Western history of aesthetic development. It is disconnected from language; it can resort to intuition. It does not need to produce results—it can suppose anything and does not need to adhere to present time, but is vested in fiction, uncertainty, and poetry. Its empirical data is imagination—ephemeral, illusive, fabricated—so instead of finding leftover corn in the abandoned field when the combine harvesters of academia have left, one ideally finds empty space to grow one's own beanstalk. There is a challenge in this knowledge. There is something in it that wants to change the orders of knowledge and understanding, by moving beyond the representational. In accepting art one also accepts the riddle of ambiguity, the oscillation of meaning and nonsense. Artistic knowledge is a place where one can make a wilful displacement of the need to understand. Where one can come close to the creative act, almost in accord-

ance with the Renaissance hermeticists, follow Marcel Duchamp's formulations of transubstantiation,<sup>5</sup> and at the same time know that all this is a construction.

### **An Outline in the Dark**

Is it possible to change the present moment by changing the perception of the past, a lost perspective on history that we can rediscover?

You can change points of view by tilting your head to one side, like someone appraising or considering a work of art. I will argue that, in a similar manner, it is possible to change the past by a tilt. What I propose here, this specific tilt and reorientation, requires a breaking point with reality, in the same way as those who ascended from the darkness of Plato's cave into the light were confronted with a new view of reality.

Such a tilt is commonly referred to as an altered state of consciousness and is associated with electrochemical processes in the human brain.<sup>6</sup> These states are profoundly inward oriented and comprise dreamlike autistic states, such as visions and hallucinations, and are achieved by various means, such as extensive motor behaviour, sensory deprivation and stimulation, activation of endogenous euphoriant releases, ingestion of psychotropic substances, meditation, and hypnotic suggestion. Hallucinations may also result from certain pathological states, such as schizophrenia or epilepsy. Another type of intensified trajectory of consciousness is induced through self-mutilation and fasting and is also frequently employed by ascetics to attain mystical states.

These practices and the way they are entered change within different societies. Whether these states are revered as benign or even divine or if they are dismissed as negative or demonic is specific to the cultural context. In ancient Greece, certain forms of madness considered to be inspired by supernatural forces were actively sought. In medieval Europe, angelic visions were revered, but demonic possessions very condemned, "yet many who were canonised in the Middle Ages would be in psychiatric hospitals in our day."<sup>7</sup>

In the descriptions of these intensified trajectories of consciousness there are many similarities, whether it is the experience of an Amazonian shaman, a Christian monk, or a New Age raver. The states often include alterations in thinking, disturbed time sense, perceptual distortion, and a loss of control of emotional expressions. Moreover, these experiences are characterised as unfathomable, enigmatic, as a contact with the ultimate truth or a hidden reality. One of the more specific experiences within the mystical induced state is a movement through what is often described as a tunnel, cave, spiral, or swirl ending in a warm bright light. In a Western clinical context, this is described as a "form constant": a retinal phenomena that works like a Jungian visual archetype, though in actuality is a neurological phenomena.<sup>8</sup> In many religious accounts of ascensions to higher cele-

tial spheres, the beginning of the voyage is described as going through a dark passage or tunnel—that of the neurological spiral vortex of the cave. According to neuroscientists, "The diversity of conditions that provoke such patterns suggests that form constants reflect some fundamental property of visual perception."<sup>9</sup> Inuit shamans, for example, describe a merger with the earth and the passing through the roots of a tree. When having this kind of experience, it is like your senses are running wild: you start hearing voices, you feel like you are floating, and your vision moves from blurry to acute intricacy—geometric patterns implode and explode and the world as you know it is gone and something else emerges. It thus makes sense that in many cultures the cave is identified as a place leading to the netherworld and accessing the cave means going into the lower layers of the cosmos. The image of the cave as a passageway to the world of the dead, as an access point to the spirits of nature, and as a symbol of magic potency was in this way given a topographical reality.

In the classical period, the caverns of Greece were a place of noetic wisdom, where prophets and sages would come to consult the spirits of the dead or to be divinely possessed. A large number of these caves would be dedicated to the nymphs and Pan, the deities of unrefined, wild nature who had taken abode in the pristine earthly shrines. Possession by the spirits of nature, nymphs, was often sought as a means to inspired divination. Nymptopsy, as it was termed, was connected with hallucinations and prophecy, and it thus makes sense that the nymphs were associated with honey, a symbol of intoxication. Some legends tell of nymphs eating honey to be filled with prophetic enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> In Greece, mead was thought of as belonging to the primeval past, coming before the invention of wine, and as such the fermentation of honey connects the nymphs to a very archaic tradition that links divination to the consumption of a sacred intoxicating drink.<sup>11</sup> Poetry likewise was seen as belonging to the same realm as prophecy. As Yulia Ustinova outlines: "Poets describe themselves and other poets as bees, and Pindar describes his song as 'a bee rushing from story to story'. Words flow like honey from the mouth of the poet inspired by the Muses, and the lips of the poet attract bees: a sixth-century poet pictures a bee wandering about on a bronze statue of Homer, lifting a honeycomb into his divine mouth."<sup>12</sup>

In the dark silence of the cave, only interrupted by the flicker of a candle or the faint sound of water drops, the withdrawal from the distractions of the outer world was almost total, and altered states of consciousness could develop. In the visions in the sacred caves belonging to the nymphs and Pan, deemed responsible for the state of trance, these spirits of the wild also appeared. Culture and belief inhabits and informs the hallucinations, just as culture is informed by the mental specificities of hallucinations. Once again, a snake eating its own tail emerges.<sup>13</sup>

The cave experience offers an illuminating example, regardless of its ancient antecedents, of a process that seems similar to my own notions about going into the studio and of the artistic process itself. Other ways are possible. It involves dealing with the unknown, reaching for the non-knowable, trying to conceive the inconceivable, forgetting about syntax and semiotics, and momentarily in this process trying find something beyond language or new ways of communicating. These moments of losing oneself, succumbing to madness or divinity, have been pushed to the fringes of our society, confined to asylums or pathological diagnoses, functioning as a kind of societal unconsciousness, instead of being a place for uninhibited reflection. Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty was conceived to provide a similar experience, designed to shock the human body, freeing it of its habitual behaviour. As Artaud puts it in his 1947 radio play: "When you have made him a body without organs, / then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions / and restored him to his true freedom."<sup>14</sup>

To be willing to partake in this ordeal of thought is a prerequisite for destabilising the conditioning of thought. It is at these limits of thought, at the threshold between light and dark, trying to conceive the inconceivable, paradoxically moving beyond the representational capacities of thought, that the daredevils of the mind reside, and it is this area I try to roam.

### Revisiting the Cave

The cave is both literally and metaphorically an essential component in my inquiry into a space that gives room or access to a new way of looking at reality and provides a historical framework to question the present. This architecture of the introvert provides the experiences that can jolt the mundane world out of its assumed place, a site of excavation and searching, where the darkness reaches back towards the human mind, a reminder of the void, the psychogenesis paradoxically resting in the negation of the will to self.



*Jurassic Dreams*, 2015. Books from Lunds University, jesmonite moulds, wood, bronze axehead, indigo. Installation view, dimensions variable. Christian Bang Jensen



*Jurassic Dreams*, 2015. Books from Lunds University, jesmonite moulds, wood, bronze axehead, indigo. Installation view. Dimensions variable. Christian Bang Jensen



The cave system functions as the mapping of my artistic territory. I see the structural categories as plastic; they are a part of my material. It is not only pure matter, but also structural and mental boundaries that are my material. I try to warp and distort the categories of the museum—its discourse—not only by juxtaposing its material and collection with mine, but through an attempted fusing of its categories with my own. Maybe my own mental constitution is one of porousness; I feel that it is hard to see any boundaries between categories—they constantly meld into each other. Seven years ago, I went to Mexico alone and visited the Sun and the Moon pyramids, as well as the Palenque pyramids. It took me some time to digest my experiences. What started out with a visit to the anthropological museum in Mexico City—overwhelming in its own right—ended in another more direct encounter with screaming howler monkeys sounding like dinosaurs roaming the jungle from the vantage point of the ziggurat and armed guards at a UNESCO site in the southern jungle of Mexico.

So in a way, the anthropological museum would be one room in the cave system. Another would be the experience at the Palenque ruins; another would be all my books. The Greek cave would be located deeper than the rest because of its dependence on darkness. It is a system connected in many ways, criss-crossing chronologies and interdependent in the formation of new experiences or pathways, always linked together by earthly matter.

As art, through the continual challenges posed by different avant-garde movements, confused the line between high and low, art and reality, so too has the cave transgressed its own boundaries. From being the dark womb and progenitor of the initial trip to self-awareness, the cave is now all pervasive—albeit in a very subtle and invisible manner. The porousness of the distinction between interiority and surface, a liminality between the world of ideas and phenomena, is growing larger and more dominant within contemporary society due to increased communication and an affluence of images, a contemporary iconomania. Instead of providing shelter and refuge from the affects generated by the surface of images, the topos of the cave has become more conflicted as our mental and physical spaces have increasingly been colonised by technology, to the extent that the line between the virtual and actual has been blurred.

### Nocturnal Adaptation

Friedrich Nietzsche describes the tragic backdrop of the seemingly Apollonian dialogues written by Sophocles through the example of an optical phenomenon:

When after a forceful attempt to gaze on the sun we turn away blinded, we see dark colored spots before our eyes, as a cure, as it were. Conversely, the bright image projections of the Sophoclean hero—in short the Apollonian aspect of the mask—are necessary effects of a glance into the

inside and terrors of nature; as it were, luminous spots to cure eyes damaged by gruesome night.<sup>15</sup>

Following Nietzsche, we would once again need to look into the terrors of nature to change our culture, to provide the luminous spots needed in the all pervasive darkness of the expanded cave. This illumination requires a *catabasis*, a descent into the cave, whereby in a dialectical play the ascent has already begun with the descent into the shadows.

The movement down into the darkness, into matter, inhibits some senses while enhancing others. The obvious link between the uterus and the cave is one that builds on an etymological basis. “Matter” is a derivative of the Latin *mater*, meaning “mother.” It is this matter that removes you from surface society, making you an outcast, abject,<sup>16</sup> and at the same time also that which brings you into the world. Through the experience in the darkness of the cave, one becomes a biological entity, an animal removed from human society and its norms; a gnostic transformative experience changes how the surface world of reality is perceived. To be enveloped in earthly matter and primordial darkness, to experience dissociative states, to feel the hollow foundation of the ego, is a practice that entails a becoming, a becoming other. The sojourn in a cave is a useful metaphor for these ordeals, but not the sole one—there are many other ways to lose one’s way and mind. To be lost in postmodernity’s web of incomplete conclusions and impasses, entanglements and digressions without end, in the shop window’s reflections of sunlight, silicon, plasma screens, and global trade networks. The notion of surface, the paradoxical concept of immanent materiality that has expanded the cave to encompass other topologies and bound *mater-ialism* and surface together in a Gordian knot, is not unlike how the meandering of grey cerebral mass in the dark hollow of the skull interprets the light of the world. Our mental images are physical.

“For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world,” Walter Benjamin claims. “It is secured by immersion in the life of creaturely things, and it hears nothing of the voice of revelation. Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth.”<sup>17</sup> A movement between the analytical mind and the immersed associative unconsciousness is necessary both in my writing and in my artistic production to make ideas oscillate and matter vibrate. Interference patterns arise when the movement between positions has a sufficiently high frequency and provides a sea to navigate and explore. Past and present merges in the work, both as the idea of the material and the material of the idea. In this darkness, one might move one’s hand across the moist rocky surface and find a light switch, or lose orientation completely and wander the psychic highways of modernity aimlessly, lost in the maze of the mind. Discovering a new vein or bringing a new image back into the light, discovered not by sight or cognition, but rather by haptic intuition, is the task of the artist. In this blinding bliz-

zard of images, it is the task of the navigator to set a course, to catch a glimpse of a long-forgotten guiding star in the sky or find new fixing points in a ceaselessly moving world of images and affect. Everybody needs a body to guide one to find the entrance, the threshold of unseen mindscapes, an orifice into the earth and inside the mind. The blank spot on the map or the blind spot in your mind.

### The Immanence of Thought

What does one see or possibly gain from a sojourn in the dark? Can any of these visions have a use, or do they remain in the domain of pure interiority or spectacle? Nietzsche writes in *Birth of the Tragedy* that there is a veil, Maya, covering our perception of the world. This veil is the rational, Apollonian way of thinking about the world of phenomena, relegating dreams and visions to a subdivision of reality. A veil that can only be pierced by experiencing the orgiastic oneness of the primordial Dionysian undercurrent that also informs our culture, albeit in a subtle and repressed manner.

Often, I feel my vocabulary in these matters is limited, too religious or transcendental. The altered states I have experienced myself and those I have read about have a certain materiality to them that makes me want to describe them through a concept of immanence. The body and mind must be physically provoked, opened to affect, stimulated with the darkness of earth, the chemistry of science, the poison of nature, in order to expand the inner horizons. As in the cave metaphor, one must have a sort of profane illumination, an experience in which matter breathes and the ceiling drips, where you cannot simply go back, a state outside of known territory. In this interzone of real visceral hallucinations and sweat-dripping affects, one can perhaps encounter the ephemerality of form and materiality of thought. This is why I find that art is the most adequate medium of thought: as it is an exchange of thought and form. It contains the complexities of matter and the possibility to oscillate between the immanent and transcendent; art holds the promise of imbuing the world and the object with something from the void. Accordingly there will always be something unaccounted for in the work of art, a residue of sorts that remains unexplained. There is a clear link or chain between the materiality of the cave and the haptic experience of the artwork, its thingness, and the rediscovery of immanent thought. You go into the cave, the preposition “in” being indicative, as it is not a movement to a higher plane as in transcendental thought, but something that is innate to our world. In the experience I am trying to outline, you go into the mind of your body, but you could likewise arrive there by going into the materiality of the world, by cultivating a more haptic mode of vision. This notion is in many ways contrary to Plato’s distinction between the world of ideas as possessing the highest and most fundamental kind of reality and the material world of phenomena.<sup>18</sup> In the cave there is no

transcendence; one is not transported *to* somewhere, but rather *into* something. This does not have to lead to an essentialist argument that traits such as native language and cultural preferences are intrinsic and not acquired. I believe that a deeper and more complex understanding of the innate properties of matter will bypass essentialisms, transforming them into evanescent waves of mental projection and physical thought processes. To examine the tools of the artist and the mystic would perhaps offer, in an intersection between the two, a glimpse of a new insight into the nature of our world.

### The Golden Chain

In my practice, thoughts and presuppositions are investigated by means of plastic formulations. There is room for digression, for singular trails of thought prompted by a specific ontological relation. A narrative slowly manifests—an obscure self-portrait develops in time, space, and matter, influenced in part by discursive undercurrents of certain philosophers and the chemical composition of the developer. An imagined space, highly subjective and affected by aesthetic nostalgias and preferences, a kind of wandering in a fog of indefinable objects that escape logic and deductions, collapsing in their own emptiness and expanding into a grey electrified mass. A rhizome woven from cable-like arguments, always out of focus, continuously escaping definitions, but visceral and subsumed by the spasms of entropy and desire. A cable, contrary to the chain, which is never stronger than its weakest link, allows for fragile and damaged threads without losing its function. An imagined monument for fleeting thoughts that feed on themselves and change velocity and momentum, as a drunk tragic figure on his way home from a long night out. Remembering and forgetting form a large part of this figure’s mental life. The insight found in the state of inebriation is now lost. The satyr chorus grows weaker, and after failed attempts at approximations, the figure starts looking for food and warmth. Something will be remembered, or perhaps inscribed into a bodily register, while other things will be forgotten and misunderstood. One might hope that the readers of this specific situation can recognise something in themselves, see their own thoughts in past and present. Although the art objects function as markers in a larger personal narrative, they are also detached, not as fragments that point to a former whole, but as objects with their own memory and independence. This makes the encyclopaedia hard to index. As an essay such as this, in vain, tries to conjure an adequate image, so is the *gesamtkunstwerk* or utopia also bound to fail. The all-encompassing philosophy or concept of the work often runs aground in its own universalism, as an overloaded dinghy in too shallow water. The logical solution, when realising that you are about to shipwreck, is either to throw something overboard or to perish. Perhaps in art there is the possibility to seize the unreachable, the fire on the mountain, in spite of being doomed to fail.

The challenge is to believe that there is something to reach for, a leap of faith. In this irrational quest there is a space inhabitable by rationality, which both justifies and becomes a logical reason for the existence of the work. Perhaps it is the play with metaphors functioning as a mediator or transport between the image and the idea, be it the boat at sea or the crystal, that in the end can save the overloaded boat. The danger is the cliché, both linguistically and as the divine or psychoanalytical patriarch always judging from above or below.

(The correspondence between the thingness of the work and the ideas constituting the artwork. On first glance, there is also immanent in the thingness of the work certain ideas if one looks closer. These may spur on a sort of secular transcendence, which will form one part of the dialogue I propose. The ideas also present in the artwork also have a material, a thingness, which is in part the artist and his specific language.)

(The eye becomes alive, it sees itself and when having an encounter with the art object, there is a moment in which the self can be lost in contemplation, when the thing beheld looks back, as if our animistic past reveals itself to us and we experience a part of our Dionysian being. This is in some ways also reflected in the—)

### The Vault

Collectors “sind Menschen mit taktischem Instinkt,”<sup>19</sup> and it is this tactility of form that informs my notion of immanence. It is also a field in which I sense a general negligence on the part of the established notion of knowledge production. Following Alois Riegl’s distinction, the haptic, in contrast to the optic, entails a sense of touch, a “closeness” and immediacy that evokes a

more interior sense and seems to escape technological mediation. In my practice I try to communicate some of my experiences with objects through my collection of curiosia. It is a very unstable process, since it involves many elements, some of which are contradictory to one another and also at odds with the language surrounding my work. It is not a collection of purely found objects, but an amalgamation of found objects, crafted objects, or sculptures that I feel would fit the collection and my thoughts at that moment. Gleaning fragments from old books and images found online, but also from more obtuse sources such as memories, dreams, and states of becoming, and using them as sources to conjure up an image that resonates in my mind and thoughts, giving me the pleasure of being unable to take it all in, unable to solve the riddle—the enjoyment of being lost in the maze. My collection is stored in boxes in my studio and is a way to organise memory of both past and present, perhaps even the future, but is also a way of forgetting, a way of displacing affects and the joy of rediscovering them again. When an image becomes part of my archive, it changes status, becomes part of my construction material, and loses its own significance. This is perhaps most apparent with the physical cut outs, but it is true of more ephemeral items as well, such as memories or pieces of a conversation that reside in the material. Having the images in one’s collection is a way to comprehend and grasp them.

My choice of objects is guided by a principle, although not a rigorous one; it is based on an intuition of the correspondences between the objects. It does not matter in what way the correspondences manifest themselves: when a wolf skull in beeswax and a copperplate corroded by wolf urine are placed next to a parrot feather given to me by a friend and



*Strategies of Defense*, 2014. Collage on paper. Detail. Christian Bang Jensen



nations, I see the artwork as the pearl captured from the *rausch* dragons of obscurantism. The profane is the material, the base matter, in which is inscribed a certain meaning or coherence; herein exists the correspondences that give rise to the revelation. I envision the correspondences as a constellation or as an astronomer finding and naming new stars in the sky from which to navigate, the equivalent of navigating a ship through a fog by night and still having the light needed to set a course and give meaning to the endeavour.

### The Library

Sometimes you encounter strange beings of thought, mental entities, like when I visited the Ritman Library in Amsterdam, a library established by a wealthy businessman that contains many rare books and scriptures. I saw an exhibition of books about Hermes Trismegistus with many rich illustrations about alchemy, the great work, the mediation of sun and moon, and man as containing the divine. Though deeply immersed in these thoughts and the seemingly intricate patterns between the dictum “as above so below” and my thoughts about the earthly cave experiences and the ephemeral visions and hallucinations caused by these descents into the underground, I felt a sort of disappointment in seeing all these wonderful books. Walls filled with Jakob Böhme, Hildegard von Bingen, *The Golden Bough*, William Blake, the Nag Hammadi Scriptures—so many visionary writings in one place was a sort of technical knockout. What could I really add to this and how was I to read or grasp all this inspired literature? When I left, a young dark-haired girl asked me if I had found what I was searching for and the metaphysical implications in this question made me stumble. I did not know what to answer except: “Yes, sort of.” Reflecting back on this experience, what really animated my mind was the girl’s question; I had not found what I was looking for, not in the books anyway—but in the question I saw the contours of an enticing and confusing allegory. In hindsight, as I see myself missing the step down to where my coat was hanging and at the same time trying to answer the question “Did you find what you were searching for?” I now feel more ambivalent about my initial rejection of the positive outcome of the search. I’ve come to think about a talk we had in class concerning motherhood in the academy, in which it was suggested that working inside a limited parameter could be beneficial for some (for example, Roland Barthes often would often restrict himself to the local library to do research for writing). This is a tempting idea, but in my opinion, mental iconoclasm is no cure for iconomania.<sup>20</sup>

### Dowsing the Promethean Flame

An illumination achieved through darkening or obfuscation is an intimidating notion. The concept of truth seems to automatically invoke scepticism and distrust. Metaphysical truth and the search for it, specifically in a Western context, seems anachronistic and outdated

in a world ruled by a consumerist economy and neoliberal capitalism, where the pragmatic approach often prevails. Furthermore this vision-seeking entails a risk; it can be both mentally and physically hazardous to undertake these philosophical and transformative ordeals, even though the rewards can be substantial. It is safer to experience fantasy, horror, and hallucinatory states in the comfort of a soft chair in a warm cinema than it is to venture into the cold damp darkness of the cave. Our desires for the enigmatic and otherworldly have to some extent been colonised by the culture industry, and while Benjamin saw the potential of the cinema and collective experiences in the new film media, it is hard not to see the exact opposite in the cinema of our days. It can be dangerous to kill the projector in the dark room. Visions are not always pleasant; they involve danger, are sometimes malignant, and some people really do go mad and never fully return, but this is, in my opinion, how the world operates: we want the warmth of fire, the cooked meat, the safety, but we shy away from the risk of being burnt or injured. I feel there is a blind spot in our daily lives that conceals the way our need for security is itself entangled in violence and domination, and we close our eyes to the harmful effects of our need for comfort. Perhaps there is a need to turn off the projectors and plasma screens and cultivate other experiences, ones that do not follow the linear trajectory of cost-benefit analysis or the standard laws of science.

### Crystal Gazing

Ascent and descent is movement between connected realities. In order for this movement to happen, one needs a vehicle, a ship, a lattice, a chain, a metaphor to facilitate the transport. The crystal is an enticing metaphor I often use in my practice and in the language connected to my practice, a metaphor that has many precursors. The modern age, epitomised by Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus manifesto, imagined the building of the future as a crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith: “the new building of the future ... will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting in a single form, and will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith.”<sup>21</sup>

I try to avoid such utopianism in the description of my own imaginary construction, which I feel has more in common with the burrows of the wasp than with the high rise of modernist architecture. Another, perhaps more adequate, version would be J. G. Ballard’s *The Crystal World*, in which the outcome of crystallisation is instead an apocalyptic homogenisation. All organic matter is turned into crystal by some unknown process that begins in a jungle near a colonial outpost in Africa. The process is contagious and infects those who remain too long in the fluorescent-green light of the jungle. After being released from their crystal prison, those freed wish once again to return to their former crystalline state. The descriptions of the afflicted allude to a return to a pri-

mordial state of conflict-free bliss, a sort of regression to an infantile state, hence the danger of the crystal world. The crystal also harbours potential protofascist tendencies, a matter which is governed by the laws of nature following specific geometric rules of growth connected to matter's inherent form.

It is in matter, in a slow process of stratification, that the crystal is formed. It is in this sense also a denizen of the cave. Below in the deep, in the enveloping darkness, in the mineral realm, matter often reaches a more desirable state. It coalesces: wood turns into coal, coal into diamonds, as if the earth is facilitating a process of transformation or crystallisation. A transformation sought by mystics and mining companies alike.

Ideally, I would like my work to function as a looking glass into the unknown, which can be many things: the material vibrations, ideas, my unconsciousness, the onlookers' unconsciousnesses, the other. It is a prism that both is a fragment and fragments reality. The transportation of light in the crystal, the diffraction of the universal light into its components, can be seen as part of this metaphor. Or crystallography, a specific trope of reductionist scientism, and its diminishing of the specific crystal to a standard set of rules, which in some ways follows the universalist tendencies of modernist art, that is, the reduction of form to primary shapes as in cubism. In the photographs of Johann Heinrich Flögel, the first to photograph snow, it is clear that no snow crystal is the same: every flake has irregularities caused by their descent from the sky to the terrestrial surface of human view. This is comparable to minimalism; instead of experiencing the primary forms, one becomes aware of one's own body, becomes aware of the irregularities

in the traces of welding in Donald Judd's sculptures. The grotesque resurfaces in our material world, and in this way the saying "the devil is in the detail" acquires a newfound weight, as if gravitation increases the closer you come to the core of the earth. Surely, the modern age could not have anticipated that the sacrament of this crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith would be liquid crystal displays, plasma screens, and the inhalation of crystallised methamphetamine fumes. The crystal holds a vast number of facets, many still opaque, foggy, and always partial.

### Outer Boundaries

In the periphery of my eyesight, in the blurred field, something resides. I have often tried to determine it, but it is like the horizon: always moving away from my field of vision, like a fly disturbing my dreams. Anthropologists often do field studies in remote areas of the world. I don't mean to generalise ethnographic studies, but rather I want to make a comparison to the field in which my own inquiry is situated, my practice as an artist. Approaching the concept of dreamtime or kinship spirits in Australia with a rationalising and binary viewpoint as emblematic of the Western approach to the Other is a cul-de-sac. What is outside the order of our own linguistic structures demands a new approach. This type of self-reflexivity has been an integral part of the academic tradition, especially in regards to that which is foreign. So how can we go about handling the foreign and the Other? By the othering of ourselves and by a purely theoretical abstraction from our own intellectual and cultural categories? I propose it is through finding an abstract spot where there is no space below or above, a misty horizon between the North Sea and the grey autumn sky.



Left: *Between Heaven and Hell*, 2015. Arrowheads made of iron from the Campo del Cielo and the Canyon Diablo meteors. Installation view. Christian Bang Jensen

Right: *Spore and Offset Print*, 2015. Life Magazine (1957 May 13), spore prints. 45 x 70 cm. Christian Bang Jensen

To construct, which means to build, a concrete mental structure in the mind, and use this construction as a viewpoint from which the eye of the body has to be taken into consideration.

The function of blur in Photoshop, and the eye controlling it, is the hypothetical point of departure for a linguistic investigation of blurred vision, but it is bound to lapse into a binary futility concerning data and the rendering of information. Blurring generally entails a movement from known to unknown, between a state of clear vision and one of no focus. This hazy liminal state of inability to differentiate between object and mind is, by definition, hard to elucidate, as it entails the opposite of clarification. In many ways, it is not even desirable to find a machine or concept that is able to produce this blur, which in many respects shies away from desire itself. There is a movement from a focus to a non-focus comparable to the camera lens, including prime-, zoom-, and wide-angle lenses, as the eye as a mechanism is linked to the *envisioning* that takes place between the mind, the eye, and the outside. The mechanism of moving outside oneself is said to be possible by ways of mediation, but, as I see it, it is in this state of trying to lose oneself and sliding away from consciousness that one reaches a kind of barrier of transcendence. In a foggy vision quest where the outcome can only be death or confusion, the displaced and ignorant vision is the only attainable result. In any case, this is the wrong way to go about the displacement of the field of vision, as it will leave the mind blind and the eyes saturated with the writings of a different language. An artificially induced trip to the edges will still leave an unwanted focus.

The blinding light of illumination is easily, but misleadingly, confused with the blurred state. There is no insight of any kind. There is no dissolution of categories in a burning flame; there is only a dimming of all contrast and contours, the categories still perceived, but no longer with any value to attach. The blur is not blind, but rather a state of diffused light from a vague emitting source. It is not a state of undifferentiated bliss; instead, it is an uneasy position of feeling one's way along a stony country road at twilight. A sudden exposure to elastic categories, an uneasy feeling of not being able to read the faces of the world, enigmatic expressions. The enigmatic always retains a connection to the known unknown, whereas the unknown unknown is not recognisable as such. In the strangest of ways, this links to the early 2000s speeches of Donald Rumsfeld, in which a similar metaphysics is incorporated to justify the Iraq war.<sup>22</sup>

This distortion of vision can be applied to all theories. Any theory or concept will contain a part of this outlook, as a displacement happens when you create a focus. This dislocation will be the very non-essence of the theory and the concepts it proposes and will hold valuable information about the standard formulas with which one normally approaches a philosophical proposition. Just as classical anthropological inquiry would take the periphery as its field of

data, I suggest that the artist or researcher also use peripheral vision as a mode of collecting or registering the world. The advantages of being in the periphery (or having peripheral vision) is retaining the ability to see the centre from a distance, remaining unseen from the strong forces that govern the centre, or having the opportunity to write the history of the marginalised as a counterhistory to the dominant Western discourse. Writing on the periphery or the anthropological subject of the Other often functions as a mirror. It shows the fallacies of one's own thoughts and preconceptions of the Other. It becomes much clearer when one looks at older anthropological books and theories, whereby this historical corrective lens itself becomes a validation for the discipline and its production of knowledge. Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) was as much a piece of literary style as it was a self-validating empirical work on the Other. In this way, it was more honest. It was not trying to make an excuse for being written in the centre and not in the field style that had been made the standard mode of conducting anthropological research by Bronisław Malinowski.

### The Archaic Smile

"Time is but the stream I go fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. ... I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. ... My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills."  
—Henry David Thoreau<sup>23</sup>

Contemporary historiography suffers from a form of amnesia, but contrary to the artwork, historical amnesia is the loss of direct experience of reality. It is a sort of neutrality that values registration and sober observation more than the actual encounter. In our society, this produces an increasingly abstract and disconnected reception of time and history, whereas in the Middle Ages oral history was "not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world."<sup>24</sup> I think the physical work holds the potential to create an intimacy with a personal history set in a larger, more global history. In many ways the oral tradition is close to my own work as it also connects to a lived life, to memory, and to death. As Benjamin puts it: "Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story as the handprints of the potter to the clay vessel."<sup>25</sup> What constitutes the anachronistic? I often use old, sometimes even ancient, objects juxtaposed with objects of a more contemporary era. The outdated or ancient artefact is a literal model for me to create new work that challenges the notion of contemporaneity. Looking at an artwork often makes me feel out of sync, as if something is pushing me towards the past. I pause for a moment in my own time and connect my memory to a number of predefined



classifications and to my own experiences with this material. I am dumbfounded again discovering my displacement of past, present, and future in front of this hypothetical, yet very real, object. Dumbfounded because I know I am to place these artefacts in chronological order and to draw from them a certain kind of information about creation, and yet I am unable to follow my tutoring, since what I see is such a swarm of overlapping connections between memory, materiality, history, and image that my arbitrary attempts to place an artwork in any framework, plural or singular, is purely a mental construction of my own mind trying to satisfy a rational mode of thinking to which I do not adhere. My own experience of time takes place in feedback loops and resonating diffraction patterns.

Contemporary art can be a form of intervention into history with the possibility to activate or create an in-between space, where history is not a linear progressive movement but rather can be challenged and reinterpreted. A place to grasp at history ad *fontes* is an enticing but utopian thought; the demand for contemporaneity seems to impede the possibility for the work to contain and describe a time other than our own. Symptomatic of our time is that it continually reproduces itself in newer versions, and if one attempts to reach through history to grasp the utopian opportunity, it is to invoke unspeakable historical ghosts.

### Mimetic Residue

In Benjamin's optics, mimesis is understood as a way to conceive of the world, seen particularly in children's imitation of adult behaviour. Following Frazer's notion of sympathetic magic, which in short is a way to influence the original by way of a copy, art (and astrology, as shown by Benjamin) can also be seen as forming a magic of mimesis by virtue of making representations. And in Agrippa's Renaissance work *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, an entire system of correspondences is laid out as a way to influence reality. While apprehending the world in terms of analogy is of course problematic, it nevertheless seems to me that there is something to be gained from this perspective.

A question that continually informs my practice is to what degree contemporary art and its rituals are residue of a mimetic mode of thinking. I try to examine and look at these links through the creative act: art as a form of imitative magic, a chain between history and modernity. By physically making representations and copies as part of my practice, I experientially investigate the world of mimesis and its consequences. Art stands between religion and science and enjoys the freedom of not having to choose, but suffers the scorn of being looked at as an unruly teenager by its presumed progenitors.

Magical thinking, clan wars, gift economies, and ancestor worship exist as more than residue or traces in our contemporary society. Not merely fragmentary or archeological phenomena, they are embed-

ded in the same manner as the reinforcement steel in our concrete buildings. It is not only the spiritual- or freethinkers who have been part of a recent significant discourse in Western culture; rather, everybody partakes in the fascination for the supernatural. It is not mere ripples on the surface of society, or something that existed only in our so-called primitive past; it is something that pervades every level of society, so much so that it can be hard to see sometimes. Logos, sports, brands, family photos, art, parties—all are examples of how technological progress cannot be equated with the progress of thought. Indeed, technology often contains traces of the mimetic.

And the intentions of the artist? Are they forgotten in the enjoyment of the practice of a ritual that fulfills a mimetic need, or is the mimetic part of the unknown in the riddle of the creative act? By giving the mimetic a double role by both being informed by the concept as something historical produced by materiality and unknown correspondences while simultaneously performing it and adding to its phantasms of materiality, one enters the murky waters of intention and unintention.

### Inconclusive

Nearing the end of the journey, I am in the darkness of the camera's bowels; the silver halide crystals form according to the light that passes through the lens. As our world has been populated by images to such a degree that we are living on the map of the world, as in the story "On Exactitude in Science" by Jorge Luis Borges, there is a need to penetrate this map, dig through the images, close the shutter entirely, in order to see what has been covered up. Can we learn to better navigate the darkness of our culture, or is it a trap from which it is hard to escape? If indeed we are trapped in the darkness of the cave, enveloped in the phantasmagoria of popular culture, could it be possible to discern the Promethean origin of the shadows on the wall? I am not sure, but I would propose to make allies with the shadows and shades in the cave, to use them as an antidote to our current predicament. My cave, this text, my attempt at an allegorical construction, is helpful precisely because of its ambiguous nature. It does not resolve any of the conflicts I outline; rather, it confuses and blurs them. The tension between darkness and light, material world and representation, is, on the contrary, preserved in the cave, and without this tension life would be mere matter or a pure mirror of representation. Maybe we should not look towards the sky for an external salvation, but instead have the courage to go deeper into the cave, dare to take a bite of the apple,<sup>26</sup> as the first bite remains undigested in the stomach of Eve.<sup>27</sup> In the recesses of the cave one might uncover the gleaming crystal needed to be able to wrest the Promethean crystal from matter itself and listen in on the galactic noise.



1 Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles, "Walter Benjamin," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/benjamin/>.

2 For example, Carl Fredrik Hill, Henri Michaux, Paul Thek, and Dieter Roth.

3 For more on the concept of the "double bind," see G. Bateson, D. D. Jackson, J. Haley, and J. Weakland, "Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia," *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956): 251–64.

4 Agnès Varda, *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (Paris: Ciné Tamaris, 2000).

5 Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act* (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1959), 77–78.

6 Michael J. Winkelman, *Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000), 148–52.

7 Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

8 R. K. Siegel and M. E. Jarvik, "Drug-Induced Hallucinations in Animals and Man," in *Hallucinations: Behaviour, Experience, and Theory*, ed. R. K. Siegel and L. J. West (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), 81–161.

9 Paul C. Bressloff, et al. "What Geometric Visual Hallucinations Tell Us about the Visual Cortex," *Neural Computation* 14, no. 3 (March 2002). 473–91, doi:10.1162/089976602317250861.

10 Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind*, 41.

11 Ibid., 52

12 Ibid., 55

13 August Kekulé claimed to have discovered the ring shape of benzene after a daydream, a revelatory state that revealed the ancient symbol of the ouroboros to him

14 Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God: Selected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 571.

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Random House, 1967), 67.

16 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 65.

17 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 152.

18 For more on the theory of forms, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory\\_of\\_Forms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_Forms).

19 That is, collectors "are people with tactile instincts" (my translation). Matthew Rampley, *The Remembrance of Things Past* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 142.

20 A gargoyle hangs motionless on the makeshift cubic wall in the gallery space. White protestant paint covers the interior; it is used to scare away malignant spirits and divert water away from the foundation of the building.

21 Charles W. Haxthausen, "Walter Gropius and Lyonel Feininger: Bauhaus Manifesto, 1919," in *Bauhaus, 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity*, ed. Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 64–66.

22 See, for example, Donald H. Rumsfeld, "DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," US Department of Defense, February 12, 2002, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>.

23 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers / Walden; Or, Life in the Woods / The Maine Woods / Cape Cod* (Library of America, 1985), p 74.

24 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhauser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 451.

25 Ibid., 471.

26 Turning on the creative class: Mac computers powered in part by rare earth minerals found in the Earth's crust.

27 "In Greek mythology, Persephone ... is the daughter of Zeus and the harvest goddess Demeter, and is the queen of the underworld. Homer describes her as the formidable, venerable majestic princess of the underworld, who carries into effect the curses of men upon the souls of the dead. Persephone was abducted by Hades, the god-king of the underworld. Demeter, when she found her daughter had disappeared, searched for her all over the earth with Hecate's torches. In most versions she forbids the earth to produce, or she neglects the earth and in the depth of her despair she causes nothing to grow. Helios, the sun, who sees everything, eventually told Demeter what had happened and at length she discovered the place of her abode. Finally, Zeus, pressed by the cries of the hungry people and by the other deities who also heard their anguish, forced Hades to return Persephone. Hades indeed complied with the request, but first he tricked her, giving her some pomegranate seeds to eat. Persephone was released by Hermes, who had been sent to retrieve her, but because she had tasted food in the underworld, she was obliged to spend a third of each year there, and the remaining part of the year with the gods above." "Persephone," *Wikipedia*, last modified June 7, 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persephone>.

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