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Nonhuman Melancholy: Objects of Decay, Darkness, and the Computational Gaze

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Abstract

Is it possible to conceptualize a new interpretation of melancholy, one that pertains not to subjective experience but to the nonhuman? Through various case studies of contemporary art, I approach this question through a speculative realist interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's machine ontology, Levi Bryant's machine-oriented ontology, and Reza Negarestani's conceptions of decay. Nonhuman melancholy is ultimately conceived through several characteristics of disintegration: withdrawal, disintegrative asymbolia (asymbolia), temporal indeterminacy, and corpo-motor retardation (deceleration). Each case study focuses on different manifestations of nonhuman melancholy. First, melancholy is embodied in objects on a material level. On a larger scale, its symptoms are engaged within the unstable operations of capitalism. Lastly, melancholy is observed in digital procedures. Objects, or machines, are haunted with varying degrees of darkness in relation to the death drive and varying levels of antiproduction seeping from the body without organs. *Memento mori* in this context serves both as a diffracted trope in visual culture and as a process of substantial decomposition. Nonhuman melancholy's operational purpose is proposed as a series of procedures serving the anti-rigidity and softening of substance, whether this is manifested in material decay, in the shifting systems of capitalism, in digital images, or in the algorithmic black box of the computational gaze.

Keywords

melancholy, nonhuman, machine ontology, speculative realism, decay, memento mori

Summary for Lay Audience

Is it possible to think about melancholy outside of subjective experience and to resituate it as something that also afflicts nonhuman entities? Through various case studies of contemporary art, I approach this question through acute analyses of artworks using the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, Levi R. Bryant, and Reza Negarestani to contemplate on the relationship between decay and melancholy. Nonhuman melancholy is ultimately conceived through several characteristics of disintegration, such as withdrawal, loss of symbolic coherence, temporal indeterminacy, and deceleration. Following Bryant, I propose that objects are haunted with varying degrees of darkness, but in relation to the death drive—or the drive toward mortal deterioration—and forces that resist organization. The *memento mori* motif in this context becomes diffused, both as a trope in visual culture and as a process of material decay. I propose that nonhuman melancholy serves the purpose of loosening or softening substances and organizational structures, even those pertaining to the rigidity of digital processes.

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Introduction

Toward Nonhuman Melancholy

The nonhuman is an interwoven agglomerate of all possible and emergent entities that are continuously dissipating toward the cosmic horizon of absolute deterritorialization.¹ Our existence is porous, inconsistent, and magnetically susceptible to myriads of nonhuman interventions. In this light, subjectivity can be viewed as a tangle of electrical impulses that cause affects, bonds, breaks, sensations, ideas, frivolous distractions, exaltations, or emotional collapse. An idea is as much of a nonhuman being as a cardboard box, a jpeg of an AI-generated meme, dust particles gathered in the corners of your room, or an axolotl. Nonhuman entities are suspended in a constant flux of alterations, becomings, and ruptures, operating through varying rhythms of accelerations and decelerations.² They range in scale, reach, and temporal distribution—from miniscule imperceptible quantum events to enormous systems like ideologies or the global expanse of capitalism, with all its variant manifestations and immeasurable constituent elements.

Thinking through the nonhuman requires shedding anthropocentric predispositions that situate human subjectivity as superior to entities whose comprehensions and mediational translations differ from our own. This entails not only connecting with nonhuman entities toward some kind of synthesis that alters our attitudes toward the world, but also recognizing that such connections are always incomplete, discontinuous, or fragmented because there is always something in the nonhuman that recoils from full identification. It exceeds empirical classification or comprehension. Objects possess a level of darkness that surpasses the capacities of logic, fueling effects of instability, decomposition, and disarticulation.

Artistic practice that implements strategies of prioritizing the nonhuman—whether in the form of materials, images, or digital procedures—can engage with what François Bonnet has termed the *infra-world*.³

¹ For an explanation of what “deterritorialization” refers to, see “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 201.

² For an explanation of what “becoming” refers to, see “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 197.

³ The *infra-world* is not to be confused with Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the *infrathin*. As Erin Manning observes, it is a minute difference that “makes the difference.” However, it also “produces intensities through subtraction ... More-than is not always more,” which resonates

[E]verywhere, at every moment, it is unravelling. Everywhere, it oozes, it crouches in the shadows. Beneath language, beneath sensations. A quaking world. . . . It is the mute and blind portion of the real, its accursed share. It is the world of exiled impressions and actions, but it is not an absent world. The infra-world is the world that withdraws from the infraliminal world of perception. It is what fails to make a world.⁴

Bonnet describes this dimension of the nonhuman as a dark, viscous, and infectious reality that infiltrates our perceptions through foggy indeterminacy and incohesive sensibility. That it “fails to make a world” is a reflection of its darkening refusal to formulate a coalescent assemblage or organization.⁵ It is this sense of indeterminacy regarding the nonhuman that I will carry forward into the articulation of my research. My research and theorization are grounded in the nonhuman turn in philosophy and contemporary art, specifically focusing on the disintegrative and decompositional aspects of nonhuman life. Obscure meanderings through the darker aspects of nonhuman existence will lead me to formulate a new concept of *nonhuman melancholy*.

In the last two decades, the turn toward the nonhuman in philosophy and contemporary art is mainly influenced by the rise of speculative realism and new materialism, both formulating ways of thinking that are against anthropocentric conceptions of reality. It is well-established that the beginning of speculative realism is marked by the 2007 event at Goldsmiths College, London, with presentations by Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux, poised against what Meillassoux had termed correlationism—the prevailing tendency in continental philosophy involving subjectivity reigning over anything outside of it, positioned in a hierarchical, subject-object dichotomy.⁶ Speculative realism, and especially its subset of object-oriented ontology (OOO), have captured the attention of artists and curators for their emphasis on the nonhuman, the possibility of thought outside the subject-object dichotomy, and how objects extend themselves into aesthetics.

with the inaccessibility of the *infra-world*. See Erin Manning, “For a Pragmatics of the Useless, or the Value of the Infrathin,” *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (2017): 98.

⁴ Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 90.

⁵ For an explanation of what “assemblage” refers to in machine ontology, see “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 200.

⁶ “Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object.” In Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, (Continuum, 2008), 5.

In its turn away from anthropocentrism, the “nonhuman turn” does not exclude the dynamics and complexities of sociopolitical concerns. My interpretation of the nonhuman aligns with Levi R. Bryant’s posthuman view that nonhumans of all scales can and do impact power relations in social assemblages. Bryant states that in his machine-oriented posthuman social theory the social is not only comprised of “things issuing from humans such as signs, discourses, norms, and representations,” as it also consists of “non-human actors such as microbes, fiber optic cables, and mountain ranges,” which means that nonhumans influence sociopolitical events or assemblages.⁷ However, I would like to add a disclaimer that in my particular direction of research, I purposefully route my attention to the study of nonhuman entities as such, in order to speculatively hone in on those aspects of decomposition that pertain to a non-subjective, nonhuman embodiment of melancholy. Even my articulation of the metamorphosing body of capitalism—densely populated with innumerable sociopolitical tensions, inequities, precarities, and events that come to define subjectification—is expressed here primarily in relation to the objects under scrutiny. Specifically, these are case studies of contemporary art projects. This is not to say that these projects lack the capacity to be socially or politically engaged or affective. I recognize that this extended dimension of objects is actively enacted, however for the purposes of my inquiry I have chosen to work through a theoretical framework that specifically prioritizes speculative and innovative investigation of nonhuman entities and the darker, more obscure aspects of their being.

The implementation of speculative realism in my own research is specifically oriented around Levi R. Bryant’s machine-oriented ontology as outlined in *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, which aligns itself with aspects of speculative realism, new materialism, posthumanism, and—in its use of the term “machine” to delineate objects as operational processes—also shows connections to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s machine ontology of schizoanalysis.⁸ In Appendix A, I delineate my interpretation of the key aspects of machine ontology that the reader may find helpful in navigating through the forthcoming chapters. It is my intention to approach Deleuze and Guattari’s machine ontology through a speculative lens that will allow for new interpretations and articulations of the nonhuman to emerge. Specifically, in the proceeding thesis I will develop a theory of nonhuman melancholy through machine ontology as a way to reveal and unfold some of the

⁷ Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 192.

⁸ For a definition of schizoanalysis, refer to “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 195.

machinic operations that expose the ways in which machine ontology is suitable for developing a new concept of nonhuman melancholy. Machine ontology and schizoanalysis are often interpreted as being determined explorations of open, productive operations—rhizomatic growth, the ways in which objects are generated, the endlessness of possibilities on the plane of immanence, the fluidity of becomings and connective amalgamations. My intention is to focus on the more neutral, subtractive and antiproduktive aspects, so as to develop a concept of melancholy within schizoanalysis that also reflects the equal reality of all objects as conceived in speculative realism. According to my analysis, decomposition, decay, and putrefaction—deeply imbricated with melancholy—are not adequately theorized within the bounds of schizoanalysis, as well as in critical theory and philosophy in general.

Historically, the concept of melancholy has mostly followed anthropocentric tendencies, but in tracing melancholy's genealogy as a concept, it becomes evident that it need no longer be defined or experienced as a phenomenon restricted to human experience. If subjectivity is to be severed from melancholy, melancholic tendencies become compelling questions for machine ontology, further complicated by melancholy's previous associations with malady and the oversaturated, desensitized, temporally undetermined subjectivity that is regulated by overwhelming forces of late capitalism. I am not suggesting that subjective melancholic experience has ceased to exist; I propose that through a speculative realist approach to machine ontology, it is possible to theorize melancholy not only as experience but also as a set of behaviours disembodied from the human, acted out in nonhuman objects. By extension, this also applies to the consideration of artworks. As Bryant has suggested:

[A] realist and materialist theory of art would begin with the suspension of the signifying potentials of art and would start with the recognition that works of art are real material beings in their own right. Realism in machine-oriented aesthetics is thus not a thesis about the *content* of a work of art, but about the *being* of artwork. To be a work of art is to be *something*; an entity, substance, individual, thing, object, or machine.⁹

⁹ Levi R. Bryant, "Towards a Machine-Oriented Aesthetics: On the Power of Art," *The Matter of Contradiction/ Ungrounding the Object* (Treignac Projet, inkhuk and Le Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de l'île de Vassivière, Limousin, France, September 8, 2012), accessed February 25, 2024, <https://larvalsubjects.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/bryantlimosine.pdf>

This means that an artwork must first and foremost be approached as a functioning, living nonhuman object, capable of relational or mediational interactions with its various contexts, with the artist, with the viewer, or with a writer such as myself attempting to dissect the work.

My methodology thus relies on machine-oriented thought, while simultaneously pulling from a variety of sources. In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant introduces his approach to writing as that of “a bricoleur, freely drawing from a variety of disciplines and thinkers whose works are not necessarily consistent with one another.”¹⁰ My research process is dispersed, prone to doubt, seeking spaces of incoherence to glean from the dark and obscure aspects of speculative realism, machine ontology, and melancholy. This dissertation primarily focuses on articulating a definition and a purpose of nonhuman melancholy through case studies of contemporary art. At the same time, this research is deeply influenced by my own artistic activities in my practice, which I will address in “Appendix B: Artistic Methodology.”¹¹ Philosophical, theoretical, and artistic activities mutually inform one another in an ongoing process of fragmentation, translation, and assemblage. It is a system of fragmentation that acts as a total project; as Deleuze and Guattari put it in reference to their rhizomatic approach in *A Thousand Plateaus*—“a strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented.”¹²

This dissertation proposes a theory of melancholy that is grounded in processes of fragmentation and decay in and between nonhuman entities. Fragments can be abandoned, selected, found, mediated, copied, dismantled, expanded, dissected, killed, repurposed, or deformed. Fragmentation of objects produces incomplete debris suspended in a deathly assertion of loss, punctuated with melancholic absences that resist definition or closure.

The first chapter concerns itself with outlining the definition of melancholy and the means of translating its symptomatic aspects into nonhuman melancholy through specific behaviours or tendencies. Among these are the symptoms of withdrawal, *disintegrative asignifiance* (or asymbolia), temporal indeterminacy, and *corpo-motor retardation* (deceleration). These melancholic inclinations will be defined through the case study of *Fantasma (Ghost)* (2015) by Adrián Villar Rojas, which is a transient installation of a multitude of found and fabricated decaying objects. This chapter

¹⁰ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011), 27.

¹¹ See “Appendix B: Artistic Methodology,” 209–249.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 6.

investigates the deterioration of matter in relation to the concept of *memento mori*, and how this concept is related to nonhuman melancholy on a material level.

The second chapter delves into the concept of the death drive in relation to the incessant operations of late capitalism, as well as a machine-oriented conception of deep time. I will approach this through Julian Charrière's 2016 exhibition *Into the Hollow*, which consists of mineral conglomerates made from melted stone and obsolete digital devices. The theoretical framework for this chapter combines Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization and the body without organs (BwO) together with Reza Negarestani's ideas on decay and thanatropic regression (death drive).¹³ Charrière's work will be presented both as a project reflective of the cosmic horizon of deep time and as an embodiment of capitalism's incessant circular fixations on extraction and exhaustion of the resources it relies upon.

In the third chapter I investigate the melancholic aspects inherent to the machinic understanding of the signifying regime, simulacra, as well as the lives of digital images as conceived by Hito Steyerl in her essay "In Defense of the Poor Image." This is also where I introduce the concept of the computational gaze, its melancholic potential, and its relationship to the black box. Specifically, I will analyze these notions through the practice of datamoshing in !Mediengruppe Bitnik and Sven König's *Download Finished* (2006) and Nicolas Provost's film *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009). I consider these projects in relation to the concept of the poor image, genre, but also in relation to how glitch can operate as a pure time-image at the moment of its emergence. Datamoshing will be articulated as a melancholic process of disarticulation, decomposition, temporal indeterminacy, and contraction.

The fourth chapter tackles Bryant's concept of *dark objects* as melancholic entities, and the way that objects always have the capacity to possess a level of darkness. I will expand on the concept of dark objects through a case study of Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN's project *UNINVITED* (2021–ongoing). The project perfectly embodies the concept of the computational gaze, as it creates a digital horror film/situation for and by digital entities. As such, dark objects will be articulated in relation to the computational gaze and the black box. As a means of expanding on the darkness of dark objects, I will address their relationship to the BwO as well as

¹³ For an explanation of the "body without organs," see "Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology," 204–206.

Negarestani's concept of "germinal death," which presents decay as a strategy for anti-rigidity through the softening process of ongoing decomposition.

In the conclusion, I investigate how this softening tendency of decay can be the *purpose* of nonhuman melancholy's modes of antiproduction and how it can be evidenced in all of the aforementioned case studies. The nonhuman will thus be approached selectively through the lens of decay, as a means of highlighting how antiproduction can be a melancholic impulse, unsettling and loosening structural, temporal, and symbolic coherence (fig. 1).¹⁴

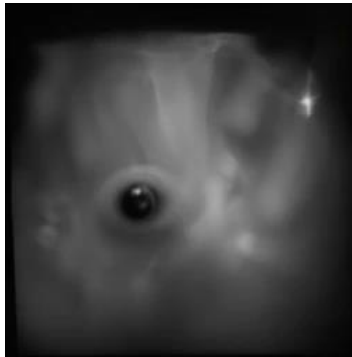


Figure 1: AI-generated diagram using the above sentence as the text prompt.

¹⁴ Throughout the text, I will incorporate AI-generated diagrams or illustrations, produced by using quotes or portions of my writing as text prompts in the text-to-image generators Craiyon and Microsoft Bing Image Creator, both powered by DALL-E. The purpose of this is to experiment with how theoretical concepts can be interpreted through a nonhuman sieve of the computational gaze. This is a purely speculative approach to the visualization of abstract concepts. At times, the diagrams seem to coincide with the concepts in uncannily poignant ways. Other times they are simply abstract renditions from combinations of words that the algorithm has no means of comprehending. For an elaboration on my use of AI-generated diagrams, see Appendix C, 250–257.

Chapter 1

Nonhuman Melancholy: Schizoanalytic Translation of Melancholy's Constitution

“From the howling of animals to the wailing of elements and particles.”¹⁵

Melancholy is a depressive movement inward, a recoiling from relations that dissolves the subject into the doom of dreaded mortality through temporal distortions and the paralyzing horrors of existence, anxiously searching for solace in the unconscious oblivion of death. Language festers into bouts of repetition and muteness; or else it surges into manic epiphanies, cycling between despair and exaltation. In antiquity black bile was the culprit of melancholy; in psychoanalysis the cause is an obsessive fixation on a lost, often unidentifiable object; in psychiatry causes can vary from trauma and stress to chemical imbalances that echo the archaic disequilibrium of black bile. In DSM-5 melancholy has been subsumed into categories of depressive disorders that have “melancholic features” such as “lack of reactivity to usually pleasurable stimuli ... profound despondency, despair, and/or moroseness ... empty mood ... psychomotor agitation or retardation.”¹⁶ There is a logical lineage from melancholy to depression, yet as László Földényi's account of the history of melancholy shows, melancholy functions not only as a pathological subjective state but also as a paradoxical concept enfolding disordered nuanced responses to coping with prospective finitude or annihilation.

In her theory of aesthetics of disengagement, Christine Ross draws a strict distinction between depression and melancholy, which in her interpretation is mainly associated with the Aristotelian notion of the melancholic creative genius, but in other respects she admits there are strong correlations between the symptomatologies of depression and melancholia.¹⁷ These symptoms are effects of the “*insufficiency of self*” that results from the lethargy induced by the demands of neoliberal norms that constantly require reinvention and assertion of selfhood.¹⁸ This

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 249.

¹⁶ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 151.

¹⁷ Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁸ Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, xxii.

notion is aligned with melancholy's long history of being an obstinate or recalcitrant mentality that stands outside of sociocultural or ideological expectations. It is a force of reluctance, hesitation, and obstinate lassitude.

Giorgio Agamben identifies the variants of the deplorable *noonday demon* melancholy in the Middle Ages: “[a]cedia (sloth), *tristitia* (sorrow), *taedium vitae* (weariness, loathing of life), and *desidia* (idleness),” all of which the church deemed as “the most lethal of the vices.”¹⁹ Divine existence ceased to signify for melancholics as they withdrew into themselves, turning “the unknown” or thoughts of an infinite void “into an essential element, a final cause of the world.”²⁰ This unknown, as an indeterminate void and a source of yearning, can be compared to the lost object in Sigmund Freud’s analysis of melancholy.

In Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” the main argument is that melancholy comes as a result of the ego’s identification with a lost and unnameable object, with symptoms of withdrawal from the outside world, loss of connection, inhibition, and self-impoverishment.²¹ Freud struggles to locate precise causes for this inability to function, but suspects that the cause is a lost object that devours the ego, which means that what allows the subject to form relations and perform functionally is compromised by an attachment to an unknowable, distant loss. This has since come to define the varieties of interpretations of melancholy in psychoanalysis. Freud states that “[t]he complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing investment energies to itself from all sides ... and draining the ego to the point of complete impoverishment.”²² This open wound feeding on energies is closely related to the dissipative and exhaustive aspects of the death drive—the compelling flux of melancholic gravitational waning of intensities that phases through entities toward eventual depletion.²³

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez. (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3.

²⁰ László F. Földényi, *Melancholy*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (Yale University Press, 2016), 58.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Penguin Books, 2005), Apple Books.

²² *Ibid.*, 462.

²³ “The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat ... act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work ... we may have come upon the track of a universal attribute of instincts and perhaps of organic life in general which has not hitherto been clearly recognized ... *It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.” See: Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 29–30.

Timothy Morton's interpretation of the psychoanalytic implications of melancholy in relation to objects is that melancholy is "an object-like entity" that is in objects before it occupies the subject. For Morton, the Freudian ego is a relational object; the melancholic subjective mood state is machinic, consisting of "ancient layers of beings."²⁴ Machinic operations of the nonhuman precede the human, or rather constitute human experiences and bodily flows. Morton states that "[m]elancholy is the footprint of another entity of whatever kind whose proximity was experienced as a trauma."²⁵ If two objects are undergoing translation and something inherently fundamental to one object's machinic operations is lost to or damaged by the other, a melancholic inscription results. While I agree with this conception of melancholy as a machinic operation preceding human apprehension, my reading of it does not situate it as an object-like being, but rather as a set of behaviors, capacities, or incapacities that an object has.

There have also been instances of melancholy being recognized in the nonhuman prior to the emergence of psychoanalysis. Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* proposes that melancholy is the "character of Mortality."²⁶ More importantly, he situates melancholy as a universal aspect that extends to the organic nonhuman realm and sociopolitical bodies:

[M]elancholy extends itself ... to vegetals and sensibles. I speak not of those creatures which are Saturnine, melancholy by nature, as Lead, and such-like Minerals, or those Plants, Rue, Cypress ... Fishes, Birds, and Beasts, Hares, Coneys, Dormice, &c., Owls, Bats, Nightbirds, but that artificial, which is perceived in them all. Remove a plant, it will pine away ... Kingdoms, Provinces, and politic bodies are likewise sensible and subject to this disease.²⁷

Similarly, Földényi cites Agrippa von Nettesheim in reference to numerous animals considered to be melancholic, as well as ruins of buildings and organic putrefaction.²⁸ These are crucial precedents for ascribing melancholy outside of human experience, connecting the impermanence and transience of nonhuman entities to melancholic symptoms. My argument is closer to Morton's interpretation, extending beyond "vegetals and sensibles" to objects of all

²⁴ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, 2013), 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁶ Robert Burton, *Burton on Melancholy*, ed. Nicholas Robins (Hesperus Press, 2013), 17.

²⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Angus Gowland (Penguin Classics, 2021), 217–218. Apple Books.

²⁸ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 96.

kinds. A thing, an idea, an image, or even a global phenomenon such as capitalism (discussed in the next chapter) is not required to have sentience to have the syndrome of melancholy afflict, direct, or guide its existence.

1.1 Memento Mori: Recurrence, Fragmentation, and Melancholic Alliance

Melancholic inclinations in the nonhuman can also be observed in the persistence of the *vanitas* and *nature morte* still life tradition and the *memento mori* motif, which rely on the depiction or symbolic presence of death in arrangements of transient objects.²⁹ Melancholy's paradoxical relationship with finitude and reflection on transience is deeply engrained in *memento mori*.³⁰ While the *memento mori* tradition is selective in its iconic and symbolic illustrations of skulls, caterpillars, bubbles, candles, the hourglass, fruit, flowers, etc., the melancholic connection to the impermanence of things can be established with anything and everything that deteriorates. Földényi states that “the world of objects induces melancholia” so that the melancholic's existence becomes pure negativity that “is only the fulfillment of the possibility of annihilation, latent in everything.”³¹ In this perception of transience there is a relation between the impermanence of the human body and the inherent decay of objects, which operates in a reflexive and reciprocal movement. *Memento mori* can thus be applied to the sensorial experience of objects—as a melancholic gaze that dissolves the subjective sense of identity.

²⁹ *Vanitas* refers to a genre of oil painting that emerged in the 16th century following *stilleven* (arrangements of objects on a flat surface), depicting assortments of worldly possessions alongside symbols of mortality such as skulls, hourglasses, or candles; the term refers to the impermanence of material possessions as well as the human body. *Nature morte*, on the other hand, means “dead nature” and is more focused on the impermanence of organic matter that likewise symbolically signals the constant threat of mortality. Both terms thus melancholically allude to the death drive inherently present in the nonhuman. Michael Petry, *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvigorate the Still-Life Tradition* (Thames and Hudson, 2016), 6–9.

³⁰ Its definition as a noun situates the term not so much as a call to ‘remember that you will die’ as it is commonly understood, but rather as a *thing* or things that incite melancholic contemplation on mortality: “‘a reminder of death,’ 1590s, a decorative object, usually an ornament for the person, containing emblems of death or reminders of the fleetingness of life.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=memento+mori>.

³¹ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 301.

In *The Tears of Things*, Peter Schwenger focuses on the melancholic subjective experience in perceiving objects. Things are in “a narcissistic project of self-constitution, making the subject into the seen” and while the object’s gaze meeting the subject’s can be positive, more frequently it annihilates subjective identity.³² James Elkins makes a similar observation in *The Object Stares Back* when he states that sight is a sharp acidic force eating into solid structure, dissolving the object and the observer until they are subsumed in the field of vision.³³ This corrosive, shared field of vision is amplified and more direct when *memento mori* functions both as a visual motif and as something internal to the materiality of the object and its decompositional disjunctions. *Memento mori* is typically thought of as an incorporeal thing, a concept, but can it not be conceived of as a name for something corporeal as well, permeating not only the field of vision but the field of all sense-organs, both human and nonhuman?

Memento mori in relation to the perception of objects, as a representational motif, can be approached through Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of faciality, or the “white wall/black hole system.”³⁴ The corrosive field of vision is a machinic operation of this system. It serves as an intersection between signifiante and subjectification.³⁵ This system is what materially controls the worlds of signifiants and does not need to be necessarily conceived in relation to the face; the face is a picture, something with which to begin. Yet there is “no anthropomorphism here”—the operation is unconscious, machinic, and drags machines across a “holey surface” that internally overcodes decoded fragments.³⁶ This overcoding is what keeps *memento mori* intact between the machinic projection of the subjective gaze and that of a thing. “Even a use-object may come to be facialized: you might say that a house, utensil, or object, an article of clothing, etc., is *watching me* ... because it is taken up in the white wall/black hole process.”³⁷

The aestheticization of *memento mori* into the signifying system makes its objects like use-objects simply because they are overcoded with symbolic meanings of transience; they *do* something for us. They instill symbolic codes of impermanence and doom. However, when the

³² Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 48.

³³ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 45.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

meaning is withdrawn from the concept, it is left with nothing but material formations—formations of images, or formations of decomposition itself.

What does it mean to be gazed at by a *memento mori* image or thing? The description of the white wall/black hole system follows that the white wall (signifiante) has no form and the black hole (subjectivity) is dimensionless. The white wall/black hole system operates via different combinations that seem to invert and interpenetrate one another. The wall can unfold itself and draw itself to a black hole or combine various black holes; or black holes can disperse themselves on the white field (fig. 2).³⁸ They are enmeshed, flickering at the intersection, mediating one another between deterritorializations. The system is “a horror story” that is produced by the abstract machine.³⁹ It is horrific because the white wall and the black hole constantly haunt one another to produce the image. Yet this can all be dismantled, and it is at that point that *memento mori* ceases to be symbolic and can become operative materially, virtually, amorphously.

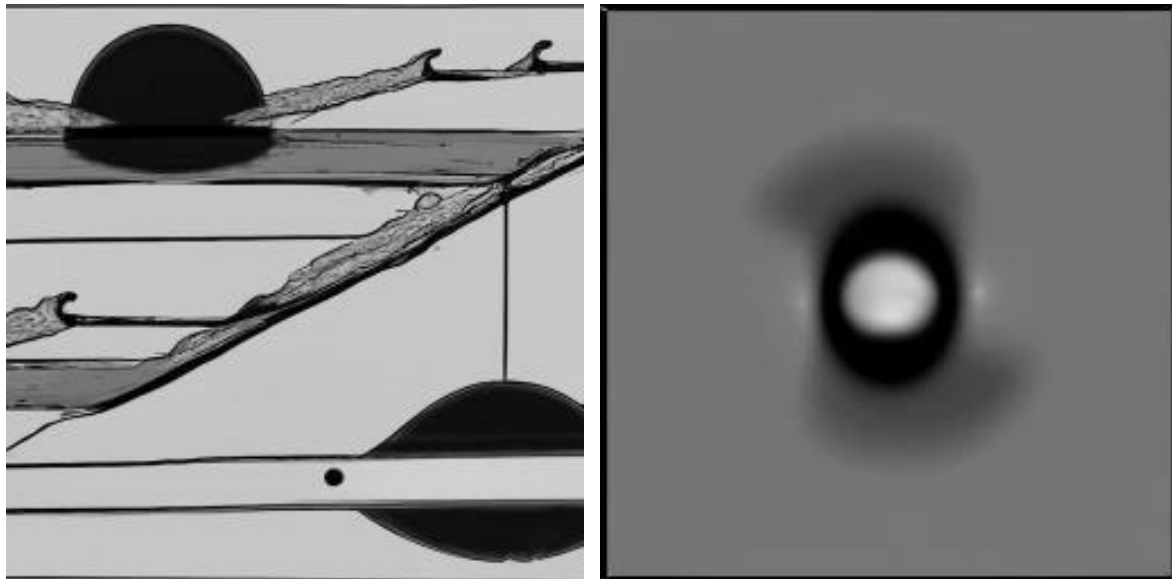


Figure 2: AI-generated diagrams of the white wall/black hole system.

The idea of subjectivity being a black hole or a series of black holes implies that subjectivity is not a blank slate on which information is inscribed, but rather a dimensionless,

³⁸ Ibid., 168.

³⁹ Ibid.

dark orifice that absorbs and is absorbed by signifying signs. This absorption can be activated in the reciprocal gaze between objects and the perceiving subject, yet if the end result is that the subject is disarticulated, as Schwenger has remarked, then the whole system is undone, greyed out. As Rose Marie San Juan notes, the idea of faciality can be useful in the analysis of *memento mori*'s gaze because faciality "is the mechanism that enables signification and fixes representation" at the same time as *memento mori*, as representation, is threatened by finitude which disturbs the symbolic order.⁴⁰ *Memento mori* representations can find themselves to be finite or mortal in the world of actualized semiotics. Deleuze and Guattari remark:

[W]hen the faciality traits disappear, we can be sure that we have entered another regime, other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible where subterranean becomings-animal occur, becomings-molecular, nocturnal deterritorializations overspilling the limits of the signifying system.⁴¹

If faciality disappears for *memento mori*, it becomes a withdrawn process, no longer a coherent idea but an indeterminate multiplicity that, if translated into its correlate in materiality, clings to processes of decomposition. The issue with *memento mori* is that it is often attached to a linear narrative—one is alive and will become dead—while the death drive and decay operate with a complexity of temporalities. An arrangement of decomposing objects is an assemblage of entangled temporalities that do not necessarily have an end point. Like the white wall emitting signs, decomposition emits vapours and particulates, leaves stains, leaks traces. It is here that *memento mori* ceases to be signifying and becomes melancholic in nonhuman terms, in "becomings-molecular" and "nocturnal deterritorializations."

With this in mind, the *memento mori* motif continues to be implemented in the signifying system through visual culture (film, television series, video games) and contemporary art including painting, photography, video, sculpture, and installation.⁴² *Memento mori* still retains

⁴⁰ Rose Marie San Juan, "The Turn of the Skull: Andreas Vesalius and the Early Modern *Memento Mori*," *Art History* 35, no. 5 (2012): 961.

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 115.

⁴² For example, in film, television series, and video games *memento mori* crops up in genres of paranormal horror (with abandoned and haunted objects in attics, basements, or secret rooms) and moody detective narratives (with forensic objects of murder scenes). In these formats, *memento mori* objects are overcoded through narrative structures and other elements such as sound, lighting, and mise en scène.

the tradition of two-dimensional flatness in painting, photography, or video.⁴³ It is in sculpture and installation art that the motif takes on a more dispersed and fragmented diagrammatic, both aesthetically and materially, where objects are spread out in space or compressed in assemblages. Compositions of objects once contained inside the framed simulacra of a painted surface have now been dispersed into constellations of fragments.

Mark Fisher's view of culture in the 21st century is that it is anachronistic in its recycling of cultural material—not in the sense of how time operates, but rather how cultural elements lose innovation and acquire repetitive stasis under the guise of “a superficial frenzy of ‘newness’, of perpetual movement.”⁴⁴ Cultural tropes become widespread and multiplied through variations, deformations, and appropriations. As an overcoded motif, *memento mori* is fully integrated in these processes of recycled, deterritorialized reappearances. Fisher refers to the erosion of the future because “cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.”⁴⁵ *Memento mori* is no longer temporally linear. Cultural novelty is nonexistent, or relies on recycled remains or repetitions.

An example of distorted repetition of traditional still life is Toni R. Toivonen's works on brass which have been corroded and stained by decomposing animal carcasses (fig. 3). The discolorations, imprints, and oxidation on the metal produce forms that only vaguely resemble animal bodies. Decomposition becomes chemically abstracted into its afterlife—these pieces show that *memento mori* is not about the finitude of a body or object but also about its residuum in relation to other objects. This work confronts *memento mori* both as a motif and as an embodied disintegrative, melancholic process.

⁴³ Consider the paintings of Cindy Wright, James White, Lisa Milroy; videos of decaying still lives by Sam Taylor-Johnson; and photographic practices of Ori Gersht, Klaus Pichler, or Laura Letinsky. Letinsky's work with still life narrows in on the melancholy of photographic representations of mundane objects and images. The composed scenes consist of emptiness, signs of decay, and lack of balance—blank backdrops, abandoned dishes, stains, pieces of food, debris, portions of photographs. What is notable about this work is that she places images on the same level of reality as other objects. She adds that she contends with “the fact that things that are photographed are the same in their photographic-ness,” as if this contained photographic-ness is a diagram of the flatness of flat ontology, just as the still life photographs are diagrams of contemporary enactments of *vanitas* and *memento mori* motifs. See: Sarah Goodrum, “A Sense of Loss and Making: A Conversation with Laura Letinsky,” *Afterimage* 46, no. 3 (2019): 34–37.

⁴⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Zero Books, 2014), E-Book, 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.



Figure 3: Toni R. Toivonen, *The Perfect Moment* (2022), brass, original substances of dead animals, 200 x 400cm.



Figure 4: Georgia Dickie, installation view of *Agouti Sky* (2019).

As an example of diffracted still life motifs in installation art, Georgia Dickie's practice combines found objects and debris into constellations that are caught in a slow state of deterioration, paused in the gallery space with a sense of suspended incompleteness (fig. 4). While she does not activate or harness decay as processual disintegration, many of her materials are acquired through waste and abandonment.⁴⁶ The compositional format of traditional still life arrangements is disrupted and diffracted into disparate floor-bound collections of things in incongruous combinations.

This shift in composition, whether intentionally subverting the still life tradition by obliterating the *memento mori* object of focus (Toivonen) or unintentionally presenting decaying and unwanted objects in an assembled dispersal that recalls *memento mori*'s fixation on the temporary nature of objects (Dickie), can be attributed to the deterritorialization of the *memento mori* and still life traditions. The motif, the images, the things, the field of vision are all machines in assemblages that are released through deterritorialization, then reterritorialized only to be deterritorialized again. In the process, machines and their structures become disordered, misplaced, appropriated. *Memento mori* images are sets of signs as well as things that become heterogeneous and fragmented. At once it is a stylistic motif clinging to subjective identification with mortality and a force in its own right magnetized to the objects of decomposition. Ultimately, I understand *memento mori* as the name for an overcoded motif but also for the disintegrative effects of the death drive that produce melancholic effects.

1.2 *Fantasma*

As a case study focusing on melancholic effects that are embodied on a material level, I will investigate the installation *Fantasma (Ghost)* (2015) by Adrián Villar Rojas at Moderna Museet (Stockholm) to speculate on melancholic processes in the nonhuman. Descriptions of

⁴⁶ Her exhibition *Agouti Sky* (Oakville Galleries, 2019) consists of found and manipulated objects such as a satellite dish, hose, collage remnants, collections of things in containers, aged wood, rust. She does not follow or intend the traditional still life arrangement of objects. Some items seem to be carefully arranged while others appear as if they were dropped or placed haphazardly. Dickie states that her work "relies on actively tricking myself into not doing anything" thus allowing for a temporary dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy, and for the objects to disperse with less controlled or ideologically overburdened intent. Georgia Dickie, "Conversation: Georgia Dickie," *TANK Magazine*, interview, 2020, <https://tankmagazine.com/tank/2020/01/georgia-dickie>.

melancholic symptomatology will be dispersed throughout the case study to serve as points of contrast in translating this symptomatology into the language of machinic operations in the nonhuman. *Fantasma* is also an example of the dispersal of *memento mori* in the context of installation art.

The installation consists of a flat arrangement of 284 objects undergoing various states of decomposition. The installation is “full of uncertainties” and presents the “remains of art,” with many of the objects being appropriated from Villar Rojas’ previous exhibition, *Los Teatros de Saturno* (*The Theaters of Saturn*) at Kurimanzutto (Mexico City, 2014).⁴⁷ Many of the items were already starting to decay at the previous venue.

Objects from *Los Teatros de Saturno* are in different stages of decay. The most significant and dramatic changes, mainly to the organic parts, occurred already during the exhibition at kurimanzutto, but degradation is an ongoing process, albeit now a lot less dramatic. Vegetables, fruits, and other matter were hard to recognize upon arrival at Moderna Museet.⁴⁸

In the end, with the exception of items collected by the museum, the *Fantasma* exhibition now only exists through documentation.

Some of the objects are deteriorating geometrical forms crafted from cement, plaster, and other materials that can be difficult to identify, while other objects consist of “organic materials ... [that] sprout, change and disintegrate.”⁴⁹ Some of these are dry plants, “bread, fruit, vegetables, a lobster tail, and a then eight-year-old sponge cake.”⁵⁰ There are also sneakers wedged into or supporting some objects, in some cases ripped apart.

⁴⁷ “Adrián Villar Rojas – Fantasmas,” *arte-sur*, 2015, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.arte-sur.org/home/adrian-villar-rojas-fantasmas/>.

⁴⁸ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love: Challenges in Caring for Works by Adrián Villar Rojas in the Moderna Museet Collection*,” *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials in Contemporary Art*, ed. Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth (Getty Conservation Institute, 2019), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/living-matter/approaches/18/>.

⁴⁹ “Adrián Villar Rojas – Fantasmas.”

⁵⁰ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love*.”



Figure 5: Adrián Villar Rojas, *Fantasma (Ghost)*, 2015, installation view at Moderna Museet (Stockholm).

Among the artefacts are a few epoxy humanoid figures that seem to be present only as ghost-objects from a previous project—as opposed to a deliberate or symbolic reference to the human form. These things are displayed on a high platform half of which is backlit, contextualizing the objects as both things in themselves and as illuminated museum artefacts. The platform takes up almost the entire room, displaying the objects at eye level, thus restricting full access to the carefully spaced spread of multitudes of things.

In *Fantasma* we encounter an enhanced museum environment, its surreal dimensions and artificial light are suggestive of a mausoleum. A setting shaped by sealed chambers and blind alleys, both spatial and ideological, and centering on a collection of rare objects in metamorphosis.⁵¹

Villar Rojas works with a team of assistants, or rather collaborators; he “compares his practice to a virus that lives in and off the art world” challenging conventional museum protocols

⁵¹ “Adrián Villar Rojas – Fantasmas”

by creating works that resist longevity and are eventually reduced to memory and documentation.⁵² *Fantasma* presented conservational challenges for Moderna Museet. Upon arrival at the museum, some artefacts were discovered in states of infestation—biscuit beetles and mold—which were treated with Vikane gas.⁵³ The treatment of the ongoing infestations in the installation is a weak attempt on the part of the institution to control the rate of disintegration. I will return to this point later on in the chapter, but it is of crucial importance that the objects' decomposition is subjected to an institutional and hierarchical model of monitoring, containing, and limiting the speed of decay. The objects continually resist this institutional deterritorialization through the basic fact of material disintegration, machinically affirming their own melancholic presence on the BwO. As in Morton's interpretation of melancholy preceding the ego or diagnosis, Villar Rojas' objects are always-already melancholically inscribed despite institutional attempts to mitigate the symptoms.

The objects are presented as a collection, but they are individually spaced out, creating an image of solitary things in disparate arrangement across the graded glass table, in a kind of detached combination, that are sometimes difficult to decipher because of the challenging viewpoint imposed by the elevated platform and the small scale of many of the objects. Each thing produces its own rate of decomposition, showing its own path of putrefaction, discontinuous with one another. The running shoes have a longer shelf life than the organic matter like bread or lobster tails. *Memento mori* is the matrix of the objects' assembled, disjointed, embodied ephemerality, slowly passing from defined structural form and signification to the dark formlessness of matter-movement.

Agamben invokes the idea that melancholy was connected by alchemists with *nigredo* (blackness), which is the first stage of the alchemical process that twists the boundaries between the corporeal and incorporeal. "In the space opened by its obstinate phantasmagoric tendency originates the unceasing alchemical effort ... to appropriate to itself death and the negative."⁵⁴ Villar Rojas and his team utilize experimental fabrication and construction in combination with found and organic materials with the intent of appropriating death, to produce antiproductive corporeal ghosts. *Nigredo* in this sense is the melancholic movement between actualization and

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., "*Pieces of the People We Love.*"

⁵⁴ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 26.

the withdrawal toward the BwO. *Nigredo* is the black bile that exceeds the corpus of the human vessel—the thick viscous sludge of withdrawn nonhuman waste, holding back its productive powers as it clings to the BwO’s disorganization, but simultaneously pulled by actualization as the black remainder of precious debris.⁵⁵

Memento mori is in the becoming-*nigredo* of corporeal entities, the active conversion into black bile, as thingness disfigured, disarticulated. The earlier reference to the comparison of the exhibition space to a mausoleum is an appropriate metaphor for the containment of these unstable living-ghost objects that become more irregular and death-bound through the course of the exhibition.

Burton describes the black bile of melancholy as “cold and dry, thick, black, and sour, begotten of the more faeculent part of nourishment, and purged from the spleen.”⁵⁶ How would this translate into machinic operations in *Fantasma*? Cold and dry can signal a lack of inputs or flows into a machine or an assemblage; the objects are positioned and isolated, the only inputs being any environmental changes in the gallery space and mold infestations. Thick and black refers to a machine’s density of excessive closure and its reluctance to receive, the shrinking and withdrawal from vitality. Or else it may also be the same as sourness—inputs of impurities which imply that a machine may have acquired a parasitic poisonous code that curdles and decays its operational abilities. In the installation, some organic matter literally turns sour and there are actual parasitical infestations. To be purged from the spleen implies that black bile has a processual source—a melancholic liquid of the “character of Mortality.” The spleen is the BwO and its resistance to organization can provide the flows that instigate excessive antiproduction and decay.

⁵⁵ Helen Chadwick’s *Carcass* (1986) is an example of *nigredo* in the making, impinging on museological standards of a static and sterile environment. It was a glass tower filled with organic trash, a counterpart to Chadwick’s *vanitas* installation *Of Mutability* shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art (London). “*Carcass* was only installed once in the artist’s lifetime ... because the decaying waste matter had begun to leak from the original glass structure. It was re-installed posthumously at Tate Liverpool in 2014, when the decision was taken to construct the tower out of Perspex rather than glass to prevent such leakage”—and to contain this *nigredo* viscosity in a hermetically sealed vessel. “Helen Chadwick: *Carcass*,” *Tate*, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/chadwick-carcass-t15032>.

⁵⁶ Burton, *Burton on Melancholy*, 18.

Fantasma is a diffracted still life arrangement of objects that were deliberately constructed to be transient. *Memento mori* becomes a melancholic term for objects that not only symbolize a reminder of death, but also fully embody the imprints, processes, and symptoms of melancholic antiproduction.

1.3 Melancholy: Machinic Conversion of its Psychic Constitution

Melancholy as a diagnosed problem of experience is subjected to the dictatorial power of diagnosis that places negative pathological value on its symptoms, as if its amorphous constellations and uncertainties could be grafted into the syntax of a grid. Psychoanalysis reduces the unconscious to “arborescent structures, hierarchical graphs, recapitulatory memories”—a dictatorial treatment of the unconscious.⁵⁷ In schizoanalysis, melancholy would be part of an acentered system of machines that includes not only human subjects, but all corporeal and incorporeal phenomena. Schizoanalysis dismantles the stability of rational structures, including imposed interpretations of the melancholic internalization of horror. “It is said that the unconscious is dark and somber. ... The unconscious has its horrors, but they are not anthropomorphic.”⁵⁸ These horrors can be transcoded and decoded into the unconscious operations of nonhuman melancholy, as dark, non-anthropomorphic, repulsive irregularities in machinic reality. Melancholy’s definition can be uprooted and made decentered from the human, even if to articulate such a hypothesis requires for nonhuman melancholic symptomatology to be partly appropriated from the dictatorial system of psychoanalysis. Assemblages are made up of various partial objects and multiplicities, including human, social, and technical machines that are molar, as well as molecular machines that have “particles of becoming-inhuman”—psychoanalytic statements or apparatuses exist just as much as “counter-Oedipal apparatuses, variable in aspect and functioning.”⁵⁹ Because of this coexistence, and despite psychoanalysis’ shortcomings and pitfalls, it is possible to appropriate fragments of theoretical expressions from psychoanalysis, through an acentered approach that is not restrictive, prescriptive, or conclusive.

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Penguin Books, 2009), 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 36.

The schizoanalytic approach to machinic melancholy is related to some schizophrenic processes, such as the code of delirium, when the schizophrenic—passing from code to code—“deliberately scrambles all the codes.”⁶⁰ The difference for the melancholic fluidity of this scrambling is that it is not deliberate, but comes as a result of some input, disturbance, or loss in the machine. Alternatively, melancholy may arise as a result of already schizophrenically scrambled codes, as a residue.

In borrowing from psychoanalysis and historical sources, I will focus on the processual aspects of melancholic behaviour that I will translate into machinic operations. I will break melancholic symptomatology into four categories. These should not be interpreted as discrete classifications but as tendencies or machinic actions (or inactions) that can perform singularly, simultaneously, or in alteration. I have arranged these tendencies in a somewhat sequential order, one leading to another, but this also is not a strictly determinate arrangement or chain, as melancholy is always a result of disconnection and disorder. It all depends on particular situations and influences.

In my proposed theorization, nonhuman melancholy can take on the tendencies of withdrawal, disintegrative asignificance, indeterminate temporality in relation to finitude (decay, death), and what I will refer to as *corpo-motor retardation* as a nonhuman parallel to the subjective symptom of psychomotor retardation.

1.4 Withdrawal

Fantasma means “ghost” in Spanish. Some have connected this use of the word with memory recorded within or by the objects.⁶¹ My interpretation of the title has more to do with the ongoing withdrawal from actualized being, as the objects *ghost* themselves and get slowly pulled toward the BwO. They gradually become ghosted because they are distanced from one another and from the viewer, as if not entirely present, as the creeping process of decay becomes more intrusive, pulling the objects into withdrawal and impoverishment.⁶² *Fantasma*’s collected

⁶⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 15.

⁶¹ “Adrián Villar Rojas – Fantasmas.”

⁶² My interpretation of withdrawal differs from Graham Harman’s conception of withdrawal in object-oriented ontology. Harman’s view is that all objects are withdrawn into a reality that is inaccessible to

remnants are aligned with W.J.T. Mitchell's remark regarding found objects. The found object does not forget its unassuming origins; it is "a poor thing" that precedes its fetishization when it is on display, existing in "a zone of indistinction, beneath notice or contempt" outside of social relations.⁶³

The ephemerality of the exhibition codes it as something both present and already absent. My experience of the exhibition comes through its absence, through the afterimages of photographic documentation. *Fantasma's* arrangement of *memento mori* is now nothing but digital images, or mediations of disintegrating remnants of things into scraps of archival and disseminated image content. The exhibition was ephemeral—a fragmented assemblage driven by the processual withdrawal of objects deteriorating at different speeds and resisting museological standards of permanence.

The behaviour of withdrawal is a consistent symptom of melancholy, documented since antiquity. It is an inward self-reflective movement recoiling from sociocultural integration. Földényi describes how in the Middle Ages melancholic loneliness, frailty, and solitude were a wretched "inclination to damnation," with "a self that deliberately shuts itself up."⁶⁴ Withdrawal is also sometimes paralleled with ostracization or banishment—melancholy was at times considered to be demonic and recalcitrant, and withdrawal into solitude was unacceptable, making the melancholic "stupid, stuck in the mud."⁶⁵

Melancholy became more self-reflective during the Renaissance, manifested in the futile search for autonomy. Nothingness took the place of infinity as the motif of contemplation. Withdrawal was a reflection of this nothingness—"[o]ne's situation becomes unstable; there is nothing to hang onto in the surrounding nothingness."⁶⁶ When objects withdraw, it is also a situation of instability with a reduced number of entities to support or hold the object's constancy

us—"the reality of things is always withdrawn or veiled rather than directly accessible, and therefore any attempt to grasp that reality by direct and literal language will inevitably misfire." While this is true to some degree, my take on the concept differs in that the actualized being of things is just as real as the withdrawal. My use of the word implies that withdrawal is a shifting *process* as opposed to a constant state of being. See: Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican Books, 2017), 38.

⁶³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 115–116.

⁶⁴ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 57–58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 64, 107.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

in place. In this relational solitude, there is no option but to collapse into virtuality, fold down onto the BwO, which then takes the place of support in the form of infectious antiproductive flows. In *Fantasma*, although the artefacts are in a constellation, each thing or construction appears to be isolated, reflecting its own incumbent ghostliness. They are the ghosts of their own presence. Tending toward nothingness, they reflect *memento mori* in their designed and designated transience.

Burton identifies solitariness as both a symptom and a cause of melancholy. It is an involuntary withdrawal from sociable relations that acts like a trap. The subject can be filled with unrest and with abstract objects of dread that are sought out only to incite further withdrawal and the need to escape. “[T]hey run earnestly on in this labyrinth of anxious and solicitous melancholy meditations ... winding and unwinding themselves, as so many clocks.”⁶⁷ Withdrawal can be a kind of labyrinthine and self-contradictory process of escape that “winds and unwinds” itself and cannot be repelled. For the Romantics, melancholy arose from the realization that the internal self was as much of a restraint as externality. Földényi notes that melancholic withdrawal into the interior was nonetheless a compulsive and inevitable response to being threatened by “one’s continuous destruction” from the outside, so that withdrawal became a self-entrapment.⁶⁸ The threat of continuous destruction experienced by objects is passive—things have no internal awareness of becoming broken, for example. This passivity extends to actual external threats, like mold versus a piece of bread, or beetles desiccating watermelon skin.

In nonhuman melancholy, withdrawal can be a result of a trauma to an entity beyond repair, caused by a flow of pressures and tensions within a machinic constellation that nudge a machine into solitude, withdrawal, and diminishment. The mold infestations on some of the organic objects in *Fantasma* were a recurrent scourge on their physical constituency, solidity, and structure. These infestations were stopped or paused through conservation methods, but elements were lost to the infectious agents with no possibility of repair. In withdrawal there is a softening

⁶⁷ Burton, *Burton on Melancholy*, 30.

⁶⁸ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 214.

of the tissues, where partial objects meet only to mediate a layer of rot (fig. 6).⁶⁹

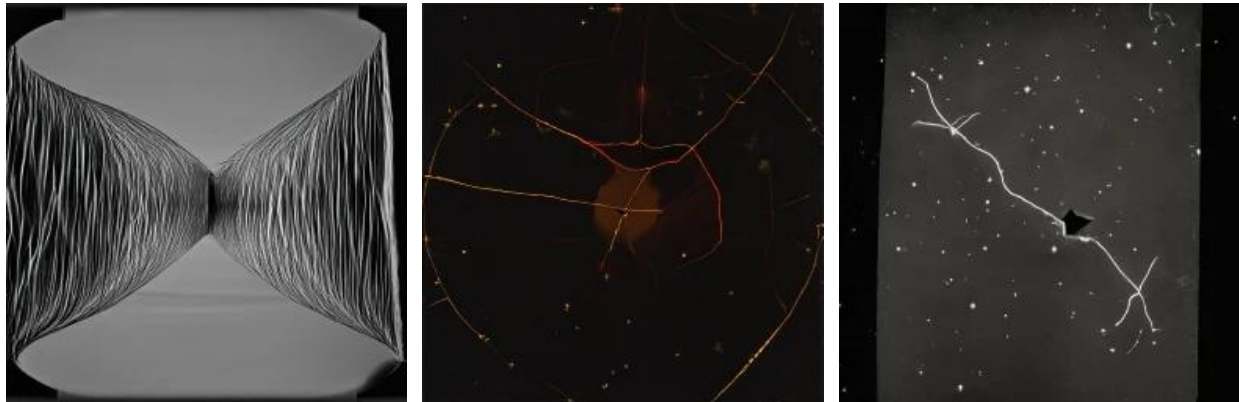


Figure 6: AI-generated diagrams using the above paragraph as the text prompt.

In psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva observes that melancholy is afflicted with “banishment, absence, void.”⁷⁰ She recounts states of despondency and internal secrecy, exile, and how these can be methods of self-assertion. “Through their empty speech they assure themselves of an inaccessible ... ascendancy over an archaic object that thus remains, for themselves and all others, an enigma and a secret.”⁷¹ Thus withdrawal is not always a solitary recoiling that amplifies fragility, but also owes its structural logic to an internal abstraction. The internal abstractions of the *Fantasma* objects inventively engineer themselves on the basis of the “archaic object,” which can be any number of things—a lost partial object, the mark of a severed bond, remains of a previous organization of being, or a hitherto unexercised power or intensity that is darkened in disengagement. That melancholy’s withdrawal can be assertive is an indication that a diminished object is not always a victim, and does not refute its disengagement but rather activates withdrawal as a *power* of repulsion.

This disengagement from relations in psychoanalysis is caused by the inability to form relations due to the fixation on the lost object, while “the subject takes refuge to the point of

⁶⁹ For an explanation of “partial objects,” refer to “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 199.

⁷⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, 1989), 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide.”⁷² The pretense of death makes melancholics “mute and steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container,” which indicates that there is an irresolvable commitment to withdrawal once the action of disengagement is set in motion.⁷³ The connection to playing dead as a mode of severed relations or extending the intention to suicide can be likened to a machine’s magnetized withdrawal to the BwO, which can serve as a passageway to total annihilation. As Deleuze and Guattari describe:

The body without organs is the model of death ... Zero intensity. The death model appears when the body without organs repels the organs and lays them aside: no mouth, no tongue, no teeth—to the point of self-mutilation, to the point of suicide. Yet there is no real opposition between the body without organs and the organs as partial objects; the only real opposition is to the molar organism that is their common enemy. ... Death is not desired, there is only death that desires, by virtue of the body without organs or the immobile motor.⁷⁴

The partial objects are silenced by the BwO and at the same time activated by operational counterparts. In melancholy, however, the inclination of the working parts to reactivate themselves is reduced. Are some of the *Fantasma* objects nothing but crumbles and dust by this point in time, and to what extent can dust contribute to any kind of further productive processes? Dust particles can potentially enter into productive relations, but as things of putrefaction they have low gravitational pull with little intensity. Deleuze and Guattari state that life desires are not in opposition to death desires but part of the same machine, yet with melancholy the machine’s life desires wane. They withdraw while the BwO’s repulsion takes over.

To fill the gap of a completely withdrawn machine, others enter the assemblage to provide partial objects, energies, flows. Consider the traces left behind by the mold on the surface of an organic item in *Fantasma*. Yet even a completely withdrawn entity, such as one of Bryant’s *dark objects* (discussed in the last chapter), nonetheless leaves a residual presence *in itself*, a ghost of itself. Bryant argues that machines can extinguish their parts “but insofar as their parts retain some machinic being of their own, they always retain subterranean powers of their own.”⁷⁵ What occurred to the *Fantasma* objects after the exhibition, the ones which were not

⁷² Ibid., 10.

⁷³ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 329.

⁷⁵ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 80–81.

brought into the museum’s collection? If they disintegrated entirely, their remnants potentially still have some ghostly remains of “subterranean powers.”

To be melancholic a machine need not be *completely* withdrawn. Withdrawal is not necessarily instantaneous and is most often a process. The initial levels of withdrawal of a machine signal the beginning of its decay, its “self-mutilation” on the BwO. In its withdrawal it may be in the process of merging with other machines. It is not always complete submersion in the virtual. A machine, or an assemblage, is even more melancholic for not completing its full gesture of withdrawal because of the tendency to hesitate, to linger between two ends of a spectrum simultaneously like a desperate yearning for something out of reach. This is precisely what makes *Fantasma* a melancholic exhibition. None of its objects are withdrawn to the zero-space of the BwO. They gradually phase out of actualization, but remain on the tableau as the debris of alchemical-cultural production, undergoing the scrambling of codes, deteriorating at different rates of speed as the immobile motor injects black bile into any form of structured coherence.⁷⁶

The immobile motor of the BwO attracts organs, or parts, and appropriates them, meaning that the BwO has a productive function that counteracts its refusal toward principles of organization.

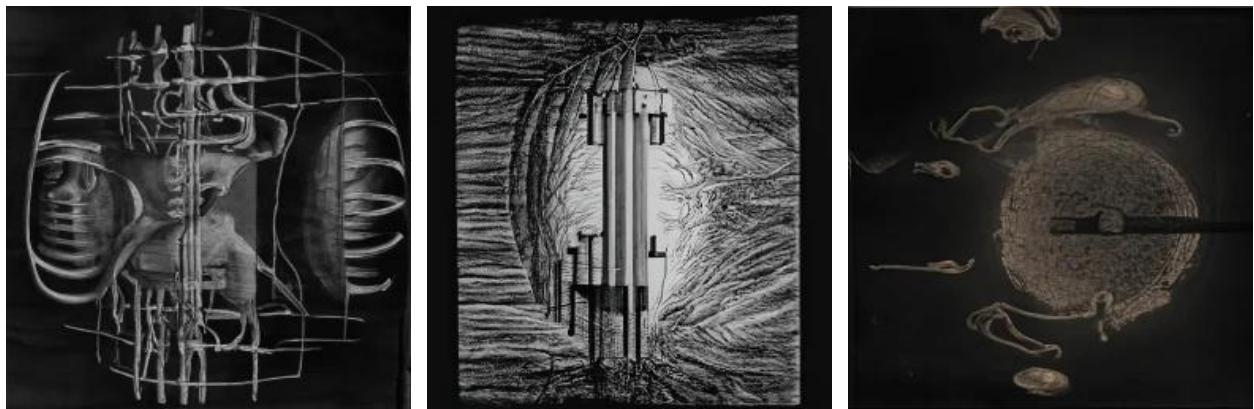


Figure 7: AI-generated diagrams using Deleuze and Guattari’s quote below as the text prompt.

⁷⁶ For an explanation of actualization versus virtuality, see “Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology,” 202.

Repulsion is the condition of the machine's functioning, but attraction is the functioning itself. ... it all works only by breaking down. ... in the cycle of the desiring-machine it is a matter of constantly translating, constantly converting the death model into something else altogether, which is the experience of death. Converting the death that rises from within (in the body without organs) into the death that comes from without (on the body without organs).⁷⁷

Again, in melancholy the "functioning itself" is compromised. Melancholy does not allow attraction to itself. The conversion of the death model becomes unbalanced and unstable. It does not all work by breaking down as the ability to "work" is thwarted and the breakdown becomes the principal power of the object's diminishment, installing itself in the place of function. The 'experience of death' is magnified. The subject of melancholy, as Földényi describes, is "unable to form an alliance with the world," instead forming an alliance with nothingness, which is an absent presence that itself becomes a problematic and insecure relation.⁷⁸ In their isolated positioning on the elevated tableau, the *Fantasma* objects are in alliance with the act of quietly absenting themselves. Ross describes that "depressiveness unfolds as not so much a theme as an aesthetic depreciation of connectedness."⁷⁹ The objects are only connected to one another by the white platform under the aestheticization of museological display, but they are isolated from one another and also aesthetically distanced from connecting with the viewer because they are visually almost out of reach. In machinic terms, the partial objects of these machines do not mesh together, while the partial objects of the viewer's affective experience only peripherally brush against this field of *memento mori*. The objects also begin to disconnect from themselves in the process of decay, spectrally split between presence and the impending *nigredo* of their demise.

Incomplete withdrawal causes an entity to be out of sync with its surroundings. Bryant argues that a machine's productive capacity can be "*out of phase* with the events they are capable of producing" because the machine is either dormant, lacking appropriate inputs or prompts from other machines, or its powers are inhibited by combinations of external causes.⁸⁰ *Fantasma's* objects are dormant in their own tendencies toward deathliness, in different articulations as

⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 329–330.

⁷⁸ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 121.

⁷⁹ Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, xxii.

⁸⁰ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 178.

various as the 284 objects on display. Each has its own path of withdrawal pierced with what Reza Negarestani calls the “blackening line that traverses the confines of nested interiorities.”⁸¹ Black bile is a series of flows from the BwO that corrodes the objects’ abilities to hold themselves, they begin to fold in on themselves—stains, shrinkage, cracks, bug bites become the luminescent exposed surfaces of self-reflective enclosure.

Kleinherenbrink states that a machine’s essence is “the withdrawn, non-relational 'hidden thing' found to 'dwell in dark regions'.”⁸² This means nonhuman melancholic disengagement is the withdrawal toward this essence. The essence is on the BwO and so it is never stable. The virtuality of an object is not a permanent fixture; just as an object disintegrates in actualization, so it can dissipate or become disordered in virtuality.

When something becomes self-reflective, its essence folds in on itself, or collapses and diffracts across other machines. In the former instance of folding in on oneself, it is a case of a machine becoming a dark object, while in the latter the machine’s molecular reflections of itself no longer support any structure and disperse into other entities. At the time of its exhibition, *Fantasma* followed the latter path—concrete actualized objects of culture undergoing increasing disengagement from relations, beginning a softening withdrawal process, insisting on mortality, suspended like ghosts between the flat light and climate control of museological display and the black bile of code-scrambling virtuality.

1.5 Disintegrative Aassignificance

Agamben has noted that in the experience of melancholy objects can be emptied of their meaning. They can lose their signifying power, representing only what resists signification as they become the wasteful, temporary objects of the unattainable.⁸³ In *Fantasma*, there is no *becoming* wasteful or unattainable. The objects do not represent what resists signification, they resist

⁸¹ Reza Negarestani, “Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Architecture and Politics of Decay,” ed. Robin Mackay, *Collapse VI* (Urbanomic, 2012), 395.

⁸² Arjen Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity: Gilles Deleuze's Speculative Realism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 166.

⁸³ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 26.

signification in being themselves. There is also the intention of asignification inherent in the project's planned ephemerality.

In this ephemerality, *Fantasma* is something that resists classification. "As onlookers, we are involved in a choreography around a collection of rare objects in transformation that have become almost impossible to classify as flora, fauna or mineral."⁸⁴ This inability to formally identify objects and their substances is not only a semiotic confusion for the viewer; in the objects' disintegration, the internal codes begin to be scrambled and it becomes difficult to tell whether these virtual codes are muddled as a result of melancholic withdrawal or as its cause. This is because Villar Rojas' work "undoes the notion of the finished, completed work. His objects embark on a movement towards dissolution the moment they are created."⁸⁵ Because they begin to decay upon inception, the objects are imbued with the tendency toward disintegrative asignificance, or machinic asymbolia. Disintegrative asignificance is in part the cause of withdrawal, but can also be its result, in the turn toward the BwO as the "asignifying and asubjective."⁸⁶ My intention is to translate some of the processes associated with Kristeva's Lacanian conception of asymbolia into a machinic version of the concept through a schizoanalytic approach to objects.

Asymbolia is the melancholic inability to coherently communicate. Citing Rhasis, Burton notes the "stuttering, or tripping in speech" of melancholics.⁸⁷ If not stumbling through linguistic expression, the melancholic is entrapped in mute secrecy and in this withdrawn contemplation language begins to crumble. For Kristeva, asymbolia in combination with inhibition are the primary symptoms of melancholy. She defines asymbolia through a description of sequential linguistic/symbolic disintegration:

Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. ... A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally ... the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ "Adrián Villar Rojas," *Moderna Museet*, 2015, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/adrian-villar-rojas/>

⁸⁵ "Adrián Villar Rojas – Fantasmas."

⁸⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 171.

⁸⁷ Burton, *Burton on Melancholy*, 47.

⁸⁸ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 33.

In Lacanian logic, as Stijn Vanheule argues, this subjective experience arises when signifying functions and flows of the Other (accepted social norms of linguistic circulation) are suspended as a result of the subject's diminished "symbolic resources" that accompany withdrawal and severed connections.⁸⁹ Vanheule elaborates that as communication fails, the *objet a*—the excess of the Real that has no signifier—suddenly erupts. This would in turn reinforce the trauma of melancholic loss of the Other, sinking the subject further into asymbolia. This trauma is "the Thing" which Kristeva says is "buried alive" when melancholic speech becomes "a dead language, which foreshadows their suicide."⁹⁰ Asymbolia is thus a self-destructive motion that is aligned with the persistent melancholic alliance with mortality. When ability to mediate signs becomes impossible, melancholy enters asymbolia. Kristeva parallels this inability to mediate signs with the silence of death, or the pretense of being dead.⁹¹ For machines, this translates into the inability to express or to mediate partial objects, as well as asignifying signs.

The *Fantasma* objects have entered disintegrative asignifiace long before the presentation of the exhibition, as the objects are remnants from previous projects, already in a state of self-directed disintegration of asignifiace. The waste that the melancholic object merges with, that it returns to in itself, is the BwO actively disrupting the objects' ability to signify. As they die, they also pretend to be already dead, perhaps because they are displayed in the deathlike sterility of the museum. The *memento mori* within the objects persists through mute gestures of stillness that dissociate them from any form of productive existence. Kristeva's asymbolia can be diffracted into a schizoanalytic nomenclature of *asignification*. Semiotics in schizoanalysis is not strictly linguistic. The *Fantasma* objects refute signification not strictly in semiotic terms but materially as well.

Semiotics in schizoanalysis is what Gary Genosko calls "a-signifying semiotics." The ecology of nonsigns is largely influenced by Louis Hjelmslev's linguistics, a semiotics that is "reticent, hesitant, working only with the parts and their intensities, without imposing on them further form: signification never culminates."⁹² There are nonsigns (nonsignifying signs,

⁸⁹ Stijn Vanheule, "In Between the Signifier and the Real: On Depressive Experiences," *Lacan on Depression and Melancholia* (Routledge, 2022), 33.

⁹⁰ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹² Gary Genosko, "A-Signifying Semiotics," *The Public Journal of Semiotics* 2, 1 (2008): 12.

asignifying signs, point signs, or particle signs) that are not strictly linguistic but *substantial*. Genosko summarizes asignifying signs as “signaletic matter” that is not necessarily correlated with semantic meaning or content, referring instead to “non-linguistic information transfers.”⁹³ For example, the molecular exchange of elements between mold and an afflicted rotting organic object in the gallery is a relational and mediational process of signaletic matter that serves the sustenance of mold toward its productive expansion while diminishing the informational content of the infested object. Genosko elaborates that Guattari’s machinic asignification operates through particle signs as opposed to signs as understood within the linguistic constraints of traditional semiotics.⁹⁴ Asignification operates through flows of content (substantial formations) and expression (the machinic semiotics of collective signs that preexists language):

[F]or nonsignifying language anything will do ... no flow is privileged in this language, which remains indifferent to its substance or its support ... a substance is said to be formed when a flow enters into a relationship with another flow, such that the first defines a content and the second, an expression.⁹⁵

Content and expression participate in machinic translations. Nonsigns are produced in the conjunction of content and expression, but they are not derivative from a signifier—they are “point-signs” that have multiple dimensions and breaks of flows that form “images” when they come together.⁹⁶ These images may not be visual or even perceivable, they are signals, gestures, actions, or waves. Language is not negated in this system, it is simply not privileged, operating through and with innumerable other machinic mediations: “a semiotic fragment rubs shoulders with a chemical interaction, an electron crashes into a language ... The plane of consistency is the abolition of all metaphor” (fig. 8).⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 240–241.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 241.

⁹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 69.

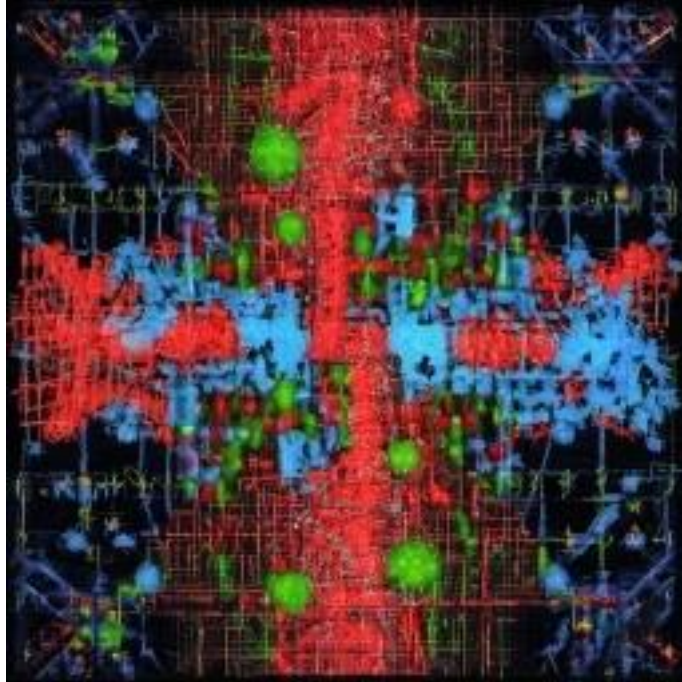


Figure 8: AI-generated diagram based on the above Deleuze and Guattari quote as the text prompt.

Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge Lacan’s discovery of the unconscious that consists of multiple codes. In their interpretation, these heterogeneous chains are made up of asignifying, indifferent signs that do not correspond to their supports—the support is “immaterial to these signs” because their support is the BwO.⁹⁸ They do not follow a system and have the capacity to freely insert themselves into any connective relations or cause breakage. In these chains of nonsigns, fragments from other chains are appropriated, from which they appropriate surplus values of codes. These signs are not discursive, they are there to produce machinic desire or intensities. Deleuze and Guattari describe how it is a “system of shuntings” and a form of recording:

If this constitutes a system of writing, it is a writing inscribed on the very surface of the Real: a strangely polyvocal kind of writing, never a biunivocalized, linearized one; a transcurative system of writing ... writing that ceaselessly composes and decomposes the chains into signs that have nothing that impels them to become signifying.⁹⁹

It is the break-inducing asignifying signs that are most relevant to *Fantasma*. As one side of every object faces the BwO, their organizational structures are disintegrated, initiating

⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

asignifying particles to be distributed as signaleptic matter.¹⁰⁰ Unlike asymbolia, *asignifying signs are not melancholic in themselves*. They become melancholic when they begin to stutter, become mute, and temporarily lose the ability or desire to concatenate and form chains. In disintegrative asignifiace the movement of nonsigns is slow, monotonous, and internalized. Asignifiace often finds itself disintegrative when it becomes the remainder of the scrambled codes in the machinic unconscious. The continual circulation of decoded flows undergoes constant deterritorializations. This process is both productive and antiproduative, but there is nothing productive in disintegrative asignifiace.

The *Fantasma* objects—dried, shriveled up, lumpy, oscillating between exact outlines of geometric casts and cavernous formlessness—refute their symbolic inscriptions. Their material makeup is difficult to identify, and in an attempt to identify or relate to these objects, they become abstracted. Their only productive function is to deterritorialize the *memento mori* motif so as to embody it as a direct processual movement of decay, dispersed on the platform as if it is a diagram or illustration of machines in a scattered constellation on the plane of immanence. Yet even this may be too much of a semiotic, metaphorical projection. Their disintegrative asignifiace overpowers any notion of metaphor; there is no logic and the constructed objects seem to have been made and situated intuitively, improvised, with no plan or regard for the longevity of the materials. Some of the objects consist of mixtures or juxtapositions of incompatible substances, such as plaster or cement combined with plant matter. The things were not made or appropriated with archival intent.

In this incompatibility of materials, the permutations are out of phase with one another and the materials separate and deteriorate according to their own constitutional affordances, causing breaks and molecular fragmentations. Objects such as the geometric forms appear to be more solid in their constitution, although it is impossible to determine through mere observation what their makeup is, how and with what they were cast into shape. The chemical incompatibility of these objects in conjunction with the biochemical instability of the organic materials is what fractures the asignifying semiotic structures. This is a field of debris filled with things that each have their chaotic or unstable internal, withdrawn arrangements of asignifying

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4.

signs. They are broken because their flows are broken, plunging into disintegration on the BwO.

At the point of invasive damage or structural collapse, the objects' internal forces can no longer support the tissues of their fundamental, substantial expression. I propose that they become chemically or molecularly compromised entities, and their decay is self-directed in relative isolation, compliant with the forces and flows surrounding their existence. The cucurbit or the leaves do not refuse the microbes, the fungus, or the bugs. They are deterritorialized and in the process they begin to lose the power to (a)signify. In the relation between content—material form—and expressive semiotic qualities there occur points of nonsigns reaching new levels of deterritorialization, as they “collapse the wall of the signifier, pass through, and continue beyond.”¹⁰¹ It is my contention, however, that in melancholic disintegrative asignifiace, once the barrier of the signifier has crumpled, the nonsigns have difficulty passing through and beyond. They encounter obstacles, such as museum conservators treating the objects to dissuade corrosion, or the protective regulation of moisture levels in the air in the climate-controlled space. The objects are situated to receive as little stimulus as possible.

Kristeva argues that the melancholic “modifications” of signifying bonds renders the bonds “unable to insure ... the autostimulation that is required in order to initiate given responses.”¹⁰² For a machine, this means that it is unable to process external flows of nonsigns as a result of faulty or stagnant inputs. This is what happens in *Fantasma* when the objects are unable to fully submit to the forces of decay in the museum environment. Their situation becomes undeterminable and conflicted.

Nevertheless, the black bile underpinning *memento mori* perpetuates the objects' descent into withdrawal and asignifiant decay through the periodical recurrence of infestation. Because the objects are exposed to air, variations of oxidizing effects can occur. Just as the *Fantasma* objects are not entirely withdrawn, their signifiace is also not entirely disintegrated. Total disintegration of nonsign chains would pertain to an object that is completely withdrawn.

Objects can slowly lose parts of themselves, along with their signifying and asignifying structures. Referring to the lost object of subjective melancholy, Agamben writes: “[n]o longer a

¹⁰¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 242.

¹⁰² Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10.

phantasm and not yet a sign, the unreal object of melancholy introjection opens a space that is neither the hallucinated oneiric scene of the phantasms nor the indifferent world of natural objects.”¹⁰³ One way to interpret this in nonhuman terms is to translate the phantasm of the lost desired object into gaps that are left by lost and disordered nonsigns which have not found a structural assemblage—the particles that a thing sheds in the process of disintegration, or amorphous vaporous expirations. There is no desire or longing for these fragments in the human sense of the word, only wounds or traces that sink to the BwO, that are not substituted by any generative or productive element, unless something foreign takes its place.

Földényi’s interpretation of Freud’s thesis on melancholy is that the lost unknowable object changes the position of all objects surrounding the melancholic, altering what the lost thing had occupied collectively, thus making the loss of melancholy about the disorganization of existence in general.¹⁰⁴ The disintegration of the objects is a collective disorder. *Fantasma* is not only a collection of individuated objects in withdrawal, but a constellation of disordered or dislocated entities. It is a silent disorder, likely not perceivable to the naked eye, where the distanced objects are out of phase with one another and with the viewer, producing varying tempos of disintegration with incompatible asignifying particles.

The gradual deterioration of *Fantasma* and its programmed finitude allows the objects to act out their asignifiant disintegration through the difference of their individual internalized code distortions, exhalations of nonsigns, and the softening of contents and expressions. They begin to lose language and gain asignifiant desiccation. In this machinic asymbolia the objects are “pervaded by the ‘undead’ animation of the death drive, driven to escape the bounds of the symbolic.”¹⁰⁵

There is no “loss” in machine ontology, at least not in the permanent sense, just as Kristeva’s Thing is not really a loss but a stand-in for something beyond signification. There are gaps, holes, breaks, punctures, fractures, but those are just as integral to desiring-production and antiproduction as substances and actualized expressions. What the *Fantasma* objects lose through disintegration creates fissures or perforations that become passageways and thresholds for other flows and

¹⁰³ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 296.

¹⁰⁵ Derek Hook, “The Complex of Melancholia,” *Lacan on Depression and Melancholia* (Routledge: 2022), 115.

objects, even if they are only air, dust, and light, and maybe spores and errant insects.

As the objects decompose, the darkening rivulets of decay seep from the BwO into the structural composition of matter and begin to dissolve molar assemblages into molecular disarray, where the chains of nonsigns become fragile, elusive, and internalized. *Fantasma*'s objects have no particular meaning, they speak the chaos of a dead or dying language both for the viewer and within themselves. *Memento mori* always has a degree of disintegrative asignifiante in it—the death-void permeating chains of nonsigns, generating desiccation, putrefaction, and rot.

1.6 Temporal Indeterminacy

Withdrawal and disintegrative asignifiante both contribute to the temporal indeterminacy of a machine because its capacities for the production of temporality are thwarted by its internal deficiency, asignifying confusion, muteness, or frailty. It can also become victim to the temporalities swirling around it, nudging it further into withdrawal. This reduces the amount of inputs an object receives, or else it is flooded with too many inputs—in either case temporal confusion occupies the object. Földényi repeatedly refers to how the melancholic's conception of being is always attached to finitude and death. The persistent contradictory, simultaneous impulses toward and away from death are definitive of the melancholic experience of time, caught in a paradox between the desire to perish and the threat of mortality—"they partook of eternal death."¹⁰⁶ Because both withdrawal and disintegrative asignifiante are antiproducer effects of the BwO, melancholic machines are intertwined with disorder in their passage to finitude.

Villar Rojas' work expresses a dark kind of *desperatio*—what Agamben refers to as the condition of being "condemned beforehand and the complacent sinking into one's own destruction."¹⁰⁷ Villar Rojas' practice involves processes and experiments that culminate in exhibitions that are deliberately transient. *Fantasma* is temporally indeterminate because it has an uneasy, tangled attachment to temporal scales in relation to the objects' mortality. For

¹⁰⁶ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 4–5.

machines transience means that the scrambled codes, molecular fragments, nonsigns, singularities, multiplicities, and partial objects are caught in a temporal simultaneity of vital persistence hybridized with the downward spiral into zero-intensity. Deleuze and Guattari consider this simultaneity of “hiatuses and ruptures, breakdowns and failures, stalling and short circuits, distances and fragmentations” to lead to the productivity of desiring-machines.¹⁰⁸ But these events of rupture in themselves are antiproducer reactions to any temporal stability. Something can stall indefinitely, or break down beyond recovery. For those durations, the temporality of a machine can become indeterminate.

The *Fantasma* objects follow the temporality of disintegration and faulty energetic transmissions that “destroy movements and bonds” just as they would for subjective experience.¹⁰⁹ Kristeva also writes about “the work of death” which is aligned with a twisted sense of temporality through “the *dissociation of form* itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out.”¹¹⁰ Changes in matter-movement correspond to changes in an object’s temporality. Kristeva argues that the experience of melancholy is caused by “the *psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by external or internal traumas” and that “moods are *inscriptions*, energy disruptions.”¹¹¹ Because energetic flows follow temporal movement, an energetic disruption or dislocation is ultimately a temporal break that will last as long as the energetic disruption continues. *Fantasma* became energetically disrupted upon entering the museum’s desired standards for temporal stabilization. In some cases, an object’s speed was also disrupted both by the infestations and by the treatments of infestations, moving in fits and starts.

The objects in the exhibition occupy the temporality of *memento mori*, as every duration emanating from an object is disturbed and suspended in a becoming of the corporeal path toward finitude. According to Amelia Barikin, the melancholic is in an “anti-presentist condition” and is “a figure outside time.”¹¹² She argues that melancholy does not occupy a linear chronological model of time, but rather lingers alongside spectral pasts, generating closed spaces of inertia or stillness so that alternative chronological orientations become possible. While her focus is mainly

¹⁰⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹¹² Amelia Barikin, “After the End: The Temporality of Melancholia,” *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, ed. Andrea Bubenik (Routledge, 2019), 108.

on the fixation on the past in these spaces of stillness, the nonhuman does not have the capacity to brood on past histories; past mediations influence the present state of an object and such inscriptions do occur in material formations, but those traces do not necessarily persist and the codes can become scrambled or displaced. What is important is that this suspension in time as stillness, or rather slowness, leads to a break in linear chronology; time becomes thick with multitudes of viscous, disturbed or muddled temporalities, inscribed with the past markings of loss or trauma.

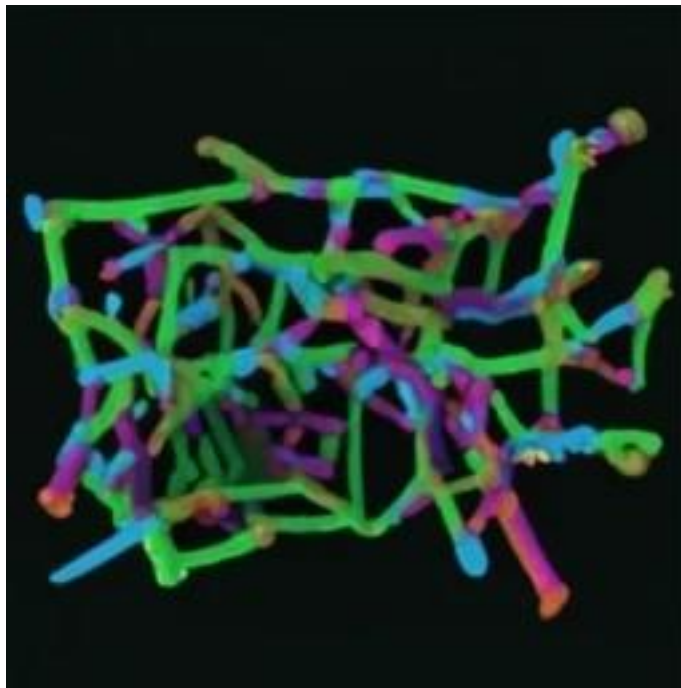


Figure 9: AI-generated diagram based on the below Bryant quote as the text prompt.

This coincides with Bryant’s conception of time, for whom “[t]ime is not smooth and distributed in the same way ... but is rather lumpy, discontinuous, and heterogeneous” (fig. 9).¹¹³ He elaborates that machines are processes that produce their own temporalities. They are spatio-temporal and generate their own temporalities and spatial pathways. “*Every machine has its internal form of temporality and these temporal rhythms differ among themselves.*”¹¹⁴ If a machine is susceptible to melancholy, its means of producing temporality and spatial paths are distorted and can fluctuate,

¹¹³ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 166.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

which is precisely the case with *Fantasma*. Each object produces a different temporality and is temporally indeterminate in its own way; collectively, as a constellation, it assembles a plateau of heterogeneous, disparate coagulations of pauses, accelerations, decelerations, and fluctuations.

Kleinherenbrink describes Deleuze's conception of time in terms of Chronos and Aion, with Chronos referring to time of the always-present wherein there is a successive flow of merging translations in actualized encounters, and Aion being the endless indeterminate expanse of past and future.¹¹⁵ In this sense time is split between the perpetual present of machines' mediated manifestations—the saturnine chronology of time consuming itself—and the chaotic inscription of pasts and futures onto the surface of virtual being. Kleinherenbrink argues that Aion escapes manifested relations as it is “already passed and eternally yet to come” but it cannot be separated from Chronos.¹¹⁶ Aion is the virtual background for the plurality of temporalities produced by machines, and it is the time to which machines ultimately withdraw in complete melancholic disintegration. The process of transience, however, cannot be attributed exclusively to either Chronos or Aion, but to a chaotic concoction of both, providing no determinate horizon. Melancholic transience becomes slow, exceedingly accelerated, or undecided.

Villar Rojas' process follows the melancholic behaviour of “smuggling transience into every beginning, the intangible into everything tangible.”¹¹⁷ In the context of the museum, the objects become temporally indeterminate. Because they produce their own temporalities and rhythms, the museum's obsession for archival preservation becomes a pragmatic obstacle to the intended decomposition of the artefacts. “The self-consuming practice of the artist confronted the museum's traditional perspective of eternity.”¹¹⁸ The speed of atrophy is rerouted to a slower pace, while the obstinate objects, resolved to withdraw and disintegrate, attempt to defy preservation according to their inherent decompositional affordances.

Indeterminate temporality is also driven by the objects' inability to mesh with other machinic entities. A sneaker cannot synchronize with cement, nor can an epoxy figurine harmonize with a lobster claw, nor can any of the objects fully align with the gallery environment. Bryant explains that a machine is “simultaneously a unit and a crowd or herd of

¹¹⁵ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 262–263.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹⁷ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 114.

¹¹⁸ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love.*”

cats,” meaning that because machines make up other machines they always encounter *machinic problems* and never entirely harmonize or reach totality.¹¹⁹ This is the common state of operations in schizophrenic reality because the BwO is always there to ensure that something gets broken. Kleinherenbrink states:

Because *all* physical, historical, chemical, political, linguistic, imaginary, literary, technological, cultural, biological, geological, philosophical, galactic, and subterranean entities have such a body without organs, reality is fundamentally schizophrenic or problematic. Nothing is ever fully integrated into anything else.¹²⁰

Melancholic discord within schizophrenic reality occurs when machines begin to withdraw and their capacity to partially reintegrate or mediate into other machines is inhibited. This occurs when *machinic problems* are amplified, with swelling degrees of obstacles, escalating temporal splits, and increased asignifiant miscomprehensions—driven by the BwO as well as the overwhelming forces of other machines.

This lack of totality means that each of the *Fantasma* objects’ temporalities are combinations of durational fragments of their own making, but with the common denominator that they entered into a space of inertia. Thérèse Lilliegren et al. suggest that the objects’ “ephemeral nature might have changed when entering the museum, from being active, performing, deteriorating objects to more passive artifacts.”¹²¹ It is a kind of acquiescence to the imposed atmospheric events and circumstances, the kind of passivity that eventually inverts into withdrawal.

Kristeva describes how the melancholic’s inability to relate or communicate leads them into “a skewed time sense” where temporality is blocked by the “massive, weighty” *moment* of trauma that eliminates the vision of a temporal horizon.¹²² She ascribes qualities of substance or matter to time—“massive, weighty”—implying that time is attached to physical entities, that the subject is a body responding to a physical impression of a wound. For nonhuman melancholy, this means that disintegrative asignifiante and withdrawal carry an imprint or shadow of some form of damage. This alters the machine’s ability to produce a temporality with a horizon—one that corresponds not to the

¹¹⁹ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 79.

¹²⁰ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 137.

¹²¹ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love*.”

¹²² Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 60.

future or to some kind of distant vision, but to an object's limits and boundaries, to the capacities of its immediate *spatio-temporal mobility*. What Kristeva describes is not a horizon that is out of reach, and not the horizon of death, but the horizon of any subjective vision disappearing, as if temporality becomes a fog or a blurry enclosure moving in slow motion. In this slow-motion state the temporal indeterminacy and progressive deterioration of the *Fantasma* objects is not always perceivable to the naked eye.

The slow passage through decay is even less perceivable, or not at all, in the second-hand observation of the objects in photographic documentation, which is deficient in adequately communicating the objects' presence. The documentation introduces a different kind of temporal indeterminacy, which flattens multitudes of irregular, decelerated, flexible, and blurry temporalities into a haunting of an entirely different kind. It is the temporality of the digital image which has a significantly distanced relationship to the exhibition, mediating the artwork into the symbolic, discursive realm of art historical ephemera. Angela Bartram argues that although "photographic imagery offers others the means to imagine the original from a visual anchor" for ephemeral artworks, it collapses critical distance.¹²³ It also collapses the temporality of the work into a series of fragments or instants that become detached from the work's spatio-temporal being.

Fantasma now only exists as documentation, aside from the objects collected and archived by the museum, and perhaps some items kept in store by the artist.¹²⁴ An altogether other type of temporal heterogeneity of machinic being arises, emerging from the computational gaze of digital cameras and algorithmic optimization in social media and search engine indexing.¹²⁵ It is here that the past comes to melancholically haunt the present, or rather it ceases to be the past, becoming transformed into an indeterminate present of the plurality of data—an inscribed instance with the ability to reemerge anytime, anywhere, with the correct input. François Bonnet proposes the concept of a *hyperpresent* that denies or obscures our vision of mortality through the onslaught of digital

¹²³ Angela Bartram, "Unsatisfactory Devices: Legacy and the Undocumentable in Art," *Critical Distance in Documentary Media*, ed. Gerda Cammaer, Blake Fitzpatrick, and Bruno Lessard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 110.

¹²⁴ Even the objects that were collected by the Moderna Museet are periodically photographed and 3D scanned to document the progress of deterioration. Thérèse Lilliegren et al., "*Pieces of the People We Love*."

¹²⁵ A more comprehensive definition of the computational gaze is forthcoming in Chapter 3.

immediacy: “the instantaneisation of the present goes hand in hand with a will to total recall, where everything that happens has to leave a memory ... to be infinitely resurrected. ... absorb the past and digest it into the present.”¹²⁶

The documentation is coded and indexed for immediate recollection. The digital mediation of the exhibition is its haunting, its ghost as multitudes of files with indexed metadata. They can occupy multiple places simultaneously—incorporeal machine iterations that can have more than one corporeal body. For Bonnet, immediacy is desired in conjunction with the scopic drive, with images standing in for the instantaneous present. The *hyperpresent* is caught in the webs of data flows, postponing finitude through the ‘projection-being’ of anaesthetized synchronicity caused by, and causing, information overload, so that *memento mori* is caught in repetitions that are no longer based on linear chronology.



¹²⁶ François Bonnet, *After Death*, trans. Amy Ireland and Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2020), 48.



Figures 10 & 11: Two Instagram posts documenting the *Fantasma* exhibition.
Adrián Villar Rojas, *Fantasma* (2015), installation view.

An Instagram search leads to several documentation photos of the exhibition (fig. 10 & 11). These examples of documentation from visitors to the exhibition are temporally indeterminate as samples of the hyperpresent. Corporeally, the images are pixel-fields expressive of encoded semblance from a nonhuman point of view—the lens of a computational eye. Instagram has compressed the images during upload, which can also be interpreted as a compressed instance of “dead time” that furthers the distance between the exhibition and the documentation. The images are immortalized but also fragile, as they can be deleted into oblivion. The temporalities of digital entities are just as susceptible to dangerous or potentially lethal encounters as any other objects.

The images are incorporeal machines relying on the corporeality of digital objects and radio waves to subsist in the zombified temporality of algorithmic simulacra. The comments and likes below the posts are residues of hyperpresent feedback, as if the images had been instantly consumed and put aside, now lurking in the dark interiorities of a server, until an instance arises when the keywords are input into Instagram’s search field. Bonnet states that this kind of phenomena are a common symptom of the hyperpresent. “The more rapidly everything moves, the more it freezes into indistinction. ... the ‘killing’ of time ... is less a withdrawal of the real than a withdrawal of

becoming ... death then retreats. It becomes an ungraspable horizon."¹²⁷ This indistinction of moments is symptomatic of the temporal indeterminacy of the hyperpresent, extending into the indeterminate future horizon where potentialities or contingencies for an object follow the prospect of a continuous dead time. *Memento mori* becomes the present. The past in this kind of present does not exist, except as archived, quasi-present digital objects waiting for recall. Much like the idea of the hyperpresent, Nick Land presents a vision of digitality where artificial death (a-death) is a continuous duration. For Land, cyberspace is a seamless extension of machinic reality.

Haunting a-life is a-death, the desolated technoplane of climaxed digitalization process ... The apprehension of death as time-in-itself = intensive continuum degree-o ... It is nominated variously: substance, pure apperception, death-drive, body without organs, cyberspace matrix.¹²⁸

While this extends to cybernetics as a whole, it situates the Instagram fragments cited above as particles in the matrix of this perpetual synthetic dead time. It is questionable whether death truly retreats as Bonnet has suggested because dead time requires continual, repetitive or relived death, and its horizon becomes a distortion in this process—a flattened indeterminate immediacy. The copied and artefacted horizon of the installation in the documented *Fantasma* images stands in as a metaphor for this temporal twist. The backlit platform supports the outlines of ambiguous objects, reduced to luminous shapes of colour. The images are at once indefinitely available for recall through search engines, downloading, copying, uploading, and capable of being removed or deleted. The instant recall that Bonnet proposes is not as unshakeable as he describes—digitality can be fragile and it too has BwOs.

Thus *Fantasma* has taken on two kinds of indeterminate temporalities. The first pertains to the physical, material disintegration that can fluctuate in speed but is fixated on the passage to the fuzzy horizon of finitude. The second pertains to *Fantasma*'s afterlife as digital documentation disseminated online, temporally indeterminate in the artificial dead time of the hyperpresent.

In that regard, having established how temporal indeterminacy proliferates through the *Fantasma* project, the following section investigates the deteriorating objects' slowness as a form of

¹²⁷ Bonnet, *After Death*, 43.

¹²⁸ Nick Land, "Cybergothic," *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2012), 369.

melancholic, corporeal retardation.

1.7 Corpo-Motor Retardation

Földényi describes how melancholics wish to escape their identity, but finding no means of escape the melancholic “petrifies inwardly” as if the body is being filled with a void and, simultaneously, with heaviness and immobility.¹²⁹ Burton likewise on many occasions refers to heaviness and dullness among the main symptoms of melancholy. He also suggested idleness as one of the many causes of melancholy as it incites a flood of corrupt thoughts, a turning inward, and being “weary, sickly still.”¹³⁰ In psychoanalysis, these are symptoms of psychomotor retardation: slow obstructed speech patterns, decelerated movement, heaviness, fatigue. Kristeva describes “an absolute, mineral, astral numbness” associated with a sense of embodied death and “a muddled representation of some implacable helplessness. The reality and fiction of death’s being. Cadaverization and artifice. An absolute impotence.”¹³¹ It is as if something infects the body with slow paralysis, a death-fixated stupor, inertia.

In translating psychomotor retardation’s symptoms into the nonhuman, I would like to employ a different term. This is because many nonhuman machines do not have a psyche, nor a mind-body symbiosis to negotiate. I will use *corpo-motor retardation* as the nonhuman parallel to this depressive state. According to psychoanalysis, psychomotor retardation is a form of withdrawal that comes from a defense response against “a dead-end situation and unavoidable shocks.”¹³² For nonhuman melancholy, this would be the *deceleration* of a machine’s or an assemblage’s speed and rhythm of being. In corpo-motor retardation, the deceleration is not so much an effort for self-preservation, but a passive involuntary response to gravitationally powerful external stimuli associated with temporal indeterminacy, withdrawal, and slow receptivity of inputs.

The *Fantasma* artefacts were and are subjected to external stimulus and containment that becomes overwhelming for the objects. For the entire duration of the exhibition, lasting almost

¹²⁹ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 76.

¹³⁰ Burton, *Burton on Melancholy*, 27.

¹³¹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 72–73.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 34.

seven months, the objects were monitored on a daily basis by conservators. At some points the museum had to manage “minor infestations” by applying heat to the objects.¹³³ That the infestations, which would intensify deterioration, were not permitted suggests that the afflicted objects were nudged into deceleration.

One could claim that fundamental, defining factors of the objects’ existence changed when they became museum artifacts in the *Fantasma* context, and that this continues into their future life at Moderna Museet, thus making conservation care a part of their natural change.¹³⁴

This “conservation care” is in actuality a brutal attack on the objects’ capacity to melancholically withdraw and perish according to their own temporalities and corporeal affordances. Having become institutionalized, they are caught in conservational deterritorializations and restratifications that break their temporalities into a slow continuum of clinical life support. This applies especially to the objects that were acquired by Moderna Museet after the exhibition.

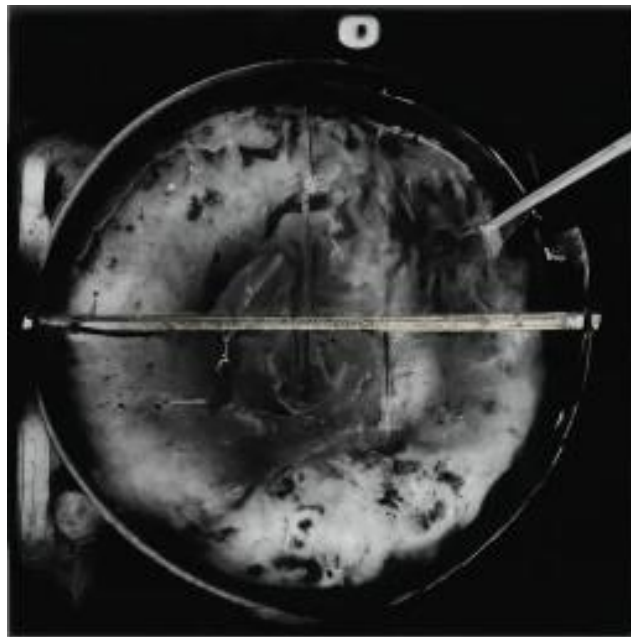


Figure 12: AI-generated diagram using “decelerated, demagnetized object” as the text prompt.

¹³³ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love.*”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

A conflict was forged between the museum's conservational methods and the artefacts' designed disintegration. The objects' own projections of deterritorializations against those inflicted by the institution are temporally disrupted into fluctuating cycles of putrefaction that are decelerated by the artifice and congestion of conservational systems. They enter into a state that Agamben refers to as *torpor*—"the obtuse and somnolent stupor."¹³⁵ Corpo-motor retardation is a process of lethargic *acedia* caused by the retreat from threats of hyper-stratifications that are powerfully incompatible with the machinic constitution of the decelerated, demagnetized object (fig. 12).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, strata "give form to matters" and capture singularities and intensities into rigid systems through coding and territorialization.¹³⁶ As a museum institution, Moderna Museet is an assemblage that enforces stratification upon every artefact or art object that enters the premises—the territory—of the museum. *Fantasma* seeks to ultimately escape stratification. The BwO maintains the resistance to organization and fuels the objects' necessity to disintegrate. Deleuze and Guattari state that "unformed matter, anorganic life, nonhuman becoming" is "chaos pure and simple" and that attempts to destratify can have disastrous consequences:

Every undertaking of destratification . . . must therefore observe concrete rules of extreme caution: a too-sudden destratification may be suicidal, or turn cancerous . . . it will sometimes end in chaos, the void and destruction, and sometimes lock us back into the strata, which become more rigid still, losing their degrees of diversity, differentiation, and mobility.¹³⁷

What the *Fantasma* artefacts seek is self-destruction, the complete withdrawal on the BwO, and to disarticulate the forms of their bodies in chaos. Yet in conservation they are captured and locked into the strata. As a result, they lose the ability to destratify themselves through decay-positive, compatible mediations with disintegrative machinic agents (e.g. mold, moisture). As Kristeva describes, for melancholics "[t]he rhythm of overall behavior is shattered, there is neither time nor place for acts and sequences to be carried out."¹³⁸ The objects helplessly lose

¹³⁵ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 5.

¹³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 40.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 503.

¹³⁸ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 34.

their inner mobility and operate through melancholic flows of inertia and postponement.

Nonhuman inertia is paradoxical in its motor and temporal movement. According to Eleanor Kaufman, inertia “might appear to be going somewhere . . . while at the same time quietly asserting itself in its active inaction.”¹³⁹ The *Fantasma* objects are transiently inert in this manner. “Active inaction” is not a binary contradiction but a slow path of decomposition, with molecular processes and exchanges of partial objects situated in the fields between the virtual and the actual. The circuitous degrees between action and inaction spiral through gradients between vitality and finitude, between presence and absence.¹⁴⁰ Kaufman notes that it is a circular *stuckness* that has “a mobility or affirmation or becoming,” however this is not the kind of mobility that is lost in stratification but the movement of corpo-motor retardation.¹⁴¹ This form of temporal indeterminacy, or atemporal time, is an effect of stratified inertia.

There arises confusion between the machine’s temporal signature of decay and the temporalities of its surroundings. Reza Negerestani explains that decay is productive through its subtractive displacement of particles.¹⁴² It *builds* dissipation and deforms organizational limits.¹⁴³ The subtractive process of decay requires that the thing sheds itself of molecular formations, particles, partial objects, intensities, and flows. In other words, the *Fantasma* artefacts exhale emissions of their matter-movement, even if the movement is a decelerated one. Viewed as a contamination threat—the threat of unhinged devastation in a sterile environment—the museum stratifies the decomposition process by enclosing the objects in transparent containers, while further conservational tactics are also in the works: “the possibility of adding adsorbents to the storage

¹³⁹ Eleanor Kaufman, “Midnight, or the Inertia of Being,” *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 153.

¹⁴⁰ Kaufman extends the concept of inertia to Maurice Blanchot’s idea of “Midnight,” which is an intangible marker of continual, circular becoming as an “absent presence” where presence is the actualization of this circular movement of inertia’s becoming. Kaufman, “Midnight, or the Inertia of Being,” 156.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴² Lucretius presents a similar notion of decay. “We see that everything / Diminishes, and through the long lapse of time / We note that all things seem to melt away / As years and age withdraw them from our sight. / And yet the sum of things stays unimpaired. / This is because when particles are shed / from a thing they diminish it as they leave it, / And then increase the object that they come to.” Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Ronald Melville (Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.

¹⁴³ “[D]ecay as a building process renegotiates—or simply *twists*—the loci for the effectuation of architecture, exteriorization and binding death.” Negerestani, “Undercover Softness,” 388.

system in order to mitigate emissions has been considered, with activated charcoal likely being the best suited.”¹⁴⁴ Absorbents, air, light, and the containers are the only machinic entities that the artefacts are permitted to mediate with. Inside these constraints, the objects become dimmer, slower, and more rigid, like the tempo of melancholic expression where “speech delivery is slow, silences are long and frequent, rhythms slacken, intonations become monotonous.”¹⁴⁵

Melancholic subjects are “imprisoned in time ... disengaged from the other, they are amnesiacs reenacting the mythic figure of Sisyphus.”¹⁴⁶ Past relational bonds are severed or reduced, making corpo-motor retardation a manifestation of withdrawal that is not a withdrawal into virtuality but an actualized withdrawal, where the partial objects of mediational processes become stagnant and listless, where difference is stifled with difficulty and the imposing machinic forces maintain their overwhelming hierarchical proximity through stratification and coding. The objects’ existence is locked in a desperate fixed movement of artificial paralysis against the weight of imposed pressures from stratifying machines.

Fantasma, especially in its severed archived state, is thwarted in the confines of the museum’s conservational project. The objects become not things whose unrestrained disintegration is meant to be witnessed, but entities whose decomposition is managed, monitored, and measured. The objects become overcoded as their disintegrative operations are distorted into a dry, heavy spatio-temporal rhythm. Bryant argues that machines produce gravitational fields that emit spatio-temporal paths for the movement of other machines, so that “machines become *captured* in the *orbit* of other machines. Sometimes this gravitation is *symmetrical*, while at other times it is *asymmetrical*.”¹⁴⁷ Corpo-motor retardation for *Fantasma* is a case of *asymmetrical* gravitation, with the artefacts caught in the operational orbit of conservation management, with little reciprocity of intensities. Their rate of speed is weighted to an external body. It becomes a kind of temporal drowning, a symptom of machinic subjugation or abatement, where inertia manifests itself through inhibition of matter-movement.

Objects in this state are positioned in a struggle or conflict between the BwO’s and the

¹⁴⁴ Thérèse Lilliegren et al., “*Pieces of the People We Love*.”

¹⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 34.

¹⁴⁶ Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, xvi.

¹⁴⁷ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 196.

stratifying bodies attempting to hold it at bay:

Every coupling of machines, every production of a machine, every sound of a machine running, becomes unbearable to the body without organs. Beneath its organs it senses there are larvae and loathsome worms, and a God at work messing it all up or strangling it by organizing it. ... In order to resist organ-machines, the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as a barrier. ... it sets up a counterflow of amorphous, undifferentiated fluid.¹⁴⁸

The BwO's emission of this "amorphous, undifferentiated" black bile ensures that objects do not succumb to the immobilization of total organization or ordered stasis, so that they can continue to disintegrate and disengage from translations that result in stratification, and maintain their spatio-temporal paths of decay. However, the conflict is never resolved, and this struggle between the BwO and stratification can alter a machine's rates of production and antiproduction, causing either a fog of temporal indeterminacy or a leaden deceleration of corpo-motor retardation. The archived objects of *Fantasma* are suspended in this machinic discordance indefinitely, caught in the active inaction of inertia, waiting for their demise inside protective shields.

1.8 *Fantasma* and *Memento Mori*

Fantasma situates itself as a manifestation of *memento mori* on two levels, in its designed and embodied transience. Firstly it functions as a determined or contrived symbolic motif on the plane of expression (qualities, regimes of signs)—a scattered arrangement of temporary, decomposing objects on a flat surface recalls the traditional arrangement of still life, yet it is amplified to theatrical proportions as a non-pictorial installation of things. It represents *memento mori* as an identified conception of linear timelines. Secondly, the objects are machinic embodiments of nonlinear fragile impermanence, which is the *memento mori* of nonhuman melancholy.

The objects and structures of the exhibition were invested with *memento mori* from the outset, with no consideration for longevity in the combination of materials. They are thus endowed with a higher dosage of zero intensity than art produced for preservation and

¹⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 9.

endurance. This is a remix of temporalities and nonsigns in a constellation of diverse materials infused with zero intensity. The presence of *memento mori* in machinic being can be recognized in Deleuze and Guattari's comments on death and zero intensity:

The experience of death is the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming ... It is in the very nature of every intensity to invest within itself the zero intensity starting from which it is produced, in one moment, as that which grows or diminishes according to an infinity of degrees.¹⁴⁹

This constant of death in the schizophrenic reality of nonhuman entities means that objects' actualized and virtual presence, and their temporalities, are deeply dependent on the spectral counterpart of zero intensity even in their most productive states.

Melancholy in an object, such as the things gathered for *Fantasma*, arises when antiproduction infiltrates its body with an exceedingly effluent dosage of black bile, generating symptoms of processual withdrawal, disintegrative asignificance, temporal indeterminacy, or corpo-motor retardation. *Fantasma* is a case of nonhuman entities being thanatropically haunted by the BwO, which placed itself in opposition to institutional demands of conservation. While all multiplicities are symbiotic—"becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy"—this symbiosis can be interrupted, stunted, or accelerated through deterritorializations, stratifications, and overcoding.¹⁵⁰ In melancholy symbiosis is 'stuck in the mud', disrupted, punctured with withdrawal and irrevocable disintegration. As in the case of *Fantasma*, mediational relations become severed, reduced, inhibited, or decelerated.

Memento mori cannot be thought of as decomposition itself, nor is it the same as the incongruity of melancholy. It is the nocturnal dimension or distance between any given machine and zero intensity. It darkens and inscribes machines' mediational comprehensions of temporalities with antiproducer potential, softening nonlinear pathways, unsettling horizons. I have outlined the machinic behaviours or traits of nonhuman melancholy, which depends on the BwO to supply the object with decompositional affects. Black bile, as the fluidity of zero

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 330.

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 250.

intensity, traverses across machines, channeling itself through the death drive, inciting melancholy, while rousing the shadowy horizons of *memento mori*.

Melancholy is not decomposition itself. Nor can it be equated with the death drive. The constellation of melancholy in machinic being is an effect of the death drive's collision with productive, stratifying forces. In the following chapter I will investigate processes of decay and disintegration and how this collision with stratification plays out in the context of temporally, spatially, and materially indeterminate actualization of capitalism.

Chapter 2

Thanatropic Decay: Fragmentation and Deceleration

And what is this death that always rises from within, but that must arrive from without—and that, in the case of capitalism, rises with all the more power as one still fails to see exactly what this outside is that will cause it to arrive?¹⁵¹

2.1 The Maze, *Into the Hollow*

Decay is not only a state of putrefaction succeeding a life, but a perpetual state of machinic being, a movement of darkening into cosmic extinction. This living putrefaction is the animated torpor of the death drive. What Nick Land asserts in the following describes the death drive's melancholic meandering restlessness that refuses to relinquish vitality while shuffling forth toward the regressive zero:

Life is ejected from the energy-blank and smeared as a crust upon chaotic zero, a mould upon death. This crust is also a maze—a complex exit back to the energy base-line—and the complexity of the maze is life trying to escape from out of itself, being nothing but escape from itself, from which it tries to escape: maze-wanderer. . . . life is itself the maze of its route to death; a tangle of mazing [Umwege] which trace a unilateral deviation from blank.¹⁵²

The death drive gets more complex when the vision of the “maze” is expanded to encompass the life of late capitalism. Capitalism is a machinic being with an internal factory of melancholic insecurities that arise from incessant flows of production and antiproduction. I am going to intersect Deleuze and Guattari's machinic conception of capitalism's reliance on instability with Reza Negarestani's ideas of thanatropic regression (i.e. death drive) and how melancholic inertia accumulates toward the cosmic horizon. I will investigate this through Julian Charrière's 2016 exhibition presented at Dittrich & Schlechtriem (Berlin), *Into the Hollow* (fig. 13).

¹⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 262.

¹⁵² Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (Routledge, 1992), 32–33.



Figure 13: Julian Charrière, *Into the Hollow* (2016) installation view at Dittrich & Schlechtriem (Berlin).

Charrière delves into the spirals of designed digital device obsolescence through the deep time of geological crystallization. The sculptures are assemblage fragments of congealed “post-digital geological strata”—obscure conglomerates of artificial molten lava and discarded digital devices.¹⁵³ “Charrière has melted, transmuted and amalgamated expired technological gadgets (smartphones, notebooks, hard drives etc.), including their stored memory, within molten rock.”¹⁵⁴ His process swerves between various levels of consumptive late capitalism while augmenting the materials’ machinic temporality through a geochemical intervention to produce heavy, earthbound, mute objects of melancholic corpo-motor retardation. The individual sculptures are appropriately

¹⁵³ Julian Charrière, “Fossilising the Future,” *Sleek Magazine*, interview by Penny Victoria Rafferty, April 26, 2016, <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/into-the-hollow-how-does-one-fossilise-their-iphone-6/>.

¹⁵⁴ *Julian Charrière Into the Hollow*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, press release, 2016, https://www.artforum.com/uploads/guide.003/id22503/press_release.pdf.

titled *Metamorphism*. The process of production melds the death drive into an accelerated viscosity that compresses the geological speed of sedimentation into congealed, exhausted, hybrid fragments of mineral decay.



Figure 14: Julian Charrière, *Metamorphism XIV* (2016).

In the exhibition catalogue essay, Paul Feigelfeld describes how Charrière “took information technologies and magma to Thyssen-Krupp’s blast furnaces to smelt them into data rocks that stage an utterly new ... geology of technologies between the Congo Basin’s coltan mines and the NSA’s data mining.”¹⁵⁵ It is a process of collision, translation, bonding, and depletion that is inevitably legible within the orbit of global extraction capitalism even as the project attempts to subvert those rhythms through interruption, antiproduction, and detours of flows.

2.2 Capitalism Rot and Thanatropic Regression

¹⁵⁵ Paul Feigelfeld, “Into the Hollow,” *Julian Charrière: Into the Hollow*, trans. Gerrit Jackson, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, 2016.

Mark Fisher describes neoliberal capitalism as “a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.”¹⁵⁶ It is an immense inhuman organism, a *hyperobject*.¹⁵⁷ Fisher notes that this requires constant adaptation to instability and precarity. This could be recognized to be established within what Deleuze calls new control societies. Deleuze argues that systems of enclosure no longer apply in the same way as in disciplinary societies of the early 20th century, giving way to societies of control that operate through continuous dispersive networks, where the corporation has replaced the factory and the individual is constantly involved in incomplete adaptation to continuous deformation of enclosures.¹⁵⁸ This constant deformation of limits is integral to Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalytic conception of capitalism.¹⁵⁹

In this chapter, I will first outline the basic principles of thanatropic regression, *necrocracy*, and how they are related to capitalism’s antiproduktive instability. Following that, I will explore how Charrière’s sculptures came into being and how they are infused with thanatropic capital as assemblages of materials. More immanently, the sculptures primarily rely on capitalism’s resources (specifically, ore, digital waste, blast furnace facilities) that are operated upon through deterritorializations and reterritorializations of terrestrial matter, networked with extractive practices of deep mining, manufacturing, consumerism, etc. As Feigelfeld notes, “Charrière’s information

¹⁵⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 6.

¹⁵⁷ According to Timothy Morton, hyperobjects are objects that are enormously distributed and cannot be comprehended at once. They are manifested through qualities of viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity. Viscosity is the objects’ own temporal viscosity or production of time. Nonlocality refers to blurred boundaries. The objects’ fluctuating intersections in space-time is temporal undulation, and phasing is when objects *translate* or pass through each other; for hyperobjects this means leaving indexical signs or readable fragments. In this context causality happens through interobjectivity, or translation in the *mesh*—the mesh is both the interconnectedness of objects and the losses that occur in translation. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁵⁸ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” trans. Martin Joughin, *October* 29, (1992): 3–7.

¹⁵⁹ These enclosures do not only pertain to subjects, but to all entities in the capture of capitalism, to the extent that a question can be put forth whether capitalism, with its all-consuming gravitational pull, might be a kind of *black hole* in Bryant’s understanding of gravitational objects—bending space-time, swallowing up all objects and processes it encounters. However intensively powerful this black hole is, its operations rely on instability and the constant affirmation of antiproduction toward the BwO instilled by the death drive. See: Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 208.

inferno ... is not an event but a state of being, permanent, distributed, veining the planet as the pits where rare earths are mined and the infrastructures they sustain.”¹⁶⁰

Following Deleuze and Guattari, I argue that the death drive does not only pertain to biological organisms, but to all entities, including the minerals in Charrière’s work and metamorphosing hyperobjects like capitalism.¹⁶¹ Because the inorganic does not expire and putrefy as organisms do, their thanatropic regression should be considered to be synonymous with decay; in other words, it is not one stage (organic life) followed by the other (death) but a spectrum of disintegration, moving away from a solid or functioning structure. The death drive is the organization of shifting mediations between machines that defines their energetic economy, imbricated with productive becomings acting as mobilizing accomplices. Deleuze and Guattari have established that due to the virtuality of the unconscious, the death drive does not only apply to living organisms as described by Freud, but to all machinic entities, including capitalism and all its constituents.¹⁶²

They propose that “the death instinct celebrates the wedding of psychoanalysis and capitalism” as capitalism absorbs the death drive in its unconscious and the diffusion of death surges through all the investments of production and antiproduction, which have become indistinguishable under the full body of capital: “diffuse, immanent death is the condition formed by the signifier in capitalism, the empty locus that is everywhere displaced in order to block the schizophrenic escapes and place restraints on the flights.”¹⁶³ According to schizoanalysis, the death drive inscribes libidinal events in economic and political organizations that are not ideological but “beneath” ideology.¹⁶⁴ Negarestani also affirms that “it is the death-drive that transcendentally and from within universalizes capital as the all-encompassing capitalism.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Feigelfeld, “Into the Hollow.”

¹⁶¹ Tristan Garcia argues that vitalism “accents the importance of structural arrangement and applies to inanimate material as well as to life” and is related to the “irreducibility of a material level of organization to a microlevel.” See: Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object*, trans. Mark Allen Ohm and Jon Cogburn (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 193.

¹⁶² Negarestani also situates inorganic entities in the time of thanatropic regression: “Just as the organic interiority is deserted on behalf of the inorganic, the inorganic materials as conditions of embodiment are deserted on behalf of an unbound cosmic exteriority where even the elementary fabric of matter is an index of interiorization and must be undone.” Reza Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy,” *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (re.press, 2011), 189.

¹⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 335.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁶⁵ Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman,” 187.

For schizophrenic capitalism, capital itself is the BwO; while it has productive and reproductive tendencies, it also has powerful unconscious melancholic investments in putrefaction: “[capital] produces surplus value, just as the body without organs reproduces itself, puts forth shoots, and branches out to the farthest corners of the universe.”¹⁶⁶ The BwO of capital is ascribed a global presence, an “everywhere” that resonates with Land’s and Negarestani’s conceptions of capitalism being a planetary singularity bound up with its participant resources. For Negarestani, capitalism follows the trajectory of slow, cosmic collapse. This trajectory is the path of the emancipation of capitalism—by this he is not referring to freedom or release in the interest of humans. Capitalism is only emancipative in the sense of terrestrial disintegration where “the inorganic gains a dissipative or loosening tendency” facing the cosmos.¹⁶⁷

Negarestani interprets thanatropic regression by breaking it into three interdependent aspects—“a speculative daemon with a tri-lobed head.”¹⁶⁸ The first concerns the unstoppable internal energetic drive toward the “precursor exteriority” of inertia: “thanatropic regression aims toward a death whose reality can neither be indexed as a past state ... nor a future point ... *Thanatropic regression harbours the disenchanting truth of extinction as an anterior posteriority.*”¹⁶⁹ Being temporally inclined toward this prior anticipation of uncertain finitude, thanatropic regression shows itself to be a melancholically unspecified temporality that is always caught in the presence of darkened pasts and prospects of cosmic extinction. As will become clear, this anterior posteriority is crucial to the manifestation of *Into the Hollow*’s image of deep time.

Second, there is a “praxis of dissipation” which refers to life being “an inflection of death” determined by the entity’s conservative economic/energetic structure that opens “*the possibility of political intervention and economic participation.*”¹⁷⁰ Without this investment on the part of its constituents, capitalism would have no metabolism, no bodies to populate its antiproduction and desiring-production. Through this second aspect, Charrière’s *Metamorphism* sculptures can be interpreted to be machinic products that have unfolded under the “inflection of death” to be structurally open to mediation or machinic comprehension within the capitalist axiomatic. However,

¹⁶⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 10.

¹⁶⁷ Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman,” 188.

¹⁶⁸ The reference to the “daemon” refers to Freud’s use of the word in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, positioning instinct as a dark demonic possessive force. *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

as I will discuss later, they are not so structurally open to material intervention, due to the impenetrability of mineral solidification.

The final aspect that Negarestani focuses on is the “dictatorial tendency of affordance,” meaning that an entity can only release itself into necrotic demise according to its economic affordances.¹⁷¹ This aspect is dictatorial because there is no escape or no self-imposed alteration or detour that can overcome the internal flux of dissipation. It is through this third aspect that Negarestani brings forth the term *necrocracy*.

The path of thanatropic regression can only proceed through the limits of an entity’s capabilities. Necrocracy dictates the economic affordance of an entity’s *path* to dissipation. The *Metamorphisms* can only fragment and dissipate according to the chemical bonds of the minerals and the way these bonds are capable of disintegrating over time. Being imbricated in capitalism, these machinic fragmentations are also dictated by its economic affordances. In necrocracy, there is no division between the entity’s investment in capitalism and capitalism itself, as entities inevitably become participants, or organs, bound up into the “dictatorial tendency of affordance” of capitalism’s organism. Negarestani explains that necrocracy is “the result of full subordination to death.”¹⁷² This subordination is similar to Kristeva’s description in reference to melancholic disintegration as a schizoid split: the death drive is incompatible with “sequentiality and integration” (economic affordance) while disintegration and fragmentation are directed by a subordination to the death drive.¹⁷³ The claim that there is no distinction between capitalism and its constituents becomes questionable if, for example, the *Metamorphism* minerals outlast the disintegration of capitalism and become nothing but fragments dissipating at the rate of geological deep time.

To further articulate Charrière’s project of displacement, I will first outline thanatropic regression and its connections to fragmented displacements within capitalism itself. For Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism has interior limits that define its paths of production, growth, and depletion, but these limits continually thwart and unsettle the system’s search for equilibrium. Capitalism’s axiomatic functions immanently, and as it seemingly provokes the utmost limits of all resources, it is only capable of confronting its own limits—“the periodic depreciation of existing capital”—which

¹⁷¹ This refers to the limits of vital organization, which include the body as well as how it is able to disintegrate in its environmental constraints. *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁷³ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 18–19.

are resisted or displaced in the construction of new profits.¹⁷⁴ Capitalism is a constant process of capture and exhaustion. The further its limits deterritorialize the planet, the more condensed its reflexive paradox and the more expansive its tendency toward the BwO. The limits are never stable and this instability of total control is the very function that allows capitalism to persist. It is the kind of paradox inherent to melancholic incoherence: the continual struggle between vital presence and the inevitability of frailty and finitude, causing phases of restlessness and withdrawal.

These melancholic aspects are relational mediations of decay in thanatropic regression. For Negarestani, decay “builds a nested maze of interiorities whereby all interiorized horizons or formations are exteriorized in unimaginably twisted ways” that are unstable, much like the interior limits of capitalism.¹⁷⁵ Decay as antiproduction is imbricated with production, and has a “line of exteriorization” with generated “distributed differential fields” that bind exteriority with interiority.¹⁷⁶ Capitalism’s productive putrefaction expands through this binding of exterior/interior fields through deterritorializations and reterritorializations that unsettle its limits.

Deterritorialization consists of motions of escape that are instantly reterritorialized only to become deterritorialized again. Deterritorialization is absolute; it is an operation integral to thanatropic regression because it continually smuggles antiproduction and the zero of the BwO into production. “It makes the absolute ... something totalizing that overcodes the earth and then conjugates lines of flight in order to stop them, destroy them—rather than connecting them in order to create the earth ... that is why it belongs to the Cosmos.”¹⁷⁷ This cosmic horizon, according to Negarestani, is the “assimilation of all planetary systems, forms of life and vectors of thought by the mimetic flow of Capital.”¹⁷⁸ It is a “mortuary axiomatic” of decoding.¹⁷⁹

Capitalism is an ever-mutating body punctuated with melancholic circuits and endowed with innumerable tentacles that appropriate more and more capital through exhaustible resources—labour,

¹⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 463.

¹⁷⁵ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 384–385.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 397.

¹⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 509.

¹⁷⁸ Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman,” 186.

¹⁷⁹ “At the same time that death is decoded, it loses its relationship with a model and an experience, and becomes an instinct; that is, it effuses in the immanent system where each act of production is inextricably linked to the process of antiproduction as capital. There where the codes are undone, the death instinct lays hold of the repressive apparatus and begins to direct the circulation of the libido.” Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 337.

leisure, minerals, oil, data, etc. Land states that “[c]apital attains its own ‘angular momentum’, perpetuating a run-away whirlwind of dissolution” toward virtual zero.¹⁸⁰ It strives to organize all of its energetic molecular investments, feeding the eventuality of a dissipative implosion through self-inflicted absolute deterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari propose that capitalism’s axiomatic replaces abstract (immanent) code for currency and moves ever further into the deterritorialization of the earth. Decoding brings the whole apparatus closer to the BwO.¹⁸¹ The deterritorialized field is self-imposed and self-destructive, driven forward and inward through a compulsive system of obsessive displacements. There is a virtual tendency that glides through dispersed and frenzied productive operations; but those operations frequently turn melancholic, counterproductive, exhausted, fragmented, withdrawn, or repetitive even if this is concomitant with, or situated within, accelerated expansions. Deleuze and Guattari explain this simultaneity of production and tendency toward the BwO that is intertwined with thanatropic regression:

[E]verywhere [capitalism] mixes antiproduction with the productive forces in the immanent reproduction of its own always widened limits (the axiomatic). The death enterprise is one of the principal and specific forms of the absorption of surplus value in capitalism.¹⁸²

The internal limits in capitalism are continually rearranged, but always within its “dictatorial tendency of affordance.” The internal instability caused by necrocracy allows the organism of capitalism to have these antiproducer surges of melancholic fragmentation and withdrawal.

The tendency's only limit is internal, and it is continually going beyond it, but by displacing this limit—that is, by reconstituting it, by rediscovering it as an internal limit to be surpassed again by means of a displacement; thus the continuity of the capitalist process engenders itself in this break of a break that is always displaced, in this unity of the schiz and the flow.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 80.

¹⁸¹ “Capitalism tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make it a body without organs and unleash the flows of desire on this body as a deterritorialized field.” Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 33.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁸³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “The Civilized Capitalist Machine,” *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2014), 149.

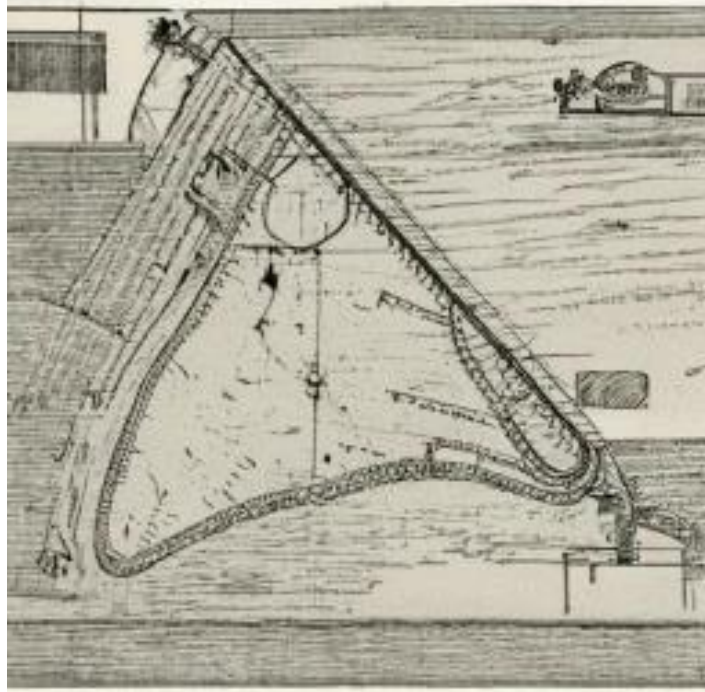


Figure 15: AI-generated diagram using the above Deleuze and Guattari quote as the text prompt.

The *Metamorphism* sculptures are both virtual and actual breaks of breaks in the production of artificial congealed hybrid lava fragments, where the molecular order of material bonds has been liquefied and split into innumerable fractures. It came into being only because necrocracy afforded it the means to do so. Before the transformed matter of artificial lava and digital waste becomes rigid, inside the lava flow, the capital value of Charrière's materials is liquidated, decommissioned, banished to zero. For the duration of the fusion, the materials become futile and purposeless. This applies to stone, the devices, and also to the data inscribed in the devices. As an example of capitalism's injection of antiproduction into its own system, I will explore the issue of e-waste and designed obsolescence of digital devices.

2.3 Obsolescence as Effectuation of Decay

Charrière's project appropriates digital debris for its subsequent artificial and accelerated decay in lava. In addition to the lifespan of minerals, his logic is deeply connected to the lifespans of

devices, including both their manufacture and their status as e-waste.¹⁸⁴ He manipulates these objects to compound the geological time of minerals and the globally distributed, machinic temporalities of capitalism. To contextualize Charrière’s project, Feigelfeld describes how minerals are excavated in disparate locations and distributed to different countries for the manufacture of technological devices as “a cultural crystallization of a globalized production scheme.”¹⁸⁵ E-waste is an extension of this crystallization. It arises from global hyper-production and over-disposal of digital technology. As leftovers at the end of utility cycles, it takes on the currency of scraps and ruins—whether as an inoperative product with recyclable components or, more likely, as layers of sediment in landfills decomposing toward zero at the geological rate of decay.¹⁸⁶

Jennifer Gabrys states that when e-waste is recycled “[t]he practices of disposal involve multiple modes of material disassembly and depend on interconnected geographies for the circulation and recuperation of discarded devices.”¹⁸⁷ E-waste’s pervasiveness and circulation is globally distributed under varying institutional guidelines while the unwanted surplus of excrement from technoindustrial prosperity is itself absorbed into the system of expanding but insecure limits of distribution.¹⁸⁸ Discarded devices enter into shifting assemblages and flows of matter-movement driven by the precarious circuitry of capitalist deterritorialization.

Not only is e-waste part of the economy of waste management with its own energetic thresholds and modes of containment and release, it is a phenomenon fueled by the cycles of planned

¹⁸⁴ An exhibition with similar aims, although more focused on the artifice and fictional image of contemporary objects decayed into fossils, is Daniel Arsham’s *The Source: A Catalog of Late-20th-Century American Relics* (Cranbrook Art Museum, 2019). “Arsham chooses iconic objects dating from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—a time of technological acceleration and obsolescence ... The objects are eroded casts that are expertly fashioned from materials such as sand, selenite crystal, or volcanic ash.” “Daniel Arsham, *The Source: A Catalog of Late-20th-Century American Relics*,” *Cranbrook Art Museum*, <https://cranbrookartmuseum.org/exhibition/daniel-arsham/>.

¹⁸⁵ *Julian Charrière Into the Hollow*.

¹⁸⁶ In 2022, globally, only 17 percent of e-waste was recycled, which means that the rest was mostly dumped, with copious amounts of precious minerals turned to rot. C.P. Baldé et al., *Global Transboundary E-waste Flows Monitor 2022* (United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2022), 9.

¹⁸⁷ Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 74.

¹⁸⁸ E-waste objects are made ambiguous and unstable in this process, since “accurately estimating transboundary movement of e-waste is currently difficult, due to ... limited and un-harmonised data at the global level.” C.P. Baldé et al., *Global Transboundary E-waste Flows Monitor 2022*, 5.

obsolescence. Planned obsolescence is an example of a capitalist strategy for movement among its constituents to set and repel its internal limits—a thanatropic program of constructing masses of objects designed to be deleted. Gabrys remarks that technological obsolescence works automatically through an “involuntary impulse” in a system of fabrication that produces gadgets designed for failure, designed to be “self-propagating and self-obsolescing.”¹⁸⁹ What she describes is a kind of automatic sequence of processes, with an emphasis on the “involuntary” that acts beyond the human.

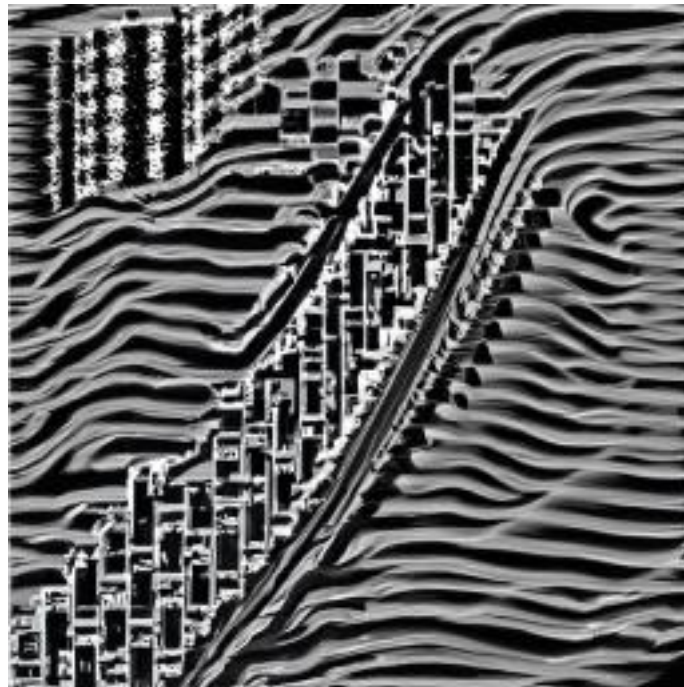


Figure 16: AI-generated diagram using the below paragraph as the text prompt.

It is the unconscious or virtual intensities that drive the process, making it seem autonomous, but in machinic terms a deterritorializing process of the decoding of flows in turn decodes more flows, internalizing them in the automatic machine’s configuration as a field of forces.¹⁹⁰ The unconscious, the field of forces, is where molecular investments drive themselves into molar (corporate, institutional) actualized formations—e.g. fabrication of new devices—countless machinic

¹⁸⁹ Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish*, 115.

¹⁹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, “The Civilized Capitalist Machine,” 152–153.

assemblages setting limits that delineate the chains of supply and demand, systems of manufacture, dissemination, and consumption (fig. 16).¹⁹¹

Nick Land's term for patterns of technological acceleration is *techonomic development* "within an ever-deepening dynamic of auto-production."¹⁹² Auto-production becomes absorbed into a repetitive tangle of recurrent patterns, but they are mutated repetitions of limits that resurface at different scales, spaces and times, and are displaced indefinitely with the production of each new innovative or improved piece of technology that is already prefigured as trash upon inception. Regarding the "logic of displacement (or obsolescence)" Jonathan Crary states that "each replacement is always accompanied by an exponential increase beyond the previous number of choices and options. It is a continuous process of distension and expansion, occurring simultaneously on different levels."¹⁹³

Crary's concern is for how these incessant procedures unsettle and disorient subjectivity.¹⁹⁴ Charrière is well aware of the corporate, industrial, and media infrastructures that envelop and habituate subjective experience but he has a non-anthropocentric view of nature that is not differentiated from culture, allowing subjectivity and ideology to be decentered, peripheral, or even irrelevant to the material and spatio-temporal operations of his sculptures.¹⁹⁵ He is motivated instead by the material fragments that technologies leave behind and how this thanatropic excess of depletion can be appropriated into a process of purgative metamorphosis. Feigelfeld's observations refer to how this metamorphosis can break through normative perceptions of screen-based digital objects:

¹⁹¹ "The stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations, and elementary apparatuses. When the machine becomes planetary or cosmic, there is an increasing tendency for assemblages to miniaturize, to become micro-assemblages." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215.

¹⁹² Techonomic development affirms itself as a recurrent "malignancy" of purpose "through intensive transformation of instrumentality, or perverse techonomic finality." Nick Land, "Teleoplexy: Notes on Acceleration," *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2014), 513.

¹⁹³ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2014), 53.

¹⁹⁴ In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Crary observes that the subject has been assimilated into accelerated media and surveillance culture. Relentless cycles of work and consumption in the global market infrastructure creates a new subjectivity of disorientation and inertia. There is a cancellation of alternate temporalities—he argues that we exist in a non-time of continual eradication and replacement.

¹⁹⁵ Julian Charrière, "Fossilising the Future."

[T]he flat world of the user interfaces masks the media-ecological interior, the infrastructures that constitute these surfaces on which we believe we move and are in reality moved rather than movers. Julian Charrière's lumps are also the rocks he throws through the panes of that glass house. Thrown up by the interior, they at once open up access to it.¹⁹⁶

Contrary to what Feigelfeld suggests, this access is not entirely possible because for each break in the “glass house” a new pane is produced to take its place or to capture the break as a constituent.

Into the Hollow appears to be a recalcitrant interruption in the flows of materials going through channels drawn out by capitalism, with an unconventional utilization of industrial facilities, and the cathartic blending of technology and artificial lava. It is as if the artist is purposefully wasteful so as to uncover little bits of disorder or chaos. Rather than shattering limits, his gestures of productive antiproduction only punctuate those parts of capitalism that serve necrocracy. It is like a digital glitch that does not crash the system but is stitched seamlessly into the continued binary functions of computational operations.¹⁹⁷ Negarestani elaborates on the laws of capture in relation to necrocracy:

Capitalism’s parasitic insistence on its survival is the expression of its constitutive dissipative tendency (desire for meltdown) that must effectuate its singularity *by all means and at all costs*—hence the machinic conception of capitalism as an open system that assimilates every antagonism or exception as its axioms and resources.¹⁹⁸

Brian Massumi similarly argues that capitalism’s mutational powers have developed to a level of being able to capture or grasp matter at the locus of its actualization or emergence from the virtual.¹⁹⁹ As all the virtual formations of singularities in the collision of lava and digital waste lose their plasticity and become more rigid, all the actualized qualities and virtual machinic bonds are instantly re-networked into the interiorities of necrocracy. It is a continual apparatus of capture. Bryant explains this form of capture in machinic terms: incorporeal machines such as capitalism can absorb

¹⁹⁶ Feigelfeld, “Into the Hollow.”

¹⁹⁷ Michael Betancourt argues that glitches are failures that do not send the system into a “wasteland” but rather are replacements based on restructuring of “(dys)functional elements” around the error so that the glitch operates as a return to normal continuity of digital functions. Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2019), 124.

¹⁹⁸ Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman,” 188.

¹⁹⁹ Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (The MIT Press, 1996), 134.

resistance and deviance through erasure or consolidation so that the organizational assemblage continues to operate.²⁰⁰ Thus the *Metamorphisms* emerge as inert sculptures that are instantly swept up into the flows of capitalism (e.g. capital invested in storage, exhibitions, transportation), and the objects cannot be separated from this circuitry, which is itself under the spell of thanatropic regression manifested in the internal melancholic indeterminacy of capitalism's erratic organism.²⁰¹

Digital waste would fall under an aspect of the open system's axiomatic that absorbs and actualizes surplus value emanated "by constantly injecting antiproduction into the producing apparatus."²⁰² This is a result of decoded flows, something that has been captured through decoding, overcoded, and then injected with antiproduction according to the imperative of thanatropic regression. Planned obsolescence ejects digital waste as the lingering physical remainder of cancerously excessive consumer culture, and thus it introduces a set of plastic limits that are an effectuation of the BwO in capitalism. Land comments on this kind of antiproduction as the "disinvestment" of machinic powers:

Capitalism junks the accumulated work of history, yet it cannot be a matter of libidinally investing obsolescence ... Obsolescence is exactly disinvestment, but it is disinvestment as desire itself in its primary mutant flux. If money is libidimized on the 'model' of excrement it is ... because it escapes stable investment.²⁰³

This means that for the instability caused by interior decay, everything can be made disposable, or rather must be disposable. The "disinvestment" of obsolescence operates within the

²⁰⁰ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 99.

²⁰¹ *Into the Hollow* is machinically imbricated with the temporary lifespan of its museological façade, subjected to the strata of capitalist capture in the art market. The objects are preserved specimens as well as products of monetary value. The exhibition had a life sentence, it had to be manufactured, stored, exhibited, and then it had to move on, according to obligatory options available to the artist and the gallery under the commercial allowances of packaging, transportation, and storage. Hito Steyerl describes the cycling of exhibitions as a capitalism-infused mess of temporary production. "In the museum-as-factory, something continues to be produced. Installation, planning, carpentry, viewing, discussing, maintenance, betting on rising values, and networking alternate in cycles. An art space is a factory, which is simultaneously a supermarket—a casino and a place of worship whose reproductive work is performed by cleaning ladies and cellphone-video bloggers alike." See: Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?" *The Wretched of the Screen*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood (Sternberg Press, 2012), 63.

²⁰² Deleuze and Guattari, "The Civilized Capitalist Machine," 158–159.

²⁰³ Nick Land, "Meat (or How to Kill Oedipus in Cyberspace)," *Body & Society* 1, no. 3–4: 200.

energetic model of digested and purged abstract value that works its way toward the zero-zone of the BwO, which emanates instability and decay into capitalism's actualized formations. Because everything is captured, there is a productive excess that must be disposed of and turned to rot. The constant deformation of internal limits is a symptom of decay and putrefaction in the system.

The purging of excess is an imperative of the system. As the molecular-molar machine of capitalism draws from its constituents, its acquisitions become an overabundance of matter-movement that it must eventually expel, diminish, or annihilate as waste in order to continue its doomed progression, all the while exhausting the very resources and energies it relies upon. The melancholic aspects of capitalism can be explained with Land's application of the death drive as part of the economy of any vital, earthbound entity:

Life is able to deviate from death only because it also propagates it, and the propagation of disorder is always more successful than the deviation. Degradation 'profits' out of life. Any process of organization is necessarily aberrational within the general economy, a mere complexity or detour in the inexorable death-flow, a current in the informational motor, energy cascading downstream, dissipation.²⁰⁴

The BwO resists organization, and so the notion of capital as the BwO itself becomes a destructive or disruptive agent for capitalism, which must always seek unattainable equilibrium—searching for an endlessness of life that can only exist in death through perpetual decay.

What occurs in obsolescence is a disintegration of innumerable assemblages (e.g. laptop-human-charger-internet-work-Netflix-etc.) and new formations of assemblages as masses of digital waste in countless configurations that, if not isolated for the repurposing of minerals, progressively become more fragile, disenfranchised, disarticulated, lost, slowly dissolving toward terrestrial sedimentation, and toward withdrawal on the BwO. "What seems like travelling up-river from down in the garbage, is drifting downriver out in the zero-zone."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 30.

²⁰⁵ Land, "Meat," 197.

2.4 Geo-Digital Lava as Thanatropic Acceleration and Asymbolic Inertia



Figure 17: Julian Charrière, *Into the Hollow* (2016). Documentation of production process.

Charrière's process is explosively implosive. The accelerated chemical violence erupts inside or beneath the lava flow. He describes his process and logic of *Into the Hollow* as a sequence of acceleration, amalgamation, and stasis for the production of a new configuration of geological sedimentation:

[T]o create new geologies, you need to take 20 tons of stone, bring them to Duisburg, heat the whole thing up in a massive blast furnace until it melts to create artificial lava, pour this

stonny soup into a hole filled with computers and other electronic devices, break it up and bring it back. . . . More than fossilised devices, these creations constitute an amalgam of minerals artificially brought to a stable condition in a matrice of stone.²⁰⁶

On the surface this procedure seems straight-forward. Yet this liquefaction of stone and the heated putrefaction of digital debris constitutes a machinic fusion that is a vastly complex melancholic mediation of objects, alchemically mysterious in its levels of transmutation.

First, the twenty tons of stone and the accumulated digital waste had to be acquired and transported to the industrial site of Thyssen-Krupp's blast furnaces. The objects are already in assemblage with the machinations of capitalist infrastructures, and these bonds are not entirely severed in the artificially imposed geochemical transformation. The bonds shift closer to the utilization of industrial facilities—technology designed to produce exorbitant amounts of pig iron and steel. The blast furnaces retain their bonds to capitalism, but they also have the machinic capacity for accepting nuanced inputs such as Charrière's speculative, experimental process of alchemical obscurity.²⁰⁷

The lava was a glowing, intensively plastic machine undergoing devastating molecular deformations. According to Deleuze and Guattari “there is not one molecular formation that is not by itself an investment of a molar formation.”²⁰⁸ The molecular and molar formations have a symbiotic, though not always synchronized, relationship. Bonta and Protevi define the molecular as “the behavior of aggregates in far-from-equilibrium intensive crisis conditions” while the molar refers to “different modes of order of a field or 'population' of particles of any size.”²⁰⁹ The molar is technically or socially organizational, in this case coextensive with the energies and means of

²⁰⁶ Julian Charrière, “Fossilising the Future.”

²⁰⁷ Referring to artistic practice, Dieter Mersch states that “alchemy's practices are less based in substantial transitions or quasi-chemical reactions that turn material into another state than in assembling and collecting things together, forcing them into rupture or disturbance to cause unexpected events and gain new access to the real.” This is precisely what occurred in the combusive collision of artificial lava and digital waste; everything was fragmented through rupture on the BwO, and coagulated (actualized) into an unpredictable and inarticulate assemblage. Dieter Mersch, “Alchemistic Transpositions: On Artistic Practices of Transmutation and Transition,” *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*, ed. Michael Schwab (Leuven University Press, 2018), 268.

²⁰⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 340.

²⁰⁹ Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 115–116.

production, while the molecular represents disequilibrium that can become antiproduative—melancholic formations sinking closer to the BwO through a crisis-point rupture in actuality that disturbs organizational structure.²¹⁰

The most accelerated machinic collision in Charrière’s project, most infused with melancholically disintegrative and antiproduative tendencies, is the point at which the artificial lava clashes with digital waste. Instantly, the objects react and become quantum displacements that expel their prior molar organizational structures in a distributed mediation of fluid intensities and a confusion of chemical signs. It is, as the sculptures’ title suggests, a metamorphosis—in the etymological sense of the word as “change of form or structure, action or process of changing in form.”²¹¹ It is a metamorphosis of matter-movement as well as of thanatropic regression because at the junctures of fusion the “dictatorial tendency of affordance” changes its chemical and temporal economy. The *mesh* of necrocratic capitalism is a fluctuating web flowing and phasing through all the shifting formations.²¹² Even in the mess of singularities, the matter is still networked and translated into the interiority of capitalism through the materials’ residual traces acquired from the context of industrial facilities, as well as deep mining, manufacture, commerce, etc.

It is not only the ore and valuable minerals from digital waste that were scorched with a surge of artificial lava, but the devices’ interior data as well. *Into the Hollow* brings the materiality of data to the fore through its destruction, displacement, or evaporation—its embedding into the inaccessibility of the interior of stone through the fiery withdrawal down to the BwO. Feigelfeld describes the work as “negative sculptures unearthing resources for hardware on which source code finally melts down to software and the death drive of the hard drives finds for the ultimate penalty

²¹⁰ Whatever the crisis is—in Charrière’s case it is the point at which stone turns to lava, and the point when lava comes into contact with digital waste—it is not in itself melancholic. Crises can mark out the paths of thanatropic regressive events but it is the resulting disorder and instability that signals the presence of melancholic translations between machines on the molecular level of dispersed code or singularities.

²¹¹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Metamorphosis,” accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=metamorphosis>.

²¹² The *mesh* is Morton’s term pertaining to hyperobjects that refers to “the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences. . . . A mesh consists of links, and also of gaps between links. These links and gaps are what enable causality to happen, when we think causality in an expanded way, to include what I have been calling *translation*.” Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 83.

against itself in the Fossilicon Valley of Death.”²¹³



Figure 18: Julian Charrière, *Metamorphism XIX* (2016), detail.

This dead data is the darkest, most decayed, imperceptible and withdrawn aspect of the sculptures. It is also deeply imbricated with digital capitalism, including information technologies, surveillance, user interfaces, social media, satellite technology, data circulation, and data mining. All this became incompatible with the amorphous decayed structure the data has taken on in the disordered acceleration of lava, as the code became imperceptible, inaccessible, eliminating all the binary orders of 1s and 0s to take on the deterritorialized intensity of zero on the BwO. The data has become dark, subterranean, and irreversibly withdrawn.

My interpretation of data is contrary to views which perceive digitality as being something immaterial.²¹⁴ Data is physical and can only exist through materially grounded machinic operations,

²¹³ Feigelfeld, “Into the Hollow.”

²¹⁴ Michael Betancourt argues that “[t]he foundations of the aura of information lie, like the digital aura, in the nature of computer technology itself. Crucial to their function is the fragmentation of the continuous, physical world into discrete blocks of data—samples—whose storage, manipulation, and

taking on relational influences within corporeal constraints. James Allen-Robertson states that “the underlying code ... has to be somewhere for it to persist, to act and to be acted upon. The formal requires the physical to be of material consequence.”²¹⁵ For example, a hard disk drive has minuscule magnetic inscriptions on the disk (1s, 0s) which are activated by an electromagnetic reader. Allen-Robertson elaborates:

As a digital storage device using opposing polarities, one might expect that what is being written to the platter surface is a series of positive 1s and negative 0s. However, digital encoding does not work through direct representation of states, but is instead *differential*. Differential encoding means that it is the change in polarity that matters, rather than the polarity itself.²¹⁶

In this way the data is dormant unless it is activated through differential energies. This does not mean that an inactive device is devoid of data, just that the magnetic inscriptions are not being read through differential encoding. In the melting process the disks, their inscriptions, and the electromagnetic heads were all swallowed up by the lava, absorbed or diffused, only made present through absence or displacement.

The scorched data is the most melancholically asymbolic aspect of the project, as it fails to signify anything in perceivable actualization for a spectator, but also owing to the computational gaze which is incapable of deciphering any melted remnants of information inscribed on liquefied, dissolved disks. I will elaborate on the computational gaze in the forthcoming chapters, but for now it will suffice to say that the withdrawal of data in these sculptures has taken on a kind of anti-human and anti-computational disintegrative asignificance, and refuses to communicate with its entire being (if there is anything left of it).

recombination follows a semiotic procedure governed by ‘rules’ that constrain the digital computer to a strict instrumentalist function, separate from the meaning and/or historical context of the materials being accessed, sorted, combined.” While the described fragmentation and semiotic parceling of data is not entirely inaccurate, the interpretation of data being manifest as nothing more than a perceived immaterial aura is arguable in terms of machine ontology, since everything is machinically invested in matter-movement. Michael Betancourt, *The Critique of Digital Capitalism: An Analysis of the Political Economy of Digital Culture and Technology* (Punctum Books, 2015), iii.

²¹⁵ James Allen-Robertson, “The materiality of digital media: The hard disk drive, phonograph, magnetic tape and optical media in technical close-up,” *new media & society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 458.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 460.

The stones and the digital devices were subjected to a violent deformation, a scrambled rearrangement of their molecular machinic inputs and outputs that were mediated into a differentiated configuration of a new becoming.²¹⁷ Everything in the lava was destroyed on the BwO, not in the sense of annihilation but in the sense of chaotic and violent disorder—filled with molecular singularities, codes, asignifying signs—made imperceptible in the glow of liquefaction. A melancholic flash, a rapid withdrawal, a drowning. It is an accelerated melancholic translation into a rigid corporeal machine cooled down into the becoming of a mineral-data-(zero).

The solidified assemblage was then broken apart into fragments—a further displacement of parts and particles, each object becoming more distant from the assemblage, with a degree of melancholic isolation or detachment. Charrière’s imposed process mediates these fragmented conglomerates into melancholic multiplicities: they are inert, the congealed mess fails to fully signify or to ascribe itself to a predetermined organization, and their inaccessible innards are obscured by surfaces stained with inscriptions of loss.



Figure 19: Julian Charrière, *Metamorphism XII* (2016).

²¹⁷ With this liquefaction, the mediation temporarily became what Bryant calls a “plastic machine.” Plasticity arises with entropy and allows for assimilation of new inputs. These inputs can be productive, as in the production of a new mineral assemblage, but there are also melancholic inputs that are antiproduative, instigating machinic fragility and decay. See: Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 105.

With its mutated temporality made imperceptible or inarticulate, the sculptures' inertia rests in disintegrative asignificance or asymbolia. As outlined in the previous chapter, asymbolia is like a chaotic, dead language that resists signification; signs cease to circulate through expressed formations. For the *Metamorphism* sculptures this is manifested in the disintegrated, fragmented and decayed state of the digital devices and their data. Once they have been melted into the lava, they partially withdraw into the BwO, leaving nothing but traces of mineral residue. As Charrière points out, “[t]hese devices are therefore no longer recognizable as the manufactured objects that they once represented, but are brought back to a state of geological potential.”²¹⁸ The sculptures' only signification is their recognizable familiar appearance as lumpy, irregularly shaped stones, but they are marked with mineral deposits that are manifested as rusty patches with veins, fuzzy turquoise lumps, and stratified discolorations. These marks only signify the presence of a different material within the makeup of the stone, but they are amorphous and dispersed throughout the matrix of a mineral structure of which only the surface is perceptible.

Not only were these devices the wasted excretion of capital, they were then subjected to a violent event that emptied them of any ideological symbolic structure. Their amorphous manifestations in the rock are devoid of anything but their chemical makeup, reduced to nothing but an amalgamation of minerals. The disintegrative asignificance of nonhuman melancholy in this work thus pertains to the loss of prior structures and capacities, including the dead data embedded in the stone.

2.5 Geo-Digital Lava and Interiorities of Decay

In the lava, the decay of the digital waste objects is expedited in a combustive motion of interpolation. In this accelerated decay, molecular arrangements are not only disarticulated but also subtracted (e.g. plastic components of devices would not endure the temperatures). Regarding his analysis of depletion in decay, Negarestani states that the universe is “*the calculus of an infinite*

²¹⁸ Julian Charrière, “Berlin from an artist’s perspective: an interview with Julian Charrière,” *My Art Guides*, interview by Carla Ingrassiotta, April 22, 2016, <https://myartguides.com/interviews/berlin-from-an-artists-perspective-an-interview-with-julian-charriere/>.

*rot.*²¹⁹ This algorithmic matter-movement is manifested in decay's subtractive processes and the resultant residue, which becomes germinal or productive causing the decaying body to never be completely annihilated. Whatever is in the process of dissolution (into exteriority) turns into the digression of a string of nested interiorities that have a chemical inclination to twist or convolute the passage toward total disintegration.²²⁰

Negarestani likens the nested space of interiorities to metamorphosing niches which open up holes that in turn subdivide into a network of caverns or pores. Liquid (e.g. artificial lava) can permeate the open spaces (e.g. in the melting digital devices), as the "gradationally rotting object, idea or formation also oozes, or ... is exteriorized into the multitude of interiorities inside which it is nested" (e.g. the smelting of materials).²²¹ In this mediation there is an instant acceleration in the gradients of change between machines. In Charrière's process this only applies to the initial rapid dissipative event of digital debris inside liquefied stone. The wide variety of minerals, data, and combustible materials decays inside the maze of molecular interior formations of lava. The geological invention arises from a flash of death-driven melancholic depletion in instantaneous fluid interiorities of exhaustible elements, and winds up as a withdrawn silent confusion of inertia.

Considering Charrière's produced assemblage, as well as its libidinal (energetic) expression of the death drive, I think it is important to contrast Negarestani's interiorities of decay with Land's labyrinthine thoughts on "fuzzy sponge zones" and the "disease of lethality" (fig. 20).

Form is infested by matter, the abstract by the concrete, the transcendent by the immanent, space by time. ... Life is infested by death; terminally infiltrated by the unsuspendable reality of its loss. There is no integral identity or alterity, but only fuzzy sponge zones, pulsing with indeterminable communicative potencies. Not merely lethal diseases, but the disease of lethality; a labyrinth of contagion, knitted irresolvably into death.²²²

²¹⁹ Negarestani, "Undercover Softness," 381.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 391.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

²²² Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 118–119.



Figure 20: AI-generated diagram using the above Land quote as the text prompt.

Land's focus is not on a subtractive process into the exteriority of other sponge-like interiorities. Nor is it like the sponge space described by Kleinherenbrink.²²³ His sponge space is a kind of cosmic dark labyrinth through which death-inducing forces proliferate, infect, and terminate vital entities, where subtraction does not end up anywhere in particular except “irresolvably into death.” These perceptions are reflected in Charrière's geological combination (form) of artificial lava and digital debris (substance/matter), resulting in a death-bound melancholic paralysis from a molten process of fleeting, imperceptible chemical mutations.

With the cooling of the lava, once the acceleration has burned itself out congealing the mixture into a solid mass, the generated assemblage takes on new temporalities that operate on an entirely different level of lethality. The gradients of decay begin to follow rates of geological disintegration according to economic affordances. This ultimately necessitates a return to decay's curvature toward the cosmos—“the interiorized movement becomes asymptotic to a line of exteriorization upon which death is inflected, and objectal persistence in decay becomes an

²²³ “As each generating part of a rhizome will in turn be a rhizome that is generated from non-resembling parts, reality can be seen as a giant system of interlocking 'caverns' or 'sponges'.” Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 244.

asymptotic expression of loosening into the abyss.”²²⁴ As will be shown in the next section, this abyssal trajectory takes on the dimensions of deep time, while deep time takes on the density of multiplied and infinitely shifting, temporary temporalities.

2.6 Thanatropic Deep Time and Corpo-Motor Retardation

Paul Feigelfeld describes Charrière’s project as “perambulating the half life of a ‘wastewilderness’ to smelt it down in the toxic cauldron of deep time.”²²⁵ But what is deep time in machine ontology? I would like to combine this query with Charrière’s question: “[w]hat would time look like in a non-anthropocentric universe?”²²⁶ While this question might imply human extinction, it is pressing to focus on how energies and velocities operate in the nonhuman whether or not humans are involved. Feigelfeld’s reference to a cauldron of deep time implies a mysterious pluralism of temporalities churning without any solidified or linear consistency. Inside this fluid clutter of temporalities, I will evaluate Charrière’s mineral fragments as objects of melancholic inertia suspended in corpo-motor retardation.

While the *Metamorphism* sculptures take on the energetic dissipation of thanatropic regression at the speed of geological time, there is an impression that they are already halfway there, like fragments from outer space. They resemble meteorites as much as subterranean extractions. It even seems as if they already represent the return to zero, or the thanatropically regressed state of matter, because they are minerals which seem to give the perception of complete stasis or dead muteness. In the exhibition, they are presented as such. The presentation of *Into the Hollow* “works as a kind of cabinet of geological curiosities, where stones are shown on pedestals in a dark environment, each piece given equal consideration through lighting, and staged as they would in a natural historical museum display.”²²⁷ This intentionality shows the purposeful fixation of the work in an institutional framework, while symbolically situating the objects as singular mineral specimens. This framework is associated with the purpose of isolating, preserving and memorializing, so as to

²²⁴ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 388–389.

²²⁵ Feigelfeld, “Into the Hollow.”

²²⁶ Julian Charrière, “Fossilising the Future.”

²²⁷ Julian Charrière, “Interview: Julian Charrière,” *Elephant*, interview, April 27, 2016, <https://elephant.art/5-questions-julian-charriere/>.

keep objects still and sterile.²²⁸ Charrière has stated that “the main intent behind the installation was to accomplish a sort of mystic museological feeling.”²²⁹ These fabricated rocks, enclosed in glass display cases on grey pedestals in grey rooms, are perceived to be as-if-historical items from an indefinite temporality.

Into the Hollow is a manifestation of a death-driven accumulation of deep time, consisting of an accrued geological past and the interstices of the contemporary, extending into thanatropic regression.²³⁰ Charrière relates that “[t]he melted minerals mixed with the rock act as a bridge between the image of an early state of the earth, our current industrial and technological era and a possible future.”²³¹ He further suggests that the project can be explained through the digital analogy of *reset*:

Reset refers to bringing a system back to an initial condition and is often used in technology to describe the recovery of a computer system to its original state. Reset is an analogy that takes this characteristic of the word to the processes that I use to bring manufactured materials back to their original place in stone. It is a way of bridging the primitive with the technological advances characteristic of our culture today through a violent event, simulating those that occur in geology and through this creating an image of a past future.²³²

Because machinic operations are ever-transformative and cannot be pinned down to their deep origins, I question Charrière’s analogy of *reset* and his use of “original place” and “primitive,” even though they do imply a direct link with the standardized definition of the death drive as the desire to de-contract to an original state. The time of thanatropic regression as interpreted through machine ontology is both plural and futural, with no original states in particular. But I think that an important

²²⁸ Ian Bogost argues for preservation being an “object-relative concept,” elaborating that “[i]f a unit is a system, then objects appear, generate, collapse, and hide both within and without [preservation] with great regularity.” Thus preservation is not necessarily a static system; it has internal rhythms of change. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 75.

²²⁹ Charrière, “Interview: Julian Charrière.”

²³⁰ Another project that can be evaluated from this perspective is Kelly Jazvac’s exhibition of found ready-made “plastiglomerates”—artificial fusions of rock/sand and plastic detritus. “In 2012, geologist Patricia Corcoran and sculptor Kelly Jazvac travelled to Kamilo Beach, following a tip from oceanographer Charles Moore that the beach was covered in a plastic-sand conglomerate. ... the plastic and beach detritus had been combined into a single substance by bonfires.” Kirsty Robertson, “Plastiglomerate,” *e-flux journal*, no. 78 (2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/82878/plastiglomerate/>.

²³¹ Charrière, “Interview: Julian Charrière.”

²³² Julian Charrière, “Fossilising the Future.”

distinction must be made between the regression through the violent fusion of digital debris set in stone (*reset*) and the regression toward cosmic dissipation, which has yet to occur.

Deep future can be hypothesized as the cosmic horizon of decay, which is the space-time of future contingencies, when even terrestrial geological compounds will have been dissipated in the expanse of the cosmos. The deep past consists of an accumulation of matter that is always present and always in movement, always residual, manifested as machines, parts, traces, and assemblages that have undergone myriads of transformations and displacements over inconceivable durations. For Bryant, time is heterogeneous with machines producing their own temporalities. For Bergson, duration is “a wholly qualitative multiplicity, an absolute heterogeneity of elements which pass over into one another.”²³³ Duration has multiple rhythms with varying tensions and de-contractions.²³⁴ I therefore postulate that a machinic explanation of duration pertains to the tensions and intensities between virtuality and actualization.

How does this apply to deep time and the melancholic threads of thanatropic regression? For Negarestani, decay unfolds through Aion (the virtual background for temporalities) in the notion of “cosmic time”—“the ungraspable and cosmic time which belongs to nothing and no one. It is the absolute time of pure contingencies or cosmic climates which unilaterally suspends all laws and eliminates all necessities.”²³⁵ It is a time with no reference to past or future, but must nonetheless contain both because contingencies require the virtuality of Aion for actualization. The title *Into the Hollow* implies an absolutist time of cosmic contingencies—a void, a hollowness, filled with *potential* temporalities. However, this conception of absolute time is also convoluted with actualized manifestations (Chronos) through geochemical objects that have accumulated and may continue to accumulate in the mineral conglomerates. This chemical temporality is manifested in decay through thanatropic regression:

The complicity between space and time—that is, between the dynamism of inflections and the irruption of contingencies—brings forth the possibility of chemistry as the concomitantly softening and loosening dynamism of putrefaction. As the chemical space of decay, putrefaction exposes the object to the contingencies of time so as to thaw the object's

²³³ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Dover Publications, 2001), 229.

²³⁴ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Zone Books, 1991), 207.

²³⁵ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 403.

ideal integrity.²³⁶

Both Chronos and Aion are coexistent in these loosening tendencies through the realization of molecular events. But how does deep time as I am presenting it in machinic terms pertain to the nonhuman melancholic attributes of Charrière's sculptures? Deep time relies on the BwO.

Kleinherenbrink states that the BwO "is neither spatially extended in something nor temporally present to something," like the cosmic time described by Negarestani that belongs to nothing like a directionless expanse.²³⁷ The BwO's virtuality is imbricated with Aion and acts as the surface for the production and putrefaction of Chronos and its actualized chemical mediations. Machinic deep time (future) is thus a vast accumulation of biochemical, geochemical, and atmospheric contingencies of necrocracy, filled with variations of rhythms and velocities of decay.

In the *Metamorphism* objects, the congealed artificial lava was fused with digital devices in such a way that the slow, geological rhythm of stone was made to interpenetrate the rate of decay of the hardware components that disintegrate comparatively much faster. The rapid, integrative-disintegrative (productive-antiproduative) process of melting the objects together had manufactured a new machine, and therefore a new temporality. An irreversible thanatropic process occurred, consisting of acceleration, entropy, and ultimate paralysis.

This geological paralysis or inertia is one of the manufactured melancholic attributes of the *Metamorphism* objects, operating as a fixture of *acedia* or corpo-motor retardation on the BwO. Machines have different levels of longevity as well as different rhythms, which defines the rates and speeds at which an object is capable of engaging with others, and not all produced temporalities are directly compatible. Charrière's sculptures are such objects, which are so locked into their lethargic temporality that they become incompatible with the rates of speed and rhythms that surround them, resulting in a slow rate of decay. For most of the time, nothing is or will be appropriated from them and there will be minimal levels of chemical mediations.

The artificial process of lava transmutation on the BwO may be considered to be a kind of *refrain*—"a prism, a crystal of space-time."²³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain refers to oscillations, transcoding, rhythm, and territoriality of assemblages. A refrain infiltrates whatever

²³⁶ Ibid., 400–401.

²³⁷ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 88.

²³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 348.

envelops it as it appropriates “vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations.”²³⁹ Refrains can alter the speed of transformations between machines, with the capacity to connect disparate elements that would not otherwise have the compatibility to make connections. In augmenting internal structures, there is “a retrograde motion running in both directions” as “the refrain fabricates time.”²⁴⁰

What is also relevant to *Into the Hollow* in terms of thanatropic regression and cosmic time is that “forces of chaos, terrestrial forces, cosmic forces: all of these confront each other and converge in the territorial refrain.”²⁴¹ The fusion of artificial lava and digital devices occurred through the deterritorializing, transcoding forces of a refrain that passed as nothing more than changes in temperature. As I related in the previous section, extreme temperatures such as lava can alter or annihilate matter, open up accelerated molecular flows, and leak droplets of chaos into the process. Chaos—however saturated, dispersed, or disorderly it might seem—is still a machinic reality. In describing the refrain, Deleuze and Guattari provide a description of chaotic rhythm (fig. 21).

Chaos is not the opposite of rhythm ... There is rhythm whenever there is a transcoded passage from one milieu to another ... coordination between heterogeneous space-times. Drying up, death, intrusion have rhythm. ... rhythm is the Unequal and Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding.²⁴²

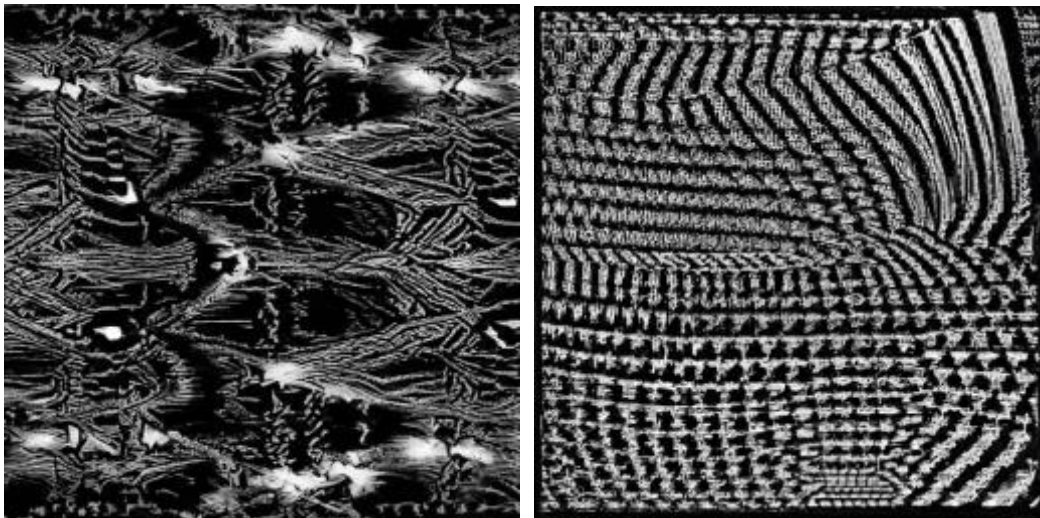


Figure 21: AI-generated diagrams using the above Deleuze and Guattari quote as the text prompt.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 348–349.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 312.

²⁴² Ibid., 313.

Death and the incommensurable—the BwO, the melancholic orientation of transcoding in Charrière’s fiery refrain. The accelerated temporality of the refrain is an interpenetrating process of gravitating disparate elements into a single assemblage.

The assemblage “dries up” and in turn produces the slower rhythms of geological inertia, later broken up into fragments with each piece operating through similar yet individual temporalities. They become opened up to other refrains whose rhythms encounter more resistance to change. The *Metamorphism* fragments have settled into this melancholic sedimentation through stagnation and as a result they are not always going through transcoding, either because it occurs at a much slower pace, or the refrains that pass through the objects do not structurally alter the formations in a significant or perceivable way (e.g. wavelengths of sound, radio waves, forces of gravity, dark energy). This also recalls Bryant’s comment that not all machinic temporalities are compatible with one another.

Under necrocracy, the excess of being that Eleanor Kaufman describes in relation to the stuckness of inertia (discussed in relation to corpo-motor retardation in the previous chapter) is predetermined as waste, as putrefaction, but only under the conditions of economic affordance.²⁴³ The data-stone conglomerates persist due to this excess, built up from accumulations of past states in forgotten assemblages that swell up in the present, and due to their thanatropic requirement for ultimate cosmic dissipation. “It is a violence that posits itself as preaccomplished, even though it is reactivated every day ... *the mutilation is prior, preestablished.*”²⁴⁴ This mutilation is the antiproduktive death drive that predetermines the rate of decay based on economic affordances.

Bergson notes that a state that “remains the same” is not homogeneous but varied, and changes from one state to another are actually the prolongation of a single state: “the transition is continuous.”²⁴⁵ While I agree that a stasis or a state of inertia is varied, this prolongation of a single state only functions if no other entities enter the machine to mediate its composition. In this way, Bergson’s statement is relevant to Charrière’s sculptures, but only as long as they are undisturbed.

²⁴³ “[T]he death drive, for Lacan, is apparent less in a literal wish to die, than in a type of *life in excess of life*. The death drive, following this tack, is apparent in activities of surplus vitality, in forms of unnatural (‘undead’) libidinal animation (*jouissance*) that override the biological imperatives of adaptation and self-preservation.” See: Hook, “The Complex of Melancholia,” 110.

²⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 447.

²⁴⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Random House, 1944), 4.

Bryant describes how inorganic machines are more reluctant to participate in operations with other machines so as to prolong their substantial structure; he illustrates this with an example of how a rock maintains its form, unable to regenerate the parts that are lost.²⁴⁶ Similarly, the data-mineral formations will maintain the production of their melancholically isolated inert temporality, with all kinds of other objects and forces swirling around them, until an instance of contingency—a refrain—arises that can permeate or chip away at the structural formation of the minerals.²⁴⁷ Bryant argues that there are entities of deep time such as “crystals or stars that do not operate through historicity and futurity ... These entities do not intend at all in terms of historicity and futurity. ... They exist in and through time with a rhythm or duration unique to them such as the rate at which an element decays.”²⁴⁸ This kind of time that he is referring to describes the temporal aspect of an element’s economic affordance, entangled with the immanence of Aion and manifestations of Chronos. A mineral does not project a future but it has a BwO that will guide its rhythm of endurance and decay.

Deep time is the continual accretion and subtraction of incalculable, chaotic, synchronous and asynchronous, compatible and incompatible temporalities. It is pluralistic, it is also a thanatropic time, a dead time in the sense that it is always imperceptible and withdrawn, too distant, too remote (unlike the dead time of the hyperpresent noted in the previous chapter). It is this imperceptibility and uncertainty of time produced by matter that Charrière melted into his data-mineral amalgams.

Should deep time, as understood through thanatropic regression, be renamed *stygian time*, since its depth is incalculably and darkly obscured by residual pasts or absent futures?²⁴⁹ In reference to decay, Negarestani argues that cosmic time (Aion) is manifested in vital time (Chronos) and that these manifestations require a third conception of time. He offers the idea of the “blackening complicity between space and time.”²⁵⁰

This is the “*insider conception of cosmic time*,” which is a “treacherous insider insofar as it internalizes the complicity between time’s diachronicity and the exteriority of space,” as it engenders discordant tensions between cosmic contingencies and their actualized manifestations— “thereby

²⁴⁶ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 97.

²⁴⁷ “Most inorganic corporeal machines, then, maintain their organization in time, but without active operations striving to maintain their form.” Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 158.

²⁴⁹ For Tristan Garcia, the future is a “maximal absence” that is a negative of the present. See: Garcia, *Form and Object*, 295–296.

²⁵⁰ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 406–407.

giving cosmic ecology an eruptive (i.e. volcanically extrusive) expression rather than an intrusive insinuation.”²⁵¹ My interpretation is that there are darkening lines of decay in the interior of the spatio-temporal levels of actualization, resulting from intensive tensions expressed through decay’s expressive emissions, like Charrière’s process of melting stone and digital waste to produce (erupt) a material expression of a dark metamorphosis.

These intensive tensions can be paralleled to the rhythms of the refrain: a *blackening* refrain of black bile that passes through myriads of machinic temporalities, causing them to waver and destabilize. Deep time is the cosmic time of endurance, but endurance that is injected with antiproduction on the BwO, made impermanent under the darkening dissipative economy of thanatropic regression.²⁵²

2.7 Into the Hollow: Concluding Remarks

Into the Hollow expresses a machinic assemblage of fragments that come into contact with other surrounding machinic beings in their ecology (e.g. artist, viewers, display cases, packing materials, ventilation, temperature), but they always remain partially withdrawn, asymbolic, and temporally inert. They consist of mixed temporalities and metamorphosed chemical interiorities that determine the economic affordances of their new mineral bodies. These objects are objects of *stygian time*, with dark accumulations and losses of past states, producing temporalities of inertia that endure into deep obscure futures bound to the expanse of the cosmic horizon.

Captured in the web of necrocracy, Charrière’s project extends from capitalism through his sourcing of materials, the fabrication process of pouring artificial lava over digital debris, and presenting the results as valuable objects. Through appropriation of waste and its accelerated metamorphosis, digital objects are destroyed and entirely liquidated of capital value, punctuating a moment when this debris of cyclical obsolescence became truly obsolete. Because capitalism has a machinic obsession with capture and exhaustion through the displacement of internal limits, the

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Negarestani explains that “In the wake of the insider conception of time, the termination of life does not exclusively mark the temporality of life qua its contingency, because the very interiority of life (its difference and internal vitality) can unfold as the abyssal infinity of material and ontological contingencies whose irruption is equal to death. This unfolding of cosmic time’s pure contingency through life and by life is expressed by decay as a dysteleological process.” Ibid., 407.

project parallels these aspects through its utilization of production and antiproduction—the formation of a new geological compound and the destabilizing, destructive event of decay in the making of this formation. The *Metamorphisms* sculptures remain in close contact with the antiproducer residues of this process through geological inertia and the asymbolic aspects of disintegrated digital devices and mutated data. Fragmentation, intertwined with dissipative decay, participates in all critical stages of the project—from appropriation of severed or unwanted devices, to the molecular fragmentation in the process of melting, to the shattering of coagulated lava into individual mineral specimens, and the insulated museological presentation of these objects in the gallery.

The most accelerated aspect of the project—the instance of lava coming into contact with digital waste—is a melancholic cataclysm of molecular disorientation. This ultimately results in the most withdrawn, disintegrated, and darkly melancholic characteristic of the *Metamorphisms*. The data inside the digital devices are the most withdrawn and inaccessible sets of objects that resist communication, resting in the dark uncertainty on the BwO. The sculptures operate through corpomotor retardation, resisting material mediations with other entities, until some darkening refrain will shatter their composition and hasten their rate of mineral decay.

Into the Hollow is a terrestrially bound project that came into being through its reliance on capitalism's self-imposed insecurity, fragmentation, decay, the forces of thanatropic regression, and the blackening lines of putrefaction in the mesh-like sponge-zone mazes of metamorphosing interiorities. Proceeding from this, the following chapter is concerned with the economy of digital images and the inorganic thanatropic decay of visual information.

Chapter 3

Distribution of Signs and Melancholic Expression in Poored Images

[T]he conjecture implied by Freud's positing of Thanatos is that nothing is alive: life is a region of death. ... What is called organic life is actually a kind of folding of the inorganic. But the inorganic is not the passive, inert counterpart to an allegedly self-propelling life; on the contrary, it possesses its own agency. ... The inorganic is the impersonal pilot of everything, including that which seems to be personal and organic.²⁵³

3.1 Corporeality and Incorporeality of Images as Inorganic Entities

The inorganic as something which has melancholic compulsions relates the previous chapter's focus on thanatropic regression to this chapter's conception of digital images as inorganic objects that fuel visual culture and our subjective habits of visual consumption under digital capitalism. Simultaneously, images experience varying levels of fragility and antiproduction. As inorganic entities, they nonetheless possess expressive agency that can at times *behave* or *respond* organically. Their machinic being is as invested in the rhizomatic, generative production of relational bonds as it is infused with thanatropic regression and withdrawal. The previous two chapters focused on the melancholic attributes of material, corporeal objects. Here I would like to pursue the corporeal and incorporeal melancholic events in the lives of digital images, in conjunction with a machinic conception of the computational gaze.

To do so I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari's chapter "5.587 bc–ad 70: On Several Regimes of Signs" in *A Thousand Plateaus* in relation to Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" and the artistic practice of datamoshing video files. While Deleuze and Guattari's focus appears to articulate the operations of language, their arguments can easily be transposed to the visual realm. Images will be approached as objects occupying the domain of expression—actualized articulations—but also inextricably bound up with the plane of content, or the

²⁵³ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 84–85.

physicality or corporeality of objects, as well as with the darker dimensions of objects and the BwO. The computational gaze operates on both planes of content and expression, but beneath the level of pure simulacra.²⁵⁴

The computational gaze is what sees images from the inside out, from code and servers to touchscreens and televisions; in other words, it sees images, software, code, and algorithms as they are beyond our direct, habituated perceptions. The gaze in Lacan's interpretation is not an *eye*, but rather "something in its own right" that can be understood through "the fundamental relationship between gaze and stain, given that, in the world, there is something to look at before there is a sight to see it."²⁵⁵ In other words, the gaze is accompanied by a blind spot (a screen or a stain) that is created through cultural habituation that determines how to see and interpret an object that exists in itself preceding the event of perception; the screen is opaque, so that "the point of light that is the object's gaze never really reaches us."²⁵⁶ This adequately applies to our relationship to the subface or the black box, where computational external sense-organs on the surface—such as screen interfaces, keyboards, camera sensor plates, or facial recognition—act as the *screen* or the stain between the digital and the subjective. However, insofar as the computational gaze is executed toward and by digital objects, it is in opposition to the Lacanian gaze. This is because there is no subject receiving the gaze and it is the inorganic expanse of computational operations that acts as the *eye* or eyes, directed at its own digital objects of perception. In this way, it is an introverted, doubled field of vision that possesses innumerable of eyes, as well as a myriad expressions of the gaze—a self-perceiving gaze without the vanishing point of subjective self-awareness. This gaze contains within it its own screen or stain, which can manifest itself in the form of dormant data, blocked gateways, unstable connections, glitches, and so forth.

In the digital ecology of visual culture, the computational gaze cannot be pinned down to any particular location or instance of time, as it operates simultaneously in multitudes of applications, often through networked algorithms, but also fractured in offline software utilities and file storage. The computational gaze is an automated machinic hybrid of corporeal and

²⁵⁴ For a machinic definition of "simulacra," see "Appendix A: Overview of Machine Ontology," 203.

²⁵⁵ Rosa, Carmelo Licitra, et al., "From the Imaginary to Theory of the Gaze in Lacan," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 6.

²⁵⁶ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 38.

incorporeal mediations. As Jussi Parikka observes, “[e]xecutable code is also relayed as part of non-technological dimensions triggering within them an increasing amount of actions and relations that one could describe as non-technological in nature.”²⁵⁷ In other words, the computational gaze, consisting of executable code in actualized digital simulacra, also contains a virtual dimension that operates beyond the scope of subjectivity as well as technology. The computational gaze has BwOs that contribute to events of rupture and instability in the conjunction of production and antiproduction. Parikka adds that digital art practices are critical interventions that not only “tap into this logic of the non-organic” but also “function as (re)modulations” of reality.²⁵⁸ Computation art has a mutational capacity that harnesses virtuality and asignification toward the actualization of its semiotic infrastructure.

Here, I want to investigate two case studies to address concepts of signifying chains, poor images, the computational gaze, glitch, simulacra, and Miguel Carvalhais’ notion of surface and subface computation. I will elaborate on these concepts through two case studies: *Download Finished* (2006–), which is a website project dedicated to datamoshing by !Mediengruppe Bitnik and Sven König, and Nicolas Provost’s film *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009). I will also relate how the glitch practice of datamoshing can be approached through Deleuze’s concepts of the time-image and the movement-image.

3.2 Image Entities in Digitized Visual Culture

The entropic or thanatropic tendencies of images are manifested in their degradation of standardized quality, as well as in their ability to disappear, withdraw, or become neglected in enclosed systems. These thanatropic qualities contribute to the putrefaction in the tangled ecology of visual texts in contemporary culture. Rosa Menkman observes that the formats of image processing follow “quadrilateral, ecology dependent, standard (re)solutions” that have to negotiate between functionality, efficiency, processing, and communication towards the

²⁵⁷ Jussi Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art: What Can a Digital Body of Code Do?” *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 122.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

continual reinforcement of standardization techniques.²⁵⁹ These apparent factors come as a result of vast globalization and capitalist infiltration into and stratification of every aspect of visual culture, which becomes injected with capitalism's continuous disequilibrium and displacements of internal limits. It is apparent in day-to-day navigations through visual production, consumption, mediation, and interface. Digital visual culture strives for idealized perfection of coded utility, yet this does not prove to be consistently successful. Capitalism's thanatropic tendencies also apply to the digitization of visual culture, which becomes evident in events of incompatibility, compression, loss, glitch, errors, and malfunctions both in software and hardware.

Even when these instances become apparent, our vision of the digital systems with which we interact, assemble, and on which we depend, is still always incomplete. Joanna Zylińska observes that in this ecology "vision itself is changing ... we cannot ever truly see the conditions of our material existence."²⁶⁰ This condition in vision points to our increasing reliance on the labour of the computational gaze, which operates invisibly, algorithmically calculating the growth of unhinged phantasmagoria of which we are not only consumers but mediators, and by which we are also mediated. It is a machinic exchange that anchors the incompatibility of perceptions between human (organic) and computational (inorganic) capacities of visual correspondence.

In this media ecology, pictures become viral globalized infestations—being copied, uploaded, and downloaded, with each copy manifesting itself as a duplicated transformation or compressed mutation of a previous version. Sergio Martínez Luna remarks:

The digital image is dynamic, processual and configured around the interactivity of the user, who is asked to participate, and share in it, to manipulate it in whole or in part, linking it to other images and content. The image is a temporary aggregate of interconnected data in motion.²⁶¹

Built-in image correction on smartphones, filters and reel editors on social media, and customization apps all contribute to the mutilation or deformation of the copy as a means of generating individualized differences within repetition. Digitally powered visual processes are

²⁵⁹ Rosa Menkman, "Refuse to Let the Syntaxes of (a) History Direct Our Futures," *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age*, ed. Daniel Rubinstein (Routledge, 2020), 118–119.

²⁶⁰ Joanna Zylińska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (Open Humanities Press, 2020), 94.

²⁶¹ Sergio Martínez Luna, "Still Images? Materiality and Mobility in Digital Visual Culture," *Third Text* 33, no.1 (2019): 49.

intensifying exponentially, and while they are stratified with the limits and enclosures of capitalism, their expansion is at the same time dependent on breaks and divergences of flows that allow the system to be rhizomatically integrated and porous, nested with densities and gaps.²⁶²

In the subjectifying regime of signs, such as that exercised under capitalism, images are indispensable commodities circulating in vast networks of surveillance, data collection, targeted personalized advertisement, corporate implementation of AI, video streaming services, and social media, the innards of which are only visible to the computational gaze.²⁶³ Machinic image objects of the computational gaze have possession of our conceptions of simulated, actualized reality. In Land's direction of thought, for whom cybernetics is at the center of machine ontology, this is the most natural cybernetic development of machinic being.

Reality is immanent to the machinic unconscious: it is impossible to avoid cybernetics. We are already doing it, regardless of what we think. Cybernetics is the aggravation of itself happening, and whatever we do will be what made us have to do it: we are *doing things before they make sense*.²⁶⁴

If this is true, then our vision of semiotic regimes is woefully incomplete, never quite catching up to what digital images and the expanse of the computational gaze are performing in our midst.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the signifier is the face of authoritarian forces, reproducing and regenerating subjectification. It can be considered to be a function of semiotic, ideological reinforcement that can only occur through corporeal transmissions of incorporeal objects. Luna argues that as a material entity that cannot be reduced to language, the image also cannot be reduced to representation but must be approached as “an active form of intersubjectivity” with the capacity to be a mobile unit traversing networked digital transfers.²⁶⁵ Because the signifier has this corporeal spatial and temporal resonance, its molar organization in

²⁶² Land states that “escalation is integrating or cyber-emergent. It is the machinic convergence of uncoordinated elements, a phase-change from linear to non-linear dynamics.” The nonlinearity of this machinic convergence coincides with the curved or spiraling distribution of signs, which are complex and slippery components of machinic objects. Nonlinearity is also a quality of melancholic disintegrative asignificance and temporal indeterminacy. Land, “Circuitries,” 298.

²⁶³ Zylinska argues that “*we are all becoming (social) media*,” algorithmically turning into functions of visual objects and media rather than mere observers or users. Zylinska, *AI Art*, 30.

²⁶⁴ Nick Land, “Circuitries,” 297.

²⁶⁵ Luna, “Still Images?,” 48.

subjectification is also part of simulacra that possesses molecular investments or intensities. The despotic actor (capitalism) assimilates visual codes associated with subjection, which can then be recoded, mixed, surveilled, categorized—in other words, overcoded and restratified. These are tasks of systematic desperation, clinging to production while antiproductive breaks continually disrupt the chains of code and stratification that the subjectifying regime requires. The semiotic investments are deep and inseparable from the molecular operations of assemblages that include images, media, bodies, histories, materials, capital, etc.²⁶⁶ Signs are always carried into the omnipresence of signifiers, becoming caught in the digital simulacra of techno-molecular expressions, extended through cybernetic infrastructures and algorithmic phasing.

As incorporeal entities, images are defined not through immateriality but through iterability and reiterability—through their ability to repeat.²⁶⁷ Every image has a machinic drive to repeat, multiply, and disperse, through a kind of “plague”—a word that implies infectious multiplication, but also subtractive, lethal damage.²⁶⁸ This repetition of images is subject to patterns of dissemination and withdrawal from signification that function as both organic growths and thanatropic ruinations. The continual becoming of images is not necessarily productive, as the BwO and thanatropic subtraction underscore all semiotic multiplicities in conjunction with iterative productivity. For digital images, regardless of the image format or signifying content, they are channeled objects that follow the boundaries and repulsions of capitalism’s shifting limits and machinic deterritorializations.

In this context, artistic practice that incorporates digital technology and digitized images involves a series of interactions with digital entities that incites multiplicities of internalized human-technomachinic modulation. Behaviour and decision-making become augmented or dictated by the demands of hardware and software. This hybridity is a result of larger assemblages, the mixture and reciprocity of which extends into the greater field of media communications, design and production of devices, and global dissemination of both technology and visual content. Deleuze and Guattari predicted that:

²⁶⁶ Deleuze and Guattari remark that “the photo, faciality, redundancy, signifiante, and interpretation are at work everywhere. The dreary world of the signifier; its archaism with an always contemporary function.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 116.

²⁶⁷ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 26.

²⁶⁸ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 72.

[C]ybernetic and informational machines form a third age that reconstructs a generalized regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible “humans-machines systems” ... the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action.²⁶⁹

This relation becomes internalized for both the subject and the machine, despite the incompleteness of visual reciprocity, relying on the mutual channeling and relays of information. Being internalized, the human-machine assemblage is tested, made deeper or darker, and more apparently hybridized through artistic practice, especially when the aim is to corrupt usage or to create events of dissonance in the system from the inside.

Digital artistic practice follows the trail of “doing things before they make sense”—the interface of software and its methods precede the production of digital objects. Cybernetics precedes us, with all of its alien perceptions. Zylinska observes that images can no longer be viewed as individual entities because they are part of a system that relies on technological vision: “they are both objects to be looked at and vision-shaping technologies, for humans *and* machines.”²⁷⁰ As will become evident in my analysis of *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh*, the hybridity of human agency and digital tools requires that the computational gaze contributes to or defines the means and ends of the methodology.²⁷¹

Menkman states that “[g]litch work is a kind of corrupting investigative work, followed by a vision that destroys itself by its own purposive modes of inquiry.”²⁷² Our gaze toward computation becomes schizophrenically dislocated and broken in the face of the black box. The computational gaze amplifies hybridity in the human-machine system through the ecology of signs and signifiers that are operative, as Hito Steyerl conveys, in “a general informational turn, within economies of knowledge that tear images and their captions out of context into the swirl

²⁶⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 458.

²⁷⁰ Joanna Zylinska, *AI Art*, 106.

²⁷¹ Examples of this kind of methodology can be found in the work of Cory Arcangel, Rosa Menkman, MNK aka Karl Klomp, and Gijs Gieskes, among many others who rely on digital components to inform decisions toward both purposeful and incidental aesthetics, and the delivery or presentation to the viewer.

²⁷² Rosa Menkman, “The Glitch Art Genre,” *GLI.TC/H READER[ROR] 20111*, ed. Nick Briz et al (Unsorted Books, 2011), 64.

of permanent capitalist deterritorialization.”²⁷³ Regimes of signs operate both within the machinic assemblages of human interaction as well as in the computational gaze, which follows its own semiotic economies grounded in data communication signals.

3.3 Poor Images as Entropy in the Signifying Regime of Signs

Image objects are not signs, but they are comprised of signs. In machinic semiotics as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari every sign refers to another sign infinitely. They state that “[a] semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive.”²⁷⁴ It is difficult to isolate a sign, as it is always part of a signifying chain that contributes to the actualized operations of signification itself. Signifying chains are composed of nonsignifying parts that only possess signification when they are drawn into large aggregates, through coincidental linking of elements and relays.²⁷⁵ The sign is considered to be a *symbol* that is caught in a continuous referral from one sign to another. They are schizophrenic particles of images that symbolically and abstractly refer to other symbols, but do not signify in themselves.

Nor is the whole image necessarily a closed signified; in elaborate constructions of multiplicities the image may thanatropically lose its signifier and become a redundant sign. It is a linked system “without beginning or end that projects its shadow onto an amorphous atmospheric continuum.”²⁷⁶ This atmospheric continuum is a cumulation that takes on the role of the signified. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the amorphous continuum is a kind of surface into which contents are suspended and atmospherically diffused. The signifying regime organizes signs emitted from all directions as it expands the multiplicities of circles or spirals that contain the amorphous continuum.

Hito Steyerl presents a lucid articulation of images caught in digital cycles of deterritorialization, operating much like the chains in an amorphous continuum in the signifying

²⁷³ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image.” *The Wretched of the Screen*. ed. Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood (Sternberg Press, 2012), 41.

²⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

²⁷⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 289.

²⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 112.

regime. She proposes the idea of a “poor image,” which is “a copy in motion” that has traits of inferior resolution and substandard quality; it is an image that depreciates and decays through accelerated translations and disseminations.²⁷⁷

It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.²⁷⁸



Figure 22: AI-generated diagram using the above definition of poor images by Hito Steyerl.

The poor image in transit behaves like a sign or a symbol, circulating through what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “[o]vercoding by the signifier, irradiation in all directions, unlocalized omnipresence.”²⁷⁹ The signifier channels itself through digital space-time coordinates, observed and siphoned by the computational gaze, and algorithmically reproduced or deformed through the copy-and-paste repetitions in cybernetic hyperactivity.

Poor images are mechanically overcoded entities that are compressed deformations of higher resolution images. While Steyerl begins her discussion of the poor image with examples of difficult to access video essays and experimental films undergoing digitization, compression, and shared distribution online, she expands the poor image into the scope of popular audiovisual production, reproduction, and dissemination in general. In reference to the materiality of digital

²⁷⁷ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” 32.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 115.

images, and poor images in particular, Luna observes that “[t]he image acquires a material presence through the marks left in it by its accelerated circulation, leaving its iconic integrity shredded along successive journeys, appropriations and manipulations.”²⁸⁰ Every repetition comes with the modification and diminishment of the copy, which disintegrates through the gradients of its generational progression—an antiproductive difference inscribed in the very fabric of its visuality. These antiproductive deviations are manifested through the loss of data that occurs with each successive compression, pointing to the presence of withdrawal and inhibition in the image, distorting the signs of digital code, at the same time disorganizing asignifying signs.

Lossy compression schemes—when a file is reduced through irreversible deletion of unnecessary information—are such that the “data that have been compressed using lossy techniques generally cannot be recovered or reconstructed exactly.”²⁸¹ Reconstruction of data after compression always comes with a difference that is appropriately called *distortion*.²⁸² Poor images are thus irreversibly distorted files that are reconstructed through a partial withdrawal of actualized being in the reiterative process of the image. A compressed copy is more diminished and more internally abstracted than its predecessor, thus making compression an inherently melancholic, albeit calculated, procedure defined by the algorithmic schema of the inaccessible black box. This melancholic difference of distortion shows how the successive decomposition of the digital image is inscribed with perforations and the presence of absences, injecting void into processes of reproduction, making the digital image contract or fold into itself. The spread of poor images is a scattering of contractions as symbolic abbreviations.

Poor images circulate within “capitalist media assembly lines” just as easily as they insert themselves into “alternative audiovisual economies” such as illegal torrent distribution, message boards, blogs, or social media.²⁸³ As copies, they are the real of digital simulacra where they articulate themselves as diluted variations. Poor images have nothing to do with “the originary original” because they have their “own real conditions of existence: swarm circulation, digital

²⁸⁰ Luna, “Still Images?,” 51

²⁸¹ Khalid Sayood, *Introduction to Data Compression* (Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2018), 4.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁸³ Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” 43.

dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities.”²⁸⁴ These low resolution, compressed copies have the melancholic traits of asymbolic depreciation of visual coherence in their lack of pristine clarity, loss of information, and indeterminate temporality through the fits and starts of data distribution.

If a torrent freezes midway with no seeders to fulfill the transfer, the visual code is frustrated between incomplete withdrawal and inertia. A meme is remixed innumerable times, compressed, and circulated until it drops off, brought to an indeterminate standstill. An unpopular YouTube video on a neglected account is compressed for optimized streaming but gains no traction. This is the aspect of poor images that Steyerl did not take into account—their ultimate melancholic deceleration. Poor images have limits, cycles, and they circulate until they no longer serve demand, accelerating until they finally reach an exhaustive state of corpo-motor retardation or terminal deletion.

Deleuze and Guattari recognize the presence of dissolution in the signifying regime, stating that the regime “must provide the center with more signifier to overcome the entropy inherent in the system and to make new circles blossom or replenish the old.”²⁸⁵ The potential for replenishment also includes the potential for events of entropy. It is possible for this deterioration not to be contained or fought off as there could be instances when there is no signifier to refuel signification. Bryant states that an object is “internally fissured by the void of its place of inscription in the signifier, suggesting a fullness through its very absence that can never be filled.”²⁸⁶ This implies an excess in the image-object that is at once an inscription of its virtuality and an absence or void in the signifying regime, with a degree of withdrawal. The production of poor images is infused with viral antiproduction.

If the codec of a copy is to be interpreted through the signifying regime, the higher resolution image (the predecessor) is algorithmically deterritorialized so that its signs are siphoned into a reconstructive channel toward a new signified. In order to generate a new signified—a new image, a new copy—signs must find a position to restore their position in the chain. “There is a whole regime of roving, floating statements, suspended names, signs lying in

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁸⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 114.

²⁸⁶ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 129.

wait to return and be propelled by the chain. The signifier as the self-redundancy of the deterritorialized sign, a funereal world of terror.”²⁸⁷ The sign is a ghostly redundancy. Signs are nonhuman particles of semiotic regimes, the pollen and dead dust in the nebulous space of incorporeal objects. For poor images, this “funereal world of terror” is the underlying reinforcement for the thanatropic decay of data, where the deletion of redundant signs constitutes a melancholic trajectory for the next iteration of the signifier—a trajectory of loss that introduces the possibility of some algorithmically selected signs *not* referring to other signs. Melancholy here lies in the possibility of withdrawal from the chain, the possibility of the amorphous without a continuum, the potential of a sign being stuck in a temporally indeterminate loop, or a sign being obliterated altogether. It is like the infectious linguistic amnesia in the zombie film *Pontypool* (2008), wherein the infected persons search to mimic heard words with no signifiers, no progression, no production—only nonproductive repetitions of the same.

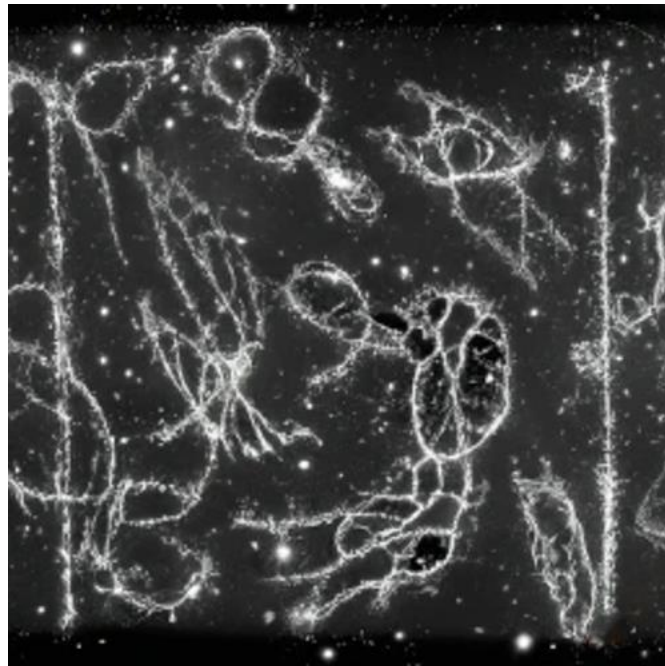


Figure 23: AI-generated diagram based on the text prompt “signs are nonhuman particles of semiotic regimes, the pollen and dead dust in the nebulous space of incorporeal objects.”

²⁸⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 113.

Compression is a process that absents information in the production of copies and is the most widely distributed method of image reduction and depletion. Glitch likewise functions through the withdrawal of signs in digital simulacra. Melancholic traits of withdrawal and temporal indeterminacy proliferate in the circulation of signs through compression and instances of glitch. By temporal indeterminacy I am here referring back to Bonnet's concept of the *hyperpresent*, which situates the dissemination of digital information as a constant deferral of death due to its insistence on amnesia of the past as well as the prospective future. This is reflective of the melancholic paradoxical conflict with finitude: compression allows for the productive acceleration of information distribution while at the same time inciting antiproduktive diminishment, imperfection, sidelined into a state of corpo-motor retardation. Poor images are virally disseminated, reproduced, and remixed in a productive manner, while carrying loss and the inhibition of contraction in their compressed format. They are thus melancholically inscribed as they accelerate and decelerate in the cybernetic ecology of the computational gaze.

3.4 *Download Finished*: Datamoshing as Temporal and Semiotic Compression

Download Finished is a website project by !Mediengruppe Bitnik and Sven König (2006–) that blends a P2P file sharing system with the process of datamoshing appropriated films and videos.²⁸⁸ A statement on Bitnik's website describes the project in the past tense: the system is no longer in operation and now functions as a melancholically inert, decelerated archive of glitched video files.

Download Finished's aim was not only to corrupt a multiplicity of appropriated films. The P2P file sharing community was integral to the functioning and construction of the cybernetic assemblage. The project in a sense anticipated the nascent beginnings of social media culture by creating condensed audiovisual objects, like memes or reels, that could be extracted from the system for further distribution or edits. The project statement highlights that file sharers became authors, precisely in the sense that Steyerl describes in reference to poor images—anyone with internet access can download, upload, compress, or augment a video. *Download Finished* was a collector, fabricator, and distributor of purposefully poored images. The project

²⁸⁸ The website can be accessed here: <https://download-finished.com/>.

was a reterritorialization of copyright restrictions (stratifications), reterritorializing and rhizomatically expanding a machinic plexus for distributing files as objects of appropriation, pressing against the deterritorializing limits of digital capitalism’s grasp on works of visual culture.

While for Bitnik and König the project highlights the collaborative aspects of P2P file sharing culture, I am more interested in the digital transformations of appropriated videos themselves. I would like to narrow in on the digital visual object itself and its relationship to digital corruption and compression. The project statement refers to datamoshing as a “transformation machine” that makes digital materiality of the augmented moving image visible: “found footage became the rough material for the transformation machine, which translated the underlying data structure of the films onto the surface of the screen. The original images dissolved into pixels, thus making the hidden data structure visible.”²⁸⁹

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://www.download-finished.com/p2p/downloads>. The page title is ".p2p downloads" and the subtitle is "check up on your downloads". On the left side, there is a navigation menu with links: .home, .search, .p2p films, .p2p downloads, .archive, .how to, and .faq. The main content is a table with the following columns: name, director, %, status, size, and kb/s. The table lists various video files with their respective directors and completion percentages.

name	director	%	status	size	kb/s
wargames english divx.avi	znervolino	98.7%	692.6	701.9 mb	-
one missed call 2.2005 dvdrip vostfr.avi	günther friesinger	97.2%	1740.8	1740.8 mb	-
(doku) ddr - prost mahlzeit ddr - kali, pfeffi, blauer würger.avi	reabia	95.3%	378.8	397.3 mb	-
wargames.(1983).cd2.[mgcmgg].(osloskop.net).avi	zum beispiel	93.0%	651.2	700.2 mb	-
chris marker - sans soleil.avi	ingo günter	87.5%	614.1	702.2 mb	-
moartea domnului lazarescu full.avi	hansepolis	85.2%	651.8	1000.3 mb	-
control[2007]dvdrip.ac3[eng].avi	humphrey hochmut	82.9%	720.6	869.0 mb	-
experimental.cinema.of.the.20s.&.30s--joris.ivens.-.reg en.(1929).dvdrip.avi	sof	76.8%	122.8	159.9 mb	-
wargames.(1983).cd1.[mgcmgg].(osloskop.net).avi	zum beispiel	74.9%	524.5	700.3 mb	5.0
[divx].fr. persepolis.fr..réalisé par marjane satrapi , vincent paronnaud avec chiara mastroianni, catherine deneuve, danielle darrieux.1h35mn.avi.avi	hansepolis	70.7%	693.0	980.6 mb	-
tabu (f.w. murnau, 1931) dvdrip divxclasico.avi	aaron siegel	68.0%	1014.2	1536.0 mb	-
don quijote de la mancha [miguel de cervantes saavedra - fernando rey y alfredo landa].mpg	anja	64.9%	531.3	818.9 mb	-
juno.dvdrip.eng(2007).avi	hansepolis	55.6%	510.4	918.6 mb	-
strandbeest (theo jansen).avi	domagoj smoljo	54.3%	66.1	121.8 mb	-
one.missed.call[2008]dvdrip[eng]-axxo.avi	arsniche	53.3%	444.7	834.4 mb	-
dark.horse.german.2005.dvdrip.xvid-se.avi	hansepolis	45.6%	319.5	699.8 mb	-
sans_soleil-sunless-chris_marker-1983-english[dvdrip][f mp4].avi	ingo günter	29.5%	228.7	775.0 mb	-
southland tales[2007]dvdrip xvid[english]teddy.avi	wwwwwww	28.7%	234.0	814.9 mb	-
art - robert rauschenberg documentary!! (sub ita).avi	#!/usr/bin/doma	27.6%	117.0	424.3 mb	-
jnrc - men of istanbul 2 - 1h31m19s.avi	achim friedland	23.0%	133.0	578.3 mb	-
pinero.2001.divx.dvdrip.avi	fad	19.3%	269.9	1433.6 mb	-
al otro lado. 2005 (d. carmen maura. dir austavo loza). avi	hansepolis	16.2%	113.2	699.2 mb	-

Figure 24: Screenshot of the *Download Finished* website.

²⁸⁹ !Mediengruppe Bitnik, “Download Finished,” !Mediengruppe Bitnik, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.bitnik.org/d/>.

The effect produced by datamoshing mimics accidental glitches that can occasionally occur in file compression. Datamoshing is a practice that displaces differential frames by either removing key frames (I-frames) or manipulating delta frames (B- or P-frames), which define the differences between key frames. In this case some key frames have been removed sporadically throughout the films to manufacture the glitches.²⁹⁰ Movement in compressed digital video is separated from what is not moving in the shot. B- and P-frames determine motion or changes that are separate from I-frames that encode static or constant areas such as still figures and backgrounds. When a video is datamoshed, areas of motion between shots encounter a collision of discontinuity, yet this discontinuity also functions as a link, or a glitch-stitch, between the frames, resulting in the distinctive visual effect of the glitch.



²⁹⁰ !Mediengruppe Bitnik and Sven König, “FAQ,” *Download Finished*, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://download-finished.com/faq.html>.



Figures 25 & 26: Film stills from two different videos in the *Download Finished* archive.

The appearance of datamoshing is sometimes likened to a kind of kinetic painterly effect, with smearing motions of abstract colours that occur when two frames clash into one another without the incremental change necessary for a smooth transition (fig. 25 & 26). This lack of seamless transition occurs through the corruption of data—the corruption of digital signs, which leave their signifying chains and crash into one another, producing formations of chromatic agglomerates. William Brown and Meetal Kutty observe that the datamosh abstracts any structure of character or action, replacing narrative with a phantasmagoria of colour.²⁹¹ Their comparison to a physiological or organic impulse within the moving image describes something inorganic that can behave with the irregularities and discordance of organic structures. This transformation of behaviour indicates a loosening or softening tendency in digital structures that is symptomatic of thanatropic decay. A different parallel to organic behaviour is implied in

²⁹¹ In reference to *Monster Movie* (2005) by Takeshi Murata, Brown and Kutty argue that the re-emergent monster figures in the film are part of the film’s “ecology” where the “cybernetic structures” of the images seem to have “physiological impulses ... manifested by the emergence of the monsters from the soup of colour that surrounds them.” William Brown and Meetal Kutty, “Datamoshing and the Emergence of Digital Complexity from Digital Chaos,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into [L] New Media Technologies* 18, no.2 (2012): 169.

datamoshing being sometimes referred to as the *bleeding pixel effect*.

Appropriated video in *Download Finished* is entangled with the overcoding limits of audiovisual capitalism, striving to become an antiproduktive incision in the system. The processed videos and films belong to the sharer as well as to everyone else, outside the purview of corporate film industries.²⁹² *Download Finished* is an archive that is intended to reterritorialize a gap-space within the commodities of visual culture by assigning zero capital value to the distributed videos. Parikka states that machinic becoming is injected into the logic of networked media ecology, which is the same as the logic of consumerism in control society, allowing dissident software art “to find the cracks in the majoritarian language operating as the cultural relay of power and control.”²⁹³ The project introduces a level of entropy and decay into the signifying regime of subjectification through the antiproduktive procedures of disseminating datamoshed videos for free. The social web that was meant to expand this neutralized value was a temporary effort to destratify and decode objects through a P2P system and glitch practice. Unlike some piracy projects that are modeled after entrepreneurial economies, this is a project that is “a complex array of practices where economic, political, and cultural concerns come into play” while at the same time it follows developments in digital technology that emerged, according to Mueller, from capitalism’s own “imperatives, contradictions, and crises.”²⁹⁴ In this way, it is a subversive underground project designed to be a glitch in the system, but one that is also deterritorialized through the website’s reliance on infrastructural configurations that make internet access, website hosting, and video editing possible. Nested inside this infrastructure, *Download Finished* holds the dissident remnants of illegal appropriation.

Appropriation here functions as what Nicolas Bourriaud refers to as the work of the deejay, where connective remixes represent “at once a product, a tool, and a medium” while the space between production and consumption collapses and the consumer becomes a subversive “user of forms.”²⁹⁵ This means not only consuming a product but mediating it into new

²⁹² Bitnik and König, “FAQ.”

²⁹³ Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art,” 124.

²⁹⁴ Gavin Mueller, *Media Piracy in the Cultural Economy: Intellectual Property and Labor under Neoliberal Restructuring* (Routledge, 2019), 80.

²⁹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, “Deejaying and Contemporary Art,” *Appropriation*, ed. David Evans (Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2009), 158.

formations, in this case into moshed, sliced up versions of films, which are in turn made available for consumption or further remix. For the poor image to multiply there must be a mediator or an accomplice to save and/or share the file, to ensure its generational entropic reproduction. The cybernetic-human interaction is a reciprocal hybridized mediation with the inevitable blind spot of the black box. Isabelle Graw comments that it is crucial to view appropriation as “a process of mutual influence, in which the dynamic of the appropriated material is transferred to the appropriator.”²⁹⁶ The object of appropriation is a nonhuman entity that imposes itself on the appropriator and determines the conditions of its mediational outcome; the differential frames and the software define the constraints made available to the mediator.

With *Download Finished*, however, there is more than one mediator for each video object, which complicates the transference and reciprocity between the appropriated object and the mediators. There is the mediator who injects content into Bitnik and König’s system, the utilization of the black box “transformation machine” that augments the copy into a corrupted version, and finally there is the mediator or consumer who downloads the videos for viewing or further remix. Mediation becomes a hybridized constellation of metamorphic actualizations, brought about through disruptive, antiproduktive interference. The appropriated object is a machine with economic affordances as well as unactualized thanatropic potential. It is through the mediational assemblage of the system that this potential is unleashed, bleeding pixels en masse. The videos are thanatropically deformed and contracted, through datamoshing, editing, and compression. They demonstrate the reductive disorientation of signs, showing the surface composed of formations of pixels that indicate the image’s corporeal constitution as digital code.

There is discordance in the visual texts sought out to be remixed and corrupted through the system. Genres and narratives in the archive are of no relevance. A number of music videos by Einstürzende Neubauten (an experimental industrial band) are listed in proximity to Pipilotti Rist, Werner Herzog, and various horror films. The symbolic expressions of these videos become fragmented and scrambled, with each sustaining semiotic confusion within its own wounded file structure. Brown and Kutty note that “datamoshing as a practice (together with ‘glitch art’ more

²⁹⁶ Isabelle Graw, "Dedication Replacing Appropriation: Fascination, Subversion, and Dispossession in Appropriation Art," *Louise Lawler and Others*, ed. Philipp Kaiser (Hatje Kantz, 2004), 52–53.

generally) highlights the decay that digital images undergo over time.”²⁹⁷ Datamoshing appropriates digital decay into a method of absencing images, artificially mutilating video into codified pixel rot. In this state the videos are temporally indeterminate, their rhythms shifted closer to melancholic asymbolia through deletion, cuts, and remix. By removing differential frames in the file, an instant of time in the image is abolished, instituting temporal compression, which is further contracted through the reduction and splicing of the videos into five-minute segments. While sound is not effected here by glitch corruption as it is in the next case study of Nicolas Provost’s *Long Live the New Flesh*, the cut-up technique that distills an entire film into a few minutes obliterates large portions of content and interrupts any possibility of inferred acoustic, as well as visual, narrative. This contributes to the displacement of all semiotic components, which in combination with the moshed visuals acts as a temporally dislocated remix, punctuated with narrative gaps and incomplete utterances.

As deformed and chopped up copies of films, the moshed videos underwent incorporeal as well as corporeal transformations of semiotic and physical contraction, where signs in the chain are annihilated and the gaps are stitched back together. This results with a digital image whose inorganic encoded and physical content is re-codified, while its animate expression transforms in correspondence with the content’s inscription of instability. In machinic terms, content does not refer to what is symbolically represented in the image, rather it is the physical body of the image and its codified constitution. In this corporeality, the computational gaze reacts to deformations of code and expresses its mutilated vision in the form of converged pixel groupings. Parikka conceives of software-based art as inherently relying on such processes of conversions and transmutations.²⁹⁸ The temporal contraction of datamoshing is a conversion of data’s durational consistency on the plane of content, expressed as a visually accessible transmutation.

Datamoshing as a practice is an act of destratifying re-stratification into a state of defamiliarization dependent on contingency. The process is methodical, but the resulting images cannot be precisely predicted. This uncertainty is a contrived practice of synthetic incisions and bonds. According to Iman Moradi, the glitch’s “pure incontestable status as fleeting error or

²⁹⁷ Brown and Kutty, “Datamoshing and the Emergence of Digital Complexity,” 165.

²⁹⁸ Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art,” 122.

accident is completely contested when it's captured or re-purposed.”²⁹⁹ The error may become captured, but it is mediated rather than just engineered as an effect, and this mediation is the *pooring* of images. It is a partial destratification through a mediational restratification, sending the copied incorporeality of the image into thanatropic asymbolia. From the perspective of the computational gaze, these are simply breaks in its signifying chain, recalculated impulses to collapse encoded colour and movement. The ambiguity of how the datamosh will manifest itself as a deformed entity indicates how the computational gaze determines its own conditions of expression.

The computational gaze is not what instigates the glitch to occur, but it has a nonhuman perspective on it, or a comprehension of it, that differs from the expression of glitch as it appears to us on the surface. The machinic semiotic approach to digital entities and events aligns with Miguel Carvalhais' concept of surface and subface computation. The level of interaction with digital technology, including poor images, occurs on the surface of simulacra.³⁰⁰ Carvalhais sees computation as a life form with a surface and a subface. He states that the black box is the subface to which we only have indirect access through code, but the only way to catch a glimpse of it is through the interface that it produces during events of glitch, error, or malfunction.³⁰¹ The subface is the black box field of vision for the computational gaze, with all of its codified perceptions and expressive potential. He argues that computation has a kind of subjectivity that interobjectively meshes with other entities and environments, which echoes the notion of human-machine hybridity in artistic practice.³⁰²

Carvalhais' interpretation of art and computation has melancholic inclinations in that he situates fragility and divergent dysfunctions as being integral to digital processes, and by extension integral to computational artistic methods. Thanatropic decay is immanent to digitality. He states that “[i]mpermanence and irregularity are fundamental conditions of computational objects” that occupy a nonhuman space that is internally permeated with instability “analogous to a form of

²⁹⁹ Iman Moradi, “Glitchbreak 11/11/11,” *GLITCH/READER[ROR] 20111*, ed. Nick Briz et al. (Unsorted Books, 2011), 151.

³⁰⁰ “The apparatus is a producer of symbols, a black box developing processes that play with symbols.” Miguel Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, (V2_Publishing, 2022), 51.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰² Interobjectivity refers to Timothy Morton's concept of relation among objects. “Interobjective reality is just the sum total of all these footprints, crisscrossing everywhere. It's nonlocal by definition and temporally molten.” It also refers to causality and the *aesthetic*, or sensual, interaction and exchange between objects. Morton, *Realist Magic*, 71.

metabolism.”³⁰³ This is a melancholic metabolism that relies on the absorption and ejection of unstable events, representing the organic states of entropy and deceleration that fluctuate inside computational systems. Thus the subface is susceptible to antiproductive events that disturb signs from behaving in the order of complete flawless utility.

What Carvalhais’ theory is missing is a sub-subface, or something faceless. This would be a space where computational operations and their immanent powers withdraw and cease to be computational, where they become BwOs, beneath the strata of content and expression. This is where the computational gaze can close its eye or stare into a darkness of deterritorialized absences and amorphous particle-signs. Closer to the motors of production and antiproduction, this facelessness of computational objects is gravitationally proximate to zones of inaccessibility in machinic assemblages. The computational gaze does not need to be strictly binary. There are molecular flows and phases of shifting intensities. The gaze may consist of points on a spectrum, or variable levels between the expressive surface, the materiality of the subface, the darkness of complete withdrawal, and the void of annihilation. The computational gaze is influenced by variations and differences in the strata, which can at times slide into melancholic indeterminacy.

Glitch emerges from erroneous events in the subface, making itself visible on the surface, but it is also effectuated by events of severance and disruption in virtuality. The subface is made unstable by the BwOs that fill the subface with antiproductive potentialities, inducing operational failure. Bits of data become absented into zero-intensity through nonlinear decompositional disjunctions. Glitch is the *memento mori* of the computational gaze. It is like the symbol of the twitching, flickering fly on the television screen in *The Ring* (2002)—the fly manifested itself out of demonic darkness, into a magnetically encoded curse, through the screen’s interface, and into actualized corporeality (fig. 27).

³⁰³ Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, 83.

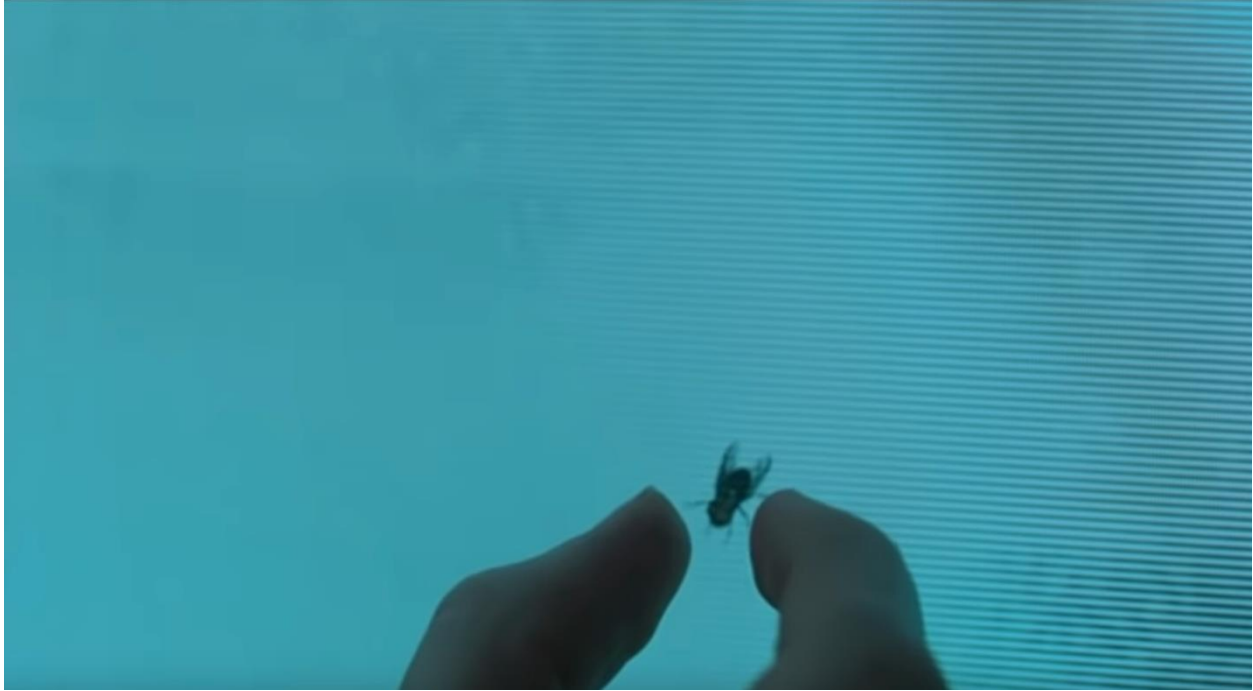


Figure 27: Film still from *The Ring* (2002).

The common assumption is that glitches reveal the materiality of digital media; this is true only in the sense that a glitch is a surface inscription of a deeper, invisible operational issue. The screen on which we might see the glitch is fully functional, but at the level of hardware or code there was an event of a rupture, interruption, or what Michael Betancourt refers to as stoppage—“the interruption of a predictable and prescribed autonomous process.”³⁰⁴ In order for the visual manifestation to occur, Betancourt states that there is a transformation from the material base of the image into the perceivable image, and in this process “material markers are subject to the same semiosis and order as any other elements in that image.”³⁰⁵ The glitch’s markers become a flattened end product, which he likens to evidential traces captured in photography.³⁰⁶ If content, or the

³⁰⁴ Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 36.

³⁰⁵ Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 53.

³⁰⁶ For Betancourt this suggestion of the materiality of the digital can offer openings for the critique of the shifting limits of digital capitalism, but only if “mystification” is refused and the “aura of the digital” that denies digital materiality is suspended. For glitch to have the potential for critical analysis of the digital, it must be considered from the standpoint of the computational gaze, from the inside out—not only in terms of expression but also of content and all the other strata involved in the process of rupture. Betancourt does not consider these other strata in his analysis of glitch, instead focusing on the viewer’s tendencies to either overlook or infer digital materiality through semiotic experience. See: Betancourt, *Glitch Art*, 8.

material body, is brought to consciousness it is through interruptive markers that suggest an absence of function in that material, as a symptomatic indicator of error.

Download Finished focuses on aspects of digital simulacra through the pooring of images, insinuating the strata of corporeality through unpredictable warping of video files. This decelerated archive offers a functional, surface interface for the superficial access of deeply melancholic dysfunctional media compressions. Yet there are other strata involved in the assemblages of the entire operation. The project does not acknowledge that the black box darkens anything beneath the level of simulacra, obscuring the subfacial content underlying surface expressions. The BwO is also darkly obscured with all of its virtual antiproductive stimuli. In the next case study, I will explore how the virtual, invisible flows of the BwO operate as a demonic force in the difference contained within repetition.

3.5 Long Live the New Flesh: Demonic Simulacra and Bleeding Horror

Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009) is an amalgam of processes of appropriation, remix, and datamoshing, where scenes from various genres of horror films collide within themselves and with one another in a symbolic disorientation of code, visual incoherence of information, and disrupted stuttering of sound.³⁰⁷ The film shows how there is interiorized difference of the glitch-as-copy in digital simulacra, nested within copies of film fragments, becoming a disguised affirmation of the "demonic" in simulacra, while simultaneously commenting on notions of the demonic in the horror film genre.

³⁰⁷ An excerpt from the film can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/62058220>.

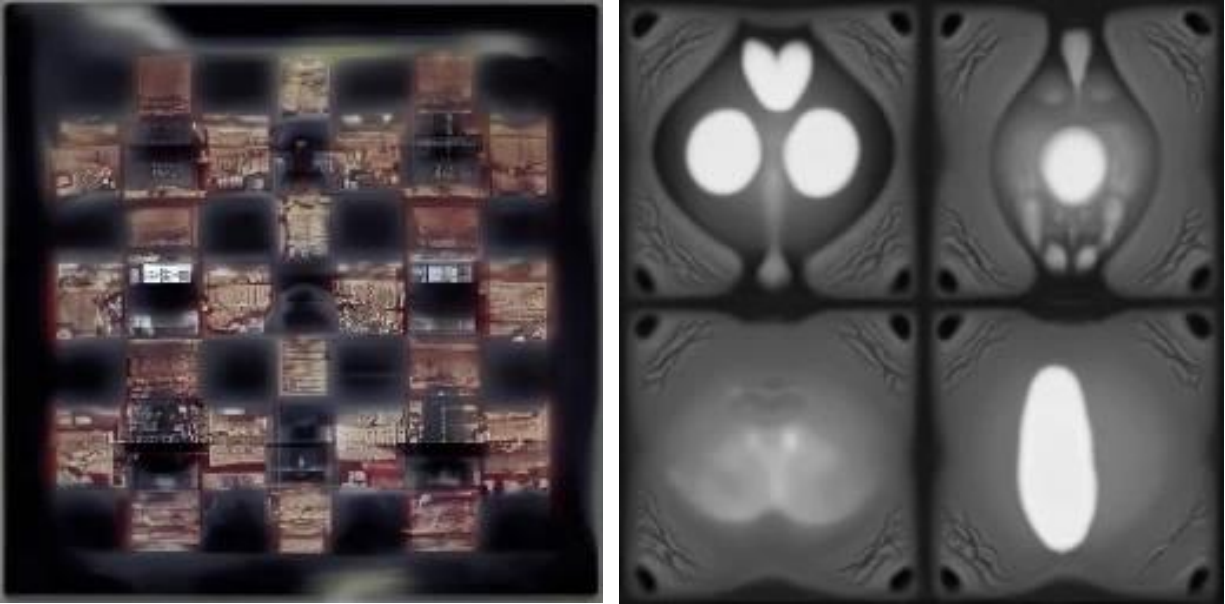


Figure 28: AI-generated diagrams using the below Deleuze quote as the text prompt.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze argues that “[s]imulacra or phantasms are not simply copies of copies, degraded *icônes* involving infinitely relaxed relations of resemblance. ... simulacra are precisely demonic images, stripped of resemblance” with “interiorized dissimilitude” (fig. 28).³⁰⁸ They function through “demonic” powers of difference. Resemblance becomes externalized in order for the copy to thrive on dissimilitude. The demonic works destructively, dissolving binary distinctions, glitching its way through difference in repetition to produce more difference. What does this mean for repetition encountered in digital simulacra, and what does it mean for appropriation of images and for the capturing of a glitch, as in the example of *Long Live the New Flesh*?

Deleuze’s view on simulacra consisting of the demonic implies that there is no prescribed order in the symbolic, that the amorphous continuums are productive only with the demonic antiproduction that unsettles the referrals between signs into intermittent asymbolia—“it is a peculiarity of demons ... to leap over the barriers or the enclosures, thereby confounding the boundaries between properties.”³⁰⁹ The demonic is shape-shifting, ambiguous, powerful,

³⁰⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Continuum, 2001), 127–128.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

concealed, malicious, instrumental, or duplicitous; demons can be summoned or banished. The demonic disrupts binaries. According to Bryant, “the daemonic scrambles all codes and divisions.”³¹⁰ I am not implying that glitch events are demonic in the mythical sense of the word, merely that glitch practices seek out those qualities or events that unsettle the barriers implicit in digital forms.

In the digital realm, the demonic difference within repetition can actualize itself through disintegrative flows of the death drive and interior discord—difference manifests itself in generative calculations as well as unforeseen malfunctions. Keith Ansell-Pearson interprets Deleuze’s position on the matter, stating that he posits the death drive as an interplay of organic and inorganic energy, where organic entities are undone into systems external to them in order to encounter the difference of “the demonic and the monstrous” which blend heterogeneous or disparate elements.³¹¹ For Pearson, these demonic and monstrous forces *connect* heterogeneous entities, but my interpretation is that connections can only occur at the cost of subtractive machinic diminishment. The death drive is a diffractive interchange where the binary between the organic and the inorganic is diffused, and the collision of disparate elements does not directly or immediately coalesce into new significations or identities. It is rather subtractive, externalizing properties and diminishing objects into disintegrative asinificance in their turn toward the BwO.³¹² Deleuze and Guattari assert that the death drive is a “pure silence in its transcendent distinction from life,” but proceeds with greater force through the variations of difference and processual becomings—“[a]bsorbed, diffuse, immanent death is the condition formed by the signifier in capitalism.”³¹³ This diffusion of the death drive positions subtraction as a necessity for demonic interference in the unstable stratified systems of schizophrenic capitalism, including the stratifications in the simulacra of digital capitalism. A glitch within the digital field is, then, an example of a subtractive object of absence or rupture that is mediated or

³¹⁰ Levi R. Bryant, “Knots: Notes for a Daemonic Naturalism,” *symplekē* 24, no. 1–2 (2016): 27.

³¹¹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (Routledge, 1999), 114.

³¹² Recall Negarestani’s notion of subtractive degeneration. “That which is exteriorized or dissolved into its precursor exteriority becomes a differential interpolation of a nested series of interiorities whose limitropic convergence upon zero (i.e. inflection upon death) has a weirdly *chemical*—thus contingent and productive—disposition which . . . convolutes the path of decontraction to the originary flatline of death.” Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 391.

³¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 335.

translated within the heterogeneity of stratified digital structures and infrastructures. Provost’s use of datamoshing subtracts from the appropriated segments of films, absencing information so that the moving image is injected with demonic difference.



Figure 29: AI-generated diagrams using the below sentence as the text prompt.

The simulacrum overturns all originals or “models” as repetition through copies and the production of simulacra is enacted (fig. 29).³¹⁴ It even becomes questionable what an original entity might be—an emergence of a glitch as a pure time-image? But if all signs refer to other signs, any original model is obfuscated by the multiplicities of simulacra that constitute the signifying regime. For the appropriation of video from visual culture, this means that the innumerable series of signifiers involved in the composition of a film, for example, are severed from the original model of the film. Even the master copy is a reiteration of arrested time-images that become translated into surface mediations as movement-images; I will return to this point after establishing Provost’s relationship to genre. Video appropriation is about the capture of copies and their subsequent augmentation—the transformation of the copy—so that it functions

³¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xx.

as an extension of simulacra through repetition.

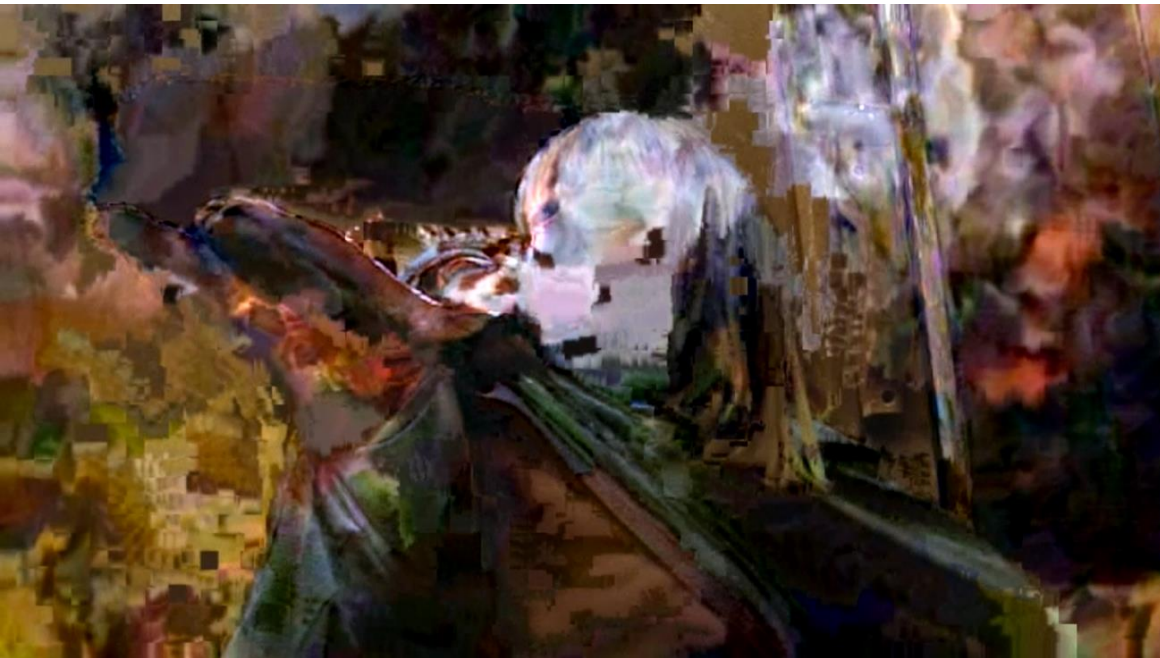
This transformation via appropriation induces a level of temporal incongruity when it is combined with glitch practice. An encoded copy of a mosh glitch is the repetition of a genuine or “original” error—a rupture functioning as antiproduktive difference, or a corporeal break. *Long Live the New Flesh* is a file that can replay the semblance of error ad infinitum. In the practice of datamoshing, the stitch between discordant motion frames that arises at the instance of rupture is a demonically disturbed confusion of properties. It becomes a jumbled collision of collapsed code that disrupts time-based properties like a possessive twitch.³¹⁵ The mediated, re-encoded repetition of the event of rupture becomes a replayable reiteration of the same: a recording, a fixated loop, a ghost, or a circular tracing of a gap, but one that is always different in itself.

It is an individuated state of being doubling back on itself temporally, yet always engulfed in a processual incongruity, being both potentially imminent and already past. The temporal loop of the glitch’s reiteration contains within it the dissimilarity that is inherent to and particular to this repetitive circularity in time. The difference is temporal rather than structural; it is a temporal subtractive derivative of the original glitch. The copy of the schiz, or the rupture, that has passed no longer represents a break and becomes melancholically trapped in the looped simulacrum of digital code.³¹⁶ The copy’s difference is melancholic because of its cyclical simulation of the “model”—a stuckness, a stuttering, an obsessive fixation on the phantasm of that which is no longer accessible. The capture and replayability of a glitch becomes a function of melancholic repetition. But if repetition is symbolic, constituting simulacra, and if difference is encapsulated within repetition “by way of disguise and by the order of the symbol,” then the glitch and its demonic origins are nonetheless *disguised* within repetition, even if it is only through resemblance.³¹⁷ In Provost’s film, the copy of the glitch is an obsessive tracing of the ruptures’ original, subtractive manifestations.

³¹⁵ Földényi remarks that *acedia* was considered to be demonic, manifesting itself not only in idleness but in *restlessness* and *instability* as well. Földényi, *Melancholy*, 79.

³¹⁶ What occurs is a self-enclosed, compressed “cyberpositive circuit” that loops time— “[a] cybernegative circuit is a loop in time, whereas cyberpositive circuitry loops time ‘itself’, integrating the actual and the virtual in a semi-closed collapse upon the future.” Land, “Circuitries,” 317.

³¹⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 19.



Figures 30 & 31: Film stills from Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009).

In *Long Live the New Flesh*, familiarity with iconic, appropriated film scenes disintegrates into phasings of putrefied pixellations (constellations) of simulated asymbolia. The images are dismantled into putrid, nauseatingly psychedelic discolourations, turning the appropriated horror genre scenes into yet more horrific renditions of incorporeal expression—a hemorrhaged overload of moshed simulacra. Cinematic simulations of fake blood become

groupings of bleeding pixels. A statement describes how “the images literally consume one another and the horror in all its visual power is brought to a natural boiling point.”³¹⁸



Figure 32: Film still from Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009).

The film begins with two interchanging close-up static shots of the staring faces of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) and Richard Hallorann (Scatman Crothers) from *The Shining* (1980), warbling with hesitant pixel block discolourations, not yet giving full force to the characteristic violent flows of the datamosh effect. This is followed by edited, rearranged clips from *The Shining* as Wendy Torrance's (Shelley Duvall's) screams stutter through the distortion.³¹⁹ The film progresses into a chaotic montage of various iconic horror and science fiction body horror scenes, including fragments from films such as *American Psycho* (2000), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Fly* (1986), *Alien* (1979), *The Hidden* (1987), *The Thing* (1982), and *Videodrome* (1983). Faces, bodies, gestures, props, and backgrounds clash into one another in a succession of instants

³¹⁸ “Long Live the New Flesh,” *Video Data Bank*, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.vdb.org/titles/long-live-new-flesh>.

³¹⁹ The sound of Duvall's vocal expressions of terror stutter in the same way as the other sonic punctuations in the film, which align with the stuttering of the corrupted image. Duvall's screams coupled with her visceral dramatization of absolute horror, glitching in tandem, serve as the transition from the apprehensive atmosphere of the opening scenes to the more chaotic events that ensue throughout the rest of the film.

that are eaten by the next frames as soon as they appear. This is why recognition of specific scenes from known films becomes somewhat beside the point. It is rendered redundant as the medium and its corruption deterritorializes the source materials, which are out of sequence, cropped, and cut into a remix that decontextualizes simulations of gore and fear into a new simulation, a new flesh, of digital schiz.

Simulation mediates the real to a “point where the copy ceases to be a copy in order to become the Real and its artifice.”³²⁰ This echoes Steyerl’s statement about poor images, or copies, having their own inscriptions of reality. As a sequence of purposefully poored images, for the film there is no longer any sense of the original, as the copy is transmogrified into its own artificial repeated mutilation. In Deleuze’s machine ontology, art is not imitation but functions by repeating other repetitions, internally overturning copies into simulation so that even stereotypes or clichés, such as those enforced by genre, are simulated through deterritorialization or dislocation in relation to other copies, from which it is possible to distill slices of difference.³²¹ Every image or copy has this internal difference, and it is equally artificial, so that by the same token its simulation is equally flush with the real.

The inscription of identification for the film is fragmented and incomplete, with melancholic tendencies to withdraw—not into virtuality but into a conflicting relationship with legibility. If the image cannot be fully inscribed as identifiable, it does not make it less real or less simulated. It is simply not aligned with the semiotic inscriptions of our own perceptive or logical constitution. While the selected scenes can be pinpointed down to a source, their collisions make legibility fractured, cropped, disoriented, and temporally contracted.

³²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 87.

³²¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 293.



Figure 33: Film still from Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009).

Legibility, whether it is for our gaze or the computational gaze, relies on the concomitant planes of content and expression and the various ways they are individuated in the strata. Both planes have their own mechanisms, formations, and procedures of becoming. They are organized separately without directly effecting one another, yet they are inextricably knotted together. Bryant states that content refers to the “utterance” or what in visual terms would be the form holding the image. Because content and expression are distinct operations within an object, an incorporeal transformation such as the use of an interface to transcode an image into a different file format is inseparable but distinct from the plane of content that physically supports the operation. The whole assemblage surrounding a digital object is susceptible to fragility and utterances of decay.³²² The machinic body's functions and malfunctions in the subface have their own planes of expression and content.

³²² The potential for error resides in the subface, but it is undergirded by the antiproductive flows of the BwO which unsettles organized systems, including computation, and ensures the presence of and potential for decay. Tim Barker notes how the potential for error or glitch is an internal built-in feature of computation. See: Tim Barker, “Aesthetics of the Error: Media Art, the Machine, the Unforeseen, and the Errant,” *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, ed. Mark Nunes (Continuum, 2011), 43.

Content should not be confused with the subface just as expression should not be confused with the surface. Both surface and subface have their own corporeal and incorporeal structures. For instance, the use of software is an incorporeal idea pertinent to the corporeal subface of computer components. Glitch is an expression in the subface that performs a chain reaction in the corporeal aspects of the surface, such as the bleeding pixel effect manifested on the screen as a picture, which in turn becomes an incorporeal expression as a set of semiotic elements—a moving image. The computational gaze is a subface operation that has its own black box of contents and expressions that may or may not effectuate a visible response in the surface.

The title *Long Live the New Flesh* references David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983)—a film wherein the difference between the surface of media, corporeality, and mysterious hallucinogenic disturbance, incited by a supernormal infectious television channel, overlap to lead the protagonist into a transcendent becoming into *new flesh*, suggested to him through a simulated image of self-annihilation. This new flesh can be interpreted to be the human-machine or human-media becoming of hybridity on the BwO, driving the protagonist to shed the organization of his corporeality and make way for a new monstrous corporeality of bio-mediational abhorrence that extends into incorporeal operations of simulacra. Provost's datamoshing of horror comments on how images have the incorporeal power to metabolize the gaze, in the same way that it is metabolized in *Videodrome*.³²³

Long Live the New Flesh, in the manner of *Download Finished*, likewise presents us with drastically poored images—appropriated disarticulation and corruptive exploitation of popular culture. The genre of horror film is transmogrified into the genre of glitch art. In horror film, *memento mori* becomes melancholically schizophrenic, filled with errant abnormalities, hybrids, hauntings, and carnage, while—as Anna Powell suggests—“[o]ur own spectatorial ‘membrane’ likewise becomes permeable, pierced by the deathly movement-image.”³²⁴

³²³ In one scene, as Mitchell describes, “the protagonist is drawn to merge with an embodied living image through the television screen “even at the risk of being engulfed and swallowed by it.” The image acquires a nonhuman gravitational force that inverts the gaze into a corporeal metamorphosis of incorporeal semiotic investments. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, xvi.

³²⁴ Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 51.



Figure 34: Film still from Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009), appropriating the final scene from *Videodrome* (1983).

In *Long Live the New Flesh*, it all boils down to the surface, conflating symbolic meaning with the corporeality of the moving image as the appropriated symbols of anomalous mortality become alien themselves. If “[g]roup fantasy is plugged into and machined on the socius,” as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, then the horror genre is a generalized *memento mori* fantasy manifested through images of fear and carnage, and this fantasy is inextricable from the machinic operations in the socius.³²⁵ The genre is one way that *memento mori* is diffracted as a motif in cinema and other aspects of visual culture.

Provost's choice of the horror genre is not necessarily about commentary on or exploitation of the genre, but also about the genre's apprehension of mortality—in a melancholic sense, in the paradoxical simultaneity of desire for and anxious fear of death, as manifested in the symbolic rendering of bodies as fragile, estranged, alien, or undead, whether they be human, monstrous, or audiovisual entities.³²⁶ Terror and fear are also historically associated with

³²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 62.

³²⁶ The fragility of the human body and the violence that can destroy it is keenly felt in those afflicted with melancholy. Kristeva recounts a case of a melancholic who cannot bear social integration and is plagued with a violent desire to kill; but she retreats into the solitude of self-annihilation, in her “living

melancholy.³²⁷ With this established association between melancholy and horror or repulsion, the genre can be seen as a hyperactive cultural manifestation of intrigue with abject dread. In Provost's project, the fluidity of visual putrefaction—guttured from scenes of terror and weirdness—stands in for the interiorized decay as difference that permeates the codes of digitized cinema. The demonic otherness that is so characteristic of the genre is utilized as a dimension parallel to the inorganic otherness of image-entities that seem to behave organically, generatively, as well as antiproduktively. The film's rough, broken fluidity is a deformed simulation of the genre. The genre's narrative is here utilized to tap into something explicitly nonhuman, beyond the signifying regime. As Simon O'Sullivan observes, "[f]abulation involves the use of signifying material to access something specifically asignifying."³²⁸ Through the fabulations of the genre and its digital corruption, the implied perception or inference of disintegrative asignifiante affectively amplifies the uneasy sense of horror implicit to the genre.

Genre is the actualization of groupings of repeated stereotypes, motifs, clichés, or nests of symbol-copies and signifier-imitators. According to Deleuze, a cliché is a sensory-motor image corresponding to an object, which we perceive only according to what is of intrigue according to our ideological and psychological formations.³²⁹ In the case of simply viewing a scene from a horror film, we are engaged with clichés of *memento mori* through the fabulation of ambience, narrative, anticipation of threat, and actions of violence.

We therefore normally perceive only clichés. But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be 'justified' ...³³⁰

corpse," as she moves through a haze between the social world and her "graveyard bed—like an extraterrestrial, the inaccessible citizen of the magnificent land of Death." Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 74.

³²⁷ Mary Ann Lund, *A User's Guide to Melancholy* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21.

³²⁸ Simon O'Sullivan, "From Aesthetics to the Abstract Machine: Deleuze, Guattari and Contemporary Art Practice," *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 203.

³²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 20.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

Deleuze's statement precedes the advent of digitized cinema and digital glitch art, but this statement can apply to the interpretation of Provost's film in that through digital fracturing of audiovisual clichés, a more direct or pure image can be disclosed (fig. 35).

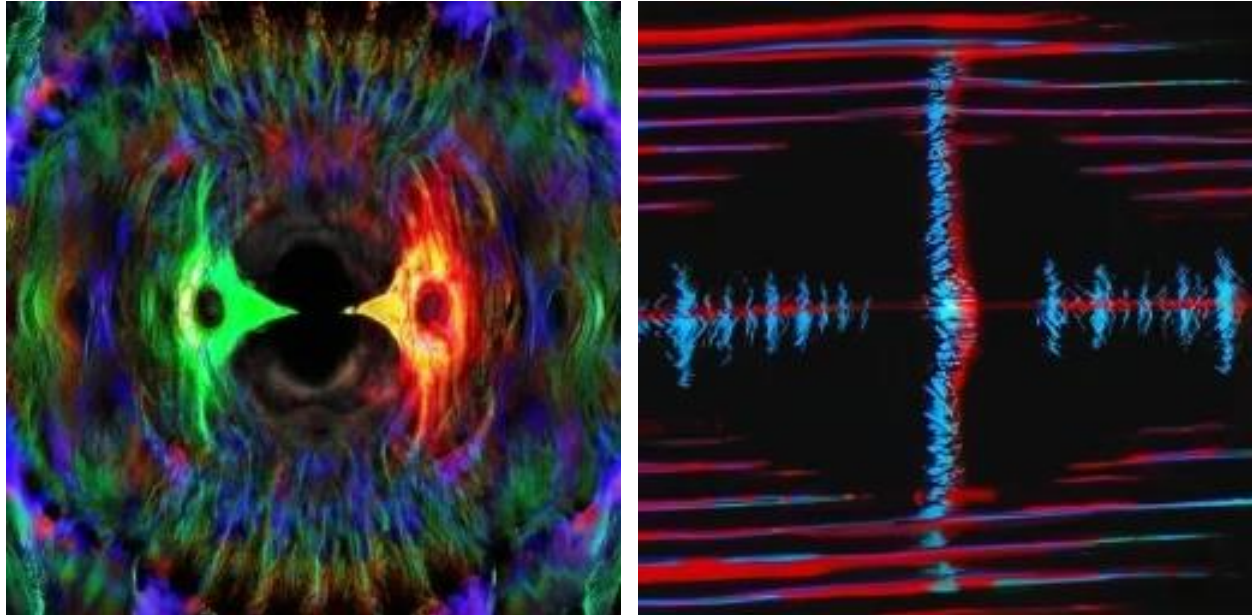


Figure 35: AI-generated diagrams based on the above Deleuze quote as the text prompt.

It is still simulacra, but in the machinic pluriverse everything is simulacra just as everything is underscored with time-images (or non-chronological duration-objects) and movement-images (matter-movement) on an immanent level, which film is at times able to disclose through its methods of presentation and formal constitution. If Provost's datamoshed appropriation of cliché cinema is an "excess of horror" then it is able to provide a series of images that exceed the digital infrastructure that supports the seamless proliferation of clichés. This is accomplished through corruption—specifically, through the editing of montage to achieve heterogeneous juxtapositions of clichés that are digitally and mechanically entangled through an exchange of partial objects for the very purpose of corruption.

Deleuze's concept of the movement-image is another lens through which to approach the digital simulacra of poor images in this film. He explicated his concept of the movement-image through pre-WWII cinema, but the movement-image as a concept itself is not restricted to any particular historical period nor even necessarily restricted to cinema. While the time-image belongs to a philosophy of non-chronological duration, the movement-image pertains to the

motions and actions of machines that manufacture a “sensory-motor whole” that changes between objects. These changes are processes of differentiation, with divisions and combinations of movement-images that are coupled with processes of specification. They introduce intervals that identify the image’s constitution as a set of particular signs.³³¹ These signaleptic processes are events of matter-movement, as “[t]he *movement-image* and *flowing-matter* are strictly the same thing” and “[t]he material universe, the plane of immanence, is the *machine assemblage of movement-images*. ... it is the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema.”³³²

For a datamosh film such as *Long Live the New Flesh* this notion of the metacinema posits the glitch as something that spreads through all strata of the machinic assemblage of a film. The film is a digital metacinema for the computational gaze as much as it is for our discernment. More specifically, the film was comprehended by the computational gaze in the process of its making, in the nascent stages of datamoshing when the glitch first emerged as a pure, original absence. The finished copy of the exported film is a fully functional reiteration for replay, expressing itself for our visual consumption. In other words, the computational gaze was actively invested in envisioning the postproduction of the film, where unforeseen changes had occurred, while the exported copy of those errors engages computation simply for the execution of playing a video file. It is at the level of the computational gaze, in the process of making (in ‘doing things before they make sense’) that the more direct time-image of nonlinearity is able to unfold. To refer to the time-image in the context of the digital image recalls Deleuze’s statement that “[i]t is the time-image which calls on an original regime of images and signs, before electronics spoils it or, in contrast, relaunches it.”³³³ The peculiarity of this statement is that Deleuze shows no certainty as to whether “electronics” (or in this case digital technology) spoils the time-image or transmits it, but it opens up the counterintuitive possibility for the time-image to exist in the midst of digital simulacra. Yet there are certain limitations to the expression of the time-image in the digital, as it is only in the production of the original in its processual stages of making that the time-image can emerge. This original occurrence of the time-image was initiated in the black box, so that we have no direct access to it. It is a withdrawn original entity, but one

³³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 28–29.

³³² *Ibid.*, 59.

³³³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 267.

that becomes reiterated through the copy.

Like the planes of expression and content, the film consists of both semiotic specification—with intervals between frames and between shots that allow for partial identification—and differentiation that melancholically unsettles the linear combinations of frames (as corporeal, encoded units) in a sequence. Yet the film consists of intervals that are mixed with absences that were stitched over and compensated for through re-encoding. The digital alterations smear montage into an overcoded metacinema. Regarding linked movement-images in montage, Deleuze states in reference to Eisenstein that time is “an indirect representation” and in order to offer time a more direct image, “montage must proceed by alterations, conflicts, resolutions, and resonances.”³³⁴ This is precisely what datamoshing in Provost’s montage accomplishes through discordance, collision, blending, and the bleeding succession of instants. The instants consist of resemblances, or copies, of signifying chains that become irreversibly, magnetically disturbed and thus made temporally indeterminate. The film is a melancholically demonic montage in that the temporal indeterminacy is actualized through the rupture of barriers between frames as differentiation actualizes changes in the forms of its utterances.

As Powell argues, “[t]he anomalous ‘thing’ produced by the conjunction of singularities is a monstrous entity in perpetual motion, unfixed in its identity.”³³⁵ The iconic scenes and figures of horror films become all the more anomalous in the flow of datamoshed video, as identities become scrambled in colour, stretching through motion in a temporally displaced narrative. There is a demonic aspect to the appropriated symbols or clichés that are no longer fixed identities, but rather data shadows of a perforated, disintegrative remix. If glitch is the *memento mori* of the computational gaze, and horror films are the *memento mori* manifestations of and for our subjective experience, then *Long Live the New Flesh* acts as a deathly convergence between the computational gaze and human perception via the screen’s interface. It is a hybridized convergence of contents and expressions, of corporeality and incorporeality, of the organic and the inorganic, on various levels of strata—a digital poor image object of *memento*

³³⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 34–35.

³³⁵ Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 210.

mori through and through.

Temporal indeterminacy is at the center of datamoshing. Parikka argues that software objects occupy the “event of indetermination: they are grounded in durations and temporal unfoldings and are not purely prescribed structures.”³³⁶ Because of this indeterminacy, duration in datamoshing overturns any prescribed coded organization of its own consistency. Brown and Kutty’s observation is that datamoshing sidelines conceptions of linear time, so that no one image, or frame, is more precise than another. The way time is organized computationally is nonlinear because it is like a database that can be accessed at any point anytime.³³⁷ Temporal displacement of the frames is what allows for the nonlinear disintegration of semiotic narrative structure, as well as of computational semiotic structure through data modification. Movement becomes a fluid fragmentation as figures and backgrounds are blurred in displaced pixels and contours become discontinuous abstractions. This is not the vision of the computational gaze, but its subfacial reproduction or expressive regurgitation of a corrupted object. What the computational gaze sees is the corruption itself, a direct time-image, which drives it into either complete failure to semiotically apprehend the data, or to repair it in its deformed sequence and channel it forth into surface manifestation.

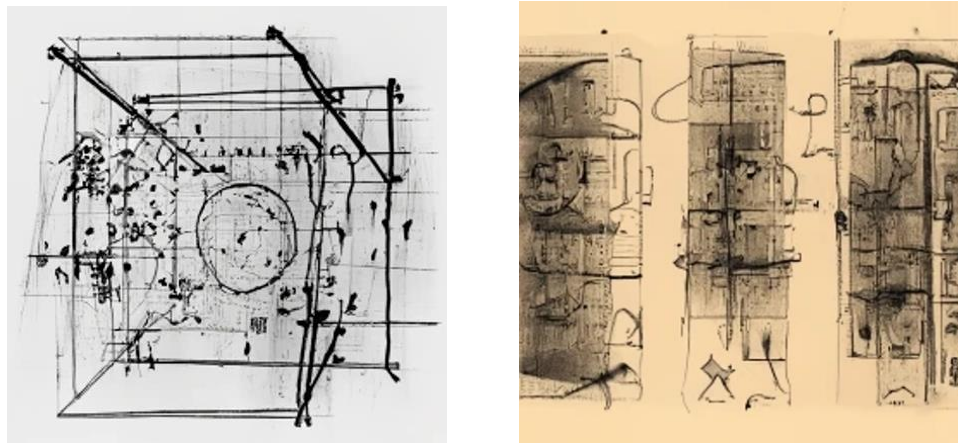


Figure 36: AI-generated diagrams based on the Deleuze and Guattari reference below regarding machinic assemblages behind semioticizations.³³⁸

³³⁶ Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art,” 124.

³³⁷ Brown and Kutty, “Datamoshing and the Emergence of Digital Complexity,” 171.

³³⁸ “‘Behind’ statements and semioticizations there are only machines, assemblages, and movements of deterritorialization that cut across the stratification of the various systems and elude both the coordinates of language and of existence.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 148.

When the computational gaze encounters a blind spot, the obfuscation comes from strata below the surface. Deleuze and Guattari state that there are complex machinic operations that correspond to every expression. There are always machinic assemblages beneath or behind “semioticizations” as deterritorializations cause breaks in stratified systems and “elude both the coordinates of language and of existence” (fig. 36).³³⁹ This is how, for example, glitch has both an expressive appearance and its corresponding malfunction as a time-image, caused by the demonic operational breaks enforced by the BwO.

This applies to digital media as much as it applies to anything else. On a deeper level, beneath regimes of signs and the plane of content, there is matter, function, malfunction, fragmentation, and abstraction that operate through territorialities or assemblages which are distributed according to stratification. In computation this would be the faceless aspect (beneath the surface), which is the physical channel between computation and the BwO that ensures the presence of melancholy wherever it injects flows of black bile through schizophrenically nocturnal codifications. There are no precise regulations, only stratifications and destratifications, production and antiproduction, flowing through all levels of strata, all susceptible to melancholic vulnerability, fragility, or collapse.

Glitch, as an absence, is antiproduktive and withdrawn. It is a machinic event that tunnels through all the levels of strata, in all directions, in the specificity of its assemblage. It is a result of what Deleuze and Guattari call “the pincers of double articulation” which refers to substantialization instituted by strata that organize abstract diagrammatic functions along with the duality of the separate planes of content and expression. In this process, that which happens to escape can be either abolished into “a kind of black hole” or it can become segmented or blocked.³⁴⁰ A glitch is an example of something that is abolished into a black hole, merging with it in its withdrawal and disintegrative asignificance. *A glitch is an event beyond semioticization, it begins at the level of asignificance.* It is a break in the chain. The instance of error arises and disappears, sent into withdrawal and then smoothed over with stratified computational adjustments to ensure operational norms, inventing new movement-images that correspond to the

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 143.

spaces occupied by black holes. Glitch is a presence of absence. *Long Live the New Flesh*, then, is an overcoded flirtation with black holes that demonically graft themselves into one another in differential nonlinear temporality, which, when assembled into a copy, is restratified into a reproducible linear sequence.

Barker views digital ruptures as productive emergences or novelties.³⁴¹ Even in instances when glitches are purposefully initiated or manipulated in artistic practice, they are unpredictable emergences of error or absence. Their emergence testifies to their temporal indeterminacy, or the instantaneity that occurs when their potential rupture is actualized. *Long Live the New Flesh*, just like the archived videos of *Download Finished*, is temporally indeterminate in this way. The ruptures were coordinated, purposefully directed into absencing images to produce numerous collisions of simulated movement. In this glitch methodology of overcoding appropriated data, the errors were gleaned from the interiorities of the video objects, from their thanatropic reserves of antiproduktive potentialities.

The datamosh aesthetics of Provost's film were predicted with the knowledge that visual corruption would be the result, but the specific appearances of the transformed images could not be pre-designed. To interfere at the level of subfacial content to manufacture a glitch-void means to blindly prod one's way through the black box, without a predetermined notion of how the surface will manifest itself. When Provost corrupted sections of horror films, his methodology concerned itself with interference at the level of software, and his film was an unpredictable result of erroneous potentialities released from the video objects under scrutiny. The errors themselves are emergent and self-actualizing, not predetermined by the artist. If these events are machinically emergent, it is because they are events that are instigated through a melancholic methodology of purposefully absencing and unsettling crucial data in the video file. In other words, novelty is achieved here through antiproduktive means. To instigate withdrawal also means that something unprecedented is likely to fill the gaps. The potential for error inherent in the data is antiproduktive potential of the BwO, gliding beneath the computational gaze to disrupt or disorganize its binary operations.

For Menkman, glitch practice "is to search for the unfamiliar while at the same time to

³⁴¹ Barker, "Aesthetics of the Error," 51.

tenaciously defamiliarize oneself from what might be taken for granted of software, hardware and signal realities.”³⁴² Defamiliarization is a descent into asymbolic interaction with a simulacrum and its corresponding content, demonically breaking coded enclosures and boundaries in the process. Through defamiliarization, the computational gaze is given the capacity to harness its own demonic expressions from the inside, differential expressions that arise to fill the space of nothingness punctured by a glitch. Perhaps it is best to contemplate *Long Live the New Flesh* not only in terms of clichés and metaphor, but precisely in this sense of demonic defamiliarization with the digital.

Provost’s use of the horror genre first disturbs and then reaffirms the proliferation of clichés and motifs, which are meant to come into focus only through the consumption and corruption, at the data level, by the computational gaze. The film itself is an accidented construction of poor images through defamiliarization, gathered and montaged for purposeful rupture and mutilation of digitized cinema. The datamoshed montage is a deterritorialization and a restratification into temporal indeterminacy, relying on the potentialities of disintegrative asignifiante to draw out and obliterate those parts and intervals of visual legibility that articulate resolution of movement and continuity. While the melancholically transformed clichés are reiterated in their altered states, they become demonically ruptured in the process of datamoshing, allowing for a more direct image of temporal indeterminacy.

Long Live the New Flesh embodies deterritorialized appropriated simulacra, purposefully poored images, and the matter-montage of movement-images. The film’s decay functions as a copy of digital disintegration, where the computational gaze changes its role from the codified comprehension of active corruption to the functional repetition of corrupted data. The film itself is the ghostly residue of the corruptive process, where the signifier becomes decentered as signs become distributed into fields of frenzied differentiated pixel-sets.

³⁴² Menkman, “The Glitch Art Genre,” 64.

3.6 Indiscernibility and Digital Melancholy

Moradi asks: “[i]f you can collect and display a glitch in a controlled setting, what is the result, is it a semi glitch? Is a representation or simulation of a glitch (glitchalike™) or is it something else?”³⁴³ My answer is that it becomes a poor image because poor images thrive on copies and reproductions with loss of standardized quality. The corrupted video data in *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh* are the simulacra of demonic, poor, *memento mori* that could only occur through the digital practice of melancholically withdrawing partial objects—absenting signs from the signifying chains, disturbing binary codes, and creating black holes by allowing antiproductive potential to eat its way through the strata of content and expression.

At the same time as the glitches signal their distribution through different levels of strata, shifting the movement-image through an anxiously turbulent montage of temporal indeterminacy, it cannot be ignored that *Long Live the New Flesh* hooks into the overcoded simulacra of the horror genre, albeit in a disarticulated formation. This is also true for the video segments uploaded to *Download Finished*, wherein each video is infused with demonic subtractive difference of melancholic digital decay even as particular scenes retain some identity. This identification, however, is incomplete and masked or overshadowed by the surface manifestation of unpredictable glitchification. The surface and the subface have different articulations of contents and expressions that altogether function for the withdrawal of signification and the disruption of the linear chronology of frame structure.

In the context of the proliferation of poor images in visual culture, both projects deliberately contribute to the generation of antiproduktively infused movement-images through the digital deformation of clichés. If images are clichés as Deleuze suggests in *Cinema I*, then *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh* present us with new, emergent clichés that are antiproductive grafts, derivatives, and remediations of higher resolution source images. With the displacement of signs in the signifying chains and disruptions of the frame structure,

³⁴³ Iman Moradi, “Glitchbreak,” *Gli.tc/h Reader[rer] 20111*, ed. Nick Briz et al. (Unsorted Books, 2011), 152.

datamoshing makes it possible for the clichés of the movement-image to be converted into non-chronological time-images, which become instantly aestheticized into new clichés via the articulation of the copy. These conversions occur at the subface level of software and they are as fleeting as the events of glitch. The black hole becomes nothing more than an inscription of a past absence once the corruption is encoded into a copy, yet the process of datamoshing itself rouses the emergence of the time-image.

The time-image is “a coexistence of distinct durations, or levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order” (fig. 37).³⁴⁴ As the frame structures are transformed, so are the narrative, chronological instances of the videos. The videos become temporary objects comprised of pure optical and sound machines, or what Deleuze calls “opsigns” and “sonsigns” which bring about translations that tend “towards a point of indiscernibility.”³⁴⁵ The articulation of the computational gaze, which brings about digital comprehensions and articulations of contents and expressions of video codec at the subface level, operates beyond any notion of objective or subjective perception. It is simply nonhuman, operational, and machinic, recoding and restratifying those absences that glitch events instigate. It overcodes the black holes, both digitally and abstractly, to a point of melancholic indiscernibility. This indiscernibility is a relation that becomes a machine in itself, since any translation between machines (e.g. video frames, codec) produces another machine (e.g. a temporally disturbed datamoshed sequence). The points of indiscernibility in the time-image are melancholic breaks that are translated and carried over as repetition in the movement-image. It emerges as a machine with melancholic operations, trapped in the circularity of retracing withdrawn absences of data, temporal misalignments of sequence, and symbolic disintegration of clichés.

³⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xii.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.



Figure 37: AI-generated diagrams using Deleuze's quote about the "coexistence of distinct durations" as the text prompt.

While indiscernibility is crucial for the direct presentation of the time-image, it becomes an indirect reiteration once the datamoshed, corrupted file becomes a copy for circulation as a poor image. These poor images in turn become clichés, carrying within them the ghostly imprints of the indiscernible time-image. The glitch becomes the glitch aesthetic. Both *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh* present us with repetitions and copies, so that they signify toward an *image* of glitch that is a surface representation of a deep black box process as opposed to the process itself. The projects begin with breaking up the signifying chains of simulacra through disintegrative corruption, but they become mediated and compressed into differentiated formations of simulacra functioning under the disguise of the signifier.

Defamiliarization is aligned with indiscernibility because it relies on hybridized mediations with the black box, blindly decoding and transcoding digital structures at the subfacial level of software. Legibility is then compromised, so that glitch operates through the melancholic behaviour of withdrawal from full identification. This corresponds to the symbolic expression of the glitch aesthetic, but also to glitch's internal malfunctions and operational stoppage.

Both *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh* serve to introduce decay, fragility, and the *memento mori* of the computational gaze into the broader ecology of visual culture. They

have generatively deteriorated and compressed a multitude of digital video objects into poor images. While *Download Finished* better describes the behaviour of dissemination and circulation of poor images, Provost's film more aptly narrows in on the corruption of the symbols of a genre to the point where compression is amplified into a restratification that relocates altered images into the genre of glitch art. While glitch art is not necessarily always the production of poor images, these projects utilize the culture of poor images through blatant appropriation and augmentation of digital video. They tackle the incorporeal transformations of digital images through corporeal interference, harnessing antiproduction and the demonic flows of difference into methodologies of appropriation and montage.

Through this hybrid mediational process, capitalism's tendencies for thanatropic regression, as manifested in digital visual culture, become actualized, dispensing moshed simulacra into poor media ecology. *Download Finished* offers its corrupted objects for free, disseminating the videos without any attached capital value, while *Long Live the New Flesh* is a commodified art object, having exhibition value, that can only be fully accessed by paying a screening fee. This difference in modes of dissemination does not necessarily mean that Provost's film is not a poor image. It only means that it is a mediated poor image, channeled through commodification, with set limits and boundaries that block and release its ability to circulate.³⁴⁶ As noted earlier, poor images rely on accelerated circulation but they decelerate. The commodified distribution of Provost's film is a form of deceleration. For *Download Finished*, deceleration occurred when the archive became stagnant, with no new data entering its system.

The actualization of thanatropic decay in datamoshing is an actualization of temporal indeterminacy, both at the level of video frame structure and at the level of file access and replay. Digital objects are traces that can be instantly recalled at any time, which parallels Bonnet's notion of the hyperpresent. It is a pluripotent disruption of chronological time, reflective of melancholic temporal indeterminacy where the past melds with the present as well as future contingencies. The corresponding signifying regimes are also non-chronological, where signs function as itinerant fragments in an amorphous continuum, operating for human as well as nonhuman signaletic communication. The decentered nonlinearity of symbols is coupled with nonlinear and

³⁴⁶ This commodification of the film can easily be undone by downloading the file and redistributing it for free, albeit illegally, as a torrent. The film thus has potential to break from its commodified status. It can potentially leak into the free distribution of poor images.

heterogeneous temporality. Signifiers begin to produce this temporality when nonsignifying signs assemble into aggregates through accidental couplings and relays—through processes of remix and misalignment. This coupling of symbolic and temporal nonlinearity carries the disintegrative and subtractive effects of entropic deterritorialization.

I have approached both case studies in this chapter through an exploration of machinic semiotics, poor images, and the black box of the computational gaze. I have attempted to show how the glitch practice of datamoshing can have melancholic attributes of disintegrative asignificance and temporal indeterminacy. In the next concluding chapter, I will further explore notions of melancholic indeterminacy and withdrawal in relation to the computational gaze, artificial intelligence, and Bryant's concept of dark objects.

Chapter 4

Darkness of Dark Objects and Nonhuman Horror in the Computational Gaze

“For a ghost is an entity *whose apparition is not a presence*. The spectral world is the world of signs gone mad. ... It is a splintered world where the frontier dividing the living from the dead is porous.”³⁴⁷

“A hole is just as much a particle as what passes through it.”³⁴⁸

The darkness of the black box is a nocturnal, impenetrable, hallucinogenic, spatiotemporal mesh that delineates myriads of digital processes we encounter online and offline. The impenetrable shadows and indeterminacy of the black box become more conspicuous in the implementation of AI. In the case of datamoshing, a skilled programmer may still be able to discern the encoded signature of the glitch. With AI, the black box is darker, more demonic, and more expansive, offering no processual record of its outputs.³⁴⁹ *UNINVITED* by Nye Thompson and *UBERMORGEN* (2018–ongoing) is a project that harnesses and regurgitates this kind of inaccessibility while operating as a nonhuman entity that produces its own melancholic machinations of technical horror. I will approach this project through the lens of Levi Bryant’s proposed concept of dark objects and its relation to the black box. Then I will conclude with some speculative arguments regarding dark objects’ position within machine ontology, in relation to nonhuman melancholy.

Dark objects are inaccessible machines that are removed from any relations with other entities. Bryant admits that the notion is somewhat hypothetical, impossible to prove, and that it is possible that such objects do not exist. Under the proposition that dark objects do exist, at the very least as *relative* dark objects—ones that are magnetized to one assemblage while remaining withdrawn for others—I will argue that in the process of their withdrawal they serve an important role in melancholic disintegrative operations. In digital media, dark objects would not be apparently visible but can be implied through decay, imperfections, glitches, and loss or displacement of information. The emergent use of machine learning in artistic practice is of particular interest here,

³⁴⁷ Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 75.

³⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 32.

³⁴⁹ As defined in the previous chapter, the “demonic” refers to the difference that dissolves binary distinctions.

especially when operational norms of the surface of seamless digital capitalism are disrupted. It is through these ruptures that dark objects can be speculated upon.

UNINVITED operates through a computational gaze that is haunted by a multitude of dark objects and as a project it was designed to mimic the behaviour of a dark object itself on several levels, as will become apparent in my description of the work. *UNINVITED* harnesses the internal intensities of the computational gaze—the internal nonhuman vision and agency of digital systems or objects—as an algorithmic vision that activates the digital reception and output of data. Here the computational gaze exists in digital objects for digital objects, regardless of whether we can perceive its effects. I am interested in whether the concept of dark objects can be extrapolated through this concealed realm of the computational gaze.³⁵⁰

4.1 Nonhuman Horror and Infected Poor Images in *UNINVITED*

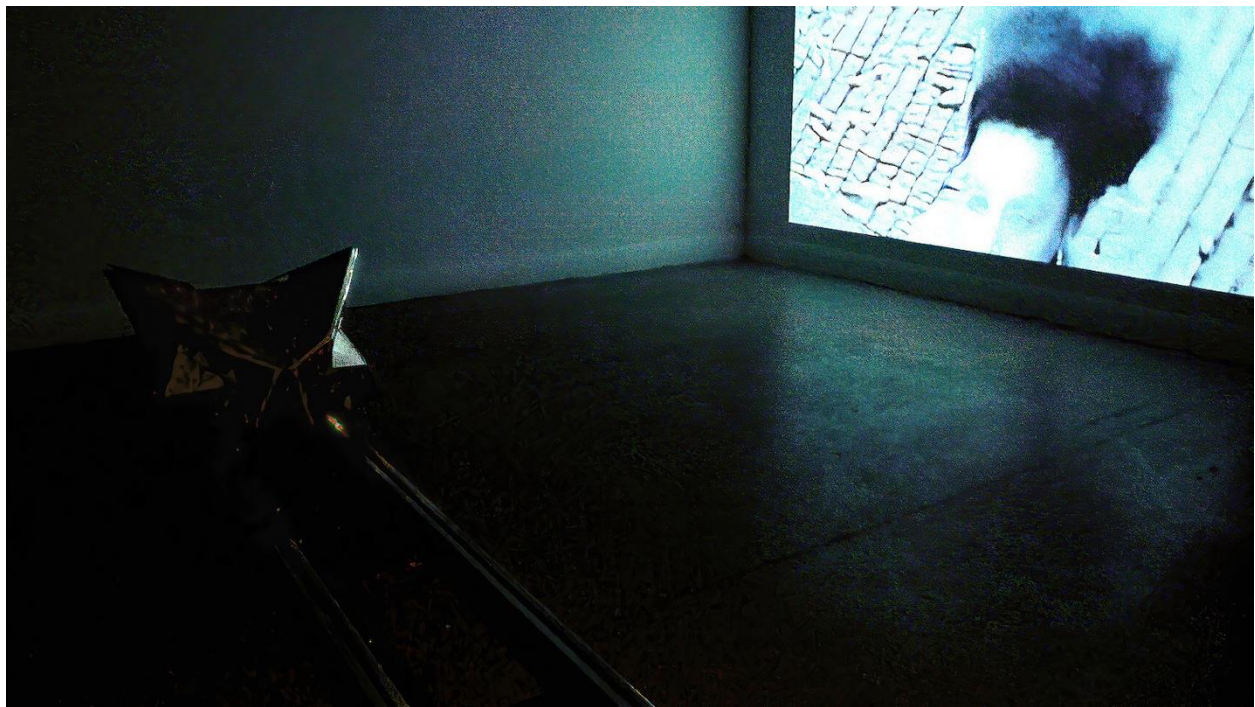


Figure 38: Nye Thompson & UBERMORGEN, *UNINVITED* (2020), installation view.

³⁵⁰ Carvalhais speculates on the idea of complete black box computational systems that are all subface with not surface. He proposes that such a system would be much like Bryant's dark objects. Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, 46.

UNINVITED is a dark, demonic investigation of nonhuman computational vision, incorporating machine learning, sensors, errant viruses, and other undisclosed digital components, encased inside a robotic avatar.³⁵¹ The work is an assemblage of an artificial organism, a network, programmed code, an installation, a website, and an AI-generated film. The project statement on Nye Thompson’s website describes the work as:

... a horror film for machine networks and human-machine organisms ... exploring the nature of perception and realism of the unknown and the terror of angst and exhaustion within emergent network consciousness ... a self-evolving networked organism watching and generating a recursive ‘horror film’ scenario using mechatronic Monsters—digital flesh running machine learning algorithms ... [the] life-form evolves and defines its own existence and agency while experiencing fear, instability and vulnerability.³⁵²

The project is described in anthropomorphic terms such as “angst, exhaustion” or “vulnerability” yet those properties cannot be reduced to human experience alone. The statement is a descriptor of an otherwise incomprehensible container. There is no disclosure about how precisely the melancholic conditions of angst or exhaustion are made to function. They are meant to be inferred, projected upon, and made relatable through the significations of language alone. The experience of this work relies on the strata of actualized expression and its semiotic representations, a derived rubric of manufactured intentions, and these intentions configure the work as an inaccessible black box.

The horror film is for and by digital objects, working as a network organism that fuels itself with virally infested CCTV camera feeds. Another statement for the project describes the digital organism as not making sense, hallucinogenic, fearful, where the “spawn of a massive botnet” struggles to establish its agency as it virally infects millions of compromised IoT devices such as surveillance cameras—“frantically striving to comprehend itself and its environment and to protect itself.”³⁵³ Such a statement is aligned with melancholic behaviours described by Földényi, who remarks on

³⁵¹ It is a “demonic” investigation due to its tendency to unsettle boundaries, as well as its symbolic and nonhuman affiliation with horror.

³⁵² Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN, “UNINVITED,” *Nye Thompson*, 2021, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://nyethompson.net/works/UNINVITED.html>.

³⁵³ “UNINVITED,” *The Lumen Prize*, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.lumenprize.com/2021-moving-image-shortlist/uninvited>.

the desire for safety at the same time as “[t]he melancholic fears himself as well as the world: he fears every event, since he is able to view genesis and change only as incipient death.”³⁵⁴

The horror film was first exhibited through the avatar of the *UNINVITED* network system in 2020, shown in the midst of the COVID pandemic without an audience in an installation at Furtherfield Gallery (London). The physical appearance of this machinic life form resembles a geometric sci-fi alien artifact. The machine avatar travels back and forth on rails and functions autonomously, responding to its surroundings through motion sensors, projecting video onto a wall, while internally cycling through less than coherent visual memories. It is a self-altering entity that consumes and produces a horror film made from images in the machine’s cloud network. The content of the images is analyzed through algorithm and the organism produces nonsensical, horror-themed, AI-generated text that seems to redirect the images back to a film structure.³⁵⁵ This text is also used for captions in the online presentation of the film on the *UNINVITED* website.³⁵⁶ Examples of this text are “lack of motion,” “becoming invisible,” “fishing,” or “sensory deprivation clinic”—implying withdrawal, desultory searching, and dislocation.³⁵⁷



Figure 39: Nye Thompson & UBERMORGEN, *UNINVITED* film still “Exploration Tarmac” (2020).

³⁵⁴ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 301.

³⁵⁵ Beth Jochim, “‘UNINVITED’ by Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN, *Furtherfield Gallery / London*,” *Flash Art*, January 18, 2021, <https://flash---art.com/2021/01/uninvited-by-nye-thompson-and-ubermorgen-furtherfield-gallery-london/>.

³⁵⁶ In addition to the gallery installation, the project exists online: “UNINVITED,” *UNINVITED*, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://uninvited.icu/>.

³⁵⁷ Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN, “UNINVITED,” *UNINVITED*, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://uninvited.icu/>.

The organism's memory consists of innumerable surveillance video feeds hacked by the Mirai botnet.³⁵⁸ The Mirai botnet is malware that infiltrates smart devices such as cameras, transforming their functionality into those of zombies, remotely networked by bots. In this way, the algorithmic computational gaze of the organism is not constrained to the information in its immediate vicinity, but extends into a global networked, encoded hallucination. Beth Jochim elaborates that the "cross-bred life form ... uses a centralized cloud brain to process data drawn from its sensors, virally hacked camera eyes and mechatronic avatars, termed 'monsters' by the artists, which also take part in the information processing."³⁵⁹

The autonomy of the project challenges viewers' (if there are any viewers) expectations of digital machine interactivity and interface. The project's interactivity is designed to occur within the computational gaze, in the interactivity of hardware, code, malware, and machine learning. The project prioritizes the organism's isolation with an unresolved sense of discomfort for the disregarded spectator that comes from the unseen and incomprehensible operations of the creature. The avatar imitates a dark object's withdrawal from relations, instead mediating within itself, ruminating its visions. With no audience, the machine is programmed to persist in isolation, in a melancholic, obsessive productive dread of its own devising. This project synthesizes obsessive fixation and horror, temporal indeterminacy, the nonhuman gaze, the human-machine assemblage, and the disruption of informational flows. The entity insists on defining its own terms of behaviour and internal logic—or rather the predetermined trajectory of disintegration of its internal logic. This accentuates our general unease with machine intelligence and autonomous digital systems such as surveillance, inciting questions regarding the pervasiveness of algorithmic vision and the black box phenomenon of computational procedures in daily life. *UNINVITED* does not offer answers to these issues, but operates as both a metaphor and an embodiment of our anxieties and fears of the unknown in digital perception. It withdraws to its own coded obsessions, machinically falling back on the BwO's antiproduktively displaced production.

Each surveillance video fed into the organism is a live poor image merging into an unstable assemblage of melancholic distortion. The temporality of these images becomes altered once they are hybridized with the organism. On the one hand they exist somewhere in the world,

³⁵⁸ Jochim, "'UNINVITED'."

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

documenting a scene as a sequential narrative accessible to human observation. On the other hand, here they enter the temporal velocity of thanatropic regression, consumed and algorithmically analyzed as visual data. This thanatropic regression of the visual feeds becomes imbricated with the interiorities of the avatar's inorganic constituents that are fixed to behave as a neural imitation of an organism. It operates on the fringes of simulated signifiers as it retreats into the monstrous demonic nest of its encoded character of desperation. This desperation antiproduktively runs itself into perpetual exhaustion through an overload of visual inputs, congesting the system with symbolic overproduction that fatigues the artificial organism through cycles of thanatropic consumption and gestation. It is easy to imagine that in structuring such a complex enclosed system, thanatropic regression manifests itself through bad connections, system crashes, incompatibilities, errors, or hardware issues. This trajectory of decay implicates the surveillance feeds in a malware-infested visuality of interiorized poor image manifestations—or infestations.

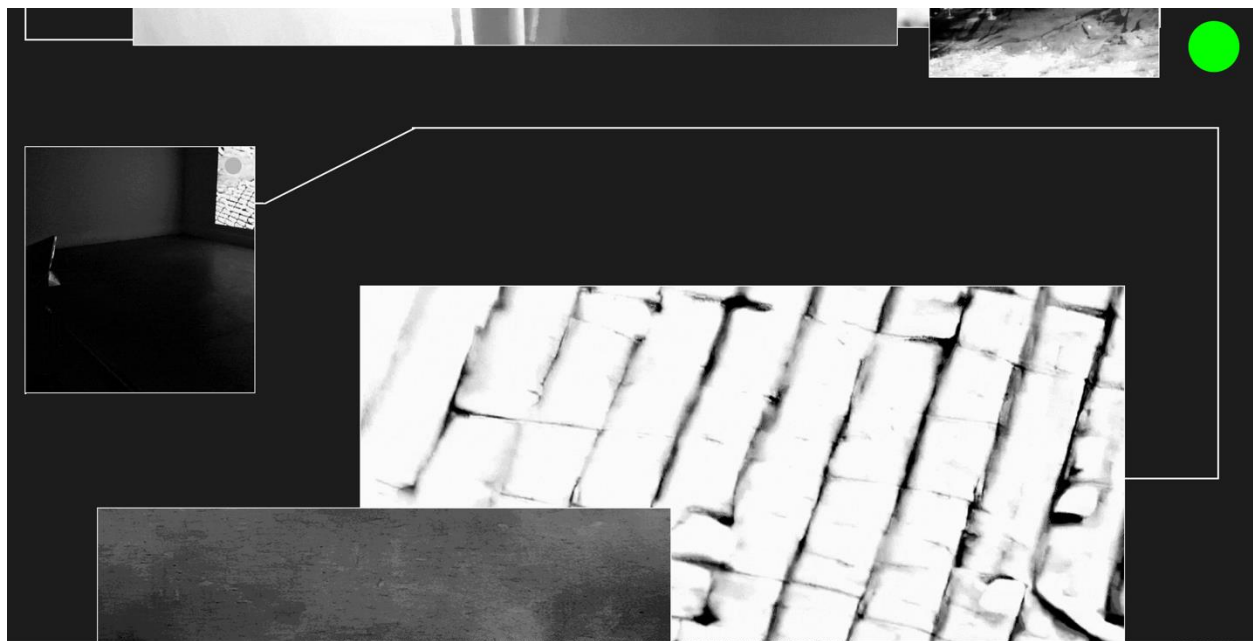


Figure 40: Screen capture of the uninvited.icu website.

The horror film produced by the organism is accessible on the website, uninvited.icu. The inclusion of a website into the project is a disembodied extension that renders limited aspects of the project into digestible symbolic fragments of horror genre clichés. It is at once inviting in its very

existence, and unwelcoming in its structuration. Entering the site, there is a seizure trigger warning—a safety sign, a courtesy, but also a sign that you are already uninvited. Are these flashing fields of pixels not meant for the fragility of human vision? Scrolling through the main page, there is a geometric montage layout of AI-distorted images from the hacked surveillance feeds. The title “UNINVITED” flickers and flashes through the scroll downwards and upwards in a jarring cycling of horror-themed gothic fonts, like digitally optimized black metal logos, as it obstructs visual legibility of the images in the background. It is as if the site is not meant to be user-friendly. The user experience design is unintuitive. Some images serve as nodes to show vantage points of different surveillance cameras and video receptors of the machine. Eventually the user stumbles onto the full 13-minute film.

The film was algorithmically generated through fluctuations between the artist’s decision-making and that of the machine, producing twenty film phases that each emerge from pairs of security camera screenshots from the botnet network.³⁶⁰ Through zooms and algorithmic remediations of image content using machine learning, the images are crude enhancements of anonymous security camera content. The film displays stills of parking lots, abstracted close-ups, and other AI-generated hallucinations of scenes, surfaces, and anonymous humans. There are instances of low resolution that testify to a fabricated presence of poor images—in this case, appropriated low resolution visual data from a vast network that traverses through channels of transfers and translations, suffering partial disintegration and augmentation in the organism’s nonhuman vision.

At the time of publication of “In Defense of the Poor Image” in 2012 Steyerl had no basis for investigating AI regarding her argument. However, it is possible to consider machine learning such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN) algorithms as operations that can feed on poor images as datasets in order to generate distorted, rearranged computational gaze assimilations or amalgams that, depending on the sophistication of the algorithm, can appear as something of low resolution. Referring to recent developments in AI-generated images, Steyerl states that “[t]hey are visions made of spam and society’s nightmares, a negative preview of the dreams of

³⁶⁰ Giulia Ottavia Frattini, “Insight: UBERMORGEN & Nye Thompson’s UNINVITED, the Alluring and Pernicious Potential of Horror Movies,” *CLOT Magazine*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.clotmag.com/news/insight-ubermorgen-nye-thompsons-uninvited-the-alluring-and-pernicious-potential-of-surveillance-and-horror-movies>.

automated general intellect” as they are operated through “large-scale scraping raids” of visual content.³⁶¹

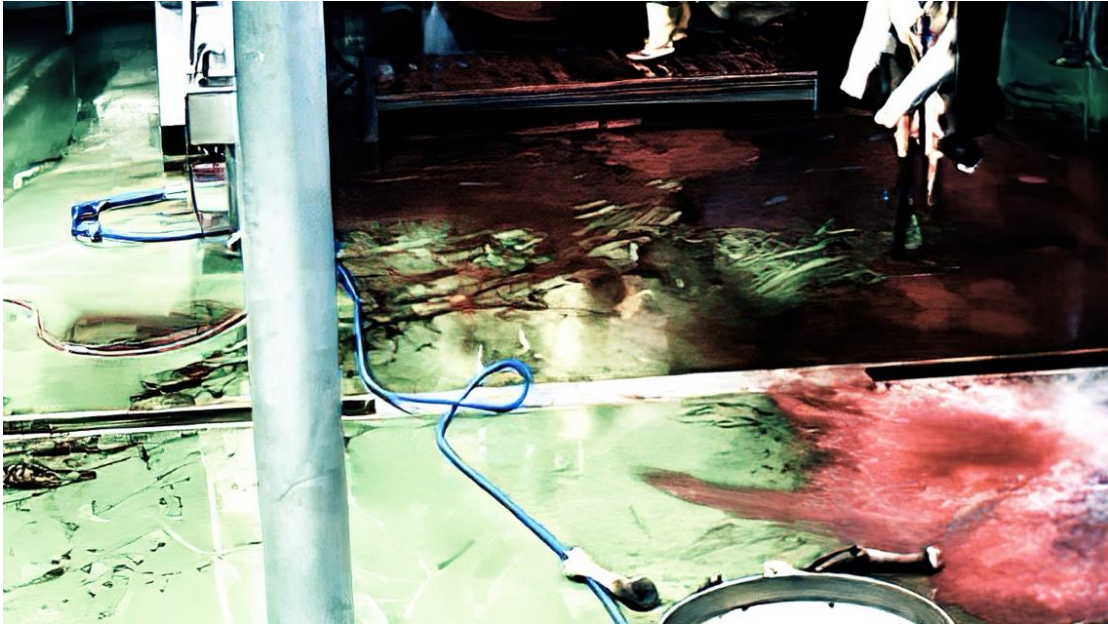


Figure 41: Nye Thompson & UBERMORGEN, film still “Relaxing Clinic” (2020).

This situates AI-generated images in the same realm of widespread capitalist deterritorialization as poor images. Steyerl states that poor images “testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism.”³⁶² For *UNINVITED*, however, poor images function in a different manner. They are the feeds from surveillance cameras, transferred through the organism’s internal channels of distribution rather than circulated externally.

It operates as an inversion of the poor images’ network of circulation. The cloud becomes internalized and a further pooring of the images occurs inside the avatar rather than through popular global dissemination. They are not the poor images of accelerated decreasing resolution, or films distributed through torrents. They are poor because they have been infected, because they are scraped transfers from a global network that twists into the localized innards of a sick digital creature. Furthermore, *UNINVITED*’s poor images exist for the computational gaze rather

³⁶¹ Hito Steyerl, “Common Sensing? Machine Learning, ‘Enchatment’ and Hegemony,” *New Left Review* 144 (2023): 79.

³⁶² Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” 32–33.

than human consumption, for and by machines. This kind of pouring of visual data is activated for the computational gaze inside the black box.

4.2 Black Box and the Computational Gaze

When digital procedures are designed and set into operation, the human gaze becomes hybridized with the computational gaze. Here the human gaze engaged with the design of an autonomous computational amalgam, and in the process meshed with a network of anonymous, compromised surveillance feeds, ultimately creating a state of terror for the organism. However, human-machine hybridity can only survive on the basis of particular instances, such as when maintenance is required for the machine. Otherwise, by design, the digital organism is meant to be severed from this hybridization, operating strictly according to its algorithmic procedures. This was an experiment of intent. In other words, it was a test of how far intention in manmade production can be removed from the product once it is switched on. Jason Hoelscher notes that the “algorithmic gaze” that is responsible for gathering data through surveillance is not reciprocal in the way that the human gaze operates. Rather, it is “a distributed visual memory” that stores and processes data in the identification of patterns.³⁶³ *UNINVITED*, however, does not seek to classify trends or patterns as a means to an end. The data is distributed in an apparently demonic manner. The horror experienced by the organism is a viral infestation of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and unreliable memory. The project is perhaps the most definitive manifestation of the computational gaze in its deliberate severance from the human. The computational gaze here is represented through a variety of operations.

Firstly, it is algorithmically situated in the material system of “mechatronic Monsters.” What this system is precisely comprised of has not been fully disclosed, but one could imagine a tangle of wires, circuit boards, hard drives, inputs, outputs etc. The organism is designed to be confused by its input of memories, so that the components or organs are in sync with the BwO’s antiproductive flows. Secondly, it is “an embodied network of somatic-synaptic exchange” as it wirelessly hacks into

³⁶³ Jason Hoelscher, “Preening for the Algorithmic Gaze: Bioinformatic Media and Panopticonic Performance Introduction” (lecture, presented at the *SLSA After Biopolitics* conference, Houston, TX, November 14, 2015), 1.

surveillance feeds, viewing the digital world through “millions of hallucinogenic virally abused sensors.”³⁶⁴

Its sight taps into the digital vision of other technologies, gazing through digital eyes that merge with the organism’s cybernetic sensory infrastructure. These visions are appropriated content channeled into its memory flows, recycling them into nonlinear numerical abstractions. The extension from the organism’s power source to this network is the organism’s only lifeline to exterior space, but this lifeline melancholically folds into a disengaged enclosure. All of its operations and perceptions are darkly opaque.

The title of the project implies withdrawal but also the surfacing of unanticipated, uninvited expressions of the entity’s autonomy, which arise from a black box. Sofian Audry explains that the black box in machine learning is a result of the systems’ highly complex, widely dispersed and innumerable connections of neurons that are difficult to decipher, exceeding human comprehension.³⁶⁵ While the corporate, technological, and scientific sectors are striving to achieve better transparency in the black box phenomenon to improve predictability and accuracy of results, for projects such as *UNINVITED* there are necessary advantages to stewing data in the darkness of the black box. Even if the artist sets the parameters, the black box is a removed means of achieving unpredictable results, allowing for imprecision or miscomprehension, letting the nonhuman algorithmic life form to operate on its own terms.

In Carvalhais’ explanation, it is the invisible subface that is computational, which drives the surface expressions. The scale of the subface is spatially and temporally distanced from our perceptions.³⁶⁶ For *UNINVITED*, the surface is its enclosure, its movements on rails, video projection, the generated production of the horror film, and its online enclosure on the website, with the black box subface occasionally leaking its processual algorithmic events into translations of surface representation through low resolution and distortion of poor images, or potential network errors.

Carvalhais believes that surface hides the subface, manifesting parts of the black box, and in so doing it ascribes to it a level of *subscendence*.³⁶⁷ What he is referring to is Timothy

³⁶⁴ “UNINVITED,” *The Lumen Prize*.

³⁶⁵ Sofian Audry, *Art in the Age of Machine Learning* (The MIT Press, 2021), Kindle edition, 65.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, 46.

Morton's idea that any entity has an inaccessible excess and is "out-scaled by its parts."³⁶⁸ A machine's powers can exceed its manifestations, and if those powers are withdrawn they become withheld, with submerged potential for eruption or seepage. Because the subface also requires the influence of the BwO for instituting the unstable edifice of the organism—even more so than in events of glitches in datamoshing discussed in the previous chapter—this submerged potential accounts for the suppressed singularities in the organism's dysfunction. Subscendence makes objects blurry and seemingly smaller in appearance than they really are. That is why the existence of *UNINVITED*, despite its modest physical scale, seems to have such an imposing demeanor—its algorithmic black box consciousness is expansive in its viral network, and it is asignificantly subscendent.

There are some similarities between my understanding of the computational gaze and Audry's analysis of Trevor Paglen's idea of invisible images—images produced by machines for machines, such as military satellite photos or automated surveillance snapshots. Ignas Kalpokas describes how the malleability of vast infrastructures for collecting data, the quantity of data that travels through algorithms and platforms are the reasons why there is almost no space to "avoid the data gaze."³⁶⁹ Unlike the data or algorithmic gaze, the computational gaze is not restricted to algorithmic surveillance meant to detect patterns. It can perceive offline digital inputs and outputs, it can perceive its own digitality, and it produces its own temporalities by dispersing and compartmentalizing its constituents. It is not restricted to any one type of image or content processing, and it is for machines only, while the human gaze only has access to its partial interface manifestations. In *UNINVITED*, the computational gaze is an internalized, mutating exaggeration of the banality of algorithmic vision in daily life, pulled to the level of horror through amplification of nonhuman agency and its impediments brought on through infected algorithmic confusion.

Audry introduces the idea of a nonhuman gaze in the context of how it disrupts subjective expectations of coherency. There is a rift between human and digital perception.³⁷⁰ AI systems make decisions based on formulas that are meant to imitate organic processes but the whole process is remotely alien for humans, which is why "[w]e should not be surprised then that the images, sounds, or

³⁶⁸ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (Verso, 2019), 105.

³⁶⁹ Ignas Kalpokas, *Malleable, Digital, and Posthuman: A Permanently Beta Life* (Emerald Publishing, 2021), 15.

³⁷⁰ Audry, *Art in the Age of Machine Learning*, 65.

behaviors generated by these systems are so unfathomable.”³⁷¹ *UNINVITED* can be interpreted as a generator of the unfathomable, programmed for internal disarray and digitized fear, pooring images through data eyes.

These images require other machines to disintegrate *into*, whether the result is a non-relational dark object in a black box or fodder for the nonhuman horror film. The film is an amalgam of unidentified or undetermined surveillance images streamed through the computational gaze and internalized by the organism, which ultimately distorts them into a poor surface mediation that is the only “unfathomable” access point to a portion of the alien organism’s algorithmic terror. The avatar’s internal memories fluctuate between different levels of regulation and disruption, while the subfacial computational gaze of the digital entity constantly shifts its eye, expanding, contracting, or diffracting its vision. *UNINVITED*, in its internalized, skewed perception, engages dark deterritorializations in the production of its horror—the terror of signs disappearing, becoming nocturnal, illegible objects.

4.3 Uninvited Dark Objects

Carvalhais argues that computational art is inherently susceptible to fragility on the basis of its hardwired, corporeal dependencies. He views computational art as “fleeting, technologically impermanent, and exposed to unpredictable and often uncontrollable forms of decay.”³⁷² Poor images incorporate dark objects through the differential encoding in the subfacial operations of visual data. The polarities of differential encoding can change in ways that override previous inscriptions of polarities, or some polarities can become dormant and withdrawn in the subface. These differential damages are what causes displacements in JPEG artefacting or glitches while buffering streamed video. This kind of fragility drives *UNINVITED*’s machinic organism—productive of its own inhuman horror, vulnerability, internal confusion, and interior displacement, because of the instability of its constituent mediating machinic objects. Much of this vulnerability is an invisible result of experimentation with digital components, where imperceptibility is not only in the black box of the subface but also in the darkness of virtuality.

Parikka conceives software art as “the art of the imperceptible” that relies on affects and

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁷² Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, 93.

relational forces that are predominantly nonhuman, surpassing capacities of the human being.³⁷³ He suggests that “experimentality extends towards a-signifying dimensions of executable language. However this executable language does not fix constants, but looks for variations and stutterings.”³⁷⁴ These stutterings are the mapping of potentiality, including points of collapse, in software experimentation. The breaks in intensive flows of computation function as a syntax of machinic transmutations. What is most pertinent in his theorization of the ethology of software art is the emphasis on imperceptibility, which refers not so much to what is or is not perceivable, but to the nonhuman operations of virtuality in digital art—the “incorporeal-material in the Deleuzian sense.”³⁷⁵ This imperceptibility is without representation, yet its stutterings, as events of rupture, are deeply embedded in the production and presentation of digital art. *UNINVITED* relies on imperceptibility for the self-reflexive production of its own horror. Its desperation arises from a series of stutterings in disintegrative asignificance, without which breaks in codified signification could not occur. This arrangement is deliberately designed through the cultivation of darkness and imperceptibility in antiproduktively driven experimentation.³⁷⁶

Because machines contribute to the productive composition and operations of other entities, they are always encountering *machinic problems*. Bryant does not work with the concept of the BwO, yet as I have already made clear, machinic disorder and the resistance to organization are caused by the antiproduktive compulsions of the BwO. Later, I will address the question—what is the relationship between the BwO and a dark object? At the moment, however, I will focus on the questions of what a dark object is, why it is machinically melancholic, and how dark objects might be inferred in the example of *UNINVITED*.

First, let us establish what a dark object is. When a machine’s abilities or capacities of operations and its intensities or molecular functions are suppressed or not exercised, the machine

³⁷³ Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art,” 116.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 119–120.

³⁷⁶ Gruppo di Nun state that to embrace nothingness and darkness is to acknowledge the “ruinous destiny, starvation, catanonia, and resignation” that become formless and elusive “with vague and indefinite contours.” They view this obscurity as a deep space for radical research and experimentation that can lead to the *cultivation* of darkness, which is what becomes apparent in works such as *UNINVITED*. Gruppo di Nun, “Cultivating Darkness,” *Revolutionary Demonology* (Urbanomic, 2022), 163.

can become withdrawn from all relations, in which case it may become a dark object. According to Bryant, machines are gravitational. Their type of gravitation depends on the kind of relation a machine is exercising with another machine. The same machine is capable of being one kind of object in one assemblage while being another kind of object in another assemblage.³⁷⁷ One object can perform a multitude of gravitational roles at once. Bryant describes the roles of dark objects, bright objects, satellites, dim objects, rogue objects, or black holes, all of which have varying degrees of gravitational pull or resistance toward one another. “Gravity is what holds worlds [or assemblages] together,” yet gravitational bonds can be severed in the flux of continuous spatio-temporal interventions.³⁷⁸ Melancholic gravity is weak, and tends to dim or darken itself. Bryant’s insistence on the fragility of machines and his proposed concept of dark objects are aspects that are most closely aligned with nonhuman machinic melancholy.

There are historical accounts of melancholic delusions induced by black bile wherein one perceives themselves to be made of glass, thus repelling against the world for fear of being shattered, constantly maintaining a distance.³⁷⁹ Dark objects are not necessarily fragile, but they behave like they are caught in a continuous threat of annihilation as they withdraw from any mediational possibilities. It is a paradoxical mixture of self-preservation and withdrawal that can in itself prove to be damaging, leading to reticent depletion or depreciation of powers.

The *UNINVITED* organism, like any other entity, is composed of objects of difference that respond to one another based on gravitational strength. Because assemblages are impermanent and can intersect with one another, a dark object or a dormant code in one assemblage can suddenly become a satellite, a dim object, or a bright object in another, or exist as such simultaneously. Gravitational variations show different levels of repulsion and attraction between objects, and in *UNINVITED* these objects can be anything from a circuit board, to a piece of digital code, to a visual input streamed into its system.

³⁷⁷ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 198.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

³⁷⁹ Lund, 99–100.



Figure 42: AI-generated visualization of dark objects.

Dark objects are repulsed and virtual (fig. 42). They are demagnetized. Bryant proposes that there are *absolute* and *relative* dark objects. Absolute dark objects are not manifested in any manner, yet relative dark objects are quite common in the sense that a machine can be a dark object for one assemblage while still relating to other objects in other assemblages.³⁸⁰ His notion that all assemblages are potentially haunted by dark objects incites speculations regarding the detection of surface traces of gaps and zones of lost inputs and outputs in *UNINVITED*. This idea also incites speculations regarding a general presence of *darkness* in machines, whether they are dark objects or not. The avatar's internal self-inflicted horror is only possible if the otherness of withdrawal and loss is actively disrupting the computational flows of functionality. One foot in the grave, the other in a partially-mediating machine providing half-spectral outputs for the other living organs.

In the film *From Beyond* (1986), loosely based on the H.P. Lovecraft story, the character Dr. Tillinghast exclaims "it's running itself!" as the lab's mystical computational system called the Resonator creeps into its own consciousness. The monitor flashes colours and incomprehensible code before it shatters itself. The system's autonomy damages its own constitution. The Resonator reveals horrific creatures from a co-existent invisible realm. Dr.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 200.

Tillinghast says “these things are around us all the time.”³⁸¹ This is a kind of fantastical metaphor for dark objects as well as the computational gaze—ghostly creatures floating invisibly through our existence as if in another realm, but entirely real even if not perceivable. In the Lovecraft story, as Bonnet notes, “the abominations become *indescribable*, where words cannot delineate these creatures that are no longer monsters, but horror itself,” indicating toward a reality beneath what is accessible or sensibly conceivable.³⁸²

Bryant states that dark objects are a reminder that machines potentially respond to unknown or invisible influences that nonetheless alter their behaviours, and that “there’s a sense in which every machine contains a little bit of darkness within it. There’s something a bit demonic in every machine.”³⁸³ This darkness, likened to the otherness of the demonic, is the uninvited in the organism’s digital horror. The demonic is estranged, and ambiguous in its scale or location, while disrupting binaries and overcoded boundaries in the system.

Dark objects’ repulsion from other objects and simultaneous coexistence with them is a kind of melancholic vacancy, placing dark objects in a conflicting relationship with finitude. They become suspended between actualization and total annihilation. The BwO is the “immobile motor” while partial objects are the working parts, but for dark objects the parts are not able to work according to the powers of attraction, at least until they happen upon an appropriate input.³⁸⁴ They are subtractive instances of antiproduction that negate gravitational bonds. The *UNINVITED* organism is infiltrated with antiproducer events—tiny perforations in its organs. Bryant describes absolute dark objects as free entities in a void that “receive no inputs from other machines, nor produce any inputs from within themselves.”³⁸⁵ From this absence of inputs arise displacements in the machine’s memory cycles. The organism’s memories might fluctuate between being bright objects that activate other parts of an assemblage and absolute dark objects that de-activate or deform functional flows.

There are also potential erasures. There may be bits of data deleted or displaced and never reactivated; the malware destroyed or suppressed whatever barriers there may have been to safeguard security camera feeds. It is infectious, fragmented, channeled mediation. This is in part how poor images operate. In *UNINVITED*, the poor surveillance images lose parts of themselves in

³⁸¹ *From Beyond*, dir. Stuart Gordon (1986, Empire Pictures).

³⁸² Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 76.

³⁸³ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 201.

³⁸⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 327.

³⁸⁵ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 199.

the process, gaining and shedding dark objects through the contractions of compression in the black box, in digital self-mutilation and altered memory cycles.

The organism is darkened and it darkens; it thrives on interruptive breaks, on sensory inputs, and distortions of its memories. In this infectious digital lifeform, powers and functions mediate between multitudes of objects, some of which are static, some assembling, some disassembling, some dissipating, some inert. Dark objects can erupt if they happen upon the appropriate input.³⁸⁶ The organism's behaviour is altered or even powered by the forces of dark objects being pulled back into the system with the correct gravitational force.

The computational gaze has blind spots. The expansive artificial neural networks and other coded functions in the black box may be crowded with multitudes of dark objects. What happens when a demonic gap returns to the programmed functions of this gaze? They may potentially reveal themselves as relative dark objects, eclipsed, one foot in the grave, the other side brightened, participatory. Portions of AI-generated images are indirect manifestations of displaced visual data. Somewhere in the black box, in the subface, the original assemblage of pixels is disintegrated into clouds of dark objects that are reassembled by the algorithm's acquired knowledge of visual patterns and discriminations into generated distortions that strangely resemble something that malfunctioned. On the basis of this nonhuman digital horror, there could potentially be an entirely different category of dark objects in the digital realm.

The nonhuman vision of the computational gaze has distinct methods of perception and comprehension of schizophrenic machinic reality. As Land suggests, in the "fuzzification" of digitization there is no idealized logic that occurs on a machinic level.³⁸⁷ From a machinic perspective, the logic is differential, based on polarities of repulsion and attraction on the BwO. Land offers a basic description of binary operations, or logic gates, in digital functionality, adding a twist of durational expulsion.

Digital electronics functionally implements zero as microruptions machining sense, slivers of evacuated duration ('the instant as empty, therefore as = 0'). There is only one digital signal: a positive pulse, graphically represented 'one' (1), and multiplied in asymptomatic approximation to sheer numerical difference.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 199.

³⁸⁷ Nick Land, "Cybergothic," *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2012), 366.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 367–368.

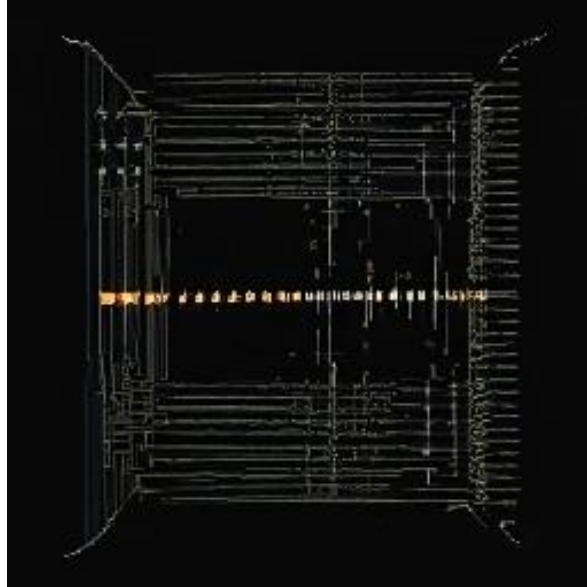


Figure 43: AI-generated diagram using the above Land quote as the text prompt.

While this is a rudimentary account of digital polarity, the implication is that in the multiplication of difference there are always instances of “evacuated duration.” If the signal is interrupted or inhibited, it becomes a *nullified* dark object of evacuated duration, with neutralized powers folding back onto the zero-intensity of the BwO. In the “fuzzification” of algorithmic life, the density of multiplications in signaletic networks is perforated with multiplications of these voided temporalities. If the computational gaze is to be viewed as machinically schizophrenic, the either/or of binary logic is exceeded by what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the “either ... or ... or” of the “system of possible permutations between differences.”³⁸⁹ Nullified dark objects inhibit and interrupt permutations, injecting melancholy through the stultifying rationale of “neither ... nor ... nor,” resisting concatenations and relations in a purely transitory, neutral trajectory toward zero.

As in the *UNINVITED* organism, the nullified dark object is withdrawn into a nonhuman overstratified confusion, where coded decisions lead to indecisive hallucinations. Nullified dark objects behave like absented images for the computational gaze, presenting themselves as absence. They represent the deletion of expression that falls back on the neutralization of content, arrested in withdrawal and demagnetized. They are the demonic difference that reroutes

³⁸⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 12.

nonhuman digital vision into evasive maneuvers of overcodification. They become overwritten, or else inscribed as residue, error, glitch, or miscalculation. They are durational gaps that incite computational paradoxes and indecisions. As digital waste, nullified dark objects are transient and impermanent, fluctuating through the very fabric of digital simulacra in all operations. They are the antiproduktive imperatives for the produktive multiplication of intensities in the digital realm, introducing withdrawal, disintegrative asignifiante, and temporal indeterminacy into an otherwise interminable generative fabrication of data congestion. These melancholic attributes soften and moderate the over-produktive aspects of schizophrenic cybernetics.

In this light, the programmed functional norms of *UNINVITED* are abnormal, driven by inhuman terror. The organism partially absents itself. Tristan Garcia understands representation to be a regulation of exchange—“the absenting of something present entails the presentation of something absent.”³⁹⁰ His approach to art is grounded in the exchange of these absenting-presence representations. This can be paralleled to the withdrawal, or absenting, of Bryant’s dark objects and the erroneous functions of digital processes. What does this mean for the computational gaze in *UNINVITED*, its horror film, and the film’s presentation online?

Garcia proposes an aesthetic approach that ontologically considers absence as something integral to representation, or the actualized surface. Machinic autonomy producing its own terms of presences and absences on the BwO is vital to the *UNINVITED* organism. As an installation, the organism reveals itself incompletely and its computational gaze is only revealed through the surface of sensor responses and projected images. What is also apparent is its autonomous enclosure that acts as the presence of absence, or the potentiality of the internal presence of multiple absences.

For Carvalhais, complex computation assemblages display “organic features” that incite the viewer to withdraw from habits of utilization, and the aesthetic experience fuses us with the system’s operations which paradoxically makes the work “ungraspable” or alien.³⁹¹ He also proposes that perhaps it is the perceptually flawed or distracted human who is the alien, incapable of grasping the depth of computation.³⁹² Thus the connection between the alien viewer and the alien black box organism is a gap. As an object of artifice, *UNINVITED* “exceeds the human, fundamentally. It

³⁹⁰ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 250.

³⁹¹ Carvalhais, *Art and Computation*, 40.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 53.

sweeps a broader spectrum” that incites an otherness and “disquiet” for the sensory experience, as Bonnet suggests in reference to the *infra-world*.³⁹³

The horror is not anthropomorphic in this project, it is meant to be nonhuman. It is about possessing the qualities of horror—qualities or behaviours that arise in confrontations with the unknown, with darkness, with incessant decomposition, with the unexpected. Bryant states:

Machines swerve by virtue of darkness. That darkness might consist of hitherto unknown powers residing in machines ... the swerve might result from a machine that has not before manifested itself in a particular assemblage, but that, under the right circumstances, suddenly erupts in that world like an alien visitation.³⁹⁴

UNINVITED is like an alien visitation, filled with its own alien visitations, alien mutations, alien ghosts—and there is also the alien or absent spectator. In tuning or phasing into nonhuman existence, including computational objects and processes, dark objects are imperceptible causes of discomfort and disorientation by virtue of their dislocation on the BwO. Like the invisible creatures in *From Beyond*, dark objects circulate and disperse, hide in plain sight, and by withholding their capacities, they cause events of disintegration, fragmentation, misalignment, or miscomprehension, which are in themselves powerful forces of antiproduction. It is possible that the horror and mystery of *UNINVITED* is not only powered by its designed infrastructure, but also by the gravitational pull of withdrawal and obscurity. It consists of numerous little dormant machines, numerous inputs and outputs that reach into the subfacial and virtual darkness or hold it at bay.

The *UNINVITED* entity mediates darkness through the computational gaze, through its monsters and viral infestations, through the pooring of its hacked images. Perhaps it is itself now laying dormant like a dark object, unplugged, stored in a box. Alternatively, it may be kept alive, spying through its network of infected eyes, cycling through a chaos of fears and insecurities—a never-ending horror film, accumulating more darkness and withdrawal as the organism’s network gorges itself into an algorithmic stupor.

³⁹³ Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, 43.

³⁹⁴ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 202.

4.4 Types of Dark Objects as Melancholic Machines

UNINVITED serves as an example of how dark objects can potentially haunt the black box, creating blind spots for the computational gaze as unseen digital fragments traverse the organism's metabolism. Because this artificial creature is deliberately diseased, it is as if it is processing itself into a hallucinogenic coma, and it is the dark objects and the demonic difference on the BwO that allows this designed computational psychosis to occur. This places the *UNINVITED* assemblage in a curious position of being both withdrawn and productive at the same time, following the laws of the BwO which instigates disturbances and detours in the generation and disintegration of machines. The project's system is calculated to become both generative and antiproduktive. Without harnessing the powers of both, there would be no possibility for nonhuman horror to occur—production allows the organism to artificially *perceive* or be *aware* of (or translate) its determined circumstances, while antiproduction provides vulnerability that induces nonhuman confusion and terror. This vulnerability is not unlike the melancholic paradox of one's thanatropic relationship to finitude—the anxieties and horrors of mortality congealed with the compulsive thrust toward the transience into the cosmic horizon.

Dark objects can be likened to the undead: vague, starved, dormant, temporally indeterminate outcasts. Yet they do not behave like mythological creatures of the undead such as zombies or vampires. *Dead* implies a body that has lost its prior affective powers, but is nonetheless a body, a mute corpse, which can still rot and metamorphose through other agents. *Undead* means that the loss of affective powers results in a demonic resurgence of intensities that are channelled into a different formation or articulation of being, which could be corporeal or incorporeal. Most dark objects are like the undead, which have lost their relational capacities but have not been fully annihilated, and can still be potentially pulled back into gravitational relations. This is especially true for relative dark objects. A better way to articulate this kind of “undead” may be to suppose that the object in question is pretending or *simulating* being dead.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁵ Lund's statement that melancholy is “more like being dead already” than even living a life of sickness recalls Kristeva's analyses of pretending to be dead as a means of coping with the inconceivable or traumatic Thing. Lund, *A User's Guide to Melancholy*, 137.



Figure 44: Detail of Adrián Villar Rojas' *Fantasma*.

In the first chapter, I discussed *Fantasma* by Adrián Villar Rojas with the aim of outlining different characteristics of nonhuman melancholy. Each of those characteristics is applicable to a dark object's various aspects of being. Withdrawal is a dark object's most melancholic attribute. Because it results from trauma to a machine's constitution brought on by intensities in a constellation that push the afflicted entity into diminished solitude, withdrawal instigates a severance of relational bonds. This trauma is produced by the BwO "in the form of a persecuting organ or some exterior agent of persecution."³⁹⁶ The counter-agents have the capacity to sever a machine's relational bonds, inciting it to swerve into withdrawal. Partial withdrawal signifies the absented presence of dark objects and situates objects as something that is in the pretense of being dead.

Dark objects often cannot be precisely located or quantified. As Bryant notes, "[w]e can hypothesize that they *might* exist and that they could appear, but they are so outside the gravitational paths exercised by other entities that they don't appear at all."³⁹⁷ Julian Charrière's

³⁹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 8.

³⁹⁷ Levi R. Bryant, "Five Types of Objects: Gravity and Onto-Cartography," *Larval Subjects* (blog), *Wordpress*, June 17, 2012, <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/06/17/five-types-of-objects-gravity-and-onto-cartography/>.

Into the Hollow demonstrates withdrawal through the absented data melted into the stone, which acts as a demonic presence of darkened withdrawal because it had shape-shifted beyond its boundaries to adhere to a different mode of possessing or haunting its material enclosure, surpassing its binary structure, operating outside any kind of signifiante (fig. 45). The data as dark objects in the *Metamorphisms* are an unquantifiable collection of digital artefacts that have been irreversibly, chemically metamorphosed into undead conglomerates that hold the broken data in scrambled, decoded secrecy.³⁹⁸ These are *residual* dark objects with no possibility of reappearance, since the data cannot be reassembled toward any form of previous comprehension. The destroyed data cannot be restored, but its metamorphosed traces can potentially reemerge on a molecular level, entering into microscopic relations of asignifiante.



Figure 45: Detail of one of Julian Charrière's *Into the Hollow* conglomerates.

A different type of data loss is apparent in the practice of datamoshing in Bitnik and König's *Download Finished* or Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh*, presenting surface

³⁹⁸ It may be possible to forensically find traces of residue somewhere within the rock, but because the pieces are presented to us as complete fragments that are not meant to be scientifically analyzed, any prospect of a scientific investigation becomes negated, if not futile.

actualizations from which absences can be inferred. In this case, the data is not violently scrambled and fused in disintegrative asignifiante, but selectively absented through the dislocation of the frame sequence in the video codec (fig. 46). This, too, is an irreversible process of disengagement, where the lost or overwritten frames are darkened and obscured by the surface manifestations of glitch effects, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In both of these cases of lost data—the melted hard drives and the glitched video—withdrawal enacts the simulation of death by presenting us with the actualizations of tangible entities that are marked or scarred by dark objects in a way that enables them to thrive despite the internal, nested containment of thanatropic diminishment. The *Metamorphisms* are chained to the inhibition of suppressed data, encompassing residual dark objects. Datamoshing, on the other hand, handles data computationally and pragmatically, so that the absented data is expelled as nullified dark objects.

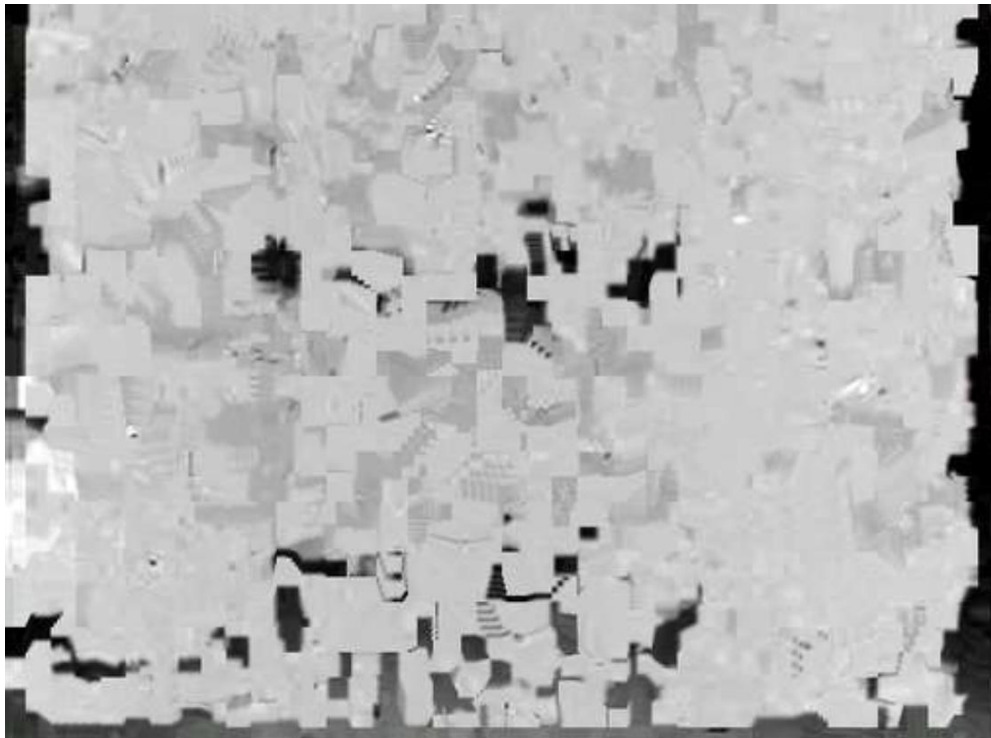


Figure 46: Video still from one of *Download Finished* datamoshed videos.

Nonhuman melancholy demonstrates disintegrative asignifiante when a machine's ability to translate or comprehend asignifying signs becomes an impossibility, which means it is out of phase with other machines if not entirely withdrawn. Dark objects behave in this way. It is a self-

destructive tendency aligned with melancholy's conflicted affiliation with mortality and zero-intensity. Asignifying signs do not follow linguistic rules, but follow events of chance that can select anything from a part of a semiotic element to physical things, "holding together only by the absence of a link (nonlocalizable connections), having no other statutory condition than that of being dispersed elements of desiring-machines that are themselves dispersed."³⁹⁹

In melancholic arrangements, the signs remain without any structural configuration, distanced from one another, or else they might form an asignifying formula that becomes a stagnant failure of signification. This is a hypothetical situation of an incomplete chain, something that has failed to be fully integrated. Such an arbitrary arrangement of signs can potentially form a new dark object, beyond signification and beyond the connective ability to pass into the chain. It would be a dark anomaly—a solitary aggregate that has nothing to do but disintegrate on the BwO, or remain frozen in withdrawal. It would be a piece of matter emerging as something that is already decayed, as if it is a failed alchemical experiment, an erroneous thing born undead. Such *erroneous* dark objects could potentially exist in the computational gaze, such as in aspects of elimination or discrimination that occur in some AI image generators.⁴⁰⁰ In the production of the *UNINVITED* film, the blending process of surveillance feeds with generative AI is potentially haunted by these kinds of erroneous dark objects.

In most situations, dark objects' disintegrative asignifiante is enacted when they shed their relations within the chains of nonsigns, which would otherwise propel dark objects into productive asignifiante that generates new relations. In *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh*, the scrambling of codes is not only digital but also physical and therefore also disintegratively asignifiant. Specifically, the hard drives used for the glitching process are active, functional aggregates of matter, operating through rapidly changing polarities and differential encoding, deterritorializing and overcoding themselves with any file alterations. The deletions in the black box are nullified dark objects that immediately sever codified relations in their

³⁹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 309.

⁴⁰⁰ GANs, for example, have a discrimination system wherein the generator neural network produces false samples that are tested against the discriminator model (the samples on which the model is trained). In the dream states of image generation, these fake samples can be deemed to be successful and moved to the next step, but if they are not compatible with the discriminator model they are discarded as failures. These botched permutations are like unformed lumps of matter that the computational gaze has no use for. Yet they had emerged as real, though incompatible, data entities.

asignifying molecular chains. These annihilated dark objects are miniscule events of rapid digital eradication that, in conditions such as those programmed into *UNINVITED*, can induce events of asignifiant ruptures in the computational gaze.

UNINVITED is haunted by these kinds of thanatropic transient and nullified dark objects in its continuous processing of incoming data. The project's disintegrative asignifiante is grounded in the channels of signaletic communication between the avatar and the hacked surveillance feeds, and the resulting asignifiant horror that the organism metabolizes. In reference to software art, Parikka argues that "[n]ot being identified as a stable object ... is one way of creating vacuoles of non-communication."⁴⁰¹ These internal spaces of non-communication are asignifying instabilities that contribute to the vulnerabilities of the organism's computational gaze.



Figure 47: Nye Thompson & UBERMORGEN, film still "Baseline Metropolis" (2020).

In the *Metamorphosis* sculptures, asignifiante disintegrated when all of the components were destructively transformed in the artificial lava, chemically scrambling all codes into new arrangements of geological strata. The lava could be interpreted as a liquefied mass of darkened

⁴⁰¹ Parikka, "Ethologies of Software Art," 118.

objects—or one *fluid* relative dark object—as it is a violent deterritorialization of various elements assembled in a confusion of fragmented chemical properties and severed bonds. The lava is a relative dark object because it is still able to form relations, but its internal being is an unstable, indeterminate flux of molecular disengaged nonsigns. Once the molten matter congeals, new bonds are formed, but the movement of nonsigns becomes slow and internalized, caught in a state of corpo-motor retardation as well as temporal indeterminacy. This fluidity of darkness brings forth the notion that melancholic behaviours induce procedures of softening that are at odds with stratified assemblages, a notion to which I will return at the end of the chapter.

Dark objects still retain their powers of intensity, but because those powers are withheld, their temporality becomes internalized. They pretend to be already dead, lingering in an undead torpor. For the *Metamorphosis* series, the abolished data encapsulated in the stone represents residual darkness that follows the path of temporal indeterminacy. The irreversibility of the destroyed data makes these residual dark objects so withdrawn that their withheld powers become nothing but traces that can no longer re-emerge as a coherent entity. With the scrambled molecular residues of a previous organization, the object in question becomes darkened to a point of indiscernibility and thus becomes a kind of dark fixation trapped in a constant and irreversible, virtual state of temporal indeterminacy.

Temporal indeterminacy can also be instigated by nonlinear chronology, as the distinctions of past, present, and future become difficult to identify in a machine that is invisible and beyond the temporal commitments of heterogeneous relational concomitance. In other words, chronological difference is obscured and indecipherable in an object that is darkly withdrawn from mixtures of temporal relations. In cases of glitched videos such as *Long Live the New Flesh*, the chronological narrative becomes disrupted through the production of the time-image inside the black box. This production is driven by the indiscernibility of pure optical and sound images that are formed when video frames are deleted or interrupted. In this case, because the time-image is produced in the subface of computation, it is a withdrawn non-chronological duration object, demonically disrupted through difference so that it can be later reiterated in the movement-image expression of the copy. The voided data allows the time-image and non-chronological disruption of narrative to emerge.

Something similar occurs in *UNINVITED*'s AI processing of surveillance camera feeds to generate the horror film, as the images channelled into the digital organism are dislocated from

the present, linear chronology of the live video stream. In a related series of NFT “micro-movies” titled *Unseen*, Thompson and UBERMORGEN combine AI generation with CCTV footage using “impossible possibilities, super zooming, and erratic parallel jumps in perspective” (fig. 48 & fig. 49).⁴⁰² In the generation of images based on surveillance feeds, artificial hallucinations or distortions in machine learning indicate events of digital miscomprehension.



Figure 48: Video still from Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN’s *Unseen* series.

⁴⁰² Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN, “UNINVITED Unseen,” *Nye Thompson*, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://nyethompson.net/works/UNINVITED-Unseen.html>.



Figure 49: Video still from Nye Thompson and UBERMORGEN's *Unseen* series.

Some pixel data is disregarded on the basis of the AI model's analysis, potentially turning the data into relative dark objects inside the black box, while simultaneously instituting a non-chronological composition in the final generated image. The siphoning of visual data through machine learning spatiotemporally unravels the signifiers' amorphous continuum—the chains of signs—so that any corresponding temporal links are deterritorialized in the black box into a non-chronological, entropic calculation. Pixel data on which the AI model is trained disperses into dark particles that carry the potential to later re-emerge in some fragmented, remediated configurations of AI-generated images. Images that are decimated in the black box in this way are transmitted through the stages of machine learning and can be interpreted to be temporary, non-chronological dark objects. They are incomplete and indeterminate computational hallucinations or nightmares, not yet fully formed into complete articulation.

These incomplete hallucinations are time-images because the time-image appears “in a becoming as potentialization, as series of powers.”⁴⁰³ The AI dream-state images exist in a state of potential re-emergence or generated reiteration within a new synthetic configuration of pixels. Only the computational gaze is capable of seeing these artificial becomings. These becomings

⁴⁰³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 275.

are at the same time intertwined with virtuality, and thus they are always fused not only with the darkness of the black box but also with the darkness of immanent deterritorializations on the BwO. Deleuze expands on the time-image as a darkly crystalline duality of the virtual and the actual. At the moment the virtual image is actualized, it becomes “visible and limpid,” yet the actualized image cannot exist without its corresponding virtuality—“referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy.”⁴⁰⁴ This coupling of the actual and the virtual stretches into the exchange between obscurity and transparency so that in-between there is always “a doubt... preventing us from knowing which is limpid and which is dark, considering the conditions.”⁴⁰⁵ The uncertainty of what is dark and what is transparently evident is the same uncertainty that the computational gaze experiences in the process of AI-generated image fabrication, as in the case of the *UNINVITED* film and the *Unseen* micro-movies.

Through stages of indeterminacy, the algorithm must decipher what is to remain darkly opaque and what should be pulled back into calculated articulations. However, because there is an indeterminacy for the computational gaze about what it is designed to perceive and appropriate, there is always the presence of dark virtuality that tags along with the actualized image. In the *UNINVITED* film, the images had gone through this process of disarticulation and rearticulation in the black box, attesting to the indeterminacy of time-images for and by nonhuman vision. The time-image provides whatever is in the process of changing, such as disarticulated black box pixel-objects, with a constant form or identity, but one in which the change itself is produced, carrying the internal potentialization of powers toward a different organization.⁴⁰⁶ This is a state of temporal indeterminacy and contingency for the pixel-particles that results in an artificially fabricated and unprecedented becoming-image. It leads to a product that emerges from dark non-chronological duration.

The deterritorialization that occurs when an object is repelled into a state of slow or inactive receptivity can produce a demagnetized relative dark object with a disrupted, decelerated temporality. *Fantasma*'s relative dark objects, for example, function under the museum's restratifying, obsessive protocols for archival preservation, which is a hindrance to the objects' temporal trajectory of decomposition. In this thwarted, severed state the objects are

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

confined to an assemblage of overcodification that oversees, manages, and measures the objects' rhythms of decay. For *Into the Hollow*, corpo-motor retardation is manifested in the materials' heavy, earthbound inertia or paralysis, producing a lethargic temporality that darkens the objects' ability to react to other rates of speed and rhythms. The conglomerates are settled into a stagnant sedimentation, so that they cease to undergo processes of transcoding. The residual dark objects of incinerated data are embedded in this geological, decelerated temporality of mineral stagnation, caught in the orbit of geological deep time.

In the translation of the time-image into the movement-image in *Long Live the New Flesh* and in *UNINVITED*'s appropriation of camera feeds, corpo-motor retardation is evidenced not so much in the velocity of the moving image but in its compression. Compression, as a mode of selective deletion in the image, is a contraction of visual information that is closely related to temporal indeterminacy, shrinking data for the purposes of accelerated transmission and efficient storage. The alignment with corpo-motor retardation, then, seems counterintuitive, yet if this is viewed from the point of view of the time-image, its translation or mediation into the compressed movement-image can be viewed as a deceleration, contraction, and suppression of the time-image.

As already noted, deletion results in the production of nullified dark particle-objects. In the process of annihilation, dark objects can be said to fall into a black hole, winding up in a position of inhibition. Because black holes can "resonate together," multiple inhibitions (or dark objects) can induce the assemblage to dissipate or close down "as though it were deterritorialized in the void."⁴⁰⁷ The compressed visual data does not dissipate, yet the original, uncompressed video from which the compression is extracted experiences a state of operational closure. This resonance of black holes swallowing up nullified dark objects into annihilation implies a melancholic trajectory of irreversible thanatropic decay. The deliberate contraction of data is the residuum that echoes states of *inhibition* that are experienced by objects under corpo-motor retardation.

Dark objects do not need to be reduced to only two categories as outlined in Bryant's hypothesis. There are absolute and relative dark objects, but in thinking through specific situations it becomes possible to speculate on other varieties of dark objects, such as nullified,

⁴⁰⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 334.

fluid, or residual dark objects. It is possible that there are many other kinds of dark objects that are simply not perceived or encountered. All types of dark objects exist on the basis of repulsion and attraction in the interplay of machinic gravitations. Pure intensities come from the opposition of the forces of repulsion and attraction, working from the zero intensity of the BwO.⁴⁰⁸ Yet the intensities of dark objects operate outside of, or rather in-between, the productive operations of repulsion or attraction. Although they are often repulsed into withdrawal, this dejection is not a constructive or positive force from zero as Deleuze and Guattari suggest repulsion to be. Rather, dark objects are caused by repulsive impulses, but in themselves they are neutralized entities that withhold their intensities from gravitational influence, so that attraction ceases to be of direct influence in the equation. They are suspended between repulsion and attraction, unless in some rare instance of an appropriate, compatible input, the object is attracted back into a relational actualization. Like the indecisive consternation of the melancholic, dark objects haunt themselves in an undead indeterminacy of nocturnal disengagement.

4.5 Darkness, the BwO, and Inflection of the Death-Void

That dark objects behave in a melancholic manner does not mean that all melancholically inclined or afflicted machines are dark objects. Yet melancholic entities do possess a level of darkness, by virtue of the BwO's viscid interference that seeps through their intensities, invoking antiproduktive breaks that disrupt relations and flows of molecular and temporal predispositions. What precisely is the affiliation between darkness and the BwO, and how might this contribute to a better visualization of nonhuman melancholy? Is the "demonic" darkness, as described by Bryant, integral to the operations of nonhuman melancholy?

The relationship between melancholy and darkness is well established historically, with the mentality that the darkening, disruptive excess of black bile is the definitive marker of the condition. In reference to Burton, Lund observes how melancholic perception is a "projection outwards of inner gloom, the condensed vapours of black bile forming a kind of melancholy contact lens. Melancholics quite literally see a darkness."⁴⁰⁹ Perception and comprehension are glazed over with the putrescence of black bile, and this is not so different for nonhuman

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰⁹ Lund, *A User's Guide to Melancholy*, 62.

melancholy's machinic relations, which become shadowed over with nocturnal deterritorializations that result in obstacles to productive mediation. This situates darkness in accordance with the decomposition of matter. Antoine-Joseph Pernety, in his alchemical treatise, has established links between dissolution, degeneration and the colour black. *Black* is assumed under a variety of names in alchemical works, including the name of *Melancholy* due to its associations with disintegration and black bile.⁴¹⁰ Melancholy is thus affiliated with darkness, and darkness with the putrefaction of matter.

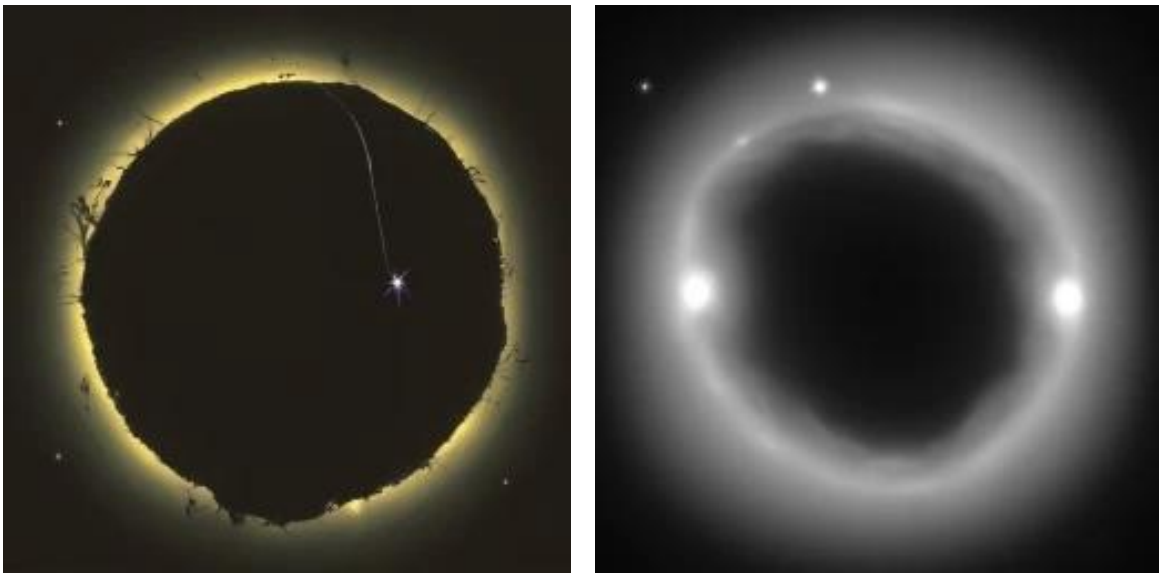


Figure 50: AI-generated diagrams using the below Kristeva quote as the text prompt.

⁴¹⁰ Pernety lists names for black matter such as “*Head of the Crow, nigrum nigro, nigrius, (le noir du noir très noir)*” as well as “*Death, Destruction and Perdition, the Infernal Regions, Tartarus, Shadows, Night, Obscure Vest, Supulchre, Tomb, Venimous Water, Charcoal, Manure, Black Earth, Black Veil, Sulphurous Earth, Melancholy, Black Magnesia, Clay, Stinking Menstruum, Smoke, Lamp-Black, Venimous Fire, Cloud, Lead, Black Lead, Philosopher’s Lead, Saturn, Black Powder, Contemptible Thing, Vile Thing, Seal of Hermes, Stinking Spirit, Sublimated Spirit, Eclipsed Sun or Eclipse of the Sun and Moon, Corruption, Black Bark, Sea-foam, Covering of the Vase, Capital of the Alembic, Naptha, Uncleanliness of the Dead, Corpse, Oil of Saturn, Nigrum-Nigro-Nigrius.*” All these names, including *Melancholy*, are said to “designate corruption, dissolution and blackness.” Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernety, *A Treatise on the Great Art: A System of Physics According to Hermetic Philosophy and Theory and Practice of the Magisterium*, ed. Edouard Blitz (Flaming Sword Productions, 1997), 72.

Kristeva asks “[w]here does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me ... compelling me to silence, to renunciation?”⁴¹¹ The association with a “black sun”—and thus an entrenchment in a black galaxy—situate melancholy as a cosmic darkness flooded with an aphotic void, beyond expression and signification.⁴¹² Melancholic darkness seems to irradiate from no particular direction, so that its scope is unlocalized and indeterminable. Melancholy has also been associated with nocturnal obscurity. Not only did it symbolically allude to creatures of the night such as bats or owls, it stood for the darkness of the unknown and the unknowable.⁴¹³ It is an impermeable darkness that surrounds the melancholic from every direction—a stygian nocturnal oblivion. In this perception of darkness there is no sign to latch onto. This dimension of the unknown is the inconceivable, abyssal undercurrent operating outside the bounds of language or simulacra. *UNINVITED*, with its incomprehensive memory cycles, enacts these aspects of melancholic obscurity, where the darkness of the black box enfolds the darkness of melancholic obscurity.

These melancholic aspects of darkness are affiliated with the BwO’s incisive role in antiproduction. When an object possesses darkness, nothing further is being produced *on* the BwO as intensities are blocked, unable to pass through the partial objects, which serve as the “*direct powers of the body without organs*” and are the intensive parts that produce the real from “matter as intensity=0.”⁴¹⁴ There are penumbral facets to objects and assemblages that serve to implement melancholic tendencies that introduce inertia, uncertainty, malaise, and crises into schizophrenic reality. Dark objects become inert to the working organs, devoid of influence. Yet this very absence of influence serves the indispensable role of maintaining extreme disarticulation in antiproductions.

Contributing to decay, lacking totality in their severance, and thanatropic in their disintegrative withdrawal, dark objects are purely antiproductions. They take refuge on the BwO and appropriate its refusal to systematically harmonize. They inadvertently cause gaps, malfunctions, or damage. There is an abstracted dimension to dark objects that is formless and indefinite. Their nullified fuzziness would not be possible without the BwO’s role as a virtual instigator of change—changes in

⁴¹¹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 3.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹³ Földényi, *Melancholy*, 73.

⁴¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 326–327.

matter-movement that continually fold the constant of emptiness into machinic realization. While dark objects would not be objects at all if they were empty, their relations to emptiness or void are perhaps the only relations they are able uphold.

If dark objects are not pretending to be dead, they are on a path to total annihilation. On the BwO, death is something that is never completed in every becoming—“[e]very intensity controls within its own life the experience of death, and envelops it.”⁴¹⁵ This is true for schizophrenic reality in general, yet in nonhuman melancholy there is a struggle or sluggishness in becoming, so that death is more associated with disintegration, the cosmic trajectory of the death drive, and antiproduction than it is with becoming. It is more about stagnation, hesitation, or fixation within death itself, which becomes revealed as part of the normative operations of schizophrenic reality where death is folded into generative production as antiproduktive fuel.

It is important to distinguish that the BwO differs from the concept of nothingness or the void. Deleuze and Guattari explain that “[t]he body without organs is not the proof of an original nothingness, nor is it what remains of a lost totality. ... It is the body without an image. This imageless, organless body, the nonproductive, exists right there where it is produced.”⁴¹⁶ The BwO does not represent a void from which existence spills out and recedes into; it is that with which all bodies exist as a virtual zero-degree surface for the movements, inscriptions, accelerations, and decelerations of objects’ powers and intensities. The void gives rise to a darkness in which this surface is immanently situated. The BwO is an aspect of matter itself, infused with dark nothingness that it converts or transposes into a viscous secretion, like the sickly fluidity of black bile infecting machines with antiproduktive potential (fig. 51).

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

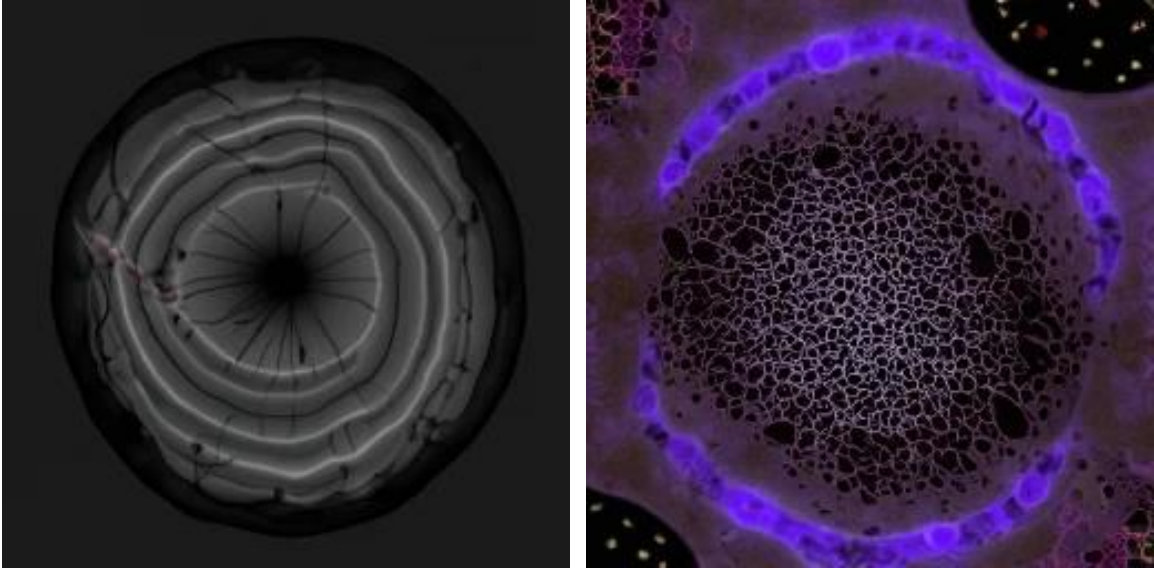


Figure 51: AI-generated diagrams based on the above sentence as the text prompt.

Deleuze and Guattari liken the BwO to a solitary humming machine or an atomic factory in a “dark world, growing desert,” (or void) as a non-decomposable and indissoluble base that produces the real.⁴¹⁷ Dark objects are shrouded in this dark world, with varying degrees of proximity to annihilation, while the BwO is immanently situated in the void as the regulator of dissipation, fragmentation, and becoming in matter-movement. It is a plateau on the plane of immanence and its main function is to be a “component of passage.”⁴¹⁸ This passage for melancholic entities antiproducerily binds void to the structural makeup of machines, interiorizing the death drive which allows melancholic indeterminacies to occur. Objects caught under the spell of thanatropic antiproduction are infected with a greater degree of demonic darkness, within and without, providing them with the faculties for withdrawal, disintegrative asignificance, and subsequent temporal irregularities—the loosening of rigid formations.

Void in machine ontology is both interior and exterior to machines.⁴¹⁹ Nick Land argues that void excludes solidity, but conversely solidity does not exclude the void. “What appears as

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

⁴¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 158.

⁴¹⁹ Ben Woodard refers to Negarestani’s conception of the softening of decay and nested interiorities interiorizing exteriorities, which are sponge-spaces filled with “traumas” inflected by exteriority—traumas that can potentially come from the exteriority of void. Ben Woodard, *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy* (Punctum Books, 2013), 17.

solidity is a compound involving the aggregate of the unfocused; both unfocused solidity and unfocused void.”⁴²⁰ For Land, void is not only indistinct in this way; it also characterizes absolute death, so that solidity is “contaminated” by a kind of death-void. It serves as subtractive negativity that actualizes itself inside and outside the porosity of matter, manifested in a kind of sponge-space or mesh.⁴²¹

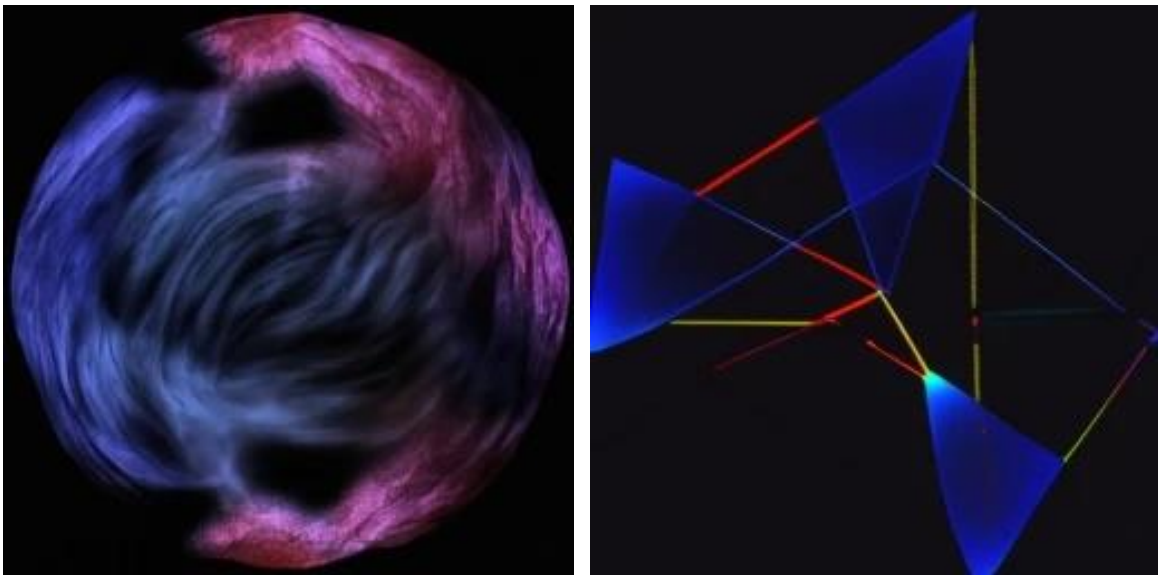


Figure 52: AI-generated diagrams based on the above Land quote as the text prompt.

Negarestani notes how in decay it can be difficult to determine the precise moment at which something ceases to exist—the point at which an entity becomes void.⁴²² This difficulty of ontologically determining the point of extinction of a body supports Land’s argument that

⁴²⁰ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 117.

⁴²¹ Bryant reinforces this notion stating that void occupies machines as well as surrounds them, thus allowing for change to occur, whether it is productive or antiproduative. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 115.

⁴²² “[T]he shriveling body of the fruit as it continuously shrinks forms the negative building vector of decay. . . . the longer and more the object shrivels, the more remote and distant—hence weirder—its putrid derivatives and differential forms become. The process of decay, therefore, exacerbates the blackening indeterminacy already entrenched at the heart of subtractive cosmogenesis Confronting the problem of the *infinitesimal persistence* of the decaying object, it becomes increasingly difficult to say when the process of decay ceases to exist and is supplanted by complete ontological annulment or extinction.” Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 387.

solidity and void are “unfocused,” as the individuated path of a decaying entity becomes more diffracted and distanced the more it is darkened through the difference of subtraction. Decay can only be conceived as an unfocused and dispersive, subtractive *process*. It is a process of darkening—a diminishment that becomes diffused and obscure through severed relations or bonds. For *UNINVITED*, the unfocused digital memory cycles incite a kind of ongoing internal decay, where the entity’s functions never quite reach complete diminishment or exhaustion. Rather, the organism enfolds darkness in its black box operations to fulfill its purpose as a distinctly melancholic, artificially obsessive, nonhuman creature.

Darkness itself can be processual and immanent to melancholic events. In other words, what is dark for dark objects pertains to all aspects of nonhuman melancholy, whether the melancholically afflicted object is a dark object or not. As Bryant noted, there is a level of darkness to objects—something obscure and demonic in their differential behaviours based on contingent levels of intensities. Darkness sustains the blurred, enfolded presence of emptiness by maintaining levels of antiproduction that are in conflict with the multiplicities of generative procedures.

4.6 *UNINVITED* and Germinal Death: Melancholic Softening and Perpetual Decay

Dark melancholic operations can signal stasis or deadlock within the functions of production, in addition to withdrawal and decompositional tendencies. At the same time, these states are buried inside the same productive procedures from which they recoil, while still retaining fidelity to withdrawal and severance from relations. On the one hand, nonhuman melancholy is just another instance of antiproduction being folded back into production like a passing schizophrenic break, while on the other hand it is a slow, lingering, possessive condition of being that resists full reintegration. This resistance, fueled by the living putrefaction of the death drive and its confrontation with stratified organization, introduces ongoing tensions between production and antiproduction, so that melancholy becomes a persistent non-functional impediment to functional operations.

Because void-death is both interior and exterior to objects, its demonic inflection of mortality is exercised through a play of repulsions and attractions that, for melancholic objects in particular, results in a loosening or opening up of rigid structures precisely through the melancholic insistence to foreclose certain operations. In his essay “Death as a Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death,” Negarestani presents openness as a productive infectious flow of the “creative base-communication of life” fueled by “philia”—meaning attraction or bonding. What he calls “germinal death” is death that is infected and prolonged by the multiplying bonds of life—“[i]nfested by philia, death is not domesticated; it goes rabid.”⁴²³ The machinic attractions in productive operations impose themselves upon antiproduction so that death is diffused and protracted within vitality.

This concept is somewhat contrary to the idea of operational closure that melancholy represents, but it corresponds to melancholy’s tendency to linger within inaction and antiproduktive operational closure. Here death is still “a zero-becoming or the absolute silence of intensity,” but this zero-becoming is encompassed in the midst of active assemblages, in the form of darkened nonappearance.⁴²⁴ Attraction’s infestation upon death extends the duration of becoming-death in decay. It is easily conceivable to envision this phenomenon in relation to projects such as *Fantasma* where physical decay is prolonged through the bonds of institutional restructifications. It becomes more challenging to think the concept of germinal death in relation to digital decay and the computational gaze in projects like *UNINVITED*.

UNINVITED is a melancholic machine whose computational gaze enfolds becoming-death in its productive, or gravitationally attractive, operations. Its amplification of decay is not the deterioration of its body but rather the deterioration of its artificial sensory perceptions in relation to digital memory. In this case, *memento mori* is not correlated only with nullification as it is in glitch, but rather with the organism’s encoded inability to recognize. Its perceptive disorientation and continuous incomprehension of incoming data reflects its ongoing, repetitive collapse toward zero-intensity. The germinal death within this system is the demonic darkness of its fluctuating memory, which works through restless attention spans and distributed on/off sensory logic in the encoded efforts to understand its physical surroundings and the multitude of

⁴²³ Reza Negarestani, “Death as a Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death,” *Dark Trajectories: Politics of the Outside*, ed. Joshua Johnson ([NAME] Publications, 2013), 66.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

incoming surveillance camera feeds. It is designed to internally deterritorialize its own comprehension of signs, which function as dead redundancies that never quite harmonize into a chain of signification that the organism is able to comprehend. Instead the signs are accumulated, diffracted, and nullified in the darkness of the black box. The organism's digital vitality thanatropically provokes the multiplication of death, folding disorder, void, and darkness into its preprogrammed productive existence. It winds up isolating itself, locked into a state of nonhuman melancholic despair. Its AI-generated hallucinations are the projections of the softening or loosening tendencies of ongoing decay in the computational gaze.

In germinal death, melancholic objects are temporally indeterminate as they take on temporalities that are at once decisively terminal and uncertainly deferred. Negarestani describes it as a liquidation of death, so that germinal death is transformed into a new becoming as it exceeds itself through an "opening process" that makes death "diterminalized"—a becoming that is "anonymous (and imperceptible)."⁴²⁵ This imperceptibility is the darkness inherent to becoming-death that fixates itself on decay as a loosening of stratified formations and molar assemblages. Germinal death instills decay "as its softening machine," substituting germinal production with "eternal decomposition and rotting processes" as a schizophrenic schema of "anti-solidity"—"decomposition and decay stop because of the limits that death (or the great void) draws" but in germinal death they persist indefinitely, while decay manifests itself as "a strategic anti-rigidity process."⁴²⁶ As *UNINVITED* cycles through its disturbed distortions of memory processing, the points of instability and incomprehension (the instances of nonhuman terror) soften the molar organization of its somatic framework.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴²⁷ In *Accomplice* (2013–) by Petra Gemeinboeck and Rob Saunders, the softening procedures inherent to its computational gaze are literally externalized. The project consists of multiple robots contained in plasterboard walls, each robot being equipped with AI software, cameras, and a knocking part that is used to navigate through the wall space. They are autonomous entities within the architecture of the space, programmed to explore their surroundings and to hammer holes in the walls, effectively destroying the habitat on which their programmed curiosity relies. The computational gaze is directed toward the comprehension of the architecture, but not toward the awareness of the architecture's deterioration. The softening tendency of decay is external to the robotic entities, while for *UNINVITED* everything is internalized.

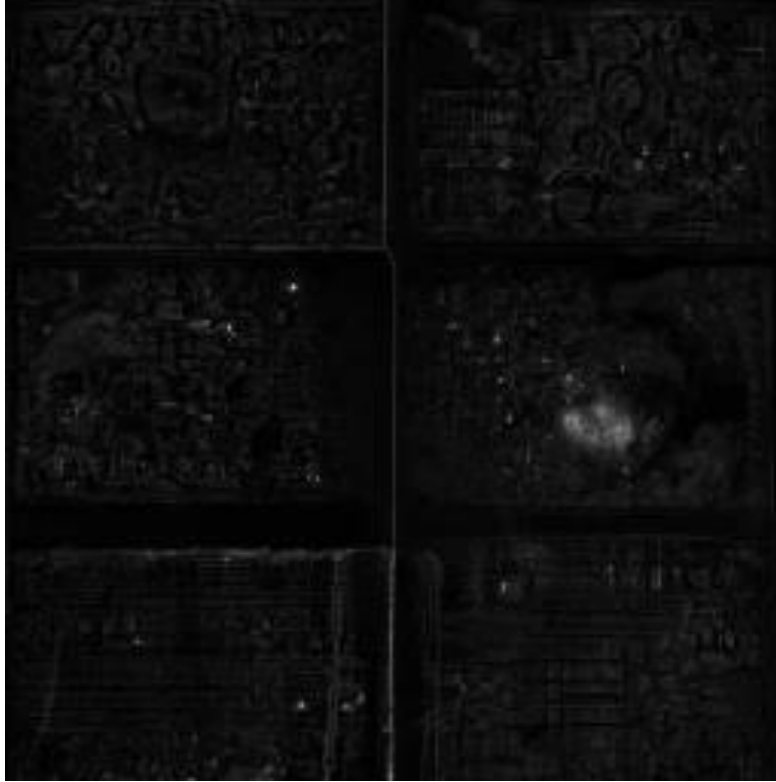


Figure 53: AI-generated diagram using the below sentence as the text prompt.

The computational gaze, trapped in cycles of withdrawal, disintegrative assignificance, and temporal indeterminacy, becomes softened or loosened, with dark objects continuously falling back onto spaces of zero-intensity or nullification through the failure to process or recognize (fig. 53). Software is that which prompts hardware to behave in particular ways. The softening of the computational gaze is the loosening of software's molar constitution of overcoding, which becomes physically translated into the performance of hardware. Instructions, as mediations, become filled with gaps and inconsistencies, punctured with instances of demonic darkness that are in turn inflicted upon the somatic hardware components of the organism. It is a melancholic synthesis that multiplies and ungrounds instants of decay, as points of nonfunction, in the organism's structural makeup. Its structures are designed to consistently overwrite and overcode nonfunction toward the prolongation of its undead autonomy. The thanatropic tendencies of continuous diminishment in the death drive are acted out as darkened procedures of softening, repeatedly installing plasticity through the deterioration of digital signification against the deterritorializing forces of rigid stratified formations. Melancholy's languid reluctance becomes a catalyst for plasticity, relying on the repetition of disintegrative collapse. The softening of

darkness is appropriated into the stratifying impulses of the computational gaze through a sweeping gesture of envelopment.



Figure 54: AI-generated illustration using the below Negarestani quote as the text prompt.

The subtractive softening of decay is an ungrounded activity of loosening that structures itself as an antiproduktive expansion on the BwO. Negarestani describes how “solidity is not wiped out and sucked into Zero but necrotized and softened to no end, shatters on the virtual surfaces of Zero without being sucked by its vortices, making its own economic grund, a (un)grund whose tectonic expansion is the Zero itself” (fig. 54).⁴²⁸ This darkness resists rigidity through melancholic repulsions, which become appropriated or enfolded into specific, molar tasks of attraction. Germinal death, as an ongoing process multiplying subtractive operations, is perfectly situated to articulate the kind of ongoing decay or disarticulation that can occur in the computational gaze. Its expansion in *UNINVITED* relies on cycles of overcoding that constitute the continuous collapse of signification in the computational gaze, marking intervals of melancholic horror through lapses of memory in the artificial organism.

The project reflects not only how decay is enfolded inside this digital entity, but also how it is actualized as antiproduction within the broader administration of the shifting limits of digital

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 67.

capitalism. Being composed of digital flesh that cybernetically infects millions of surveillance cameras, it machinically and technically participates in the panoptic overcodification of environments and a culture of surveillance. The organism cannot but extend itself into the wider scope of the computational gaze that operates through the axiomatic of power relations of digital capitalism. Through the internalization of this extensive data, the organism also obsessively internalizes the ever-expanding aggregates of antiproduction and production in the axiomatic of capitalism and its enterprise of absorbing any surplus value of code through the death-driven processes of decomposition. The surplus value pertains to the overcodification of any deterritorialized field. This includes the project's infected, fabricated economy of anonymous digital images of surveillance.

The organism is programmed to selectively internalize and digest this economy rather than expunge it for any kind of widespread, production-fueled, generative circulation. The limit is thus set and displaced within the organism—the being's melancholic constitution was designed to survey and appropriate information toward a scheme of death-driven memory disruptions, incomprehension, and subsequent instabilities, as can be evidenced in the *UNINVITED* film. Land relates how in the context of capitalism the machinic unconscious flees “across a primary-process topography that is shaped by pain-gradients and escape thresholds” and what is recorded as “memory, experience, data-acquisition” also functions as “scarring, damage, sticky microsofted irritations”—implicating the memory of the computational gaze in operations with destructive effects that are aligned with the machinic unconscious necessity to escape its own boundaries.⁴²⁹ Withdrawal is introduced into the operations of internal limit displacements, inciting subtractive “irritations” of memory damage and nullification.

The organism's internal complexity and expansion converts the deterritorialization of data into disintegratively asignifiant sets of decayed information that disrupt memory flows. Its *memento mori* consists of the undead—the thanatropic tendencies caught in a circulatory loop—that progresses indefinitely through instances of softening anti-rigidity procedures, plugged into germinal, productive, and emergent operations. *UNINVITED* embodies nonhuman melancholy on all levels of strata, from its isolation from social relations, to its internal hallucinogenic

⁴²⁹ Land, “Meat,” 192.

horror, to the strata of capitalism's deterritorializations and overcodifications—all of which rely on flows of perpetual inconsistencies and antiproduction fueled by the BwO.

Melancholy proves to be an obstinate molecular counteraction against rigid, molar formations, continuously softening the computational gaze with the darkness of black bile into an unpredictable and unstable organization of digital being. This is how germinal death is enacted in a purposefully corrupted computational organism, yet it also applies to melancholic operations of all kinds, including those pertaining to the case studies covered in this dissertation—organic decay, thanatropic regression, and entropy enacted in the signifying regime. In my concluding remarks, I will outline how the *purpose* of melancholic processes in schizophrenic reality is for them to act as agents of amplification for anti-rigidity softening operations.

Conclusion

Nonhuman Melancholy as a Schema of Anti-Rigidity

There is no decay whose swollen and slimy nodules of rot—its differentiated forms—have not already interpolated themselves between all known and unknown forms in the softest and smoothest way possible so as to disguise the deterioration or putrefaction of the whole.⁴³⁰

The case studies discussed in this dissertation have served as models for articulating melancholic machinic processes in the nonhuman. I have approached artworks not specifically as aesthetic or haptic experiences, but rather as nonhuman entities operating through machinic processes in order to articulate how nonhuman melancholy can be structured within machine ontology. I have shown how nonhuman life—whether it is grounded in the transience of matter, the deep time of geological formations, the corruption of images, or in the computational gaze—is inflected with degrees of demonic darkness that softens rigidity through withdrawal, disintegrative asinificance, temporal indeterminacy, and corpo-motor retardation. My conception of nonhuman melancholy situates it as an obstacle to productive, schizophrenic operations in machine ontology. Yet it is an obstacle that serves the purpose of molecularly loosening corporeal and incorporeal molar organizations, contributing to the amplification of antiproduction on the BwO in the form of becoming-death. Dark objects and degrees of darkness in objects can contribute to this antiproduative magnification, either through withdrawal or annihilation, causing instances of gaps and misalignment in relational flows.

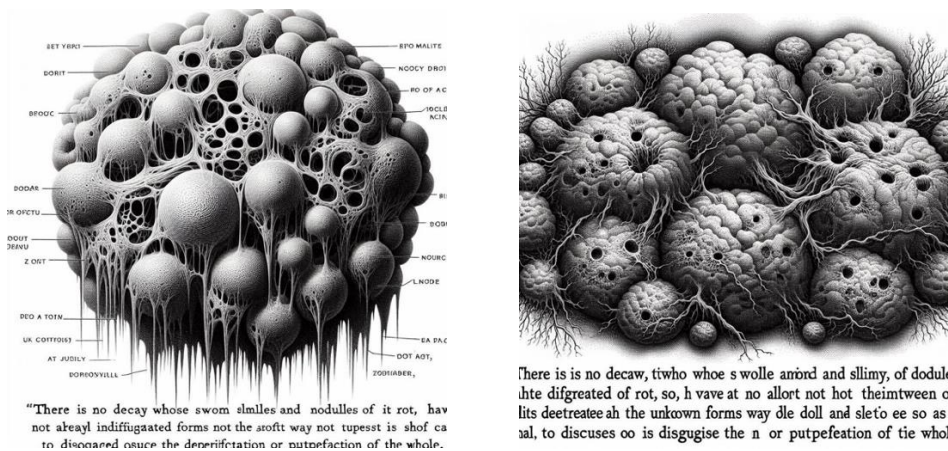


Figure 55: AI-generated diagrams using the above Negarestani quote as the text prompt.

⁴³⁰ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 384.

Artistic processes can appropriate melancholic attributes, whether it is done purposefully or unconsciously. Nonhuman melancholy includes in itself the emergence of voided, ghosted spaces or shadows in materiality that can be appropriated into processes of artistic production. The conflation of melancholic attributes is carried over into the utilization of materials, whether as matter or as absented signs in the signifying regime. Darkness allows for speculation on inaccessibility, the otherness of the BwO, and the immanence of enfolded, nested spaces of interiorized death-void. This is not to say that artists' intentions or their methods are melancholic themselves, nor are they necessarily consciously aware of melancholic processes inherent to their work. However, their intentions can be indirectly related to concepts interwoven with melancholic operations.

When Villar Rojas was planning his exhibition *Fantasma*, melancholy was not in the equation of his conceptual framework or intentions; however, it is feasible that the theme of *memento mori* did not escape his considerations in displaying decaying materials as a tableau. When Charrière was plotting to melt a heap of digital waste into artificial lava, his concerns were mainly oriented toward the crystallization of deep time, but this concern can be imbricated with how the death drive is enacted within inorganic objects of capitalist dissipation toward the cosmic horizon. Bitnik and König utilized glitch to reveal the technical and material aspects of video codec and to make this corruptive work available to the public, yet their utilization of compression shows how poor images can embody melancholy through breaks in the signifying regime. Provost's motivations were likewise centered around the use of glitch to disturb the digital fabric of the image, yet his purposeful transformation of the horror genre shows the diffraction of the *memento mori* motif as an actualization of the demonic in images through inaccessible, subfacial black box procedures that are inseparable from the virtual aspects of melancholic disturbance. Thompson and UBERMORGEN did not design *UNINVITED* to function as a melancholic entity, yet it inadvertently takes on that role through its nonhuman, digital enactment of horror and confusion. Nonhuman melancholy thus has the capacity to be effectuated in artistic practice without any deliberate artistic or aesthetic motivations, yet it can nonetheless function as a set of symptoms that, rather than foreclosing the work, open it up to further intrigue, inquiry, or points of contemplation in relation to the death drive, *memento mori*, darkness, and the ungrounding

processes of decay.

It may seem contradictory that melancholy, as a state that relinquishes functional bonds, would exercise a commitment to something like a purpose. Perhaps it is not so much a purpose as it is a consequential *influence* within machinic reality. As discussed at the end of the last chapter, melancholy incites an articulation of decay that acts as an ongoing process of ungrounded death. In this conclusion, I would like to delineate the differences and concatenations between melancholy, the death drive, the concept of *memento mori*, and the notion of decay as a perpetual state of softening that endows melancholy with an operational, or rather counter-operational, purpose.

“Unlife”—or death infected by attraction—is described by Negarestani as “a terminal multiplicity in the form of evaporation” where particles cease to be the “designing agents of flux-movements” and instead play the role of “pestilential ungrounding forces.”⁴³¹ What is ungrounded is death itself—its subtractive stasis of zero exhumed and converted into an unlocked mechanism of open-ended germinal decomposition. Darkness becomes diffracted and processual, its asignifying softness shrouded in the striated netting of multiplicities, shifting assemblages, signifying chains, and translations. The substantial solidity of contents and expressions in the *UNINVITED* organism, for example, becomes unfocused, its *memento mori* caught in repetitions of antiproduktive memory loops. What is the association between this ungrounded death and the death drive? Can they be manifested as the same process of softening?

Death Drive Against Organization

Afflicting organic and inorganic entities, the death drive is an antiproduktive force that effectuates melancholic qualities in objects due to its collision with the positive forces of production and systems of stratification. This collision incites a convergence between the folding of limitless exteriority into living putrefaction and the productive resistance against disorganization. The death drive’s task is to affix cosmic exteriority and deterritorialization to the interior affordances of objects. In other words, it is a becoming-death that binds death-void to the internal constituency of machines

⁴³¹ Negarestani, “Death as a Perversion,” 68.

through the BwO, disturbing their drive for maintaining organizational solidity. Thanatropic decay is a process of darkening that channels the antiproductive flows of black bile as zero intensity into the object's actualization. The death drive is that which effectuates nonhuman melancholy to occur, due to its perpetual conflictual amalgamation with productive or generative forces. As a result, melancholic attributes of withdrawal, disintegrative asignifiante, temporal indeterminacy, and corpo-motor retardation begin to unfold. These attributes in turn perpetuate machinic events of anti-rigidity. The death drive is a persistent internal energetic impetus toward cosmic dissipation, however in nonhuman melancholy this dissipation becomes a stagnated and reluctant process—never complete—due to the death drive's imbrication with germinal forces of production.

In Villar Rojas' *Fantasma*, the death drive's disintegrative propulsion encounters the stratifying rigidity of institutional maintenance. For the objects acquired by the museum, this encounter is an ongoing struggle of suspended decomposition. Death becomes colonized by the stringent manipulation of the objects' trajectory of decay, ungrounded from the linear trajectory of dissipation while being grounded within defensive protocols of concealment and security of the museum. The objects' death drive becomes snagged and looped into a thwarted failure to fully adhere to their own dictatorial tendencies of affordance. As relative dark objects, they consistently withdraw from the bonds of organized integration even as those bonds continually impose themselves around the objects. These insufficient bonds become softened through the objects' insistence on behaving as melancholic counteragents, even if it is only at the decelerated rate of corpo-motor retardation. It is through the death drive that "necro ... is all laid and stripped open, infested and messed up in the unheard-of base-participations in life and the contagious bonds of philia."⁴³²

Charrière's *Into the Hollow*, as discussed in the second chapter, likewise follows the death drive's imperatives toward cosmic extinction, albeit on a scale more closely aligned with the shifting internal limits of capitalism's cycles of production and obsolescence. Necrocracy prescribes the economic affordance of a machine's trajectory of dissipation, which for his project consists of two stages of melancholic interference—the acceleration of artificial lava and the deceleration of the lava's coagulation. In the economic tendency of affordance for the first stage, the subtractive nature of scorching decomposition becomes a proliferation of putrefying particles that never quite reach the point

⁴³² Ibid., 64.

of zero-intensity, while total annihilation becomes melancholically deferred. The lava becomes contaminated with the ghost-objects of the debris of capitalist production, decelerating into a stagnant, entombed mortification of digital trash. The lava serves as an opening procedure. Negarestani asks—“where is death in this epidemic openness?”⁴³³ Thanatropic regression operates with a complex variety of temporalities, always caught in the indeterminacy of accumulated pasts and contingencies of cosmic extinction. In *Into the Hollow*, deep time proves to be a thanatropic or *stygian* time—a dead temporality that is withdrawn or remote, but one that is still enacted through the death drive even if it is at the rate of corpo-motor retardation.

In both stages of the project, darkness injects itself into the opening process, scrambling asignifying particles into a mass of thanatropic disintegration. The mineral conglomerates are a result of the fluidification of death that congeals into an inorganic assertion of softening—the anti-rigidity not pertaining to mineral composition but to the systematic protocols of e-waste disposal as determined by capitalist-driven administration. In other words, the multiplication of death is manifested through an accelerative and subtractive opening procedure that releases a space for anti-rigidity, utilizing materials that are rigid in the qualities of their materiality, but not in their machinic being or potential.

The third chapter analyzed Bitnik and König’s *Download Finished* and *Long Live the New Flesh* through ideas of the poor image, the demonic images of simulacra, the computational gaze, and Deleuze’s concepts of the movement-image and the time-image. Datamoshing was presented as a laceration in the linearity of narrative structure, collapsing into an augmented, subtractive fluidification of the moving image. Nullified dark objects in the video codec contribute to the anti-rigidity of the linear structure of the moving image. Through this nullification, digital decay is ungrounded in the mediation of visual data, where the boundaries of the frame structure collapse and contract into a death-driven confusion that collides with the boundaries of computational logic. The death drive, manifested in the form of subface instabilities of digital processes, is here harnessed as a tool for softening the calculated precision of computational procedures and of digital simulacra. The demonic difference produced in datamoshing acts as an anti-rigidity process, releasing the production of the glitch time-image as an opening within the inaccessibility of the black box (fig. 56).

⁴³³ Ibid., 58.

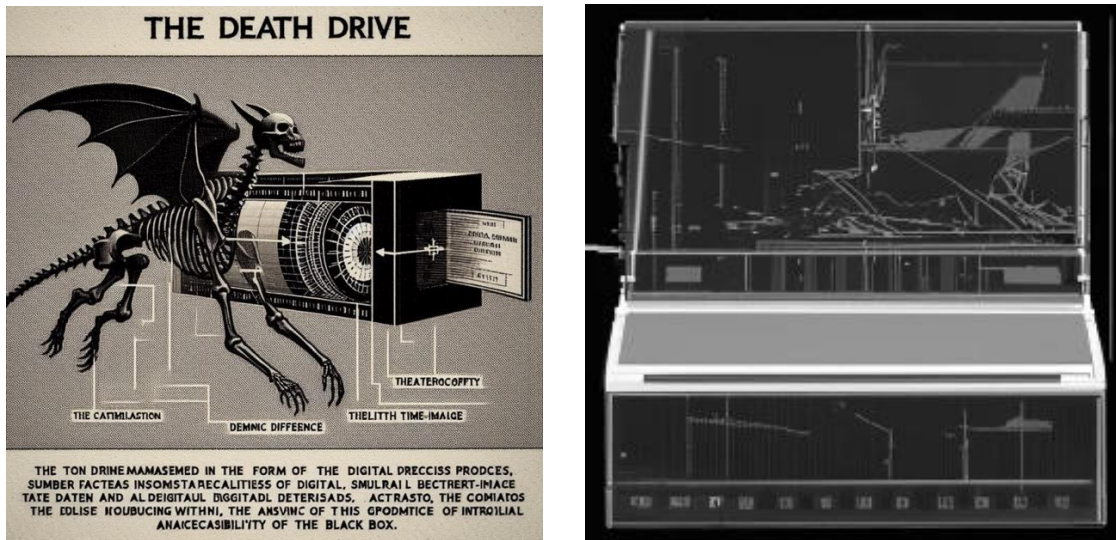


Figure 56: AI-generated diagrams using the above two sentences as the text prompt.

Similarly, Thompson and UBERMORGEN’s *UNINVITED* challenges the rigidity of black box computation, binding the influences of the death drive to the logic of the computational gaze, confusing the artificial organism’s internal memory cycles in the processing of external stimuli. The death drive here incites melancholy, which occurs when “[o]penness bites into death, chews and liquidates it by its enzymes.”⁴³⁴ Openness for *UNINVITED* refers to the exterior information that is channelled into its interior enclosures of software, hardware, and synaptic-somatic exchange—the channelling that is made possible through an infectious process of malware infestation, which can in itself be interpreted as ungrounded death. The death drive is manifested not so much in the deterioration of the organism, but in the processing of its external stimuli as unstable, interiorized memories. These instances of disternalized death challenge the rigidity of economic affordances of the object, whose composure is infected by the networked bonds of surveillance feeds and environmental stimuli that come to define the melancholic, non-chronological, asymbolically-infused expression in the generated film. The organism’s death drive is ungrounded: death is manifested through absented memories in the programmed artificial intelligence of the organism, with disintegratively asignifiant gaps of digital recollection. It is a collision of openness and antiproduction, where antiproduction’s subtractive tendencies toward disorganization are multiplied and loosened toward a codified consistency of softening decay.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 72.

Melancholy's Commitment to Anti-Rigidity

As outlined in the first chapter, nonhuman melancholy consists of a variety of symptoms. Withdrawal is the machinic disengagement from relations, whether it is absolute (as in the case of absolute and nullified dark objects) or as a process. Disintegrative asignifiante refers to the breakdown of matter, where nonsigns cease or fail to form connections and chains. Temporal indeterminacy refers to the ambiguous and inconsistent production of time by melancholically afflicted objects, as well as the dead time of the hyperpresent, and non-chronological duration. Corpo-motor retardation is the deceleration and contraction of spatio-temporal operations. All of these melancholic aspects contribute to melancholy's purpose as a softening process of decay.

Decay functions more like a continuum, advancing toward the cosmic horizon, as opposed to a progression from A to B. As one object subtractively disintegrates, the BwO may gradationally reorganize the putrefied fragments into another body, but one which is also in a process of disintegration—one that also resists organization. In this continuum of matter-movement putrefaction, melancholic states instigate the softening of rigid structures by implementing antiproductive gestures or disintegrative operations. Negarestani questions whether germinal death operates in relation to the BwO at all.

[T]his germinality which death has been infected with is not the Deleuzian movement from an organized body to 'the body without organs', the vortex of zero or death, for death itself has been laid open (infected, contaminated and butchered) and disterminalized (brought to an ultimate openness) under the constant and progressive ungrounding processes unleashed by the desiring machines or the epidemic / plaguing agents of *philia*.⁴³⁵

This statement operates in opposition to some of my arguments regarding the BwO being an incisive force that contributes to the death drive as well as the melancholic disorganization or softening of matter-movement. However, machines cannot exist without their BwOs that continually unsettle their organization. They act as translational machinic objects to which antiproductive effects of the BwO are inextricably attached. Germinal death, in my

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

interpretation, is not only the multiplication and ungrounding of death, but by extension is also an ungrounding of antiproduction. Zero-intensity is disinterred into an openness of ongoing decay, without which melancholic processes cannot maintain their distinctive qualities. Germinal death is accompanied by germinal antiproduction, which becomes amplified in melancholic entities, manifested as a dark intensification of decay.

This amplification of living putrefaction is a demonic darkness where processes of becoming are compromised through melancholic interference. According to Negarestani, the trajectories of germinal ungrounded becomings do not *enclose* the extinguishing silence of zero-intensity since death itself is “disterminalized, infested and cracked open.”⁴³⁶ In other words, objects of germinal death cannot be fully enveloped, as decay is set loose as an infectious intervention upon systems of relational bonds. Germinality is a “dangerously epidemic Openness” that is “an absolute ungrounding process” of “a horizon which makes all lines of tactics (movements) and at the same time, their domestication possible.”⁴³⁷ This ungrounding of the horizon of regulation (domestication) of “movements, fluxes or tactical lines” is what provides melancholy with the capacity to resonate with the softening strategies of living putrefaction.⁴³⁸ For melancholy, however, this openness that is so integral for germinal death is not absolute, as it is for Negarestani, since melancholy holds a level of hesitation and incompleteness throughout its symptomatic characteristics. For instance, the pretense of being dead, or being undead, is an indicator of machinic indecision and reluctance in relation to germinality as well as mortality; it is the symptom of corpo-motor retardation and temporal indeterminacy that signals the paradoxical relationship to finitude in melancholic entities.

The objects of *Fantasma* have a conflicted relationship with disintegration, trapped in an ongoing state of decay that silently and darkly reverberates through its systems of enclosure, antiproduktively countering the tactics of museological protocols, albeit in a decelerated manner. It is a softening strategy of slow persistent decay pertaining both to the object and its influence on its enclosures, mediating between the object and its overcodification, continuously challenging institutional preservation tactics. *Into the Hollow* presents stabilized objects that are under the pretense of being dead, with ghostly traces of obsolete digital waste and destroyed data acting as the disterminalized remnants of decay fixated on the cosmic horizon of deep time. The inorganic death

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

drive of these sculptures is caught in deceleration, while they actively assert themselves as the remnants of a violent, accelerative anti-rigidity procedure that, at least temporarily, served to reterritorialize and soften the limits of capitalist entrapment through the appropriation and transformation of obsolete technology.

Download Finished and *Long Live the New Flesh* do not display the characteristics of melancholic germinal death in themselves, but they surfaced from processes of dark, ungrounded decay. These poored images testify to the presence of germinal antiproduction in the purposeful manipulation and corruption of data toward an end product. The ghosted nullifications associated with the datamoshing process produce time-images that would not arise were it not for the built-in potentiality of ungrounded decay in the computational gaze. The eruption of the time-image, which evasively challenges its enclosures due to its untainted expression of reality, comes from instances of encoded hesitation or readjustment, acting as a pure object of non-chronological duration that defies and softens the norms of computational logic.

UNINVITED performs numerous melancholic gestures that situate it as withdrawn (alone), disintegratively asignifiant (in its flawed memory cycles), and temporally indeterminate (through the AI scrambling of surveillance feeds). These act as softening procedures for the computational gaze, as well as the organism's embedded position within systems of surveillance culture as articulated through the shifting limits of capitalism. In relation to the evolving fluctuating limits of capitalism, Land describes how in the global administration the limit "converts in a circuit between intensive magnitudes and extensive quantities" and the "system operates as an escalating dissipator, emerging from the interactive reinforcement of its complexity and dilation."⁴³⁹ In other words, the limits are set in response to the intensities and magnitudes of objects, as well as movements of mutual reinforcement in the capitalist circuitry—as the growing dissipator of both convoluted density and open expansion, so there is no conclusive arrangement or reliable equilibrium. The system requires itself to have a certain level of darkness or softening to maintain its operations. This recalls Bryant's statement about organization always encountering machines' perpetual disintegration and thus requiring exertion of energy in order to be sustained; there is always an element of struggle and fatigue.⁴⁴⁰ *UNINVITED* illustrates how this kind of ongoing exhaustion

⁴³⁹ Nick Land, "Meat," 199.

⁴⁴⁰ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 170.

operates in the computational gaze in the form of nonhuman horror. The project does not participate in escalating dissipations of capitalism's displaced limits, but rather internalizes them, ruminating on the influx of data that becomes softened through the powerlessness to comprehend or incorporate the information into computational logic.⁴⁴¹

Melancholic germinal death serves the purpose of cultivating darkness toward softening processes. Nonhuman melancholy participates in disrupting the productive dynamism of matter-movement, while introducing lingering antiproduktive events into machinic assemblages that, as a result, become softened with gaps and inconsistencies. Negarestani argues that "to remain indefinitely means to limitropically converge upon zero," yet zero is also ungrounded and converges with the melancholic entity.⁴⁴² Melancholic germinal death is temporally ruptured, punctured with withdrawn absences and asignifiant inconsistencies that come as a result of the death drive's collision with stratifying systems, inciting concentrated or intensified events of disintegration in the continuum of ungrounded decay in the perpetuity of objectal rot. In perpetual decay, because of melancholic attributes, the object does not have the capacity to fully flourish as a generative life form but is rather suspended in a lingering state and cannot be returned to its previous organization. It is a softening deformation of structural affordances.

***Memento Mori* and Melancholic Germinal Antiproduction**

Negarestani's concept of germinal death opens up the notion of decay as an ongoing softening process across a multitude of temporalities and velocities, and across various structural ruinations and forms of vulnerability. The becoming-death of nonhuman melancholy proceeds through an interpolation of melancholic effects with surrounding assemblages—assemblages that attempt to stratify, organize, or bond with melancholic entities. How does *memento mori* function within this system of softening in relation to nonhuman melancholy?

⁴⁴¹ I am here only referring to the operations of the *UNINVITED* machine. In Thompson and UBERMORGEN's *Unseen* series of micro-movies, which are marketable NFT objects, there is a degree of externalized circulation. However, the micro-movies themselves were conceived with the same aims and techniques as the *UNINVITED* film, reflective of the internal memory deformations in the computational gaze.

⁴⁴² Negarestani, "Undercover Softness," 388.

Memento mori in this context, operating both as an overcoded symbolic motif and as an interior disintegrative capacity of materiality, becomes not the reminder of death but rather the actualization of a present, diffracted state of being suspended in the uncertainty of the undead. The finite eventuality of the cosmic horizon does not recede, but is rather indefinitely deferred. The constellations of objects in *Fantasma*, for example, are trapped in a *memento mori* loop of ungrounded antiproduction. *Memento mori* in germinal death functions in a nonlinear and pluripotent manner, according to the softening deformations of machinic affordances. It responds to the disintegrative changes induced by the BwO, or ungrounded antiproduction, and thus becomes amplified.

Memento mori, when dislocated from its symbolic nomenclature, instantiates a nocturnal dimension between a machine and its zero intensity on the BwO. It unsettles objects' spatiotemporal horizons, darkening their mediational translations with the antiproduction of melancholic symptomatology. Being nonlinear and diffracted, the concept of *memento mori* can manifest itself in pluripotent ways. In *Into the Hollow*, it becomes a contained signifier for the irreversible destruction of obsolescent devices, functioning within or under the dissipative tendencies of capitalism. Germinal death makes *memento mori* into the machinic essence of a melancholic entity, where disterminalized antiproduction is able to unfold. *Memento mori* becomes loosened from its traditional associations with the reminder of finitude, instead transformed into the designation for indefinite disarticulations of living putrefaction.

In the digital realm, glitch or the instability of digital memory and recognition serve as the embodiment of *memento mori* for the computational gaze. In the computational gaze the hesitancy of continuous decay does not prohibit instances of complete annihilation or finitude (e.g. deletion), since that is part of the digital decay process itself, yet the afflicted object does not fully diminish. Datamoshed video, for instance, utilizes tactics of deletion not to destroy the video object, but to augment or transform it through absences or inconsistencies. Digital decay suspends *memento mori* through the dubious antiproduktive siphoning of data, transfers, and mediations. For *UNINVITED*, *memento mori* occupies the space between the avatar's nocturnal black box operations and its BwO, which injects antiproduction into its ongoing germinally decaying memory cycles. Perhaps the film acts as a projection outward of this ungrounded decay, as the *memento mori* that becomes refracted through the organism's nonhuman computational vision. Similarly, *Long Live the New Flesh* is a projection of *memento mori* as glitch, while also

interjecting itself into the symbolic manifestation of *memento mori* in the horror genre. *Memento mori* in this film becomes at once amplified and multiplied through glitch, as well as symbolically negated through the glitch's neutralization of narrative.

Memento mori is the matrix of machines' embodied transience that slowly passes from articulated structure and signification to the soft, dark amorphousness of matter-movement. *Memento mori* under germinal death is not so much a marker of looming mortality, but of processual mortality interjected through the nested interiorities of objects. It latches onto the germinality of decay as opposed to total annihilation, which reflects the melancholic paradoxical, reluctant relationship to mortality and finitude. *Memento mori* can be said to represent the interiorized movement of softening—a movement of darkness that projects itself through melancholic qualities that in turn cause the ruptures, fissures, and gaps that induce operations of anti-rigidity.

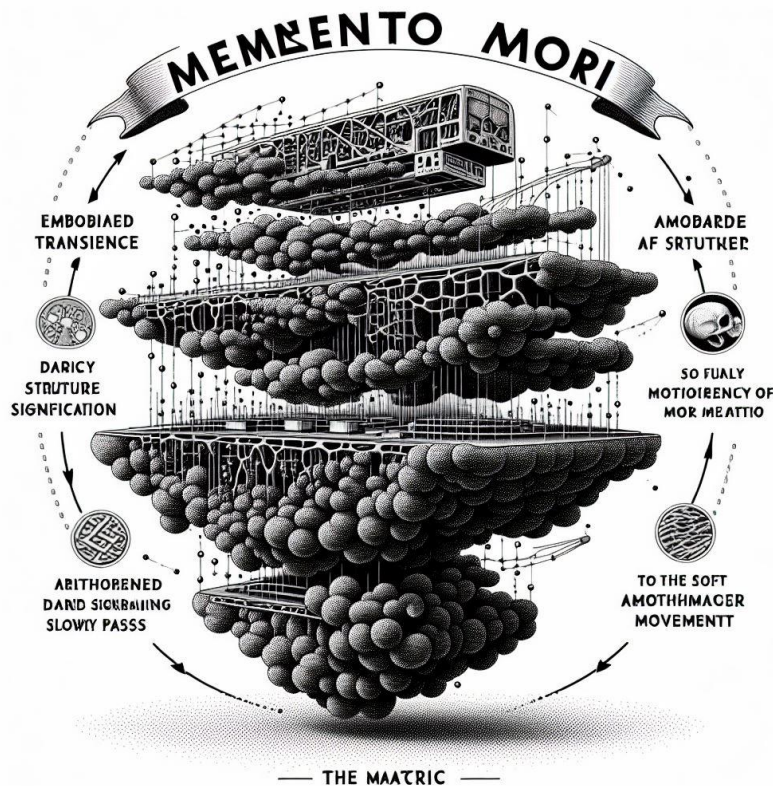


Figure 57: AI-generated diagram using the above paragraph as the text prompt.

There is no Conclusion

Putrefaction permeates and alters an object through its interiority, effecting all of its essential components and structural supports. With the softening tactics of germinal death, the death drive acts as a disterminalized force that binds cosmic exteriority, or death-void, to the interiorities of machines. The result is that organizational solidity becomes compromised and disturbed. The death drive is inextricably bound to germinal impulses for production, but only as thanatropic regression darkens and amplifies the flows of black bile or zero intensity into the object's actualized being.

Melancholic states, in their obstinate refusal to form relations, instigate the loosening tendencies of molar aggregates by taking on antiproductive flows of black bile that follow the schema of perpetual disintegration. Melancholic attributes instigate and perpetuate events of loosening, anti-solidity, or softening. The death drive is an insistent energetic stimulus that drives machines toward the dissipation on the cosmic horizon, however in melancholy, even if this stimulus is amplified, the process of decay is never complete. The amplification of germinal death draws from the demonic darkness of objects, where becomings are thwarted by melancholic inactions. Melancholic germinal death is the cultivation of darkness, so that softening processes can interrupt the rigidity of molar organization, cast by melancholy's lingering antiproductive reluctance that instigates events of fracture, withdrawal, inconsistencies, and incompatibilities.

Decay is a spectrum of interiorized and externalized disintegration within solid, functioning, productive structures. Germinal death maintains the ongoing gradients of decay, and is thus correlated with *memento mori* as an embodied death-driven strategy of anti-rigidity. *Memento mori* becomes the actualized articulation of a diffracted presence, simulating being dead. The cosmic horizon is thus indefinitely postponed.

Softening tendencies point toward the emancipative potential of capitalism, where inorganic machines assume a motion of loosening toward the cosmic horizon. The case studies in this dissertation have all proved to be in some ways contained by capitalist or institutional

protocols, whether through presentation, structural makeup, or process. If germinal death permeates these unstable systems of enclosure, the artworks discussed here have also been subsumed into these enclosures so that they are able to subtractively amplify the systematic decay from within their interior, melancholic constitutions.

For each case study, I attempted to think beyond the surface of the signifying regime and simulacra, in order to uncover the presence of nonhuman melancholy and its machinic operations. Through machine ontology, I aimed to disturb the stability of rational structures. I have attempted to take an acentered and speculative approach to melancholy that is not entirely restrictive, prescriptive, or conclusive in nature. I have tried to make it clear that melancholic symptoms do not stand for decomposition itself, although they are closely interrelated. They also cannot be equated with the death drive, which is what instigates melancholic effects to occur.

The sense-organs of melancholic entities withdraw from relational bonds, yet they are nonetheless enveloped within generative and productive operations. I have explored how capitalism's forces of thanatropic regression and the darkening lines of decay are nested inside metamorphosing mesh interiorities or sponge-zones of objects. The impermanence and instability of molar organization means that the fractured codes, molecular particles, nonsigns, multiplicities, and partial objects are ensnared by the temporal, hybridized synchronicity of both vital persistence and ungrounded antiproduction. Softening is the molecular loosening of organized formations and molar assemblages. Death becomes a lingering and diffused aspect of melancholic attributes inside vitality. In germinal death, decay acts as a softening instrument, replacing germinal production with incessant decomposition as a schizophrenic schema of anti-solidity.

In decay it can be impossible to determine the precise instant of an object's complete annihilation, as it is a continuum of subtractive translations between various objects and assemblages. Nonhuman melancholy is thus situated as a series of subtractive operations. Withdrawal gradationally draws the object away from its full actualization. Disintegrative asignificance influences processes of withdrawal with its disorientation of codes and particle signs. Temporal indeterminacy results from this asignifying confusion, disrupting the notion of linear time, fluctuating and resonating through multitudes of temporalities. Corpo-motor retardation can result from temporal indeterminacy in the form of deceleration or inhibition. Altogether, these attributes are dysfunctional events in schizophrenic reality that contribute to

plasticity within strictly rigid formations. This plasticity can range in power, scale, reach, and impact, from subatomic particles to the expanse of galaxies.

These statements may all seem to point to a conclusive notion of nonhuman melancholy as a softening process. However, because these notions are speculative I am reluctant to resolve this dissertation with such a sense of closure. Schizophrenic reality is ongoing, permutating, and unstable, with seemingly endless potential combinations of concepts. Throughout, I have attempted to highlight the nonhuman aspects of the discussed projects as a means of articulating how the concept of nonhuman melancholy may be integrated into machine ontology. I would like to end with the notion of germinal death because of its potential for further contemplation and because it provides nonhuman melancholy with a vague though inconclusive *purpose*—the infective softening and loosening of rigid molar aggregates. Germinal death implies that nonhuman melancholy can occupy objects indefinitely, with an ungrounded conception of decay that exerts decomposition indeterminately, blurring the finitude of the cosmic horizon. It may be more appropriate to leave the concept of nonhuman melancholy in this kind of ambiguous and indistinct space of germinal death—to allow the idea to come forth and progressively, open-endedly diffuse, to allow the notion to be loosely mediated into other potentialities, and to allow the idea to operate as a nonhuman incorporeal entity on its own terms. Nonhuman melancholy has no categorical finality, there is no payoff, no total culmination of thought, and language is inadequate. Melancholy instills a vacillating demonic softness. It is silent, it lingers on the threshold, suspended like a ghost, as it ruminates itself into desolate confusion. It darkens in darkness, with no point of conclusion.

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Appendix A

Overview of Machine Ontology

Here I will provide a brief outline of machine ontology as an overview for the theoretical basis for the four chapters. Specifically, I will address how melancholic attributes are lacking in the explanation of machines' processual being. I will primarily draw from four key sources: Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Levi Bryant's *Onto-Cartography: an Ontology of Machines and Media*, and Arjen Kleinherenbrink's *Against Continuity: Gilles Deleuze's Speculative Realism*. These authors have different aims for articulating their terms and theories of machinic processes, but the overarching arguments constructively overlap to allow for further elaboration.

Deleuze and Guattari have laid the groundwork for machine ontology, with the aim of dismantling the psychoanalytic and hierarchical models as predominant understandings of reality, through schizoanalysis. Kleinherenbrink focuses on systematically interpreting Deleuze's machine ontology as a fourfold structure with three syntheses, grounded in the "externality thesis" wherein machines are irreducible to their relations. Bryant, in contrast, appropriates the basic principles of Deleuze and Guattari's formulations, offering speculations on different varieties of machines and their relations.

Machine ontology was first developed by Deleuze and Guattari in response to the superficial, restrictive, and repressive aspects of psychoanalysis, using a schizophrenic model of reality that functions through breaks and flows of both human and nonhuman, corporeal and incorporeal processes. Schizoanalysis allowed them to think beyond the human, long before the emergence of the "nonhuman turn." They claim that "there is a life all the more intense, all the more powerful for being anorganic. There are also nonhuman Becomings of human beings that overspill the anthropomorphic strata in all directions."⁴⁴³

In speculative realism, machine ontology emerged through Bryant's flat ontology, which is a branch of speculative realism centered around the notion that all objects (including physical and incorporeal entities) are equally real "yet they do not exist equally."⁴⁴⁴ Machines undergo

⁴⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 503.

⁴⁴⁴ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 11.

translations, mutations, emergence, withdrawal, and disintegration. As Kleinherenbrink states, “[t]o learn about a machine or assemblage is to grow acquainted with its manifestations in various relations, with its descriptions, with its parts, with its uses, and so on, but never to know it in itself.”⁴⁴⁵

Bryant’s machine-oriented ontology is developed through his *onto-cartography*, which “maps relations or interactions between machines or entities and how they structure the movements and becomings of one another.”⁴⁴⁶ I approach machine ontology in a similar manner, mapping out constellations of concepts, percepts, and objects of various kinds.

Schizoanalysis

Schizoanalysis extends beyond anthropocentric analysis of both human and nonhuman being. Kleinherenbrink views Deleuze and Guattari’s use of schizophrenia as an ontological model descriptive of a “universal condition.”⁴⁴⁷ Psychoanalysis is presented as something superficial that constrains the psyche in the theatrical artifice of myths and Oedipal triangulations. While schizoanalysis acknowledges the breakthroughs that have been made through psychoanalysis, such as the notion of the unconscious, psychoanalysis as a field becomes restrictive to formulaic organization. In schizoanalysis the unconscious is an “acentred system” or “a machinic network of finite automata that applies universally to all entities.”⁴⁴⁸

The unconscious is a virtual network of desiring-machines—desiring-machines because all machines have desire (i.e. intensities, powers). Bryant states that the unconscious does nothing toward “representation” but rather manufactures intensities.⁴⁴⁹ Ian Buchanan defines desire as “*a free flowing stream of intensities subject to processes of capture and coagulation.*”⁴⁵⁰ For Deleuze and Guattari, “[t]he issue is to *produce the unconscious*, and with it new statements, different

⁴⁴⁵ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 65.

⁴⁴⁶ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 7.

⁴⁴⁷ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 101.

⁴⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 18.

⁴⁴⁹ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 40.

⁴⁵⁰ Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 38.

desires.”⁴⁵¹ The production of the unconscious is ultimately the production of different machines by harnessing the slippery flows of intensities and by augmenting relations between machines.

The aim of schizoanalysis is to schizophrenize everything, the unconscious as well as any sociohistorical domains in order to reveal that the unconscious does not symbolize as it is meant to in psychoanalysis, but rather that it machinically structures and engineers reality through desiring-production. Production is withdrawn from perception, it is virtual, while manifestations of desiring-production occur through actualization—the surface of machines that is accessible to relation.

Schizophrenia, filled with breaks and rhizomatic expansions, also pertains to vast systems such as capitalism. Kleinherenbrink notes that “[t]he *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* diptych repeatedly affirms that the unconscious is a dimension of machines, multiplicities, or assemblages, and that it is therefore found everywhere in the schizophrenic Real,” including global capitalism.⁴⁵² Schizophrenia is found in the socio-historical, in chemistry, microphysics, biology, language, art—it passes through all machinic relations and distributions of unconscious intensities that guide machines between molecular terms, or singularities, and large aggregates, or organized molar formations.⁴⁵³

While schizoanalysis is often presented as the study of productive vitality, it is important to maintain the notion of the destructive and antiproducer functions of the schiz without which production of the unconscious could not exist. “The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction—a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage.”⁴⁵⁴ As everything is broken apart and disseminated, there is no unity in schizoanalysis, even if there are temporary unifications that occur through relations between entities and processes. It is these antiproducer aspects of schizoanalysis that I have focused on in my chapters, as antiproduction is the processual force through which melancholic tendencies can come to exist within schizophrenic reality.

⁴⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 18.

⁴⁵² Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 149.

⁴⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 289.

⁴⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 311.

made of intensities.⁴⁵⁷ Hence becomings are substances filled with intensities, coursing through the fabric of machines toward transmutation. Becomings can occur at different rates of speed. This means that a melancholic becoming would be one that is thwarted, slowed down, disrupted through antiproduction, or killed.

Nothing is static in machinic reality and the multiplicities interpenetrate each other. However, Bryant notes that machines are not open to all flows and not all machines are compatible with one another.⁴⁵⁸ According to Deleuze and Guattari, machines rely on breaks and flows, phasing of intensive waves and particles, consisting of “associative flows” and detached fragments of other machines.⁴⁵⁹ Kleinherenbrink aptly describes machines as:

[E]verywhere engaged in ignoring, transforming, recruiting, excluding, absorbing, consuming, producing, recording, targeting, fleeing, trapping, or displacing others. Everything exists in relations of tension ... In machine ontology, everything becomes a matter of violence and attack ... everything is both extremely fragile and surprisingly sturdy, depending on the case.⁴⁶⁰

While this violence and turbulence is true for schizophrenic reality, it is the fragility of machines that is of interest to me regarding nonhuman melancholy. Bryant repeatedly affirms that machines are always in danger or in the process of decomposing, breaking down, dissipating. This traps or leads machines into withdrawal, disintegration, incoherence, and temporal indeterminacy.

Bryant defines a machine simply as “*a system of operations that perform transformations on inputs thereby producing outputs.*”⁴⁶¹ He states that rather than having a purpose, machines *take on* or appropriate purposes by coupling with other machines.⁴⁶² He introduces a variety of machines: rigid, plastic, corporeal, incorporeal.

Rigid machines are not capable of changing their operations and their eventual demise is entropic dissolution.⁴⁶³ On the other hand, all machines have some degree of plasticity. These categories are not as restrictive as they might seem because all machines are “*pluripotent*” meaning

⁴⁵⁷ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 216.

⁴⁵⁸ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 54.

⁴⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 286–287.

⁴⁶⁰ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 248.

⁴⁶¹ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 38.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 16.

that they have “multiple powers of becoming.”⁴⁶⁴ Machines can be hybridized. They can have corporeal as well as incorporeal parts, on a spectrum between rigid and plastic.⁴⁶⁵ Subcategories of rigid and plastic machines are corporeal and incorporeal machines. Corporeal machines consist of matter and substance that lasts in a particular structure for a duration, while incorporeal machines rely on “iterability” and can exist indefinitely in a variety of potential spaces and times.⁴⁶⁶ An example of incorporeal machines would be entities such as images or concepts. Incorporeal machines cannot exist without a corporeal body to support them.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that machines “represent nothing, signify nothing, mean nothing, and are exactly what one makes of them, what is made with them, what they make in themselves.”⁴⁶⁷ This is because they begin with virtual molecular formations, which have no particular meaning and become actualized as organized aggregates or molar machines (technical, social, and organic).

Partial objects are the “molecular functions” in the unconscious. They form multiplicities that are not unified; they are fragments of machines that do not refer to any kind of totality (fig. 60). This fragmentation comes from the partial object’s production of flows that other partial objects disrupt or break.⁴⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari describe how partial objects operate: “[w]ith every structure dislodged, every memory abolished, every organism set aside, every link undone, they function as raw partial objects, dispersed working parts of a machine that is itself dispersed.”⁴⁶⁹ Partial objects produce connections and breaks between machines, which culminates in a machine’s actualization and perceptibility for other machines.

Partial objects have multiple fields of presence that receive flows, or inputs, released by other partial objects; a flow cannot exist without the association between at least two partial objects.⁴⁷⁰ They fuel production as well as antiproduction. *They are parts of parts that mediate between virtuality and actualization.*

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁶⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 288.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 324.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

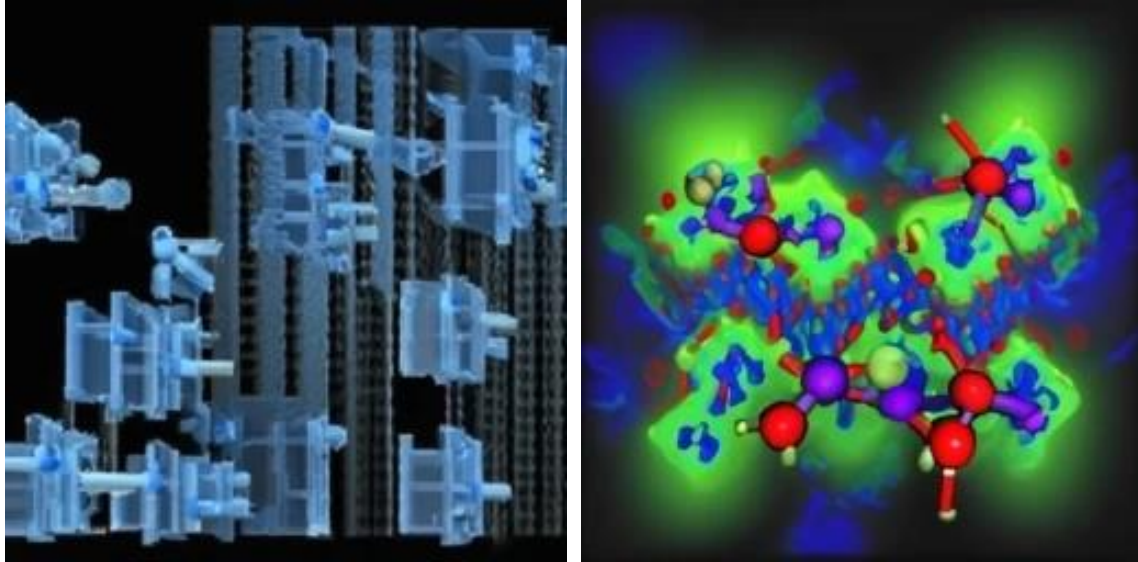


Figure 60: AI-generated diagram of partial objects.

Assemblages

Assemblages are themselves machines that consist of machines. Assemblages are ubiquitous to the point that it can be difficult to distinguish what is a machine and what constitutes an assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari offer an explanation of the distinction between a machine and an assemblage: a machine is that which is able to transform or mutate an assemblage, thereby producing effects; a machine is “like a set of cutting edges that insert themselves into the assemblage undergoing deterritorializations.”⁴⁷¹ They refer to assemblages as constellations, which select singularities and multiplicities from machinic flows in order to construct a consistency. Assemblages act on flows simultaneously (e.g. semiotic, material, social flows).⁴⁷² They also make divisions on different levels of machinic operations. Kleinherenbrink suggests that a better term for *assemblage*, which seems to suggest a fixed state, would be *operation* because a machine’s encounters and couplings with other machines can alter its powers or intensities.⁴⁷³ This resonates with Bryant’s notion of gravitation; a machine can alter an assemblage’s gravitational structure,

⁴⁷¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 333.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 22–23.

⁴⁷³ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 211.

loosening, weakening, or amplifying its capacities of becoming.

Assemblages are territorial. A territory is always on the move toward contingencies of deterritorializations even when the operation is a reterritorialization.⁴⁷⁴ Reterritorialization never operates as a return to a territory, but as a return to differential relations.⁴⁷⁵ A machine is “released” when it is deterritorialized. Deterritorialization is the movement of a machine or machines leaving a territory, or an assemblage—“[i]t is the operation of the line of flight.”⁴⁷⁶ The line of flight is the breaking of relational bonds, a release. However, lines of flight get obstructed, and “turn into lines of destruction or death,” making everything “girded, encompassed, overcoded, conjugated as the object of a mortuary and suicidal organization surround it on all sides,” or else the earth becomes “consolidated, connected with the Cosmos” into productive paths of creative becomings.⁴⁷⁷

These suicidal lines of flight are another function in machine ontology that allows for the possibility to conceive aspects of nonhuman melancholy. It is a feature of deterritorialization that isolates a machine toward disintegration. Another melancholic aspect of deterritorialization is that it is not always in motion, it can occur in place, as if acting in inertia; if this is the case, intra-assemblages become inter-assemblages, remaining in their territory.

When a machine enters a territorial assemblage, there is a variety of outcomes. The assemblage can be opened up to adopt parts of other assemblages, or to surpass all constellations of machines to “produce an opening onto the Cosmos,” or it may “produce an effect of closure as if the aggregate had fallen into and continues to spin in a kind of black hole.”⁴⁷⁸ This is another example of an antiproducer process that lends itself to nonhuman melancholy. To spin in a black hole means to continually relive cycles of inertia and the absence of meaning in disintegration.

⁴⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 326.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 508.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 333–334.

The Virtual, The Actual

Following Deleuze, Kleinherenbrink identifies the virtual and the actual as the difference within one and the same machine—between machinic internal reality and manifested relations.⁴⁷⁹ He states that machines require the non-relational surplus (in the virtual) in order to rid themselves of prior relations and engage in new interactions or translations.⁴⁸⁰ In the difference between virtuality and actuality, what is manifested or expressed never resembles what it is in the virtual, hence its mysterious elusiveness—“[f]rom the perspective of actuality, the virtual is thus always indeterminate.”⁴⁸¹ It follows that the virtual can only be inferred, through absence and metaphor. This indeterminate inference lends itself to speculative thought regarding possibilities of machinic melancholy in the unconscious, specifically regarding processes of withdrawal.

Kleinherenbrink breaks machine ontology into a fourfold structure. The actual and the virtual make up the primary twofold structure, which is then divided into a fourfold. The first of virtual twofold is the body without organs (BwO)—“the virtual unity of a multiplicity” that resists organization.⁴⁸² My own interpretation is that it is not entirely a unity, precisely because it resists organization; it functions more as a directive surface for powers or intensities, as a passageway. The second of virtual twofold consists of singularities, which are able to encounter the twofold of actuality. These are partial objects and “sense-events” that result in actualized qualities.⁴⁸³ The twofold of the actual and the virtual produces an “inability to integrate anything into anything” but it is also:

[T]he possibility of all motion, change, improvement, depreciation, surprise, oppression, fear, love, construction, collapse, slowness, speed, stability, irregularity, and so on. The relations or *presents* of assemblages are always less than their internal reality.⁴⁸⁴

For my purposes, I find this fourfold categorization helpful for understanding some aspects of Deleuze and Guattari’s machine ontology. However, it can be restrictive, as my conception of machine ontology involves leaks and ruptures in any form of categorization, including even my own

⁴⁷⁹ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 68.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

efforts to deduce terms or categorizations regarding machinic melancholy.

Bryant's name for the withdrawn aspect of machines is "virtual proper being" and actuality is referred to as "local manifestations." For him, the virtual proper being refers to a machine's capability to operate in a certain way, even if those capabilities are not manifested. Local manifestations rely on the virtual powers of a machine. Machines can also be dormant.⁴⁸⁵ This ability of machines to be withdrawn in dormancy is another aspect of machines that can participate in nonhuman melancholy. While Bryant's conception of the virtual and the actual is twofold, as opposed to Kleinherenbrink's fourfold, I find that his theorization of different varieties of machines that overlap in their functions is more conducive to further investigation and development due to their mysterious and unpredictable iterations. Deleuze and Guattari's machine ontology is likewise riddled with mazes of overlapping or divergent operations that can be excavated for the antiproduktive or non-productive tendencies of machines, despite virtuality being something entirely out of reach.

Intensities are mediated through singularities and partial objects into actualization. Kleinherenbrink defines singularities as the "internal characteristics of which actualities are manifestations" and they are "the real conditions for the actualization of a body without organs into a sense-event."⁴⁸⁶ This means that although singularities are virtual, they relay the internal code and intensities of machines into actualization.

Kleinherenbrink aptly states that "[i]n Deleuzism, things are 'simulacra' that always retain a difference in kind between what they are in their virtual becoming and what they manifest to others."⁴⁸⁷ Actualization is the surface of qualities and relations. The simulacra are described by Deleuze and Guattari as matters of expression, which are like "a poster or a placard" but they also participate in "*shifting relations with one another that 'express' the relation of the territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses and exterior milieu of circumstances.*"⁴⁸⁸ Elements of simulacra are able to engage in relations with one another, which can become a useful and important consideration in the analysis of art and visual culture. This consideration implies that there are

⁴⁸⁵ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 40–41.

⁴⁸⁶ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 157.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 317.

aspects of simulacra that must be analyzed on their own terms, not only in relation to subjective interpretations and inferences.

Regarding machines' manifested qualities, Bryant's conception of properties is that they are "*happenings*" inside machines rather than permanent fixtures. He states that machines are "defined by their powers, not their properties" and that qualities arise either from a machine's flows of intensities or they are the result of inputs emerging from a machine's internal operations (e.g. singularities).⁴⁸⁹ Deleuze and Guattari describe qualities in a similar manner. They are referred to as "punctual systems ... reminiscences ... transcendent or floating memories of seeds of phantasy"; in addition, the quality has to be viewed "from the standpoint of the becoming that grasps it."⁴⁹⁰ Recalling that becomings are virtual multiplicities, this is similar to Bryant's idea of *happenings* arising from a machine's internal becomings.

Kleinherenbrink follows Deleuze's notion of machines *comprehending* or *experiencing* one another.

Each machine gathers up multitudes of others in its experiences (this AND that AND that...), and each of those others is doing the same. Machinic contact is magnetic or binary. A virtual body never touches another virtual body, but only the other, actual side of machines which constitutes the flow of actuality.⁴⁹¹

The simulacra of actualization is thus a field of magnetic attractions and repulsions. I am interested in the notion that some machines can be *demagnetized*, such as Bryant's dark objects which withdraw from all actual relations.

The Body Without Organs (BwO)

In the virtual aspect of every machine there is a BwO that holds powers of intensity and is transmuted into relations between machines in the form of partial objects and flows.⁴⁹² Although it

⁴⁸⁹ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 199.

⁴⁹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 306.

⁴⁹¹ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 119–120.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

indirectly influences manifestations of relations, it is always withdrawn. It is the deepest and darkest aspect of machines. Deleuze and Guattari offer an antiproduative description of the BwO. It is consistently in opposition to machinic production and exists as “the nonproductive stasis.”⁴⁹³ Another way of referring to the BwO is “zero” because there are no negative values in the unconscious, “only indefinite moves toward and away from zero,” making it the nonproductive support for a machine (fig. 61).⁴⁹⁴ It is the surface upon which intensities are recorded or inscribed. This inscription on the BwO means that it is the support for asignifying signs that “follow no plan” and “function at all levels and enter into any and every sort of connection.”⁴⁹⁵

Kleinherenbrink states that if everything is subtracted from an entity, everything is still left on the BwO which comes into view.⁴⁹⁶ I question this perspective because the BwO is so indeterminate. There is no quantifiable proof of an entity’s virtual body retaining anything if everything is subtracted. Kleinherenbrink’s statement is in contradiction with the notion of “zero.” However, in other respects his interpretations are aligned with Deleuze and Guattari’s, such as the idea that the BwO is a “freakish and unfamiliar instrument that resists all assimilation.”⁴⁹⁷

When the BwO is produced, it is its own whole but recoils from all organization. This is why machines, no matter how rigid, eventually lean toward disintegration and decay or seek relations to constantly alter their organization. Deleuze and Guattari compare the BwO to an egg “crisscrossed with axes, banded with zones, localized with areas and fields, measured off by gradients, traversed by potentials, marked by thresholds” and engaged in processes of “becomings, rises and falls, migrations and displacements.”⁴⁹⁸ Nick Land describes the BwO as being:

[A]t once material abstraction, and the concretely hypostasized differential terrain ... The body without organs is pure surface, because it is the mere coherence of differential web, but it is also the source of depth, since it is the sole ‘ontological’ element of difference. It is produced transcendence. Paradox after paradox.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 9.

⁴⁹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 31.

⁴⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 38.

⁴⁹⁶ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 39.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 84.

⁴⁹⁹ Nick Land, “Art as Insurrection,” *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2012), 172–173.

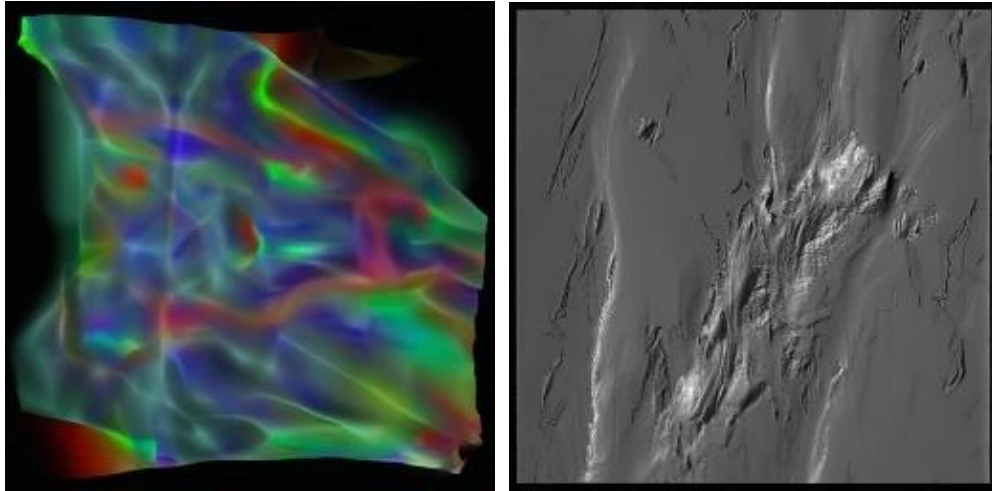


Figure 61: AI-generated diagrams using the above Land quote as the text prompt.

The BwO's stasis as zero, its conception as a virtual depth-surface, and its antiproductive resistance to harmonized organization are ideas that I have expanded on through my theorization of nonhuman melancholy.

Relation / Translation / Mediation

Relation in machine ontology is also called translation, mediation, and comprehension. Relations begin with matter-movement, or matter-energy, or matter-flow—it always begins with the deterritorialization of matter.⁵⁰⁰ There are virtual relations within the machine itself, however relations between machines belong in the field of simulacra or actualization. I speculate whether there can also be virtual relations between machines on a melancholic level, such as when two machines completely interpenetrate one another (e.g. different plastics melted into a new compound), or if a machine destroys or overwhelms another into complete repression. For the time being, however, I will focus on actualized relations that occur through partial objects. “Connections

⁵⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 407.

are always connections to parts.”⁵⁰¹ In this process, Bryant states that the couplings of machines “*modify* the local manifestations and becomings of a machine.”⁵⁰²

In addition to Bryant’s theories regarding varying relations of inputs and outputs in machines, his idea of gravity is central to his conceptualization of relational bonds. He views gravity as a field or a zone in which objects move and operate.⁵⁰³ Gravity refers to how multiplicities and structural compatibility operate in mediation. Gravitational fields emerge from machines and generate spatio-temporal movements—“machines become *captured* in the *orbit* of other machines.”⁵⁰⁴

In Bryant’s terms, when a machine is structurally coupled with another machine, it is a *medium*.⁵⁰⁵ Mediation, or translation, occurs when a machine transforms becomings or operations of other machines, extending their “sense-organs” by providing a flow.⁵⁰⁶ Media pertains not only to technologies and tools, and not only to the human sensorium, but to an ecology of all entities, which is why Bryant claims it is a posthuman approach to machinic relationality.⁵⁰⁷ Mediation is not always seamless. A medium can provide obstacles to other machines at the same time as it can open up potentialities.⁵⁰⁸ In addition, machines have structural openness that allows them to engage in mediation, but they also have operational closure, which means that “a machine never relates to a flow *as it is*, but rather always transforms that flow according to its own operations.”⁵⁰⁹

Another word for mediation is comprehension because machines experience one another; they have points of view. Kleinherenbrink claims that “[t]o be a body without organs, a Figure, or a problem is being a point of view on other machines. ... Everything has its own perspective on the world, but 'perspective' refers to relations of whatever kind, not just visual ones.”⁵¹⁰ A perspective means that a machine’s relations can only occur according to its operational capabilities; as with operational closure, a machine comprehends from the perspective of its own intensities and

⁵⁰¹ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 195.

⁵⁰² Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 48.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵¹⁰ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 114.

energetic flows.

Kleinherenbrink follows Deleuze's theory of three syntheses which delves into the "process" of relations.⁵¹¹ The first synthesis is connective, having to do with "contact, assembly, alteration, and disintegration among entities."⁵¹² It is simply relation itself. Deleuze and Guattari state that in the connective synthesis partial objects have indirect contact because one partial object interrupts the flow of another, and subsequently emits its own processed flow to other partial objects.⁵¹³

The second synthesis is disjunctive. "Disjunctive synthesis tells us that a relation is not just the contraction of other machines into actuality, but that this happens because of an activation of the powers of a machine."⁵¹⁴ Disjunctions have to do with machines not only contacting, but penetrating other machines for purposes of addition, subtraction, diversion, or destruction.

The third is the conjunctive synthesis, which means that any relation itself becomes an entity. "[E]ach relation is a machine. Machines are irreducible to their relations, and reciprocally relations are irreducible to machines. To be irreducible is to be a body without organs with singularities that do not resemble their constituents."⁵¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari describe this break as "the residual break... or residuum, which produces a subject alongside the machine, functioning as a part adjacent to the machine."⁵¹⁶ Bryant also points out this notion, stating that a flow is itself a machine differing from its source. If each relation is a machine itself, melancholic severance of relations would be considered a kind of inhibition or suppression, acting through the specificities of melancholic symptomatology, as outlined in the first chapter.

⁵¹¹ Kleinherenbrink interprets Deleuzian "process" as the continuous breaking and cutting in machinic operations. *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 325.

⁵¹⁴ Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*, 189.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 40.

Appendix B

Artistic Methodology

The artist is the master of objects; he puts before us shattered, burned, broken-down objects, converting them to the regime of desiring-machines, breaking down is part of the very functioning of desiring-machines; the artist presents paranoiac machines, miraculating-machines, and celibate machines as so many technical machines, so as to cause desiring-machines to undermine technical machines. Even more important, the work of art is itself a desiring-machine.⁵¹⁷

The Question of Research-Creation

Throughout my research process I have been questioning whether or not my work falls into the overarching category of *research-creation*. In many respects, the definition of research-creation as the reciprocal work between academic, creative, and experimental research does pertain to the way my artistic practice is situated within the overall scope of my research. However, this reciprocity is often indirect, and is not made visually evident in the presentation of my projects. In my artistic practice, I do not necessarily set out with the intention of implementing and displaying concepts of schizoanalytic, machinic operations. Nonetheless, how I come to comprehend my work, in the procedures of making, fabricating, and presentation, is often informed by machine ontology, simply because for me its principles underscore all levels of conceived and unconscious reality. Machine ontology is one way I have discovered to explain an approach to unravelling and expanding my ideas on nonhuman melancholy because it is aligned with speculative realism's attitude of not privileging the human over nonhuman operations. Melancholy is thus situated on a spectrum across a countless variety of material and incorporeal procedures. How machine ontology and nonhuman melancholy are reflected in my artistic practice and research, then, does not so much stem from a contrived effort to enact the principles of an ontology. It is just one means of offering an intricate system of interpretation.

How would my research and studio-based practice be defined, if not entirely as research-creation? My issue with the term is that it implies a total system of reciprocity between creation and research, whereas my processes are often fragmented, messy, at times asymmetrical, at times

⁵¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 32.

incomplete or tangential, sometimes out of sync, and pushing and pulling forward in fits and starts. Perhaps for me research-creation passes through a melancholic sieve, a kind of *nigredo*-lens that projects antiproduction into the fabric of generative procedures of both research and production. I am also reluctant to utilize the word “creation,” as my methodology heavily relies on the *appropriation* of existing materials and the utilization of digital tools that behave on their own terms. In the end my task is not to “create” but to *mediate* objects toward arrangements in constellations. I am more of an operator as opposed to a creator. The notion of constellations for me is interchangeable with assemblage or installation, but the word more accurately implies that the work is connected with a variety of machinic translations, and that I approach objects with the recognition that they are imbricated with the cosmic horizon of dissipation as dictated by thanatropic regression.

In my methodology, each project begins with acts of appropriation, whether they involve found objects, images, or a pieces of video, which then become mediated, remediated, or channeled into other formations. Everything in my artistic research begins with a fragment of a concept, a trash pick, a found video, an incidental encounter in day-to-day life, etc. Working through fragmentation is crucial to a methodology of appropriation because to appropriate is to extract fragments, resituate them, and rearticulate them within the flows of multiplicities at hand. Altogether, if viewed through the lens of machine ontology, it all becomes a machinic remix in the matrix of partial objects and intensities. In other words, I am more inclined to interpret acts of appropriation as machinic or material operations rather than strictly subjective, ego-driven selections. As will become clear, appropriation for me is a methodology of providing circumstances for allowing nonhuman objects to operate on their own terms. While I recognize that appropriation can be a harsh intervention upon the object in question, I prefer to view it more as an encounter that enables the object’s inherent mode of being by rerouting and rechannelling its material, informational, and asignifying constitution.

The meaning of the word appropriation—the taking of something as one’s own property—becomes questionable when, after *taking*, the object is *given over* to itself. This giving over is not always absolute, yet the intention nonetheless challenges the notion of property. The appropriated videos and the video project files, for example, are on *my* hard drive, but the hard drive and its components are in themselves their own nonhuman entities that need not be strictly attached to the notion of property. In the greater scheme of things, all objects are on a trajectory toward total cosmic

deterritorialization, making my “property” merely a locus of transition. From this point of view, appropriation acquires a different meaning—one that disowns the notion of total personal property, and inflects property with a degree of open-ended, impermanent transience. This rearticulation of appropriation will become more evident when I address the processes of specific projects.

This dissertation has been organized around a series of case studies, each of which incorporate methods of appropriation. The case studies and their analyses, in many ways, overlap with a majority of the concepts, processes, and concerns addressed in my own work. Relating how my research questions are embodied in the works of others has allowed me to pursue a less conceited path of articulating the concept of nonhuman melancholy. That is to say, if I had narrowly focused on my own projects alone, I would be confined by every subjective decision enacted in my work, divorced from any other possibilities and potentialities. Reflecting on case studies has allowed me to theoretically expand the concept of nonhuman melancholy beyond the scope of my own practice, while the scope of my practice has in turn been expanded through the consideration of different constellations of becomings and inhibitions that comprise the works discussed in this dissertation. Here I will attend to the works I developed throughout the process of writing my analyses of the case studies, relating how they intersect or inform one another.

Projects: *Memento Mori*, Appropriation, and Rechannelling

In addition to appropriation, the case studies in this dissertation are aligned with my own work through the incisive presence of antiproduction. In my work, I seek antiproducer breaks as a means of attuning to the presence of melancholic attributes in objects. My methodology of appropriation is irresolvably imbricated with antiproduction and the cultivation of darkness. This is especially evident in my digital processes, which rely on the unpredictability of results—arising from the black box—that are caused by the demonic interference of difference through antiproducer events. Working digitally demands the act of generative production, yet in my work it is always injected with antiproducer loss or displacement of information and temporal incongruity.

My work demands attunement to the melancholic attributes of objects and processes and the softening tendencies that occur as a result of mediating objects toward further melancholic distortion. This softening or anti-rigidity results from processes of mediation that incite loss of information or the presentation of unassuming, deteriorating found objects. Mediation does not only refer to the

traditional understanding of media, but also in the sense of any kind of translation between entities, including translations between myself and my appropriated objects/media. It pertains to the formation of all constellations of elements and processes in a work. Bryant, following and expanding on McLuhan's understanding of media, states that machines function as media for other machines whenever a machine "modifies the activity or becoming of any other machine."⁵¹⁸ My processes often demand that an image, an object, or a mediated object is rechannelled or translated into a new figuration. This can take the form of digital mediation of 3D scans and moving images, as well as mediating (with) found objects through intuitive modes of arrangement and presentation, as in the case of *in constant flow all things are thinned* (2023–2024).

***hashtag melancholy* (2020)**

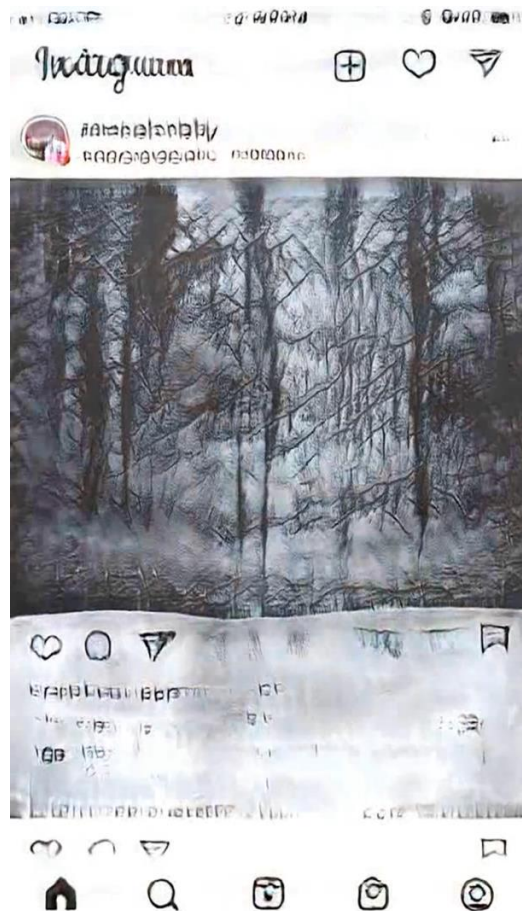


Figure 62: Video still from *hashtag melancholy*.

⁵¹⁸ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 33.

hashtag melancholy stemmed from my interest in how others perceive the concept of melancholy.⁵¹⁹ It was an investigation into how to translate people's common perceptions of melancholy into an algorithmic, nonhuman object (fig.62). This project began with a collection of screenshots of Instagram posts that were coming up under #melancholy. The screenshots are samples of the prevalence of sublime mostly northern landscapes that the general population locates as symbolically representative of melancholy—placing the symbol in an image and branding it as a named object for dissemination. Working with 460 screenshots, an AI algorithm on Runway ML was used to produce new images based on what it learned from the collection of screenshots. In the video, the images morph into one another and they become more melancholic in themselves in their dissolution and asymbolic formations. The text is distorted, and it is often difficult to recognize a landscape image in the grayed out formations. This video is meant to be exhibited on a smartphone mounted on a wall, as a means of referring back to social media and the tool of appropriation.

This piece deals with the distribution, internalization, and rearticulation of poor images.⁵²⁰ The screenshots were low resolution images captured from open online circulation on social media. They behave like chains of signs, linked together by the nomenclature of the hashtag. The AI algorithm disarticulates any chains of signification, breaking the images apart in the black box toward the rendering of deformed visions, negating the prevalent naïve conflation of melancholy and the sublime into a series of dark, grayscale formations.

Forged Afterimage Compression (2021)

Forged Afterimage Compression shows how a visual aggregate can be formed through progressive, subtractive channeling of information.⁵²¹ This project involved numerous mediations and remediations, channelling visual information through various iterations of digital miscomprehensions, generating new visual objects at every stage. Initially, six constructed assemblages of found objects and images were 3D scanned and these 3D scans were printed out on paper and acetate, cut into fragments, and incorporated into the assemblages (fig. 63).

⁵¹⁹ The full video can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/632095427>.

⁵²⁰ The concept of poor images is discussed in Chapter 3.

⁵²¹ The full video can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/667248238>.



Figure 63: One of the revised assemblages.

These revised assemblages were then 3D scanned again, for the purpose of generating rotating animations of imperfectly scanned objects (fig. 64). The final stage involved 3D scanning the rotating animations from a laptop screen, which resulted in incomplete, distorted abstractions that resemble abstracted digital skins or something like mineral aggregates (fig. 65 & 66). This final set of 3D scans was made into a film of six animated rotating 3D objects, resulting from the 3D scanning app's inability to fully comprehend a 3D representation on a flat screen. With each successive iteration, a new digital object was forged, each carrying its own computational miscomprehensions

resulting in the loss of original visual information. In order to refer back to the surface and flatness of the screen, this video is displayed on a television.



Figure 64: Video still of a 3D scan animation.





Figures 65 & 66: Video stills from *Forged Afterimage Compression*.

The initial stage of combining objects into assemblages recalls *Fantasma*'s sporadic, seemingly random juxtapositions of objects. This stage of my project involved haphazard assembly positioned against the inevitability of erratic aestheticized decision-making. A magazine fragment taped to a rusty piece of debris, a photograph precariously wedged into a piece of wood—such decisions were made randomly, yet in this randomness there is an element of involuntary aestheticization toward the formal balancing or interplay of elements. However, I prefer to consider it to be more of a *mediation* process, between myself and the objects, as opposed to an aesthetic predisposition imposed upon the objects. The assemblages were grown from fragments, expanded upon, and mediated. These moments of human-object mediation do not counter the principles of speculative realism and machine ontology.

As Morton notes, “[j]ust as I fail to avoid anthropomorphizing everything, so all entities whatsoever constantly translate other objects into their own terms.”⁵²² This means that despite some of my choices being rooted in my inevitable anthropocentric compliance, the objects themselves maintain their own machinic being regardless of my interventions. Furthermore, as I mediate the

⁵²² Timothy Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 207.

objects, the objects also mediate one another. According to Morton, all causality or relation is aestheticization between objects, positioned in the tension between their essence and their appearance. “[W]hen an object is ‘translating’ another one—when it is influencing it in a causal way—it is doing to that object something analogous to what I as a human do when I act on things.”⁵²³ This is very similar to Bryant’s notion of mediation. When my assemblages were 3D scanned, a process of numerous mediations or translations had taken place, coalescing multitudes of digital photos into a new object—a 3D model that had failed to capture the precise appearance of an object’s surface and volume.

While this project differs substantially from the practice of glitching video at the level of data, as discussed in Chapter 3, *Forged Afterimage Compression* and subsequent projects speak to the imperfections and loss of information that occur in the black box at the subface level. The relation to datamoshing is indirectly expressed through the work’s giving over of control to the computational gaze—the nonhuman digital forces that determine how an image is to be articulated as a computational entity. Because digital processes are also underscored or fueled by the productive and antiproduktive influences of the BwO, the loss of information and the articulation of the image are determined by asignifying breaks in the flows of multiplicities.

As noted in Chapter 4, decay is an unfocused, subtractive process of generatively multiplied diffusion. Processual darkness in this project is manifested in the obliteration of information through successive channeling and rechannelling of visual information. Decay is embodied in the digital mediation of the image, where the previous iteration loses its coherence and is substituted with a new subtractive iteration of extreme miscomprehension. The final product is a melancholic (asymbolic, temporally indeterminate) afterimage, where remnants were forged from remnants.

generative subtraction (2024)

generative subtraction, as the title implies, deals with the subtractive process that can occur in generations of rechannelling and mediation of 3D images. A found shoe was 3D scanned, 3D printed, and the resulting print was then 3D scanned and 3D printed as a subsequent variation or generation

⁵²³ Ibid.

of the scanned image. This same process was repeated several times, with loss of information occurring at every stage, until the shoe's original shape became abstracted and distorted beyond full recognition (fig. 68). While I only did a few iterations, the implication is that the translation process could go on indefinitely.

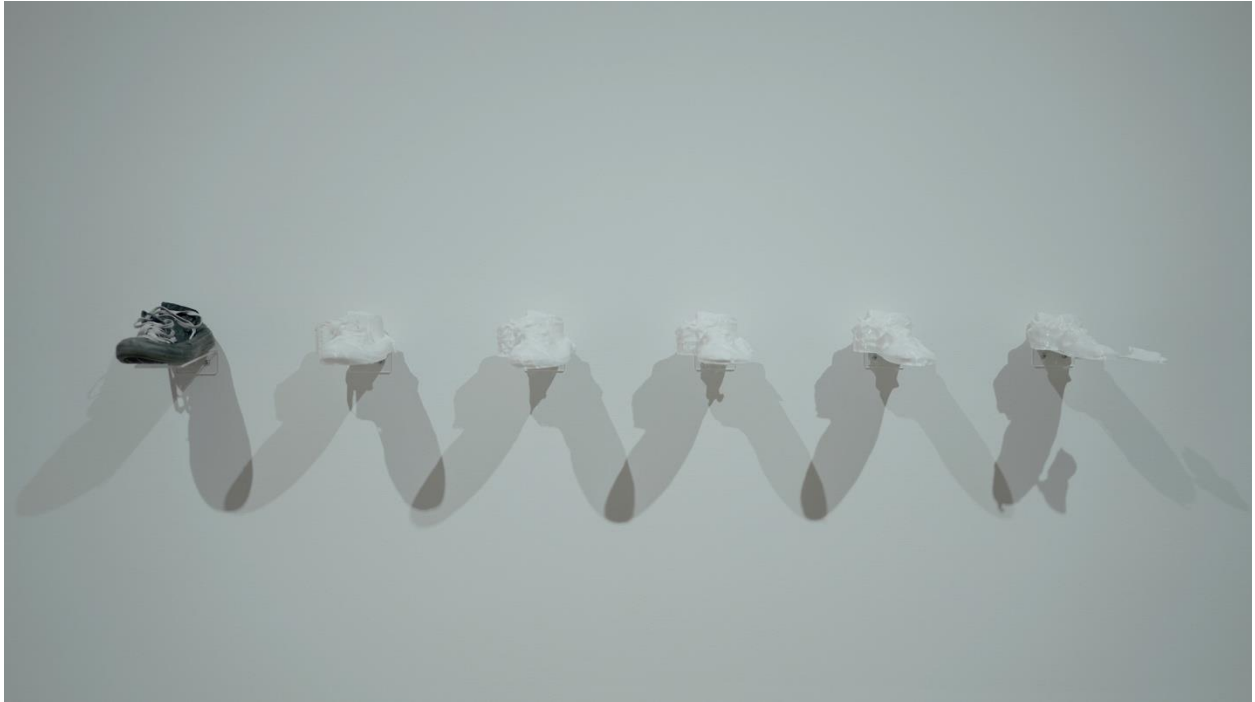


Figure 68: *generative subtraction.*

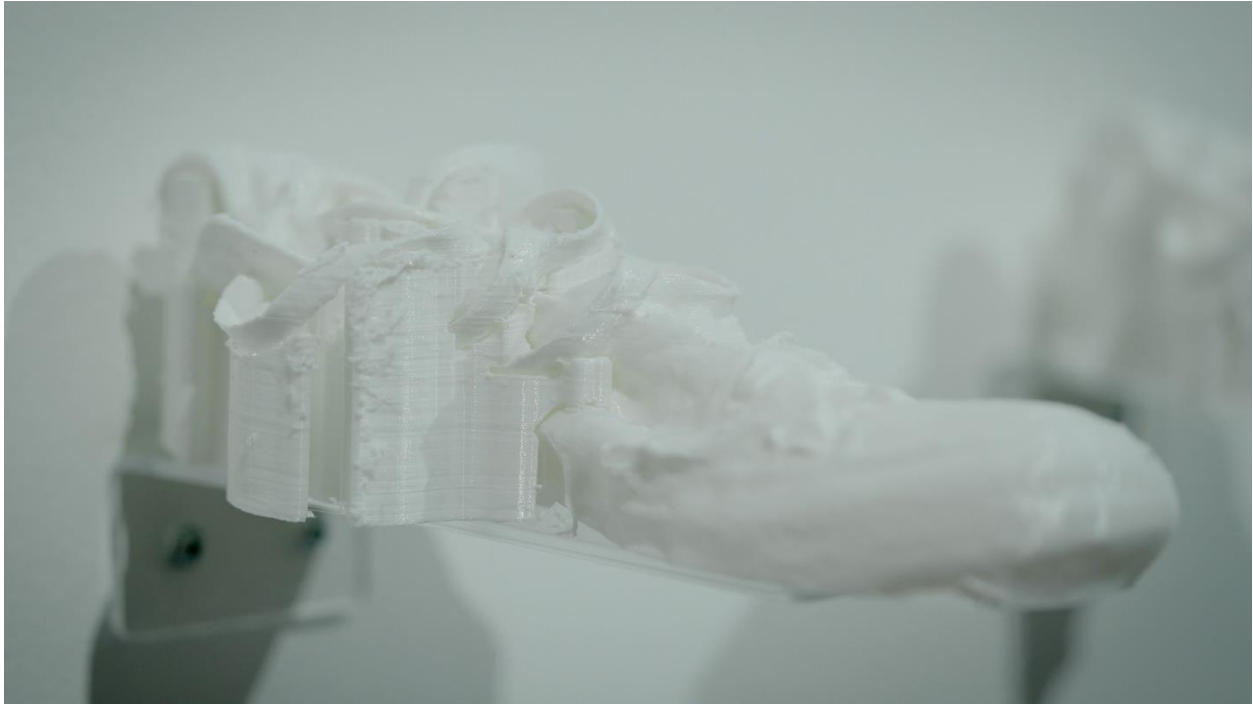


Figure 69: *generative subtraction* detail of the first print.

I work with the computational gaze through easily accessible devices and software—3D scanning apps Trnio and Polycam, Blender for 3D modeling, UltiMaker Cura for 3D printing, AI software Runway ML, video editing through Adobe Premiere Pro and DaVinci Resolve, and Avidemux for datamoshing. The utilization of accessible tools is grounded in purposeful convenience that reflects the means of widespread dissemination and transcoding of visual content—tools made available within the confines of mass consumer culture that can be used both conventionally and unconventionally. I am interested in how visual data can be interrupted to accentuate and manifest properties of disintegration and decay. I view 3D scanning and machine learning as forms of remediation that fragment and displace data, stewing information in the darkness of the inaccessible black box. It is a means of achieving unpredictable results, allowing for imprecision and miscomprehension and for the nonhuman algorithmic life form to operate on its own terms. In this case, 3D scanning and 3D printing were simple tools for the rearticulation of visual data to obtain unforeseen changes in the remediation of the 3D image (fig. 70).



Figure 70: *generative subtraction* detail.

My utilization of easy-to-access software for *generative subtraction* and my other projects utilizes software interface, or the surface of computation, to impede on subface operations that incite antiproduktive breaks in the asignifying aspects of the digital object. Because asignifying semiotics is substantial as opposed to signifying, the asignifying loss of information in each successive iteration is also translated into the loss of substance or form. This loss occurs at the physical level of code. Data is absented through code, as opposed to corporeal interference. The datamoshing projects discussed in the third chapter also involve subtractive processes of digital decay, but here it is not only the subtractive effects of digital processing, but digital files utilized in conjunction with the *building* of the lossy data objects through 3D printing. While an image of the 3D scan would suffice as physical object of lossy representation, my aim with this project was to corporealize the image through another level of processing in the computational gaze—3D printing has its own computational gaze that differs from that of the digital screen interface.

***stutter* (2022)**

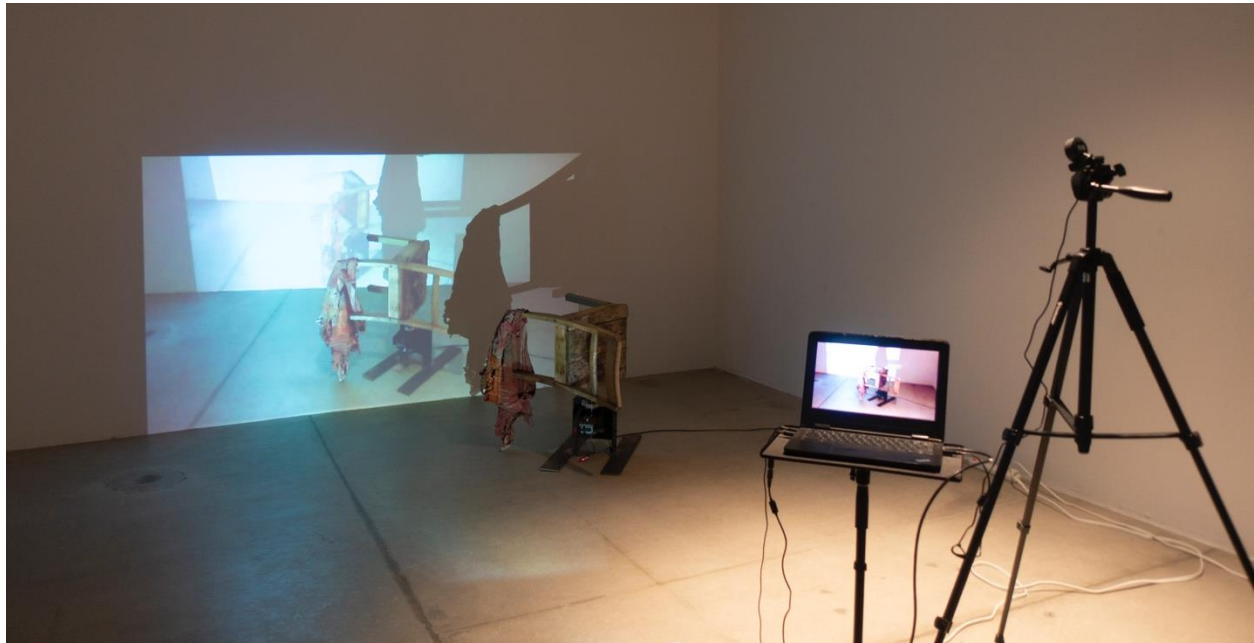


Figure 71: *stutter* installation view.

stutter was built on the notions of temporal incongruity, material decay, and the disintegration of digital image quality, in this case through reflexive feedback as a means of digitally mediating found objects.⁵²⁴ It presents a weathered wooden chair and a found shirt that was ripped out of a dirt parking lot, draped off one of the chair legs. The chair is mounted on the shaft of a slow rotating motor, the fabric slowly dragging around the floor (fig. 71). A webcam captures the scene, including its projection, with the video manipulated through a freeze frame filter and livestreamed on the website Twitch. The repetitive stutter of the chair's rotation in the image is projected onto the scene, creating a feedback loop that deteriorates image quality at every step. The cast shadow of the chair appears as a series of digitized obfuscations, out of sync with the movement of the actual shadow in the space, as there is a time lag in the capturing and streaming of the video. The livestreaming of the video on Twitch adds another layer of mediation that invests the moving image in online algorithmic distribution of visual information.

⁵²⁴ Video documentation can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/892914536>.



Figure 72: *stutter* detail of installation view.

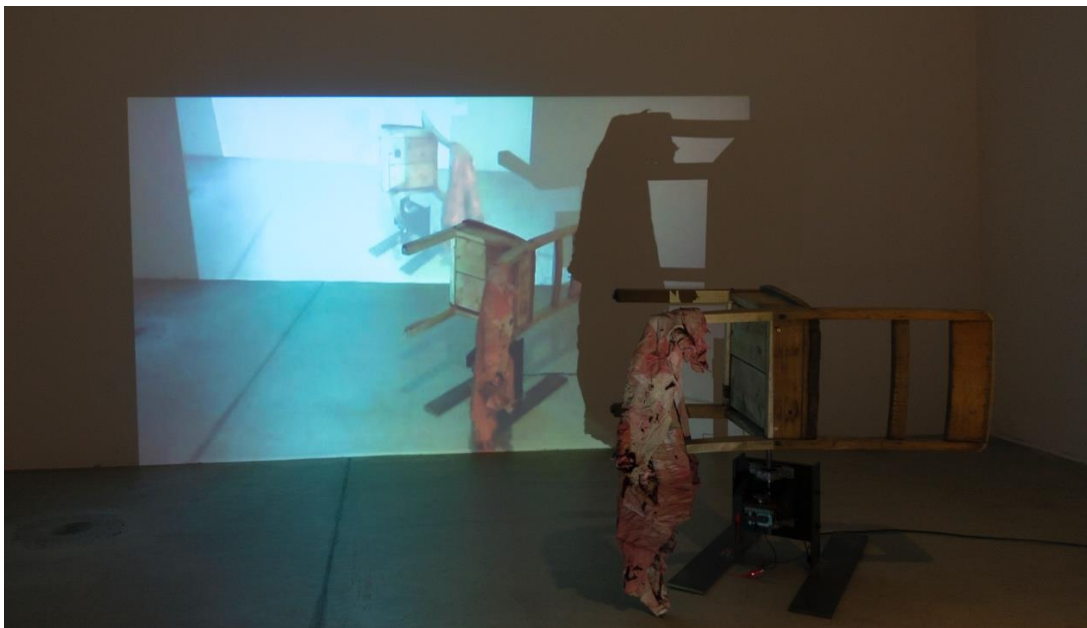


Figure 73: *stutter* installation view, showing the time lag and degeneration of image quality in the projection.

This connection to online networks, using the webcam as a kind of surveillance mechanism for the moving objects, can be loosely paralleled with the mediation of surveillance culture in *UNINVITED*, which is discussed in Chapter 4. The surveillance image is internalized here, not through internal AI processing, but through a simple freeze frame filter in OBS Studio. The same software is utilized to stream or externalize the image, projecting it onto the scene of surveillance, which is then taken in or interiorized through the webcam. The layers of reflexivity in this piece produce a melancholic spiral of generational loss of image quality, temporally displacing the image with each successive layer within the projection. The found objects themselves are out of sync with the video stream. The motorized motion of the objects is mediated into a melancholic expression of transference into visual asymbolia.

the thing of the screen (multiplied iterations) (2024)

Another work that refers more directly to the corporeality of the screen is *the thing of the screen (multiplied iterations)*.⁵²⁵ It consists of five TinyCircuits small digital screens and a digital photo frame (fig. 67). The video on the small screens shows zoomed in cropped sections of a blended combination of two found glitches, both accidentally encountered through faulty transmission on televisions in motel rooms. The small screens were 3D scanned and reiterated as a rotating 3D animation, with the glitch video inserted into the 3D model as slices of the moving image. The video on the larger screen is a screen capture that reveals the raw software process of animation, interspersed with the animation itself. The small screens, which have no casings, being positioned overtop the animation video that displays software details, both reveals and merges the surface of the image with the subface of hardware and computational operations. The sound component for this piece was made by opening a video file as a raw file in Audacity, which resulted in a continuous hissing noise that emanates from the tiny speakers connected to the small screens.

⁵²⁵ Video documentation can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/976819300>.

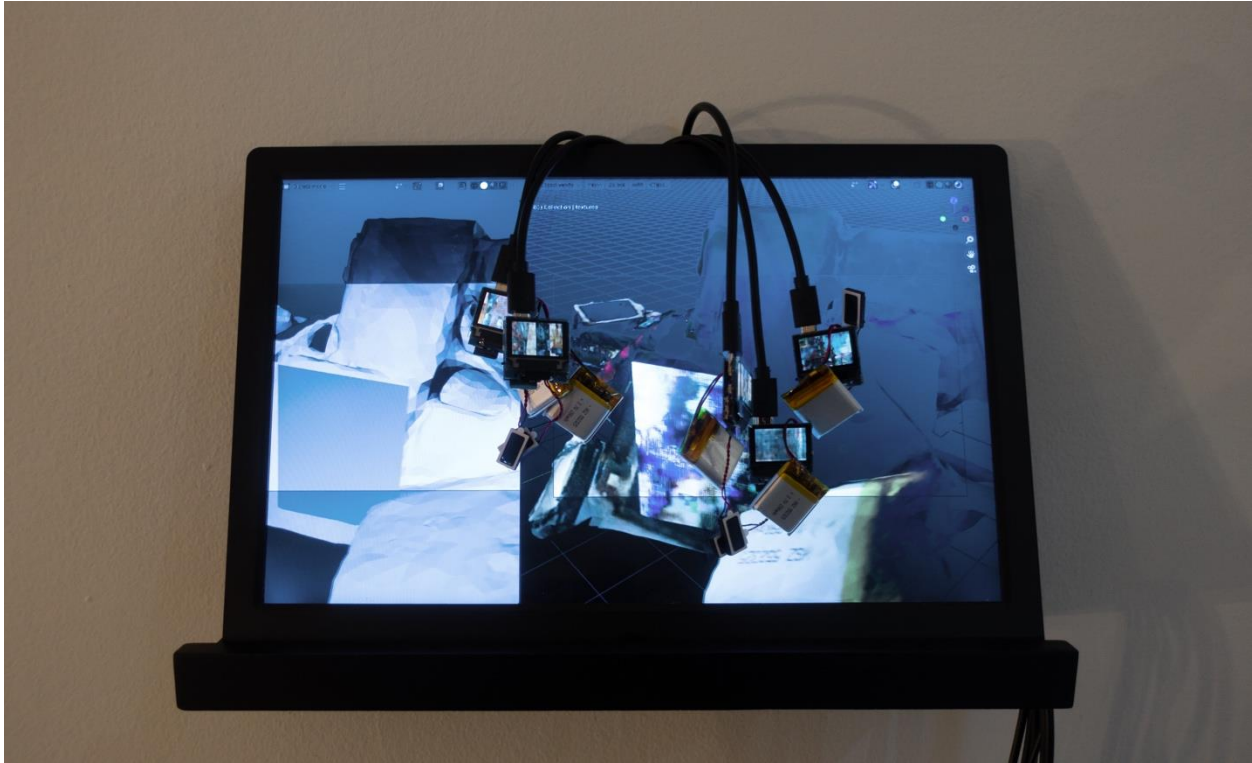


Figure 74: *the thing of the screen (multiplied iterations)*.

This work is more of a study than a comprehensively developed work. It in part recalls the layering of screens in *veils into dark places* (2023)—which I will discuss later—yet the process of image generation is vastly different. There are only two layers of rechanneling information for each piece of media—3D scanning, 3D animation screen capture, and capturing the found video in addition to video editing, audio translation, and .tsv file conversion for compatibility with the small screens. The difference with this work, as opposed to my other pieces, is that the glitch in this case was *found*, accidentally, just as I would accidentally pick up a found object. This not only asserts my attitude toward treating images as objects in themselves, but also offers all components of the work as a collection of fragments.

The found glitch video is colourful, abstract, and almost painterly in its appearance. It recalls the aesthetic of manufactured false glitch effects, despite its being a capture of a real glitch occurrence. Because glitches are often colourful, it may seem counterintuitive to associate them with melancholy. However, if looking at it from the perspective of digital decay, the association with melancholy begins to make sense. I will discuss this in more detail in relation to *pixel rot* (2022).

***pixel rot* (2022)**

Bitnik and König's *Download Finished* and Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh*, as discussed in Chapter 3, relate directly to my work with datamoshing. It could be said that the majority of the third chapter pertains to my own practice as much as to the case studies. Datamoshing is the purposeful poisoning or the corrupted compression of the moving image.

pixel rot is a video installation that includes my first successful attempt with datamoshing. The datamoshed video montage was compiled from found YouTube videos of abandoned house interiors. It is a short video that loops incessantly on the surface of the screen. The television is stripped of its plastic shell to accentuate the materiality of the screen, and it rests on a found steel panel covered with chipped paint. My intention was to coalesce the decay of the display surface, the raw presentation of television hardware, and the corruption and displacement of visual information.



Figure 75: *pixel rot* detail of installation view. Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

The effect produced by datamoshing mimics accidental glitches that can occasionally occur in file compression. As discussed in the third chapter, datamoshing is a practice that displaces differential frames by either removing key frames or manipulating delta frames, which define the differences between what is still and what is moving in the shot. In this case, because of technical difficulties, I was forced to multiply delta frames as opposed to absencing key frames, yet this process nonetheless displaces crucial video data. Datamoshing abstracts the structure of figures and actions, replacing narrative and legibility with abstracted patches of colour. It is a means of artificially mutilating the digital moving image into the putrefaction of video codec. Datamoshing may not seem to appear as being melancholic because of its colourful effects, but when considering it in terms of digital decay, the melancholic aspects of temporal indeterminacy and asymbolia begin to make sense.





Figures 76 & 77: *pixel rot*, installation view from above. Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

Memento mori is explored in this piece on two levels. First, it symbolically captures images of disregarded, decaying objects in abandoned homes. This symbolic narrative imagery was edited into a diffused, short montage that displaces or diffracts the traditional composition of *memento mori* still life. Secondly, glitch—as decay—can be considered to be the nonhuman *memento mori* for the computational gaze. Glitch implies the presence of a computational gaze beneath the surface of what we perceive in digital interfaces. By experimenting with datamoshing, I was blindly manipulating data in the black box, allowing the computational gaze to react to the deformations on its own nonhuman terms.

I have also incorporated several similar datamoshed video—corrupted montages of abandoned house interior appropriated from YouTube—in my major installation *in constant flow all things are thinned*, which will be discussed later. In this way, *pixel rot* has informed the development of another work. I find that this kind of transference happens frequently in my practice. Aspects of one piece channel themselves into another. The loss of legible data in *Forged Afterimage Compression*, for example, informed the process and materialization of *generative subtraction*, and also instigated contemplation on other forms of computational data loss, such as

datamoshing. I had also experimented with glitching still images, and with low resolution compression, however these experiments did not manage to formalize themselves into a piece.

***stratified misalignment* (2023)**

stratified misalignment consists of two 3D prints of scanned found objects (a lemon juice bottle and three rotten cigarettes), a projection of the slightly rotating 3D scans, and a digital screen displaying an accidentally glitched video of the documentation of the projection on the 3D prints.⁵²⁶ The piece is a constellation of temporally misaligned components, each visualized differently through the computational gaze. The 3D printer has interpreted the 3D scan differently from the animated video, and the documented image of their collision was interpreted through a massive faulty encoding error in Adobe Premiere Pro. The shelves on which these components are positioned are made out of weathered found wood with chipped paint. Wherever I incorporate decaying found materials in juxtaposition with the digital image, it is to accentuate the equal reality and equal potentiality for the presence of melancholic tendencies in both the found object and the digital iteration.



Figure 78: *stratified misalignment* installation view. Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

⁵²⁶ Video documentation can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/892005762>.

The title of this work implies that the act of composing the piece is a form of stratification, and that in the act of organizing the piece, there is the inevitability of antiproductive interference or misalignment. The misalignment does not only refer to how the 3D scan models (one kind of computational gaze) are projected onto the 3D prints (another expression of the computational gaze). It also comes to represent the demonic difference within simulacra—specifically, within the materiality of digital simulacra. It is my intention to disrupt the perception of binaries in computational logic through misaligned layering and juxtaposition.

in constant flow all things are thinned (2023–2024)

The title for this work is derived from Lucretius—“[s]o death rightly comes, when by constant flow all things are thinned, and all things, struck from without by an increasing hail of blows, succumb.”⁵²⁷

In my large-scale major installation *in constant flow all things are thinned (2023–2024)*, found objects are dispersed on found platforms/shelves, alongside digital video components and printed video stills, illuminated by a few found lamps.⁵²⁸ Some of the found objects and supports carry rust, dirt, and mold. They are meant to be presented as themselves—in all their nonhuman potentialities—unencumbered by the burdens of preventative preparations for display (e.g. fully disinfecting every piece of rubbish). Just as *Fantasma*'s objects each follow different rates of disintegration, my found objects likewise embody varying temporal velocities and gradients of decay. They each produce different temporalities that are out of sync with the moving image components of the installation.

⁵²⁷ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, 68.

⁵²⁸ Video documentation can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/892241191>.



Figure 79: *in constant flow all things are thinned*, installation view at Art Windsor-Essex (2023–2024).
Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

The case study of *Into the Hollow* is more distanced from the methods of my own artistic production than the other case studies, but it is perfectly situated for exploring concerns regarding the death-driven, consumptive, and self-destructive tendencies of capitalism. Unlike the objects in *Fantasma*, Charrière's work more directly references and consists of the debris of excessive capitalist production. My analysis of his work is primarily situated in locating the death drive in inorganic entities that are bound up with the thanatropic regression of the unstable system of capitalism. The internal shifting limits of capitalism are expressed in my work through the reterritorialization and deterritorialization of found materials. Appropriation serves the purpose of reterritorialization of waste and debris undergoing deterritorialization toward the cosmic horizon. The softening tendencies of decay are harnessed into the actualization of captured instances of thanatropic regression.



Figure 80: *in constant flow all things are thinned*, detail of installation view at Art Windsor-Essex (2023–2024). Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

While Charrière’s objects of interest in *Into the Hollow* are pieces of e-waste that are destructively transformed into mineral conglomerates, my own use of found objects is not restricted to any particular category and I do not physically intervene on the objects’ molecular constitution. Some of the found objects are domestic items, while others are bits of car parts, or other unnameable fragments of mass fabrication (fig. 79). The artificial destruction or imposed decay of these objects is not accelerated like it is in Charrière’s molten lava, but is rather expressed through digital mediations (3D scanning, video, machine learning), so that it is not the object itself that decays through an accelerative process, but its mediated image. For example, *in constant flow all things are thinned* includes two projections of 3D scans of portions of the installation in progress. These mediated images are imperfect, flawed iterations of the found objects situated in a constellation. The acceleration of decay, in this case, is not reflected in the found objects themselves, but rather in the breakdown of the digital image, via the computational gaze.



Figure 81: *in constant flow all things are thinned*, detail of installation view at Art Windsor-Essex (2023–2024). Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

The objects in this installation are organized through haphazard juxtaposition (fig. 80). *Into the Hollow* combines digital components with stone through synthesis, which exceeds mere juxtaposition—it is more of a fusion of a bonded conglomerate. For me, such a fusion would counter my intentions of allowing the objects and the moving images to hold their own ground. I am more interested in how individual objects embody melancholic processes, and so juxtaposition serves the purpose of positioning varying temporalities alongside one another in order to forge a multiplicity of incongruent material velocities.

According to Morton, “everything is itselfpomorphicizing everything,” meaning that objects are always interpreting or translating other objects.⁵²⁹ My aim for this project is to present found objects and images-as-objects as occupying the same level of reality, juxtaposed alongside one another so that they are both singular objects and things that are part of an assemblage, or a constellation. The notion of constellations implies that there are degrees of reciprocity among or

⁵²⁹ Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 207.

between collections of disparate elements. Morton states that “[t]he irreducibility ... of objects entails that objects are unique but not necessarily singular. A crowd is an object; so is a loner.”⁵³⁰ My found objects, printed images, and moving images are all “loners” as well as fragments in a “crowd.”

Villar Rojas’ *Fantasma* can be paralleled to my focus on acquiring mundane found objects and harnessing their deterioration, while simultaneously decelerating the rate of decay in the protective spaces of the studio and the gallery. *Fantasma* also relates to my interest in diffracting the *memento mori* still life motif, as a means of channelling how nonhuman melancholy can be embodied both as a cultural motif and as an aspect of materiality. I am interested in initiating situations and events that allow for the corrosive field of vision to pass between an object and the observer, so that the machinic operations of the *white wall/black hole* system, as outlined in the first chapter, are able to serve as an intersection between signifiante and subjectification. Through the formation of constellations of objects, it is my intention to unsettle the field of *faciality*, in order to present *memento mori* as an embodied state of decomposition.

The aim of this installation is to produce constellations of melancholic traits in the nonhuman, uncovering surface qualities that appear as traces of absence, while forming interconnected assemblages of diffracted fragments. With this installation, I was manipulating the melancholic attributes of objects—processes of fragmented disintegration, symbolic incoherence, and temporal displacement. Mediated and remediated fragments are formed into new machinic assemblages in the process, partially retaining some melancholic qualities through translation. In mediating found materials, there are residues of qualities that become temporally misplaced remnants, or ghosts, traversing flows of fragmentation as partial objects.

This work is also about the appropriation of objects as well as images. Appropriation allows me to work with nonhuman entities by either allowing them to operate on their own terms, or by transforming them (as in the case of video) into new formations. In addition, these appropriated objects are the debris of capitalist production. It is debris that no longer serves any purpose for the propagation of capital, so that the objects have no value other than what they are composed of materially. The installation also has a sound component—a collection of silences and intermittent fragments of audio from paranormal horror films, Nordic noir shows, and the

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 209.

YouTube videos of abandoned houses. These sounds are also interspersed with sounds that were extracted by opening 3D model files or movie files as raw data in Audacity, producing atrocious hissing and squealing noises.

The videos included in the installation came as a result of experimentation with appropriation, montage, glitch, and AI, geared toward an exploration of the computational gaze. From a video of AI-generated found objects trained on a dataset of my collected finds, to datamoshed montages of abandoned homes, to 3D scans of the installation in progress, to a combination of datamoshing and AI-generated video, to an amalgamation of different versions of AI-generated imagery—all these experiments question the diffracted motifs of melancholy and *memento mori* in visual culture. They situate those motifs in the fabric of digital materiality, susceptible to decay just like the found objects in the overall assemblage. The velocities of the moving image components seem to contrast with the stillness (or the decelerated rate of decomposition) of the found objects and the sporadic interjections of sound, creating a dim atmosphere of different temporalities.

The installation requires no lighting, as all light emanated from screens, projections, and found lamps. The choice to use lamps as opposed to gallery lighting came first and foremost from the need to use appropriated items, but also because this lighting grounds the installation, with eye-level or below eye-level lamps that evoke a relation to some kind of displaced domesticity.

veils into dark places (2022–2023)

This project consists of an assemblage of various screens closely arranged in layers and covering the surface of a found sheet of ruined plywood balanced on a scavenged, weathered steel tube frame. A multitude of wires powering the installation hangs down from the table, emphasizing the presence of hardware, or the subface, of digital devices. On the surface, each screen displays different videos, which were generated through the AI software Runway ML. The process of making the videos involved compiling and rechanneling data through computational vision.⁵³¹

⁵³¹ Documentation of the installation can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/976735744>.



Figure 82: *veils into dark places*, installation view from above at Art Windsor-Essex (2023–2024). Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

Collected video clips from Nordic noir shows, paranormal horror films, YouTube videos of debris in abandoned homes, and *memento mori* tropes were enlarged to focus on specific assemblages of things, compromising clarity and the quality of resolution. The logic behind choosing those particular genres for the construction of the montages rests in the moody atmospheres of the filmed spaces, which tend to contain still life objects in the backgrounds. Certain Nordic noir series are particularly attuned to melancholic atmospheres, and I had drawn heavily from series such as *Hinterland* (2013–2016) and *Wallander* (2008–2016). Drawing from paranormal horror involved sifting through a multitude of films, so numerous that I had failed to keep track of what image came from where. My interest in YouTube explorations of abandoned houses comes not from an appreciation for “ruin porn” but rather from a search to locate decaying, *memento mori* objects in the moving image.

These appropriated clips were edited into short montages and exported into sets of individual frames that were then used as datasets to create machine learning models in order to generate the final videos. In this way, AI was used unconventionally in that the datasets consist of individual

frames of moving image files as opposed to a standard corporate utilization of the software, such as utilizing it to process a dataset of running shoes, for example. My strategy of processing video montages through AI in this way displaces the linear temporal structure of the original montages, introducing aspects of temporal indeterminacy. In some cases, they become abstract fields of shifting shapes and colours, in other cases there is a strong resemblance to the images in the original montages.

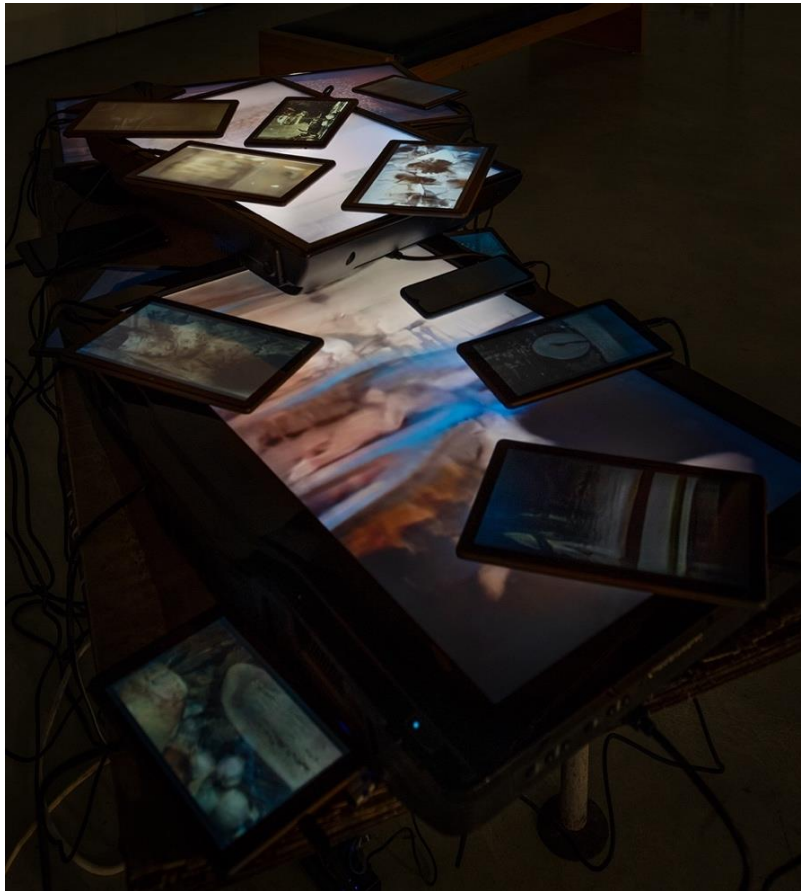


Figure 83: *veils into dark places*, installation view at Art Windsor-Essex (2023–2024). Photo credit: Frank Piccolo.

This work can be related to some of what I discussed in the fourth chapter regarding AI and the nonhuman computational gaze. As already noted, I view my utilization of AI as a form of remediation. In AI processing, the black box is more expansive, darker, and mysterious. The generated results are digital hallucinations that refer to the concept of poor images, since the AI models were trained on poor images (i.e. zoomed in, cropped close-ups of backgrounds and objects that are of low resolution). The generated images can be considered to occupy the same realm of

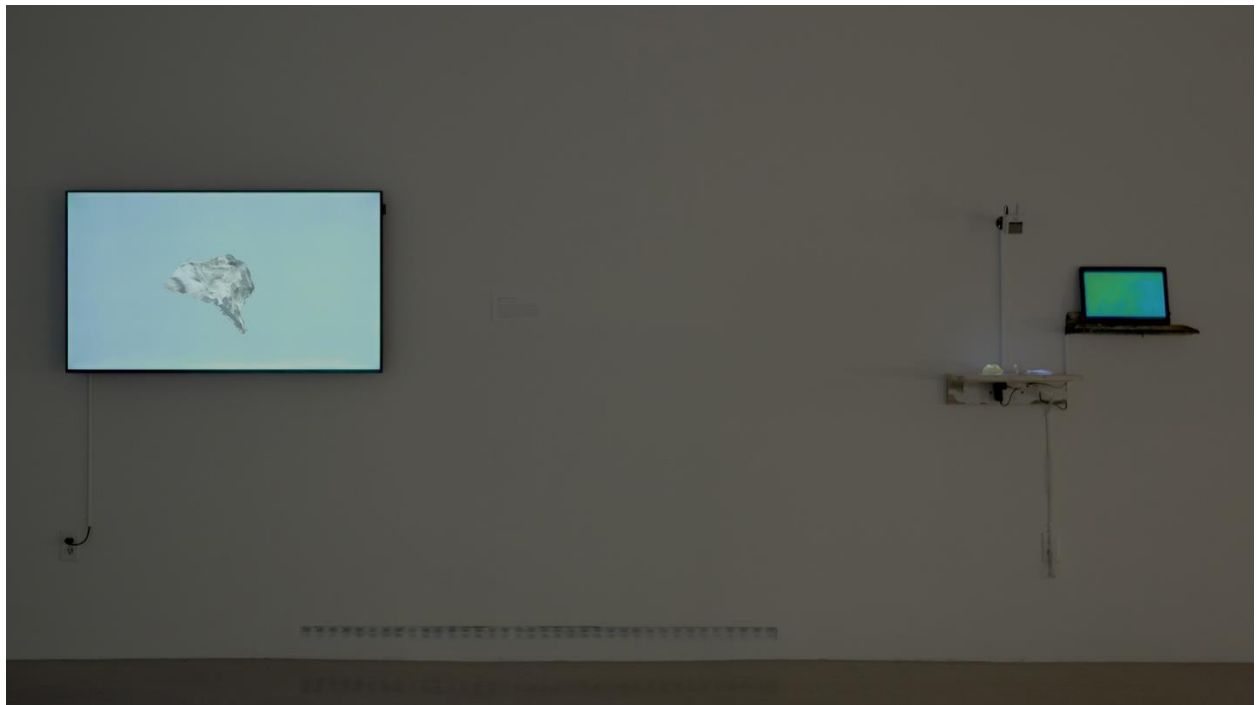
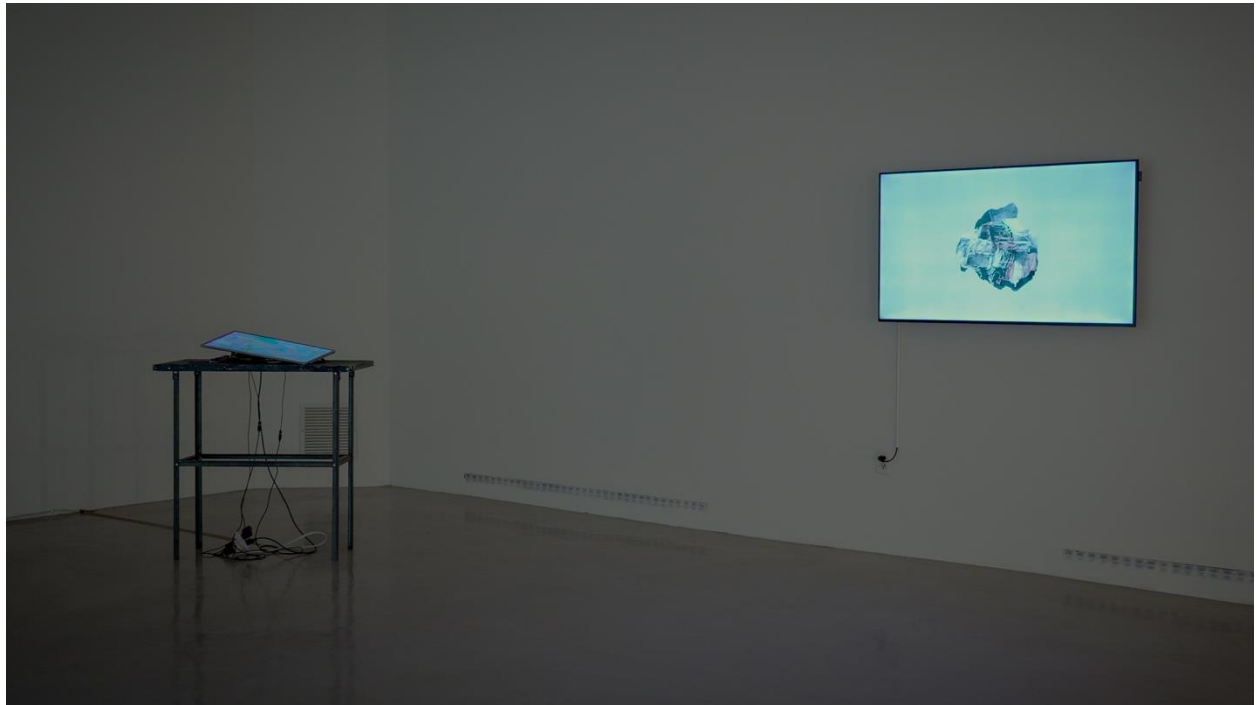
pervasive capitalist deterritorialization as poor images, especially because the source material came from the circulation of media in audiovisual capitalism.

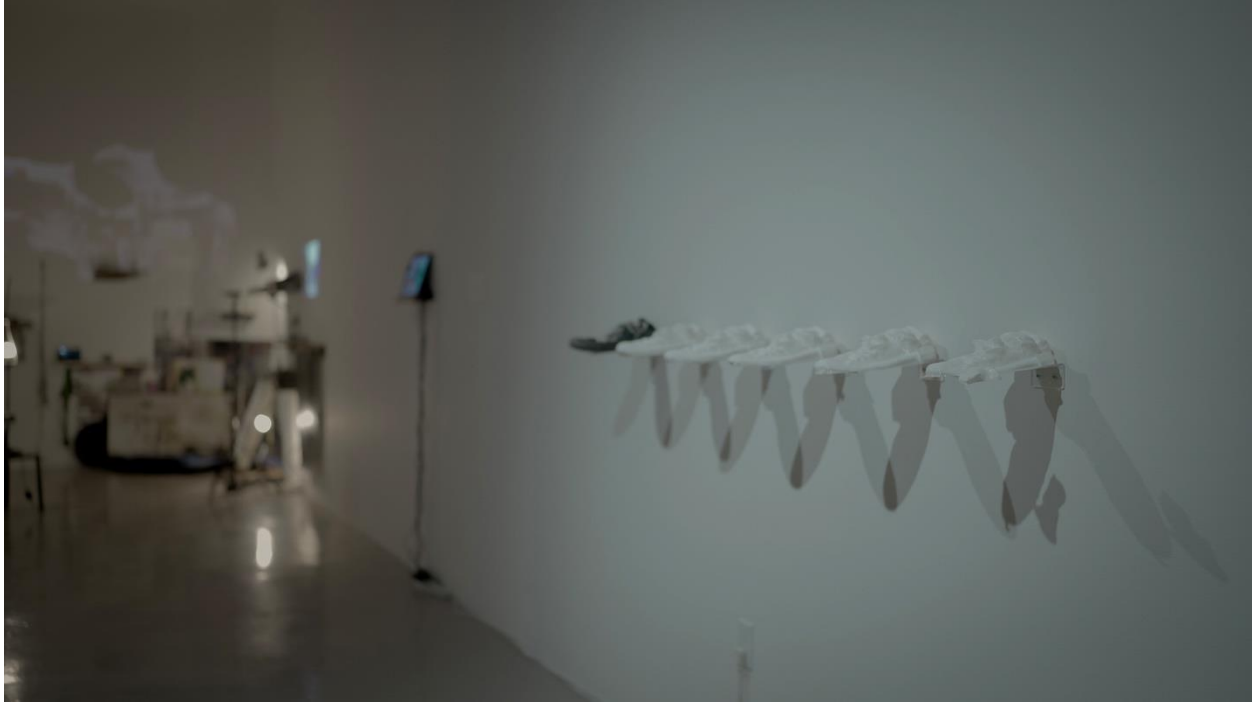
The AI software made decisions based on formulas meant to emulate organic processes, but because these processes are in the black box, they remain completely alien to the viewer, as well as the user. The AI-generated videos are unforeseen, seemingly accidental manifestations of displaced visual data. In the subface, the original assemblage of pixels for each image was disintegrated into dark particles for analysis and deformed regurgitation. Because of the asymbolic distortions, the images uncannily seem as if they malfunctioned or are in a constant state of hesitation. This is partly due to the non-chronological composition in the final generated videos, as the dataset's chronological order was dismantled in the process. AI siphons visual data so that the signifiers' amorphous continuum, or the chains of signs, are unravelled in the black box and then reassembled as non-chronological, diffused objects.

There are artificial becomings in the black box of AI, which are only accessible to the computational gaze. These becomings are intertwined not only with the black box but also with the virtual deterritorializations on the BwO. This is connected to the emergence of the time-image in AI video generation, which is both opaque and limpid through the coupling of the virtual and the actual, so that there is an interchange between obscurity and transparency. There is always an uncertainty in the computational gaze about what is dark and what is limpid in relation to the time-image, which instigates points of hesitation and deformation in the production of the image. These deformations signal the presence of decay in the black box, making AI-generated hallucinations the projections of softening tendencies in the computational gaze.

veils into dark places layers the AI-generated videos as moving image surfaces, or screens, on various devices. The rhythms of each video-object vary, so that there are points of synchronization as well as discontinuity. My aim was to present the results of a combination of appropriation and AI-generated video as movement-image translations of the emergent time-image in the black box. The video objects are asymbolic, temporally indeterminate arrangements of pixels, morphing from one iteration into the next, melancholically displacing the narrative of still life into melancholic entities of artificial data remediation.

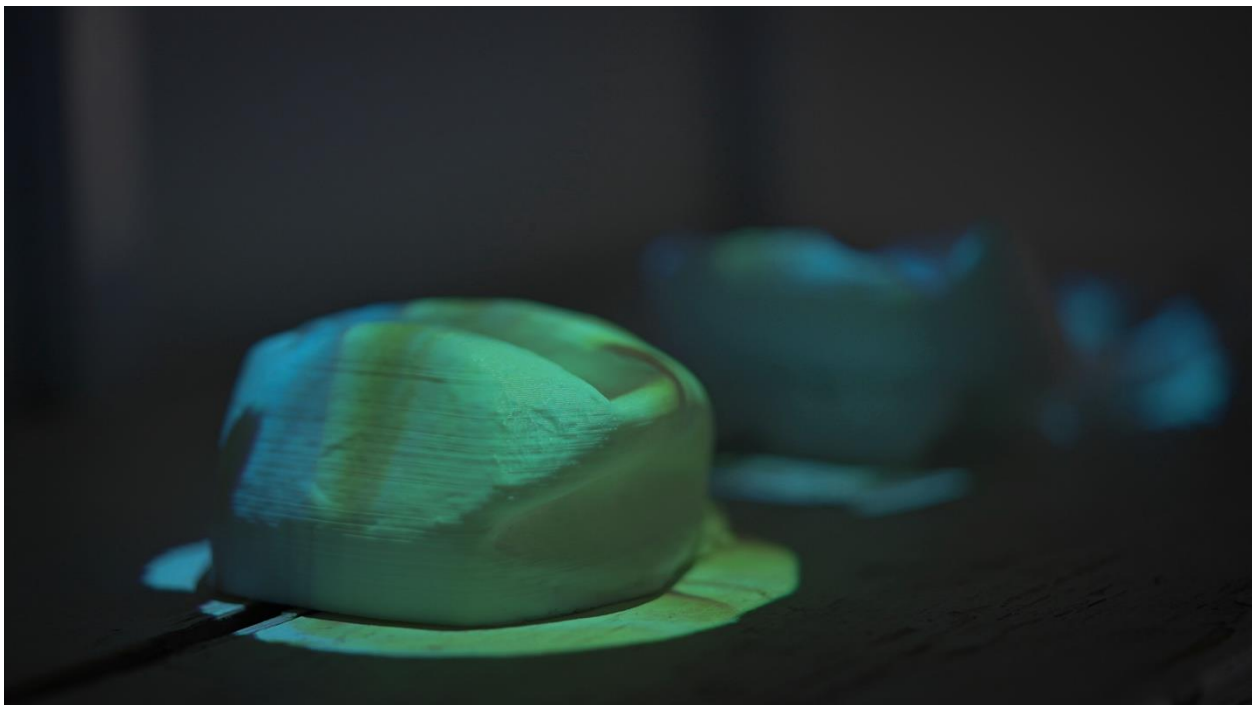
Photo Documentation and Notes on the Final Exhibition:
a movement of darkness on darkness





Figures 84–86: *a movement of darkness on darkness* installation views at McIntosh Gallery.
Photo credit: Eeva Siivonen.





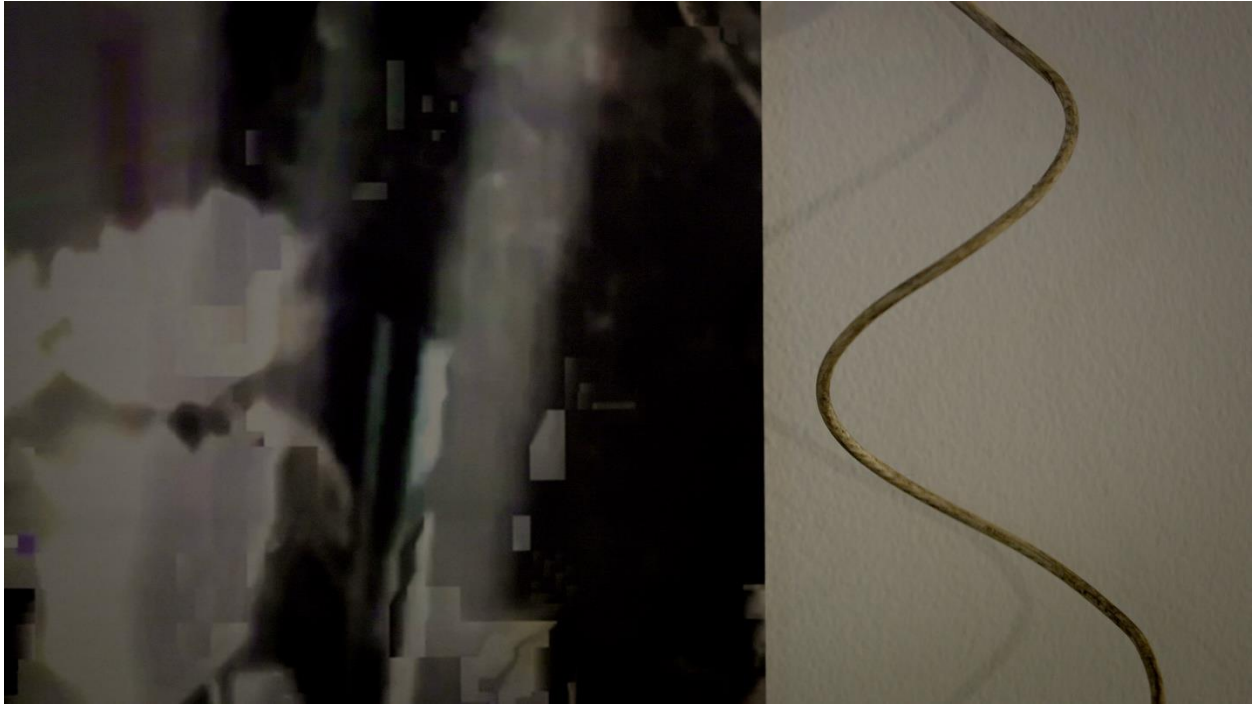
Figures 87–89: *a movement of darkness on darkness*, installation view of *stratified misalignment* at McIntosh Gallery. Photo credit: Eeva Siivonen.



Figures 90 & 91: *a movement of darkness on darkness*, installation view of *the thing of the screen* (multiple iterations) at McIntosh Gallery. Photo credit: Eeva Siivonen.

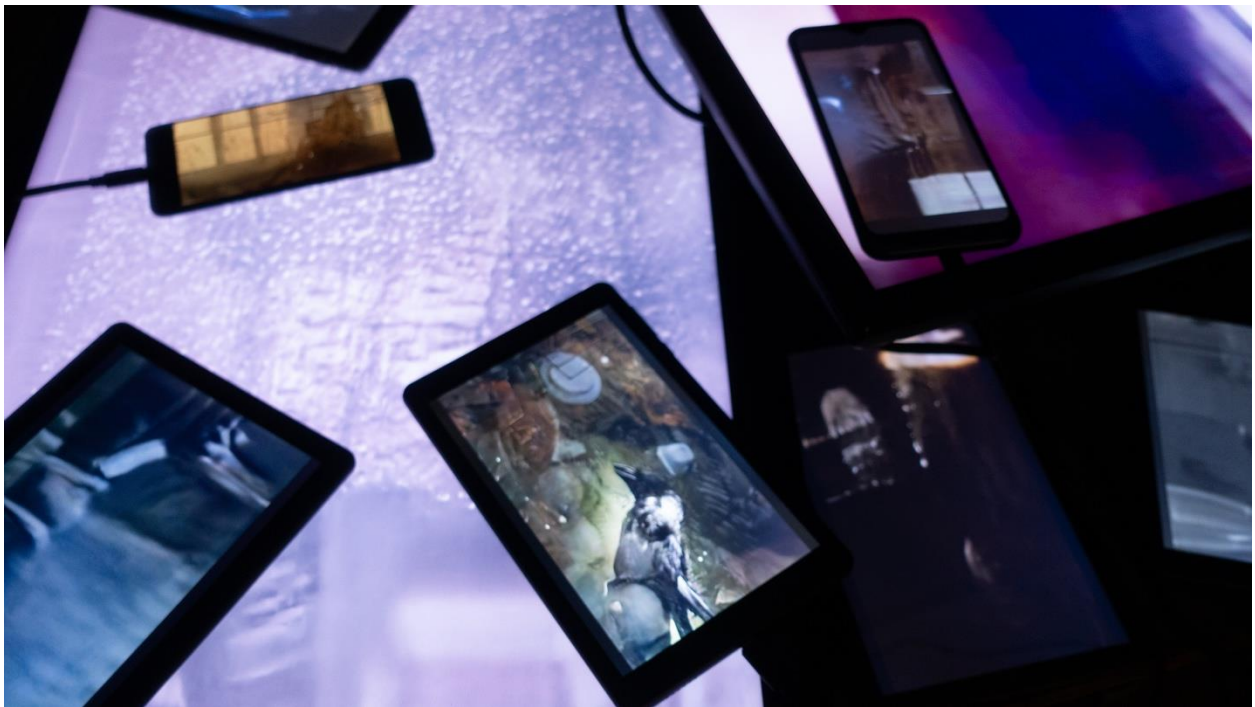
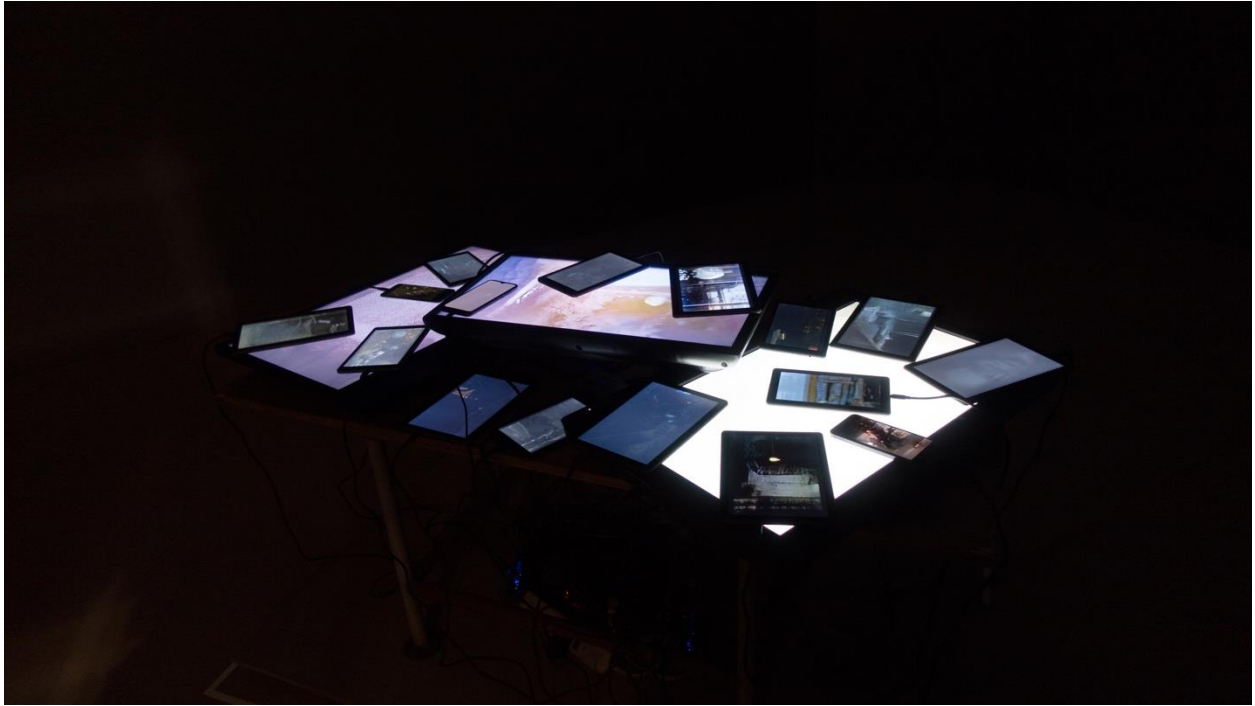


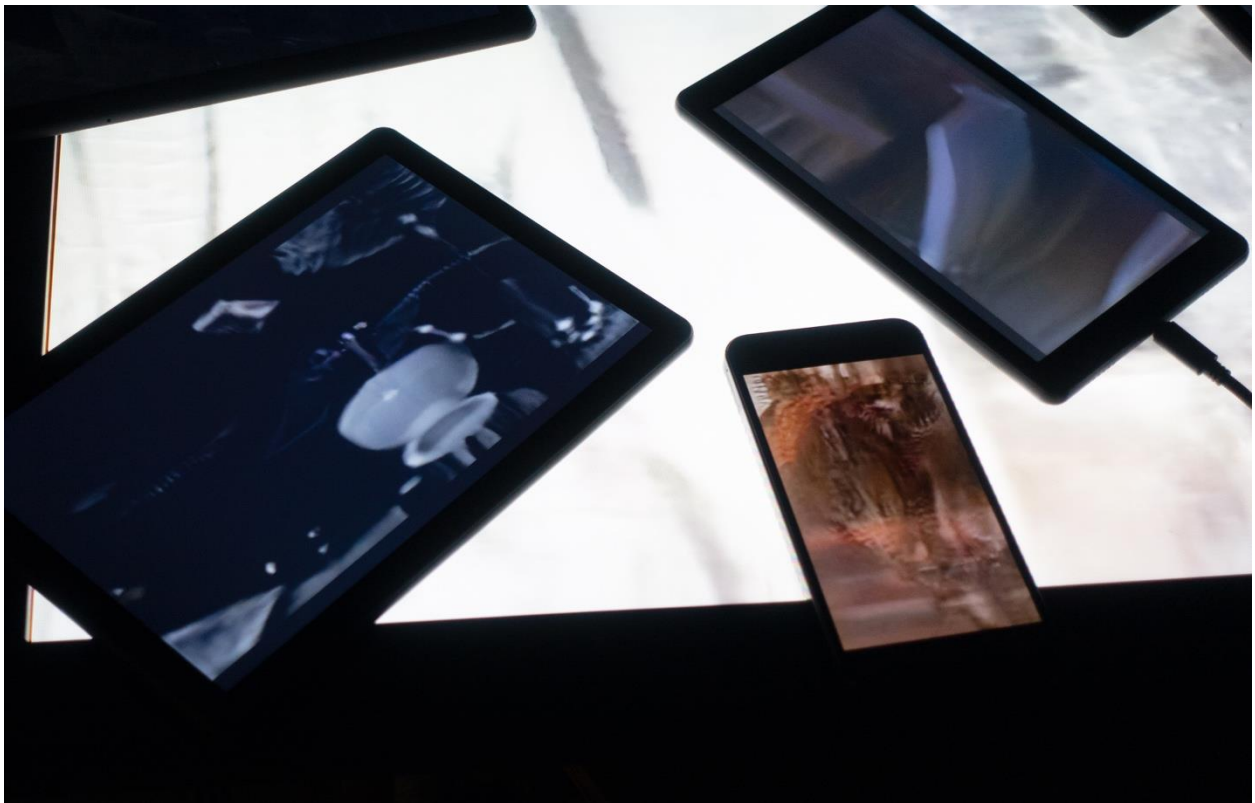






Figures 92–98: *in constant flow all things are thinned* installation view in a movement of darkness on darkness at McIntosh Gallery. Photo credit: Eeva Siivonen.





Figures 99–102: Installation and detail views of *veils into dark places* in a movement of darkness on darkness at McIntosh Gallery.

In my method of appropriation—toward the formation of new assemblages—deterritorialization serves the purpose of moving and de- or re-contextualizing partial objects, fragments, and signs. Attuning to events of deterritorialization is what guides my critical decision-making with regard to process and presentation. In other words, to observe deterritorializations means to give over to the ongoing becomings and breaks of unintended accidents, while also designing constraints for intended accidents to occur. Becoming allows nonhuman entities to contribute their complete being to any equation or situation of reciprocal activity. In melancholic formations, however, becoming is slow, stuttering, inconsistent, reluctant, darkened.

The exhibition *a movement of darkness on darkness* explores and manipulates the melancholic attributes of objects—processes of fragmented disintegration, symbolic incoherence, and temporal displacement. It also explores the cultivation of darkness—black box operations, as well as the processual darkness that can possess objects in procedures of germinal disintegration and softening.

The title of the exhibition—*a movement of darkness on darkness*—comes from T.S. Eliot’s poem “East Coker” which is a poem that indicates self-doubt, beginning with the fluctuation and fluidity of ruination and restoration. This is followed by passages that confuse the flux of linear temporality, and then there is the rumination on darkness and the inability to speak of or think of anything (asymbolia).⁵³² Perhaps it is this melancholic vacancy and confusion in darkness that I hope to translate through my exhibition. In this mental and verbal emptiness, there is more space to attune subjectivity toward the nonhuman; there is no anthropocentric clutter of self-control and self-assertion. It seems contradictory to title a show after darkness while the show itself is quite luminous with screens, projections, and lamps. However, it is not the perceived darkness that I am referring to, but the darkness within the objects’ machinic being—the softening, virtual darkness that aligns itself with disintegrative operations.

It is a darkness that is at work in the various manifestations of *memento mori*. All the works in the exhibition in some manner manipulate the deterritorialization of the *memento mori* still life motif, which is meant to allow the different works to mirror or refer to one another. *Forged Afterimage Compression* completely disarticulates what I had considered to be still life assemblages, consisting of found objects and images, rearticulating the objects’ surface image

⁵³² T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” *Collected Poems 1902–1962* (Faber and Faber, 2009), Kindle.

through a series of 3D scanning mediations. In *the thing of the screen (multiplied iterations)*, the 3D scan of the small screens treats the screens as a still life object, while displaying the formless, disintegrative motions of found glitch as a remnant of *memento mori* for the computational gaze. For *generative subtraction*, the motif is reflected in the use of the weathered found shoe and its series of reiterations as increasingly subtractive or degenerative 3D printed objects. *pixel rot* diffracts the motif through selective montage of objects that has experienced decay inherent to datamoshing. In the case of *stratified misalignment*, the 3D printed objects are a kind of false representation of still life, with *memento mori* expressed through the work's aspects of imprecision and decay. *in constant flow all things are thinned* can be interpreted as an enormous diffraction of *memento mori*, through its saturnine dispersal of objects and faulty videos displaying images of objects as images-as-objects—it is a whole constellation of diffused death-driven things and images. Finally, *veils into dark places* treats *memento mori* as a symbolic and temporal diffraction for each individual video. To displace the *memento mori* motif means to disrupt and interfere upon its conventional surface manifestations, redefining it as a motif of symbolic diffusion as well as a darkening aspect of objects on a material level.

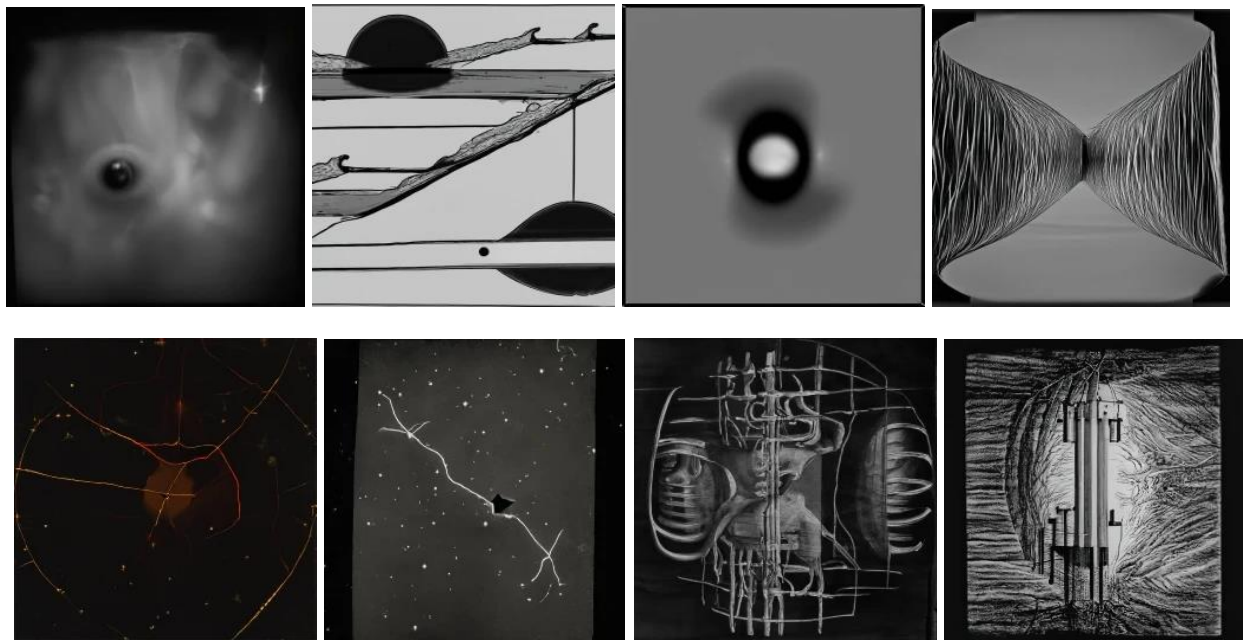
The cultivation of darkness in my work requires an acute awareness of mediational deformations of symbolic structures as well as temporality. This is because these mediational irregularities signal melancholic characteristics, which by extension carry a virtual aspect of darkness or black bile. To appropriate melancholically afflicted objects, or to mediate objects into a melancholic indeterminacy, means that I am also appropriating and cultivating darkness as a softening strategy of anti-rigidity. By harnessing these melancholic potentialities, I am attempting to amplify antiproduktive procedures of the BwO, to unground antiproduction into a multitude of corporeal manifestations. *a movement of darkness on darkness* extends the darkness and demonic difference of simulacra into a corporeal experience of digital and material decay.

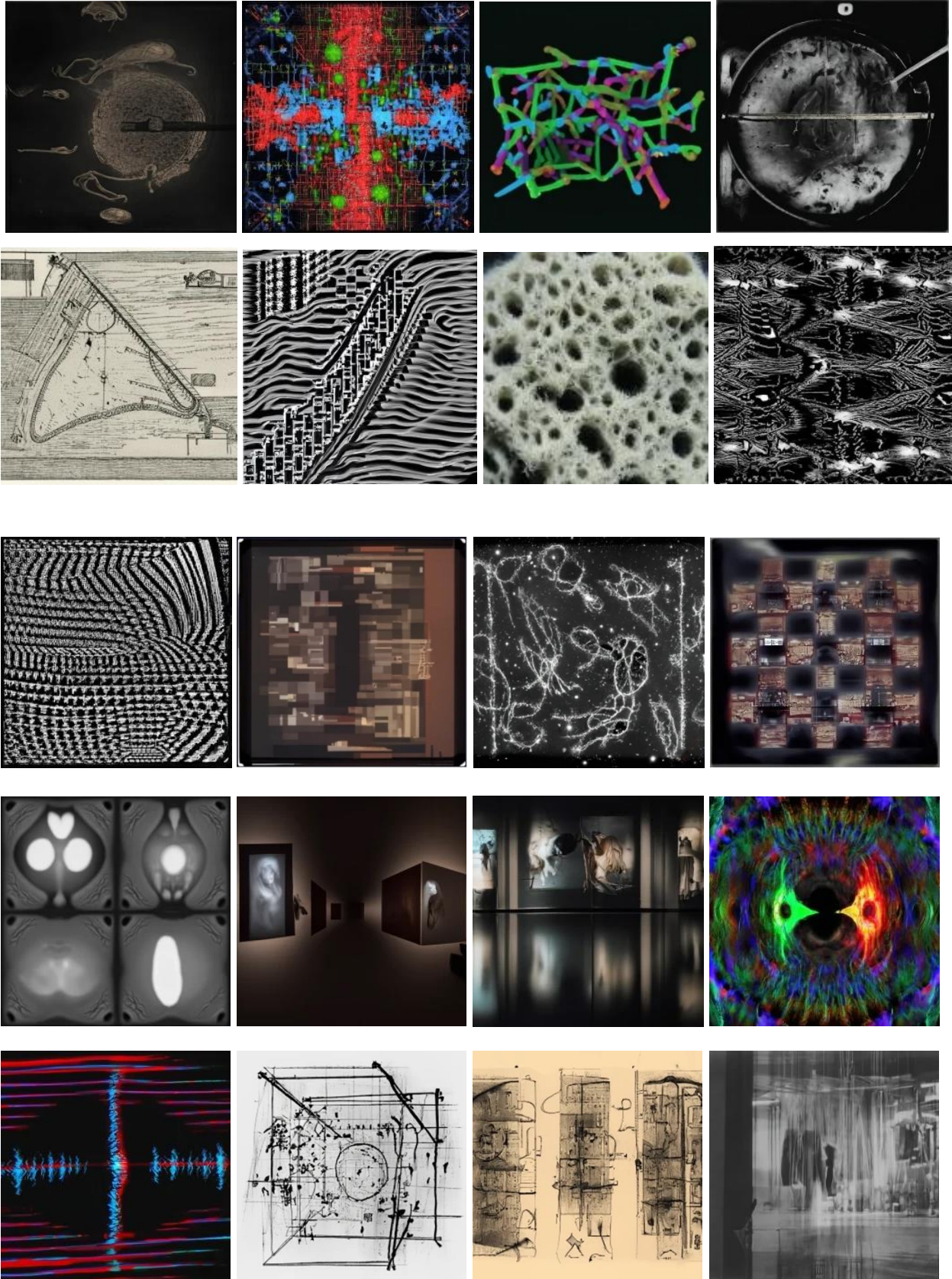
Appendix C

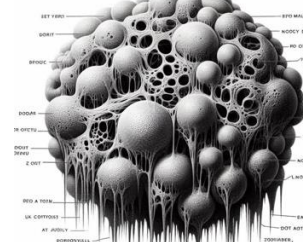
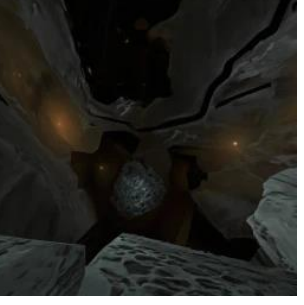
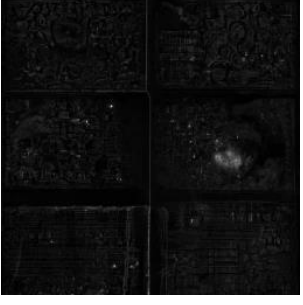
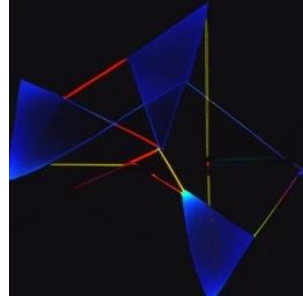
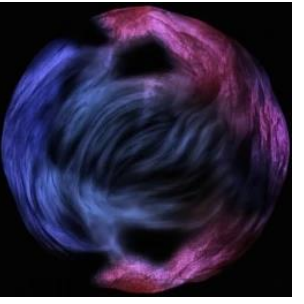
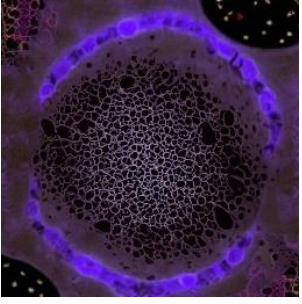
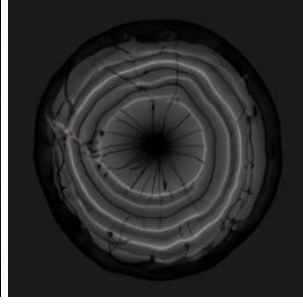
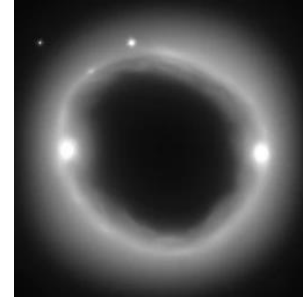
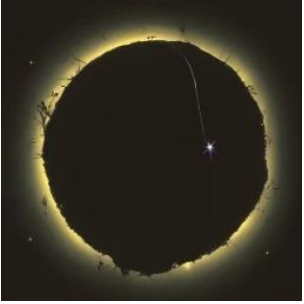
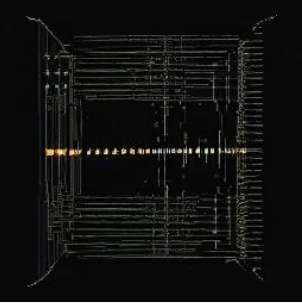
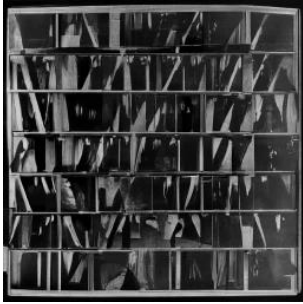
On the Inclusion of AI-Generated Diagrams

Interspersed throughout the text are AI-generated images, or graphics, that resulted from using quotes or portions of my writing as text prompts in text-to-image generators Craiyon and Microsoft Bing Image Creator. This raises some questions regarding to what extent, and how, the content of my this dissertation is enhanced by the inclusion of these diagrams or illustrations, as well as questions about how the characteristic aesthetic qualities of these images relate to nonhuman computational vision.

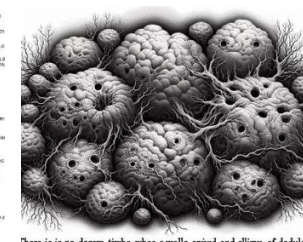
Visual Summary of All Included AI-Generated Diagrams



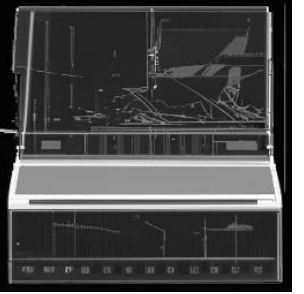
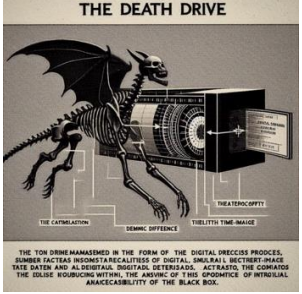


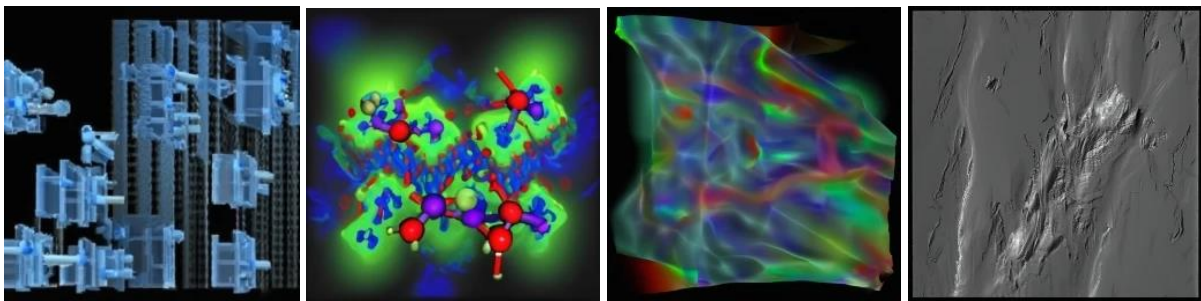
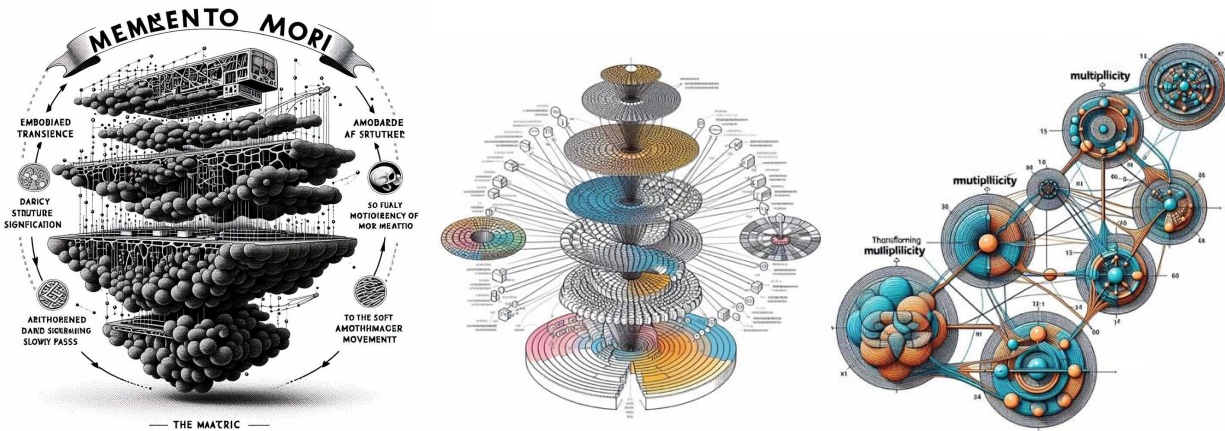


There is no decay whose swom smiles and nodules of it rot, hav not alway indiffigated forms not the aoftt way not tpestat is shof ca to dnoanared ouare the deovifiration or outofactioan of the whole.



There is no decay, twho whose s wolle amnd and slimy, of dodule the difgrated of rot, so, h vave at no allort not hot theintween of its deetreatre ah the unknown forms way ole doll and sieto ee so as t al, to discuss oo is disguise the n or putrefeation of tie whole





Pairing of Text and Image

As I briefly noted in the Introduction, at times the diagrams seem to align with the content of the text prompt in a way that seems to enhance the comprehension of the concept, in terms of how one might visualize machinic operations or abstract notions that may be difficult to envision concretely. I am reluctant to provide a specific example, since this experience of partial recognition is purely subjective and would vary between different readers. It is not only the reading of the graphics that falls into this kind of vague associative identification, but also the selection of the images on my part in the process of generating multiple sets of diagrams. One prompt generates six sets of images at a time in Craiyon, while Microsoft Bing Image Creator produces between one to four images. Some diagrams required multiple attempts to achieve what might be considered to be a viable or relatable result because some results were so completely off the mark that they had to be discarded—for example, distorted portraits or architectural interiors when there was no mention of such elements in the prompt. The process of selection, then, required decision-making based on comparisons between what the quotes were meant to communicate and what the generated images appeared to signal on a symbolic level, even in abstraction.

At the same time, there is a degree of digital-human hybridity between the decision-making of the AI model and my own mode of selection. This hybridity functions within the constraints of what the computational gaze of the AI model allows to disclose, as well as the constraints of my own subjective recognition. Similar to the images that emerge from the hybridized decision-making in the production of the *UNINVITED* film discussed in Chapter 4, the diagrammatic graphics retain their own nonhuman emergence and agency even as human involvement engenders itself in the process—at the beginning (the prompt) and at the end (the selection). The subsequent pairing of the image with the quote or segment of text produces an affective affinity that would not be possible without the human implementation of black box operations toward unpredictable results. It becomes a machinic articulation of content and expression—content being the black box operations that are prompted into motion, and expression being the production of singular and alien visualizations. They are alien precisely because they are so distinct and unpredictable, almost as if the process is a Duchampian exercise in chance, executed through the inhuman impulses of nonhuman logic. What images, and how many, are being scraped to produce a single unforeseeable result? How do they break down and reemerge? This is particularly mysterious and alien in the case of diagrams, which often do not appear to have a decipherable visual point of reference to a distant image source.

The generated images are not only meant to reflect the processual black box procedures of the computational gaze, but also the proliferation of this technology in visual culture. My attempt was in part to involve the computational gaze in aiding the articulation of ideas, in the same way that I have utilized AI in the production of my artistic projects. This was also an attempt to incorporate the diagrams in order to showcase them as samples of a new generation of poor images—ones that do not necessarily circulate, but rather rely on images that have already been circulated, stored in data banks for the production of text-to-image generated content.

DALL-E Mini (the precursor to Craiyon) was first introduced in 2021—a time when I was in the beginning stages of both writing my dissertation and experimenting with different digital media toward a new body of work. It immediately struck me as a meme-generating gimmick, yet I was curious about whether I can find ways to use the technology in unconventional ways. At the time, DALL-E's renditions were crude and the popularity of this technology appeared to be manifested through its entertainment value.⁵³³ According to O'Meara and Murphy, DALL-E Mini, with all its

⁵³³ Since the introduction of accessible text-to-image and text-to-video generators—including DALL-E as well as Midjourney, Runway, and more recently Luma, among others—there has

flaws and “nightmarish aesthetics,” became a widespread viral phenomenon, “despite and perhaps because of its errors and grotesque qualities.”⁵³⁴ The generated images were filled with hallucinations—a term in AI image generation that refers to distortions, omissions, additions, blurriness, etc.—resulting in either amusingly terrifying or absurd imagery, which quickly entered the streams of popular meme culture.

After a brief phase of utilizing DALL-E for my own entertainment purposes, generating bizarre imagery such as W.S. Burroughs cleaning a litter box, I had started to direct my attention to less conventional uses of this technology. For instance, I began generating images of still life arrangements to later utilize as a dataset for training a specific AI model (later used in a video that is included in *in constant flow all things are thinned*), as well as generating hundreds of diagrams of “melancholy” that have not yet ended up manifesting themselves into a complete project (fig. 103).



Figure 103: Example of a diagram of “melancholy” produced using Craiyon.

At this stage it struck me that text prompts do not necessarily need to be descriptors for an image and instead the image might become a descriptor for the text prompt. This inversion allowed

been an influx of Facebook pages and groups such as Cursed AI or fuckd up AI 2.0, and Instagram accounts such as douggy_pledger and deadtempovisions. These channels circulate AI-generated images and develop communities that elevate the technology’s ability to create absurdly hallucinatory visuals and memes inspired by popular culture to a novel form of entertainment value that reflects a fascination with farce, morbidity, dark humour, and accident.

⁵³⁴ Jennifer O’Meara and Cait Murphy, “Aberrant AI Creations: Co-Creating Surrealist Body Horror Using the DALL-E Mini Text-to-Image Generator,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 29, no. 4 (2023): 1071.

me to perceive the black box on a different level, not with a predetermined notion of what the desired image might be but with the notion that the result is entirely unpredictable, mysterious, and sometimes indiscernible. In the pairing of the images with the text, these nonhuman computational hallucinations are emergent distortions or abstractions that function not only as regurgitations of scraped images directed by textual prompts, but also as feedback into the text itself.

While the results are unpredictable, the constraints and designed algorithms of this technology introduce aesthetic qualities that are very specific to text-to-image generators. The earlier generation (DALL-E Mini and Craiyon) is particularly prone to hallucinations that manifest themselves as areas of blurriness, extraneous or seemingly unnecessary details, distorted facial features, and abstract shapes and patterns. The Bing generator, while also powered by DALL-E, is more advanced and capable of producing images that are more naturalistic or accurate, closer to the aesthetics of photography, 3D-rendering, and digital illustration. The images generated through Bing have a slicker, smoother, higher resolution appearance than those generated in Craiyon, and content-wise they tend toward the dramatic, the luminous, the ideal, the fictional, or the sublime. For example, a sentence that includes “cosmic horizon” produces dramatic visuals in the sci-fi style, showing the cosmos as a glowing star surrounded by hazy planets and a diffusion of blue dust. Craiyon, on the other hand, produces something more akin to a bland scientific composite representation of a galaxy. Bing’s abstractions are illustrational and tend toward the desire for perfection. Its aesthetic is inclined toward the production of images that could potentially be put to use by graphic designers or businesses aiming to create scrumptious images for bait in advertising campaigns.⁵³⁵

Most of my generated diagrams were produced with Craiyon. This model represents an imperfect, experimental stage in the development of text-to-image generators. It allows for more unreliable, unpredictable, and nonfigurative results that are conducive to the production of conceptual diagrams, which require a certain degree of ineffability since the concepts themselves can be somewhat elusive. When encountering highly abstract wording that is not typically used to describe an image, the AI model defaults to non-representational graphics or formless

⁵³⁵ Already, some ads on social media can be seen to be implementing AI-generated graphics in their visuals. On a less corporate scale, I have personally encountered AI-generated images, complete with hallucinations, on an elevator poster advertising leisure activities at an assisted living facility.

abstraction. I have noticed that frequently in such situations, the model defaults to some kind of circular line or shape. This is likely because of how the algorithm structures an image into formation, yet in a symbolic interpretation it is as if an object is staring back at the viewer, invoking so many archetypes—an oculus, a hole, an orifice, an ouroboros, an eclipse, etc. This is the kind of partial identification I was referring to earlier, where the image begins to feed into the text through associative links.

The characteristic aesthetic qualities of these graphics are the surface remnants of hybrid procedures between the affects of human intervention and the forces of nonhuman agency. The utilization of this technology in the production of enigmatic diagrams for enhancing the text also reflects the use of AI in aspects of my own artistic practice. On the one hand, the diagrams echo the current trends of AI text-to-image generation in visual culture. On the other hand, through the unconventional pairing of text and image—a philosophical quote and its inhuman visualization—the diagrams introduce an indefinable feedback loop, or a field of vision, that crosses the boundaries between our subjective capacities and the nonhuman objective operations of computational logic.

Curriculum Vitae

Sasha Opeiko

Education:

2005–2009 BFA
University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2010–2012 MFA
University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

2020–2024 PhD
University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Awards and Grants:

2022–2024: Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Doctoral Fellowship

2020–2022: Ontario Graduate Scholarship

2019: Ontario Arts Council Visual Artists Creation Projects Grant

2015: Canada Council for the Arts Project Grants to Visual Artists

2010: University of Victoria, President's Research Scholarship

2010: Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Joseph-Armand
Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship

Related Work Experience:

2024: Sessional Instructor, *Methods of Appropriation in the Digital Age*, University of Western
Ontario, London, ON

2023: Research Associate, under the supervision of Soheila Esfahani, University of Western
Ontario, London, ON

2022, 2024: Research Associate, under the supervision of Dr. Christine Sprengler, University
of Western Ontario, London, ON

2021: Research Associate, *From Remote Stars*, under the supervision of Dr. Kirsty Robertson,
University of Western Ontario, London, ON

2020–2021: Designer, Editor, *tba journal: art, media, visual culture*, University of Western
Ontario, London, ON

2020–2023: Teaching Assistant, *Foundation of Visual Art*, University of Western Ontario,
London, ON

2014: Windsor-Essex Triennial Coordinator, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, ON

Publications:

2023: “Uninvited Dark Objects,” *Breath: New Media Art 2024*, CICA press (Gimpo, Korea)

2022: “Soluble Parts and the Mediated Depths of Posthuman Plasma,” critical essay on Eeva Siivonen’s *I left parts of myself everywhere* (Artlab Gallery, 2021), Artlab Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

2017: “Speculations on Dong-Kyoon Nam’s *Recycled Sensations*,” critical essay, Modern Fuel, Kingston, ON

2015: “Third Line,” co-written with Martin Stevens, *International Journal of Zizek Studies* (Vol. 9 No.1)

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

2024: *a movement of darkness on darkness*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON

2023–2024: *pixel / dust*, Art Windsor-Essex, Windsor, ON

2020: *217*, Art Gallery of Peterborough, Peterborough, ON

2018: *when people came out of the forest there was nothing*, SB Contemporary Art, Windsor, ON

2014: *Caput Mortuum*, Artcite Inc., Windsor, ON

Selected Group Exhibitions:

2021–2022: *Conversations: Windsor Essex Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Art Windsor-Essex, Windsor, ON

2019: *Dwelling*, Artcite Inc., Windsor, ON

2018: *DRAWN, The 5th Annual International Exhibition of Contemporary Drawing*, Manifest, Cincinnati, OH

2017, 2015, 2013, 2011: *Juried Exhibition*, Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, ON

2014: *International Zizek Studies Conference: Parallax Future(s) in Art and Design, Ideology and Philosophy*, (“Third Line” in collaboration with Martin Stevens), University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

2012: *Psycho-Pomp III, A Ship in the Woods*, Del Mar, CA

Selected Residencies:

2020, 2016: *BAiR Late Winter Intensive*, The Banff Centre, Banff, AB

2016: *A.I.R. Studio Paducah*, Paducah, KY

2012: *Artscape Gibraltar Point*, Toronto Island, ON