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Standoff

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Standoff

A thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

This Paper is about the intertwining and swiveling narratives that made up the conceptual building blocks of my work process during the production of the piece: Standoff. This is not a description of the physical tasks that were undertaken in the production process, nor is it a recipe for extracting the ingredients that form the intricate relationships within the sculpture, but rather it is a collection of stories that are told through a zigzagged structure in an attempt to mirror the distorted hierarchies between fantasy and fact, history and imagination, truth and speculation.

Introduction

**Drawing** - The first impulse that my work is generated by is the impulse of drawing. I find this primordial act of translation to be the fundamental bearer of my entire art practice. Drawing is a means by which things get decoded from the mental space into the visual space. It is a way of inspecting and understanding the physical world through the body. It is a means for recording detailed events and extracting them from chaos onto a blank or transparent surface. It is a way of clearing the backdrop and positioning the self in relation to the other.

**Translation** - I am interested in the idea of translation as a form of irreversible change. The transition from one language to another becomes the coil through which meaning gets merged with pronunciation, intonations, didactics and morphologies. I speak two languages on a regular day-to-day
basis making me acutely aware of the limitations of using only a single language at a time. In my work I am able to incorporate multiple systems of translation through working in a range of interchangeable modes of production. Readymade and found objects, casting and modeling, building structures, engineering mechanized modules, video and sound all become activated components in a constructed physical syntax.

**Installation** - In my installations I attempt to translate psychophysical situations concerning the human body, and it’s ever changing emotional and physical circumstances, into synesthetic conditions that juxtapose sound, material, motion, color, and narrative. I create dream-like compositions in which objects could have multiple weights and meanings both within a narrative context and an architectural one. By interweaving compositional decisions with practical or structural decisions, ultimately the work deflects meaning and becomes an instrumental tableau of it’s own making. It lacks ideology apart from the ideology of it’s own construction, which has it’s own inner narrative, something which can only make sense to itself.

**Change** - The studio space is a lubricator of change. Ideas come and go but on their way they leave footprints in the dusty landscape that looms gradually in the studio as a result of the flow of some of those ideas that materialize. This traffic serves to construct conditions in which a production system can be sustained. One idea collapses into another and the fabric of their body is one that can absorb and enslave meaning and at the same time resist it. One thing is important one day and then dismissed the next day
and gets replaced by something else the day after. A place for making – a studio, is a place that also gets made as a product of it’s own reality. The true measure of the making place is the measure of time, and change is the most efficient product of this environment.

**Motion** – Even though Mechanical motion is an ongoing investigation in my work I would not consider myself a kinetic sculptor. I use kinetics to question the ‘still’ and ‘silent’ nature of the traditional sculptural object as a response to an increasingly obscured technological reality. My interest in technology begins with the literal meaning of the word, which is ‘the study of making or crafting’, combined with its contemporary cultural tie with the realm of scientific advancement, and the way it changes our perception of what is possible by using it as an extension of the human body. The moment we see an object move, no matter how simple the mechanism, we almost instantly feel black boxed and puzzled by its life-like performative disposition. We want to know what it is claiming, what it is trying to achieve and what motivates it. The use of motors facilitates the discomfort I find in the condition of something being stuck in a loop. It enables me to find the sensitivities of the compositions and play with pressure to reveal the breaking points, and thus find how to regulate its structural integrities as a compositional strategy.
Part One - When I Grow Up I Wanna be a Steam Shovel

“The future is but the obsolete in reverse…”
Vladimir Nabokov

Digging Up the Past

I’ve been obsessing about steam shovels – something to do with digging up the past, but I think this metaphor is double sided. I want to reproduce this object, or parts of it, as a way of getting my hands on an object of the past while at the same time separating it from its history. I’ve been asking myself this question about history, about weather it is even possible to really reveal the past, and maybe this is where the other side of the metaphor kicks in. The shovel is a tool for uncovering what’s below the surface, of reaching the unseen and perhaps even the unseeable. But it is also a tool for moving earth, for reshaping and sculpting the planet, for changing the future and, in that sense, maybe disregarding the past. The underlining paradox here, specifically with this digging machine, is that at the exact same moment it reveals some buried secret from the past, it will most likely destroy it. So the past becomes unattainable and therefor redundant. I was watching this documentary the other day about a prehistoric rainforest that they found evidence of in a giant coalmine in Columbia. The film begins with close ups of monster machines tearing away at the earth and scooping up magnificent amounts of it. One day, a sharp-eyed geology student spots a fossil of a leaf and, at that moment, all those giant machines get cut from the screen.
and a bunch of people appear, on their knees, with little rock hammers and brushes tapping away at individual pieces of rock.

What are we actually looking for when we dig up the past? Memory works in a funny way, you think you remember something and then you decide that that’s your memory of it. Memory materializes into memorabilia - somebody’s personal artifact of nostalgia that’s meant to give everybody the same idea about the past. Almost as if these physical objects are meant to prove that there even was a past in the first place and that it has to be really important. In the same film about the prehistoric jungle they were looking for the biggest snake to have ever existed. Once they found all it’s parts including the skull, and were able to form a detailed reconstructed model of it in it’s entirety, only then were the giant machines allowed

1 The Earthmover Encyclopedia - The Complete Guide to Heavy Equipment of
back into the mine, long after they had already made their
discovery but not a moment before they had actually had a
material visualization of it, as if that model increased the
value of their discovery.

Quite frankly, I think it is a little odd that even
memories from the most horrific events in history, such as
the holocaust, have some echo of nostalgia in them. In
Israel you almost never hear anyone speaking about the
holocaust without it being immediately followed by notions
of heroism and the triumph of the human spirit. We use the
past to make our present, and even more so, our future,
more spectacular and important, which certainly has very
little to do with memory.
Aside from it being a metaphor about timelessness and subjectivity, or dreaming up a fantasy future by inverting the redundant, unreachable past, I think my obsession about the shovel primarily comes from pure delusion. It is a theatrical fascination with an object that is completely alien to me, from a different time and from a different place. But it is also indefinably amicable. A friendly monster made of solid steel. Next to it I feel a comfort, like being cloaked with a shock absorber that cushions the friction between my body and the incomprehensible, impenetrable earth.

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A Brief Moment of Speculative History

The Steam Shovel was undoubtedly crowned as the capital instrument of the industrial revolution. It was a technological marvel that adhered to all the progress ideals of the 19th century. The relatively new (at the time) and powerful steam engine – the muscle that never wearies – combined with a mechanism designed to increase manifolds the will to penetrate surfaces, perhaps the most primordial relation between man and earth – the act of digging, with twenty five times the labor capacity of its mining predecessors, it expanded the horizons of what was humanly possible. This massive earth-moving capacity made steam shovels the key piece of construction equipment on mammoth-sized projects that included digging the foundations of early skyscrapers, building wonders such as the Holland Tunnel and pulling off one of the greatest engineering feats of all time – the Panama canal.

The steam shovel was also the first mammoth scaled machine tool to become an abundant, inseparable dweller in the daily landscape of the industrial age. It was the first machine spectacle that was seen everywhere on a regular basis. I can imagine parents pointing it out to their children in awe and admiration, passersby standing frozen and gazing for hours at their unremitting appetite for chunky servings of earth. It marked the beginning of the theater of construction thus securing its place in the cabinet of historical wonders.
A Practical Wonder

It is my belief that the steam shovel established a crucial psychophysical pivot point in the human perception and experience of machines, not only because of its spectacular appeal and its prevalent distribution in cities and rural areas alike, but also because of the very nature of its physical form.

Vulcan Steam Backhoe. The Vulcan Iron Works of Toledo, Ohio, was established in 1870. The first steam shovels built by the company were to the design of H.T. Stock, a long-standing figure in the steam shovel world, who worked for William Otis in the early days. By 1885, the company was building steam shovels to its own designs, and changed its name to the Vulcan Steam Shovel Company in 1908. The machine in the picture is Vulcan’s version of a backhoe, one of the first ever built. It was introduced in 1896, but was not a success for obvious reasons. Vulcan’s other shovels were of conventional construction and superior design. Their success attracted the attention of the Bucyrus Company, and in 1910, Vulcan and Bucyrus merged to form the Bucyrus-Vulcan Company. The following year this company was consolidated into the Bucyrus Company. Keith Haddock collection

3 The Earthmover Encyclopedia - The Complete Guide to Heavy Equipment of the World, Keith Haddock, Motorbooks
A mere twenty one years before the steam shovel was invented by William Otis (a cousin of the elevator entrepreneur Elisha Otis), an anonymous, twenty year old British novelist named Mary Shelly wrote a novel that would become the voiceover for manmade in man’s image machine technology that will echo through the ages. Although this machine required a human operator, the first steam shovels that were commonly visible in the foreground of the industrial age landscape, carried a house, usually made of

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4 The Earthmover Encyclopedia - The Complete Guide to Heavy Equipment of the World, Keith Haddock, Motorbooks
wood, much like a garden shed, to cover the platform containing the mechanical components used to empower the motion of the machine. The earlier designs did not take into consideration the space for the operator and often he would be barely visible, crammed amongst the cluster of the giant steel clockworks. Thus the machine became a ghostly theater resembling the devices of wonder and automatons designed to arouse astonishment from enthusiastic spectators of the 18th century.

In fact the earliest automated machines date back as early as the 1st century in Alexandria, Egypt. Frances Terpak writes: "Though necessity and practical innovation are the obvious drivers of technological advance, imagination was the prerequisite in creating the preprogrammed complex machinery known as automata." The steam shovel was no exception. This technological leap, as much as it was driven by practical necessity, it lacked nothing in imaginative design and engineering, and much like the automatons, it drew it’s influence from the natural world. William Smith Otis devised an apparatus carrying out the same actions as the person with a shovel and thus invented a practical machine that upheld the same merits of imaginative invention that drove the automaton engineers that came before him.

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5 Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen, Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, Published by the Getty Research Institute
Perhaps, precisely because of its indifference to Theater and entertainment, the steam shovel was the first mechanical object to appear to come to life as Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s hybrid humanoid monster. The steam shovel was “just” a practical tool but its anthropomorphic theatricality embodied it with an uncanny presence in the “in-between” condition of living and non-living. Some witnessed a machine with a mechanical body part – an arm, and not just an arm, a behemoth of an arm, a hallucinatory, monstrous, solid steel reflection of its organic tissue, debased human counterpart. To others it was an eating machine, taking enormous chunky bites out of the earth, making the solid surface under our feet seem softer and more penetrable than ever before. With the ability to generate the force of forty horses, it was the first machine to posses a visual resemblance to a living monster with the human body resonating in its physical form. It was primarily used in railroad projects but was quickly
recruited also to the coalmine industry. This gave the spectacle of its earth devouring abilities an edge of consciousness, as it was chewing away at the substance of its own energy source — a machine that was subsequently feeding and refueling itself.
Beneath my window in a city street
A monster lairs, a creature huge and grim
And only half believed: the strength of him—
Steel-strung and fit to meet
The strength of earth—
Is mighty as men’s dreams that conquer force.
Steam belches from him. He is the new birth
Of old Behemoth, late-sprung from the source
Whence Grendel sprang, and all the monster clan
Dead for an age, now born again of man.

The iron head,
Set on a monstrous, jointed neck,
Glides here and there, lifts, settles on the red
Moist floor, with nose dropped in the dirt, at beck
Of some incredible control.
He snorts, and pauses couchant for a space,
Then slowly lifts, and tears the gaping hole
Yet deeper in earth’s flank. A sudden race
Of loosened earth and pebbles trickles there
Like blood-drops in a wound.
But he, the monster, swings his load around—
Weightless it seems as air.
His mammoth jaw
Drops widely open with a rasping sound,
And all the red earth vomits from his maw.

O thwarted monster, born at man’s decree,
A lap-dog dragon, eating from his hand
And doomed to fetch and carry at command,
Have you no longing ever to be free?
In warm, electric days to run a-muck,
Ranging like some mad dinosaur,
Your fiery heart at war
With this strange world, the city’s restless ruck,
Where all drab things that toil, save you alone,
Have life;
And you the semblance only, and the strife?
Do you not yearn to rip the roots of stone
Of these great piles men build,
And hurl them down with shriek of shattered steel,
Scorning your own sure doom, so you may feel,
You too, the lust with which your fathers killed?
Or is your soul in very deed so tame,
The blood of Grendel watered to a gruel,
That you are well content
With heart of flame
Thus placidly to chew your cud of fuel
And toil in peace for man’s aggrandizement?

Poor helpless creature of a half-grown god,
Blind of yourself and impotent!
At night,
When your forerunners, sprung from quicker sod,
Would range through primal woods, hot on the scent,
Or wake the stars with amorous delight,
You stand, a soiled, unwieldy mass of steel,
Black in the arc-light, modern as your name,
Dead and unsouled and trite;
Till I must feel
A quick creator’s pity for your shame:
That man, who made you and who gave so much,
Yet cannot give the last transforming touch;
That with the work he cannot give the wage—
For day, no joy of night,
For toil, no ecstasy of primal rage.
The Steam Shovel

THE STEAM-SHOVEL

There was an unsightly arm
And a cupped hand with three crusted fingers.
The hand sank into earth and bulged with it:
Then swung aloft in sudden exaltation...
And the seamy, blotched man beside me said:
"I've stood here for two hours watching that steam-shovel—
Can't seem to get enough of it."

I stood for hours, but I did not see the shovel.
I saw the man in smirched blue
Jerking a rope at the precise moment
When the laden hand dipped over a freight-car—
His strained wet face, and his eyes pressed to specks.
I saw the knotted-up man at the engine,
His face dead and dented like old tin.
(Life to him is the opening and closing of levers,
And heavy sleep.)

When I walked away the two men were fixed paintings
In the little art-gallery of my mind,
Where portraits are weighed well before admitted...
The steam-shovel?—I had forgotten it.

Maxwell Bodenheim

[75]
"Boxing and chess, quite obviously, are both games. More specifically, they are both competitive games that end with a clear winner. The Rat and Bear, on the other hand, are playing an infinite game, almost as a form of dance, where winning or competing is not only impossible, but irrelevant. Since the rules keep changing throughout the course of play, the purpose of the game is simply to keep playing the game.”

Anthony Huberman: HOW TO BEHAVE BETTER

Fair Play
The interesting thing about games is that they have no long-term history, they are in a state of constant reformatting and renewal. Every time the cards are shuffled, the board is reset, the players take position—all the options are possible again. The world of a game is a reduced world of fairness, structured by precise boundaries. The rules of a game, any game, are necessarily such that they cannot influence the outcome of the game. Values like revenge and payback, grudges and cruelty have little other than a psychological impact (which is not to be disregarded but still does not fall outside the margins of fair play) when there is no such thing as an unexpected attack unless the game permits it, in which case one could argue that the unexpected becomes expected. Two or more opponents (in some cases of gambling or computer games for example, only one of the opponents might be human) begin a game within equal positions. All is possible as long as all the players who agreed to play are in the game and fairness is adhered to at all time. This is true for all games where
there is a mutual consent to play. In fact, a lack of fairness, which I can only define as an absence of mutual consent to play or acceptance of the rules, is the only possible puncture that can overpower and collapse the system of a game, the one thing that no game could possibly tolerate, whether it is a thumb duel or a Mexican standoff.

Some games, sometimes, incorporate a lack of fairness within the system of the game, usually to add a degree of flare and excitement. In these cases, one can often assume that the boundaries of the game are in fact wider than meets the eye. The real game might actually be played behind the scenes and involve large sums of money switching hands for various odds. For example: a boxing match between a heavyweight and a welterweight would very effectively attract a strong crowd of high stakes sports gamblers. The gamblers are betting within and against the odds of which everyone involved is made aware of and are given a precise statistical value, in which case fairness prevails once again. As far as the boxing match itself, a quick cruise through internet boxing forums that discuss the question of whether a welterweight could potentially defeat a heavyweight, reveals that the answer is not as obvious as it may seem, which is precisely the reason why even this particular game would have a regulated degree of unfairness incorporated into the carefully balanced structure of fair play.

Like any bottom up system, a game is made up of the sum of its parts and every part is equal to every other. Once a player is in the game, he or she automatically becomes an inherent part of the game’s rules and infrastructure. The
rules of the game can absorb the player’s skill (or lack thereof), his character, his strategy, his ambitions etc. All these become the game, and the game in return tolerates the player and flexes into a platform suitable for his/her playing needs, always as far as fair play permits.

**Poker – The Game of Deceit and Speculation**

One game that I have become particularly interested in is Poker. It is an excellent example of a game where the players make up the conditions of play. The rules of the game are such that they situate the player in a field of recurring endless possibilities and it is up to the player to recruit into the game his/her entire arsenal of creativity, not only in terms of playing the odds skillfully but by actually broadening the conditions of the game from the physical space of the playing table into the psychological space between the players. It is a game where speculation and deceit are legitimate skills that can be refined and mastered. It is a game of behavior and self conduct where winning is driven by the ability to pierce through your opponent’s mask and keep your own tightly sealed. It is a game composed of nuances and gestures where every nuance counts and the best players are those who are both master speculators and master manipulators. It is also a game that never ends. It spans and accumulates across all possible variations of time and scale: from a single hand to a match, a tournament all the way up to the sum of all the hands played over an entire lifetime. And of course luck and chance, without which nothing is ever complete, are a force to be reckoned with.
The Rules of “No Limit Texas Hold’em”:
Considered to be the “Cadillac” of all poker games, this is truly a game where, as the name indicates, there is no limit to the degree of aggression a player can inflict on another player. Two cards are dealt to each player. A round of betting begins. Each round of betting provides a player with three basic options: to fold, raise or check. After a raise has been made players are given another three options of either calling the raise, re-raising or folding. After all bets are in and all players are equally invested in the pot, three communal cards are turned over in the middle of the table – these are called the “flop”. There is another round of betting and then another card is turned – this card is called the “turn”. Another round of betting and a fifth card – the “river” is revealed. One final round of betting and the players who remain in the hand turn over their dealt cards (also called the “hole” or “pocket” cards). The player with the best five-card hand composed out of the five communal cards and the two “Hole” cards wins the pot. The unique rule here is that a player can move “all-in” with all his chips at any time during his turn to bet. This creates an option for a level of intimidation that is exclusive to “No-limit Hold’em”.

The Case of Daniel Negreanu and Gus Hansen
Daniel Negreanu, one of today’s top poker professionals, knows that in a world of deception and speculation, knowledge can be a fatal weapon. The thirst for information is always present at a Poker table and Negreanu frequently exploits this thirst to his advantage. He is infamously
known for his tendency to reveal a card to his opponent, (with the opponent’s natural consent), but free information on a poker table is usually a very costly gift. One example for this took place in a hand played in one of the many Poker shows running on today’s television networks. In season 2 of NBC’s Poker After Dark, Daniel Negreanu and Gus Hansen, both regarded as two of the top players in the game, were involved in a play that demonstrates the cruelty of knowledge at the Poker table. Two other players had folded and Negreanu was dealt \( \begin{array}{c} \spadesuit 3 \\
\spadesuit 8 \\
\clubsuit 2 \\
\end{array} \) (also known in Poker terminology as THE BULLETS). He also had what is referred to as POSITION or THE BUTTON meaning that after the first betting round he would be the last to act. This is the best position to be in at the poker table (hence the term POSITION), and when dealt THE BULLETS on THE BUTTON, it is the strongest a poker player can be in any given hand.

Hansen, to his left, was dealt a reasonable \( \begin{array}{c} \heartsuit 7 \\
\heartsuit 9 \\
\clubsuit 9 \\
\end{array} \). Some players would throw away this hand but Hansen is an aggressive player who likes to play middle hands more often than not. Negreanu LIMPS IN with 600$, a small bet which is enough to make Hansen and Twan Le (with \( \begin{array}{c} \clubsuit J \\
\diamondsuit 8 \\
\heartsuit 8 \\
\end{array} \) CALL. The FLOP comes \( \begin{array}{c} \spadesuit 3 \\
\spadesuit 7 \\
\clubsuit 2 \\
\end{array} \), a very good flop for Hansen since he flopped TOP PAIR with TOP KICKER. Le and Hansen both CHECK and Negreanu bets 1500$. Le flopped nothing and quickly folds and Hansen starts thinking. What can Negreanu have that could possibly beat his TOP PAIR? He decides that Negreanu is probably BLUFFING or perhaps flopped a middle pair and thinks he has the best hand, so he CHECK RAISES to 5200$. Negreanu takes his time, stretches back, pretends to
think and calculate. The only thing that might scare him is if Hansen was holding a small POCKET PAIR and flopped a SET but that is very unlikely because he knows Hansen would have probably made a bigger bet PRE-FLOP. After a convincing acting session he finally makes his move – ALL IN. Now he really has Hansen thinking nervously. Hansen does a little stretching of his own and starts doing the math. If he calls and loses he still has 2000$ left over to play with. If he wins, Negreanu is out plus the added bonus of calling his bluff which is a very sought after confidence builder in a Poker game. There are only two potential hands that can beat him at this point: a HIGHER PAIR ( or higher) or a SET which means Negreanu had a small POCKET PAIR to begin with, and with the way he was playing, it’s not so unlikely. Hansen is taking his time. “Is this an ‘I can’t take it anymore’ play by Daniel?” he asks at one point indicating that he suspects a stone cold bluff. Negreanu on his part is trying to put on the best POKER FACE he can manage but it’s taking too long and he is not very good at Poker faces anyway. So he finally makes his signature move and with an added twist that will inflict nothing less than agonizing torture on Hansen’s already disoriented mental state. “Can I show him a card?” he asks the dealer almost like a pleading child. The reason he has to ask is because every Casino has its own rule about this play. It is considered controversial in the least and there is an ongoing discussion in the Poker world over weather or not it should be outlawed completely. Most players however are in favor of this move being allowed as long as there is consent amongst the players involved in the play. Permission is granted and Negreanu, in an act
that appears to be both bold and discomforting, invites Hansen to choose which card he would like to see. “That’s pretty sick...” says Hansen and roles back his eyes as if knowing that he is being lured into a honey trap which he cannot resist. He points at the left card and Negreanu flips it over to reveal an . Shocked and even more puzzled than before, Hansen swells down into a state of utter confusion and shock. “That’s one of the hands I couldn’t beat...” he says repeatedly, winding down with every time he says it, deeper and deeper into the trap that Negreanu has so deviously set for him. “That’s so sick...that’s one of the hands I couldn’t beat.” Negreanu, a little alarmed by the result of his own doings, flips the card back over and says: “that’s it, I don’t want to show you anymore.” The other players seem to be getting a little worried about Hansen, and attempt to guide him back into assessing the situation mathematically. The options are only two now: either Negreanu has , or an paired with either a or a - one of the other cards on the board, both of which Hansen has beat. If Negreanu has the , Hansen would be approximately a 3 to 1 underdog, if Negreanu has or , he is a huge favorite to win. But what if he had seen the ? Then he would be wondering whether he might have another to complete a SET and he would still feel like the underdog, although Negreanu could, in reality, only have an . What Hansen slowly realizes
is that whatever Negreanu has, whether it’s $\spadesuit 3 \spadesuit 8$, $\spadesuit 6 \spadesuit 8$, or $\spadesuit 3 \spadesuit A$, the resulting confusion would have consumed him either way and the very fact that he saw that card, now makes him sick to his bones. There was never any way of knowing and it wouldn’t have mattered which card he would have seen. Disgusted with himself, he throws away his hand.

It is possible that Negreanu was trying to help Hansen make the right decision, which ultimately worked and Hansen finally folded the hand reluctantly. However, despite making the good “LAYDOWN”, he doesn’t fully recover from the shock of Negreanu’s play. Negreanu of course adds insult to injury and doesn’t confess the $\spadesuit 7 \spadesuit 6$ to Hansen until Hansen BUSTS OUT of the game, and even then, Hansen doesn’t really believe him. He will have to wait to watch the rerun of the show at home to get his satisfaction. During the rest of the game he is left to wither in his doubt. He completely loses interest and ends up BUSTING OUT a couple of hands later. I suspect that if Negreanu had not showed Hansen that card, it may not have saved his game. It would, however, have saved him the humiliation of knowing something he wasn’t supposed to know, of having a glimpse of light in a place where speculating in the dark is the accepted normality.

**Seeing in the Dark**

“The artist in the Age of Rat and Bear is one who acknowledges his or her own vulnerable relationship to knowledge, and behaves like someone engaged in a constant process of figuring out what knowledge could be. As I’ve
written elsewhere—in the context of a blind man who can’t find a black cat that’s not in a dark room3—, art knows that it knows nothing, and thus embodies a perpetually productive paradox, which has been described with a variety of terms, from Georges Bataille’s “non-knowledge” to Sarat Maharaj’s “avidya” or Marcel Duchamp’s “art that isn’t.” As a specific type of knowledge, art can create the epistemological space where knowing effectively co-exists with not-knowing. It can stop operating as an explanation machine. It can reach beyond the false binary between I KNOW and I DON’T KNOW.”

Anthony Huberman: HOW TO BEHAVE BETTER

A player in a Poker game is forced to make decisions in the dark, in a state of “not knowing”. Decisions that determine his fate in the game are based partly on skillful speculation but more importantly on his ability to form this speculation into a reality. A player acts out of the knowledge of his non-knowledge and tries to convince his opponent that he knows what he in fact doesn’t know. The opponent knows that the former doesn’t know (or at least knows as much as he does) and tries to convince him in turn that he doesn’t know what he thinks he knows. This economy of knowledge translates into an economy of value when what’s at stake is a very real currency—money. The difference between Poker and other forms of gambling is that instead of chance being a rival to speculation, it is two players speculating against each other. The reality of money places a value on speculation, enforcing the “real” into the speculative. Knowledge, in this trade, does not constitute winning. Rather, it is the ability to speculate convincingly and force your opponent into believing a
fiction that you have created for him that will induce a winning situation. In most cases in the game, the cards are never revealed. One player folds and another wins and both send away their cards face down accepting that the so-called “truth” is painfully (and gainfully) irrelevant.

“As a contemporary art critic, speculation is my element. I am a surrogate for the audience, receptacle for all the collective speculations deriving from diverse backgrounds, associations and psychologies. Like everybody else when confronted with an unfamiliar experience, I ask myself, what do you suppose it means? Such ruminations, combined with the few available facts, are the only source of “accuracy” in a shifting field.”

*Lucy R. Leppard: Overlay – Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*

Not knowing is essential to art as it is to a game of poker. Not knowing lays down the foundation for possibilities. It is a place that most people fear. The “unknown” triggers the imagination, which often generates predictions driven by fear projected into the empty dark space. As an artist, much like a poker player, I try to train myself to operate fearlessly in this most dreaded reality of darkness. Chronically not knowing what my next move will be, whether in the creative bubble of producing my work, in the relationship I am forming with my viewers or in determining my career trajectory, I aim to become outstandingly skilled in this most controversial and indispensible of perceptive abilities – the ability to see and navigate in the dark.