

Dystopian art in the post-truth era

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this case study was to analyze critically acclaimed dystopian works from the Information Age, in order to create a loose framework for contemporary dystopian art. Based on this framework, a multimedia installation artwork titled *We Will Miss You* was developed. This installation was included in the *Blind Spot* exhibition at Gallery Himmelblau in April 2019.

The film *Koyaanisqatsi* by Godfrey Reggio, and the artworks *Day Is Done* by Mike Kelley and *Still Life (Betamale)* by Jon Rafman were analyzed, and a variety of articles and literature on relevant topics such as post-internet art was consulted. A number of important connecting factors that appear in most of these works were found. These factors consisted mainly of a heavy reliance on non-fictional footage and direct documentation of real life, a focus on aesthetic beauty in order to captivate the audience, and a focus on changing the perspective or variables in everyday rituals in order to expose underlying systems.

Based on feedback from visitors of *We Will Miss You*, it appears the artwork was mostly well-received, and promoted a strong sense of discomfort and reflection. This indicates that the concept of a dystopia can still be a very powerful tool that has not lost its relevance in the arts.

Key words: contemporary art, dystopia, art analysis, post-internet, capitalism

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the written part of my thesis, I will analyze dystopian art in the Information Age in order to form a basis for my own dystopian installation work, 'We Will Miss You' on the post-truth climate of the 2010s (and most likely beyond). A report of the process as well as documentation of this work will be included in the written thesis.

Perpetuating the trend of constant exponential technological development since the Industrial Revolution, the 2010s have been an exceptionally turbulent time, where technological development appears to be outrunning humanity's ethical development more than ever before. We find ourselves in a time where the concept of post-truth politics has become a defining feature of the political and cultural climate of the 2010s (Drezner 2016, Freedland 2016, New Scientist 2016). Perhaps a good setting for an archetypal dystopia. But is this concept of the dystopia still relevant? And has it even been useful in the past?

Since its definition in the 19th century, hundreds of dystopian works of fiction have been produced, usually revealing something about society's most pressing concerns at the time of their creation. Classic themes such as environmental collapse, authoritarian regimes, and technological advancement gone awry have appeared to not have gotten old or suffered from inflation at all. Works such as Orwell's 1984, Reggio's Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance and Dostoevsky's Tales from the Underground, are still popular and referenced today.

In the Information Age, however, a concern has risen that dystopian works have been stripped of their ideological function, and have now developed into mere works of entertainment, indirectly reinforcing the point of view that capitalism (and specifically in its current neoliberal interpretation) is the only functional political and economical system. A line that is often quoted with regards to this topic states that "...it is easier to imagine the end of life on Earth than it is to imagine the end of capitalism..." (Jameson 2003, 76).

Whereas dystopias originally served as a tool to illustrate the potential negative future ramifications of certain cultural, political and technological developments, they have increasingly been reduced to simple commercial entertainment. As with many other movements and attempts at criticizing the negative sides of capitalism, dystopias, too, have become subverted by having been turned into a commodity. An example of this can be found in films like 2012, or the Hunger Games series. 'Dystopian' works which have focused on commercial success and sensationalism, rather than ideological depth.

In order to find a solution to this problem, I will investigate dystopian works by Jon Rafman and Mike Kelley, and analyze the film Koyaanisqatsi. These works, that have had an impact on me personally, are well-known and can be argued to focus more on ideological impact rather than commercialism.

More specifically, I will gradually lay out a selection of criteria for dystopian works in a contemporary art context, that could function as a blueprint for my own installation artwork. This work was exhibited at Gallery Himmelblau in Tampere between 4th and 28th of April 2019, as part of the TAMK degree show 'Blind Spot'. The production process of this installation piece will also be documented.

2. DEFINING THE FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL DYSTOPIAN ART

2.1. What defines succesful?

In order to define 'succesful' dystopian art, we must first determine what defines it as succesful. A somewhat troublesome venture, given the inherently subjective nature of art. In order to avoid any pretense of objectivity, I admit that this will be largely based on my own observations and interpretations. What I can do, however, is define my thought process as clearly as possible, and thereby hopefully present a compelling argument.

I have made a selection of works with strong dystopian themes that have been most memorable to me personally, and that have also been well-received by art- and film critics. I will analyze these works in an attempt to distill the main factors that made them so impactful.

2.2. Koyaanisqatsi

Koyaanisqatsi is a critically acclaimed 1982 film, and the first part of Godfrey Reggio's Qatsi-trilogy (IMDb 2019). As the soundtrack and cinematography play fundamental roles in this movie, important to mention also are Philip Glass, the composer, and Ron Fricke, the cinematographer. A still photo of Fricke's work in the movie can be seen in picture 1.



PICTURE 1. Still photo of one of the opening shots (Reggio 1982)

Since the film contains no logocentric narrative, it relies almost entirely on the order, repetition, and interplay of cinematography and music. Reggio deliberately left out any conversation, stating that his intention was to directly connect to the soul of the viewer. To Reggio, his style of relying solely on the combination of cinematography and music was "something more akin to direct communion than going through the metaphor of language", as according to him, "our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live". (Stephens 2010.)

Although Reggio has stated he has consciously left the film open to interpretation (Stephens 2010), his intentions and critics' interpretations seem to largely overlap. With the title of the movie literally translating to "life out of balance", it is exactly this that the movie depicts. A world in which man-made technology has entrapped man itself and has caused it to become alienated from the natural world, and which is exponentially spiraling out of control.

When considering this depiction, it is important to note that all the material in *Koyaanisqatsi* is taken straight from reality. (For example, in picture 2, a still photo from footage of an atomic bomb test can be seen.) It is a documentary - It simply shows the viewer what already exists in this world. Reggio is essentially urging the viewer to take a look at what is happening around them right now, from an outward perspective, as if during the film we temporarily put ourselves in the shoes of an alien race examining humanity in its current state. Reggio allows the viewer to form their own narrative in an intuitive manner that does indeed appear to cut deeper than possible with words.



PICTURE 2. Still photo of footage of an atomic bomb test (Reggio 1982)

In that sense it may slightly differ from some definitions of the dystopia, which for example Merriam-Webster defines as "an **imagined** world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives" (Merriam-Webster n.d.).

Nevertheless I believe it is exactly this documentation of reality that makes the dystopian aspect of *Koyaanisqatsi* so powerful. It proves its points by directing the viewer's gaze straight to the problems it aims to address, without having to rely on fiction.

It is not only the realism of *Koyaanisqatsi* that makes it so compelling, though. Arguably a large part of its appeal and memorability comes from the exquisite cinematography and soundtrack. Although *Koyaanisqatsi* is a rather depressing movie in the eyes of many, the images and music are undeniably beautiful. They completely grip the viewer's attention. The interplay of both put the viewer in a certain feverish trance, that gradually builds up to an apocalyptic climax.

One of the last scenes, that of an exploded rocket engine spiralling down in the sky (picture 3), seemingly endlessly, has become iconic. The shots of clouds, natural scenery, and the beautiful and grotesque results of human overconsumption, are all equally stunning.



PICTURE 3. Still photo of the falling rocket engine scene (Reggio 1982)

The film manages to make excellent use of humanity's never-ending morbid fascination. Yet it does so in a very subliminal, non-overt manner. The actual human gore, deformities and direct violence resulting from the culture *Koyaanisqatsi* depicts are not shown.

This avoidance of shocking material is a great strength of the movie, as the use of such images would take away from the deeper emotional and ideological impact, by becoming its main talking point. Material merely used for shock-value would likely only lead to sensationalism. The theme of *Koyaanisqatsi* is bombastic and grotesque, but it manages to remain delicate and beautiful throughout. Something that could hardly be an accident, given Reggio's views on humanity's state of desensitization and alienation from itself.

Besides, the sole point of the movie wasn't just to depress or demonize humans – I do think it was also intentional to show the beauty and frailty of not only the natural world, but also man itself. Although humanity may be on a hopeless, doomed path, a certain shimmering of hope can be seen thanks to the beautiful visuals and music. Even if the film is melancholic, to some degree it is also a celebration of life.

2.2.1 Summary

To summarize, I believe the most important take-aways as to what makes *Koyaanisqatsi* successful are as follows: It does not depict an imaginary world, but uses footage from real life, which strengthens the film's dystopian warning. It also engages with humanity's natural fascination with death and destruction, a theme that has fascinated writers and thinkers throughout history (The story of Leontius in Plato's *Republic* (Plato 2012, 150), and Freud's musings on the existence of a 'death drive' (Freud 1920) may come to mind.) Lastly, it refrains from indulging in mere shock-value, but uses aesthetic beauty instead to keep the viewer's attention and turn the film into an entrancing experience.

In the following quote, I believe Stephens (2010, 6) very accurately sums up Reggio's intentions with his *Qatsi*-trilogy:

Walter Benjamin famously commented that humanity's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." (Benjamin

1969, 242). Reggio is part of a history of cinematic pleasure of observing our own destruction. In a 2005 interview after the release of the most dystopian of the Qatsi trilogy, *Naqoyqatsi: Life as War*, Reggio admitted: “collapse, dysfunction and disintegration could be a blessing in disguise.” (Gumbel 2002). However, when Michael Dempsey suggested in 1988 that the contrast between beautiful nature and dehumanized people in *Koyaanisqatsi* inferred “a half-acknowledged fascination with the notion of wiping out the human race,” Reggio dismissed that as a “projection.” He told an interviewer in 2002 that his attempts to “raise a flag to the blinding light of technology” were meant not “to depress, it was to purge.” (Dempsey 2003).

2.3. Mike Kelley's Day Is Done

Although 'dystopian' is not necessarily the first word that is often mentioned in connection Mike Kelley's work, it is often described as a kind of dark comedy. In that sense I would argue that *Day Is Done* could be seen as a dystopian piece, one with very strong comical and uniquely aesthetic elements.

Kelley's working method has often been highly theoretical and remarkably well-organized and planned, with him having written essays that touch on for example Freud's definition of the Uncanny in connection to his exhibition of the same name (Kelley, Welchman, & Grunenberg 2004, 24-38).

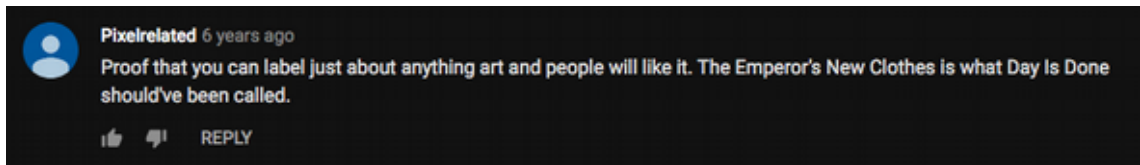
A theme that returns throughout his work is that of deconstructing and re-arranging elements of our society, in order to more clearly expose the underlying systems. This is often inspired by early psychoanalysis and its theories on for example repression and abuse (Welchman 2013). This working method has frequently netted comical results, an example of which can be seen in neo-nazi characters rapping about topics such as 'liking big fat chicks'. (Seen in picture 4). I believe this working method of dismantling modern culture in order to expose its underlying systems also highlights the dystopian element of an increasingly unethical, meaningless, neoliberal society.



PICTURE 4. Rapping neo-nazi's from Mike Kelley's Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction series, which was used in the "Day Is Done" exhibition. (2004)

In the exhibition Day Is Done, Kelley combined elements he had collected from highschool yearbooks and newspapers in ways that amplified their ridiculousness, so that the absurdity of the underlying culture became more easily recognizable for the viewer. (Art21 2010.) Subsequently, this absurdity also makes the commodification of nearly everything in modern capitalist culture quite clear. Although Kelley himself has stated that it was only once he brought the theme of commodification up himself that his work was recognized by critics in such a context. (Welchman, Graw & Vidler 1999, 10.)

A critique that I have occasionally come across online is that Kelley appears to just be 'doing whatever', and that his work is meaningless - a symbol of everything that is wrong with postmodernism (an example of which can be seen in picture 5). I think this is false. His work often highlights the absurdity and meaninglessness of the rituals and traditions in Western society, and effectively parodies the hollowness of it, which means it ultimately is not meaningless (Although his works often touch on much more than just that.) What these people are critiquing is, to some degree, the kind of thing that he himself was critical of and trying to investigate in his works. I believe the fact that people get this uncanny feeling of emptiness and confusion simply means that his work has been very effective.



PICTURE 5. Screenshot of YouTube comment posted in 2013, under a video on Day Is Done.

In Day Is Done, Kelley used an interesting and highly potent mixture of intuition and theoretical organization, as he effectively hoarded and categorized a lot of material from our society, from fringe cultures to the more mainstream, and jumbled them together in ways which felt intuitively fun, interesting, or aesthetically pleasing. (In picture 6, Kelley is seen going through his categorized archive of bizarre pop culture rituals and characters.) And although his working method was quite different from Koyaanisqatsi, it also produced a very thought-provoking dystopian experience, albeit one that relied more on humor than existential dread.



PICTURE 6. Mike Kelley showing a photograph from his collection depicting a hazing ritual. (2010)

2.3.1 Summary

In summary, the aspects that make Kelley's Day Is Done so effective as a dystopian work are as follows: It puts everyday activities, rituals and characters in a different light through replacing their context. This allows for an easier understanding of the problematic underlying systems, and greatly increases

their absurdism. It uses humor to avoid elitism and to captivate the audience. And as with Koyaanisqatsi, it makes use of real-life elements in society (all of the characters and rituals in Kelley's work exist, after all), although in this case it simply combines elements of society that are normally not put together.

2.4. Jon Rafman's Still Life (Betamale)

Still Life (Betamale) is a video artwork by Rafman from 2013 that contains some similar elements as Mike Kelley's Day Is Done, in the sense that Rafman has collected and categorized (although I am not sure if it was done as consciously and meticulously as Kelley) elements and rituals from a certain culture, except this time shifting the focus from pop culture to a much more obscure and niche internet culture, that of the self-professed 'betamale'.

The artwork consists of a selection of digital found objects, mostly collected from websites such as 4chan and the darker corners of tumblr and YouTube. As a matter of fact, on his webpage, Rafman actually has added an archival link of a 4chan thread discussing Still Life (Betamale). (picture 7)



PICTURE 7. Screenshot of part of the 4chan thread linked by Rafman on the online page for Still Life (Betamale). (2013)

In *Still Life* (Betamale), Rafman combines retro videogame gifs with images and videos of the environments of NEETs (a term often used on 4chan in a derogatory and self-deprecating manner, meaning 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'), and various fringe fetishes (hentai and crush fetishes, for example (Twerdy, 2015)), associated with betamale or NEET culture.

The terms betamale and NEET have a large degree of overlap, although they are not exact synonyms. 'Betamale' is a term more often used in connection to sexual prowess – a word for the submissive, unsuccessful, effeminate male, as opposed to the sexually, societally successful 'alphanmale'. (Urban Dictionary n.d.a, n.d.b.) Although it must be noted that as of 2019, it appears the word 'betamale' has to some degree been replaced by 'incel' (short for 'involuntary celibate') on most online communities (appendix 1). Although again, these are not exact synonyms (Urban Dictionary n.d.b, n.d.c).

Over the soundtrack, a poetic narrative is read by a tinny-sounding female voice;

As you look at the screen, it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity. You see the things that were inside you. This is the womb, the original site of the imagination. You do not move your eyes from the screen. You have become invisible. – – You won't be distracted, either by the reflection of yourself, or by the last glimpse of the things now being lost forever. – – You are again in a dream, walking endlessly winding paths, and you can't find your way out of the maze you are convinced has been created solely for you. (Rafman 2013.)

Throughout the course of the work, a video of a man in an anthropomorphic furry suit slowly sinking into quicksand keeps returning (picture 8), illustrating the slow decline into social isolation and the increasingly inescapable grasp of bizarre pornography and videogames that are guiding the betamale protagonist ever further from reality, and deeper into their own societal alienation.



PICTURE 8. Still from Still Life (Betamale) featuring a man in a furry costume sinking into quicksand. (2013)

The title Still Life (Betamale) initially had a somewhat mysterious ring to me, but when given a moment of consideration, it is actually quite concrete, as the work literally is a multimedia still life of the internal world of a self-professed betamale.

I think this work is unusually captivating and effective, and documents a highly specific facet of a contemporary dystopian, self-destructive society. Interestingly, I do think that in this case the factors that make it so effective are in some ways contradictory to the reasons why I believe Koyaanisqatsi is so powerful. In contrast to Reggio's incredibly subtle apocalyptic atmospheres, Rafman uses a lot of very directly disturbing, confronting imagery – it almost solely revolves around it visually. The soundscape and narrative save it from serving as a work of mere shock art, however.

I assume Rafman's aim is not to shock, nor to ridicule the subcultures he investigates in his works. As a matter of fact, there may even be a certain degree of poetic glorification to it, in the same manner that self-destructive behavior such as suicide was glorified in the age of Romanticism. Rafman simply uses the melancholy of the situation these people who have effectively been consumed by the internet as a tool to illustrate the slippery slope we are on as a society. His works implore us to question how much power we wish to give over to Silicon Valley, to technology, to the internet, and to ponder what our future will look like. There is a certain looming sense of an ethically and socially demented Matrix-esque world that exists in the near future in his works.

2.4.1 Summary

I believe the aspects that make *Still Life* (Betamale) so effective as a dystopian work can be summed up as follows: The work opens up a window into a subculture otherwise not often encountered by many, which allows for a fresh perspective through which one can see the modern-day dystopia from a more personal (albeit bizarre), human perspective. As with Kelley's work, it seems essential to disrupt the normal, everyday perspective in order to expose deeper, systematic issues in society and culture. On top of that, the work employs influences from romanticism in order to evoke a more aesthetically appealing, emotionally beautiful image to captivate the viewer. Finally, as with *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Day Is Done*, a large degree of realism is present in the sense that it literally compiles material from real life, increasing the work's sense of urgency and impact.

3. PRODUCING AN INSTALLATION

3.1. Reasoning behind the choice for the installation format

The reason I decided to make a media installation work rather than a 2D work or a still sculpture is quite straightforward: It is inherently much more immersive.

Inspired by the intuitive, feeling-based communication of Koyaanisqatsi, I did not want to rely solely on words to let the artwork communicate to its spectators. Since an important part of the artwork was to bring across a tense, conflicted inner atmosphere, I felt that creating a separate, immersive universe solely for the artwork itself was necessary.

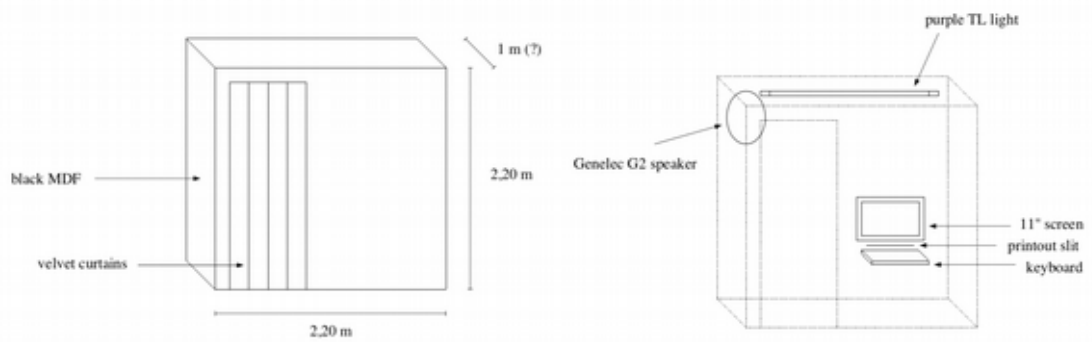
I did not want the visitors to immediately start reflecting on anything theoretical as soon as they entered the installation; instead I wanted them to experience a strong, isolated, ominous physical sensation. A sensation or atmosphere that is incredibly important to manifest in order to begin a personal reflection on the dystopian topics addressed in the video.

The height of the artwork, 1,50 meters, is quite uncomfortable for most people. The point was not to humble the spectators and make them bow before the artist, however, but to aid the spectators' transformation to a more tense, inward-focused posture. The box was designed to put one in a highly neurotic, introverted state of mind. Since one's posture is an important component of this, I wanted to prevent the spectator from relaxing and opening their posture.

The isolation and perhaps even mild disorientation that one experiences in the box is intentional, and designed to guide the spectator into an uncomfortable realm.

3.2. Origins behind the installation

I had begun working on the concept of an art installation in the shape of a rectangular box in late 2017. I had quite quickly settled on the exact physical format of the box, which changed relatively little throughout the process. I settled on the title 'We Will Miss You' quite quickly as well. (The reasons for which are explained in more detail on pages 16 and 17.) Its contents, however, went through a couple of transformations, although they did continuously build on the same rough theme, and relied heavily on the claustrophobic, neurotic nature of the box.



PICTURE 8. Sketches from the first draft of 'We Will Miss You'. (2017)

This main theme of the box's contents revolved around the concept of spiritual or ethical purification, or the washing away of one's sins. Most likely this has come forth out of a need to find a release my own anxieties and traumas, and perhaps it also was a disillusioned attempt at looking for spiritual enlightenment in an increasingly nihilist, post-truth world. Which is not exactly a new concept by any means. Art (in the form of theatre) as catharsis was already originally described in Aristotle's Poetics around 335 BC. Many of my own favorite artists and writers seem to draw a lot of inspiration from this basic concept of catharsis as well.

On a very primitive level, I wanted to see if I could find a way to bring across the physical sensations of horror and anxiety that I feel when I think about the political climate that we live in. In a sense, the process of making this work was already a kind of catharsis for me. But I hoped that it could be for the audience as well.

During an interview with Peter Schepelern in 2018, director Lars von Trier described his view on art as follows:

I believe that all good art is created under dictatorial conditions. So people must enjoy being led. I've said earlier that it's a black forest that people must go through, and they are scared to. But if they have a friend who says, 'I know the forest', they will happily follow. And then they enjoy this black forest. And that's my principle. (Schepelern 2018.)

I found this to be quite accurate. It describes why I enjoy the art that I enjoy. It is comforting and at times comical to be led through someone else's artistic depiction of hell, in a broad sense. And perhaps I dream of leading others through my own 'black forest', in the hopes that it may provide some solace, understanding, reflection and entertainment.

Retrospectively, I may have also been subconsciously inspired by the concept of the Black Lodge from David Lynch's TV-series Twin Peaks. In this series, the Black Lodge represents a surreal realm that one has to pass through in order to confront their fears and cleanse themselves, or purge themselves from evil through this process.

A character in the series describes the Black Lodge as such:

...legend says that every spirit must pass through there on the way to perfection. There, you will meet your own shadow self. – – But it is said, if you confront the Black Lodge with imperfect courage, it will utterly annihilate your soul. (Lynch 1990.)

Initially, the concept of the box was going to be quite straightforward: It would be a variation of a confessional, where one could rid themselves of their 'sins' of contributing to social media, especially Facebook, by admitting their 'sin' of even being on there in the first place, and deleting their account.

The idea was to ritualize the activity by providing an appropriate soundtrack, and printing out a semi-official death certificate of the account, if someone were to delete it in the box. This was done in order to increase the likelihood of people actually going through with it, and to allow for more reflection on the position social media have gained in society, and how unethical and abhorrent the companies behind these websites and services are. I saw social media as a good symbol for a lot of issues of our current economic and cultural systems. In this context, the title 'We Will Miss You' is also quite obvious, as it was a straight quote from the Facebook deletion page.

I eventually abandoned this concept altogether though, for a couple of reasons. First of all; I found it too one-dimensional. The idea behind it was simply not particularly eye-opening, and quite obvious. Second of all, the technical aspect of it would be too difficult to execute with the funds available, and would likely not be very long-lasting, as the programming behind Facebook's log-in and deletion pages is constantly changing. Lastly, I found out that a similar concept had already been created in website-format, called seppukoo.com. Not only was my idea therefore not that original, but seppukoo had also been sued by Facebook for privacy violations, and I did not want to have to worry about that.

So with time, a new concept came to mind; That of an immersive video work, roughly in the same box format, which, like a confessional, would aid in the cleansing of one's sins. This would be achieved in a more indirect manner than the previous idea, relying instead on subjective interpretation and reflection of the piece. The title 'We Will Miss You' remained, as it seemed to fit the new concept just as well, given its themes of melancholy, self-destructiveness, the fleeting nature of internet culture and historical human stubbornness.

3.3. Themes of the installation

In the case of my installation, the 'black forest' mentioned in page 15 is largely an investigation of a political and cultural climate of tension, disbelief, a lack of mutual understanding and empathy, and a longing for something else, in a

historical context. The frame through which this is viewed is that of the contemporary frustrated, isolated male.

I intuitively composed an ominous and hypnotic soundtrack, and compiled an edit of various fragments from YouTube channels I had been following, involving men engaging in escapist behavior to varying toxic degrees – sometimes recognizable, and occasionally understandable, but often bizarre and questionable. This would be interspersed with images I had collected online, and archival pictures of older Dutch paintings, depicting classical subjects such as hell, vanitas, and the lynching of brothers and politicians de Witt.

I had been following various YouTube channels for a couple of years which appeared to all revolve around the same theme, although they had vastly different subjects. The theme I could recognize in all of them was that of a sense of escapism combined with a very stereotypically hypermasculine attitude. I found this to be representative of many of the issues we see in contemporary society and ourselves.

While artists such as Jon Rafman have appeared to be very interested in similar themes, I feel that a certain political and tribalist element of this current post-internet, post-truth reality has been missing. While it has been very interesting, valid and important to look at various internet subcultures from an anthropological, aesthetic, poetic and sexual point of view, I wanted to explore the politically volatile side of it. I wanted to look at the violently revolutionary undercurrent of all this frustration and disillusion.

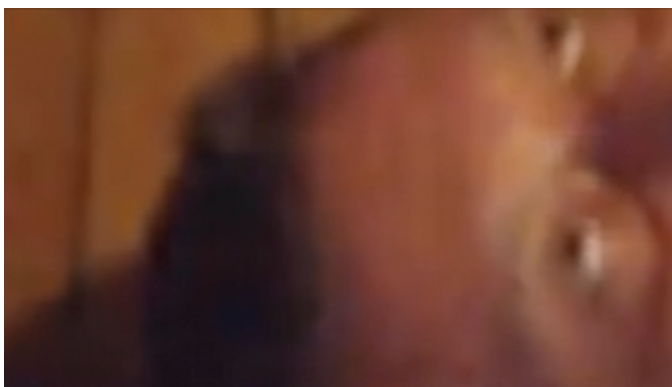
But although the historically male drive for destruction is a major element of the work, it was not meant to be its sole point. Nor was it to make a statement about one gender or the other. It was simply easiest for me to investigate and use as a framework, having grown up as a male child in a commuter town in the late 90s and early 00s, where fistfights and competition were still very common and even somewhat expected of boys.

As I have grown older, I find that a lot of this behavior is still instilled in a lot of people, although it perhaps shows itself in slightly different ways. The behaviors in the videos felt eerily familiar. They served as a good tool for the sense of dread I wished to convey feel when thinking of the volatile situation we find ourselves in, in a time when violence is often insinuated, and looking for truth and understanding is considered laughable.

The editing of the video was partially inspired by the aesthetic of internet memes, as an allegory of sorts to the increasingly desensitized yet humorous and ironic nature in which people engage with morbid subject matter. The intense irony and self-deprecation of internet memes is a good symbol for the helplessness and avoidance the millennial generation feels with regards to their position in society and politics. A good illustration of my inspiration by meme culture can be seen when comparing pictures 7 and 8. Picture 7 features a fairly typical zoomed-in style edit in a meme video, and picture 8 shows a still from *We Will Miss You*.



PICTURE 9. Still from 'warm it up exe That's a 10!' YouTube meme by H3H3. (2013)



PICTURE 10. Still from 'We Will Miss You'. (2019)

We Will Miss You is not intended as a statement about humanity being worse or more evil today than it has been before, though. And this is where the painting references by Bosch (picture 9), de Baen and Mignon serve an important role. They provide a historical context, one that encourages the viewer to think about human nature, and whether we will ever truly change.



PICTURE 11. Still from 'We Will Miss You', featuring a crop from Hieronymous Bosch's Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony. (2019)

I wanted to emphasize that I am well aware that I am not the first, nor the last to address these types of issues in society. While Hieronymous Bosch looked at the grotesque nature of humanity from a Christian perspective as opposed to my secular point of view, I find that there are still a lot of similarities to be found with our current day and age. Humans are still drawn towards self-destructive and violent methods of escapism, and I am interested in translating and interpreting many of the age-old sins depicted by painters like Bosch in a secular manner.

The Jan de Baen painting of the lynching of the de Witt brothers hereby is a grim reminder of the very real consequences of political hatred, and the capability of humans to believe they have the right to take other's lives. Even if the 'other' is a horrible, evil person, I believe any sort of violent justice is morally completely deplorable, and brings one down to the same level as a murderer. Sometimes I get the sense that a lot of people simply have an innate bloodlust, which they are happy to suddenly reveal once they have a supposedly 'good' reason such as the punishment of a criminal.

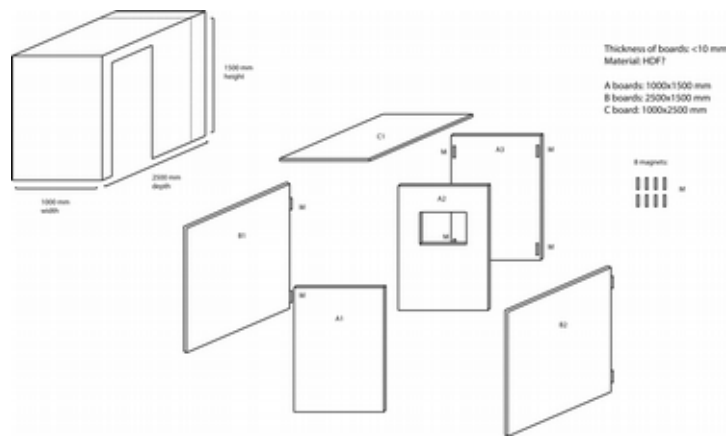
Which touches on yet another layer of the work – since the men featured in the video are quite different from the general contemporary art audience, and are in some cases are even the exact type of person that is often criticized, I hope it invokes a reflection on one's own empathy. Even if someone is directly or indirectly calling for violence, maybe even violence against a demographic one belongs to, what is the appropriate response?

All in all, I hope that the themes in my work provide plenty material for reflection and discussion amongst the audience. Whether it be matters of (toxic) masculinity, social media, history, empathy, politics or violence. And that is not to say I do not wish to make a statement as well. I do hope it is quite clear and understood that I am quite cynical and concerned about the rise of neoliberalism, populism, and the radicalizing, isolating effects of social media echo chambers. But I believe art is most effective when it is also conducive to asking questions, exposes underlying societal systems, and produces emotional responses that can be used to later reflect on intellectually, rather than merely 'preaching to the choir', so to speak.

3.4. Build-up of the installation

Building the installation started with creating a fairly detailed design for the wooden structure that would be the box, around two months before the opening (picture 12). The box was to be 2,4m long, 1m wide, and 1,5m high, and to include a hull behind the screen to hide all the electronics and wiring. It also featured a 80cm wide doorway to enter the box (roughly following the standard width of most doorways in Finland), which was to be covered with a velvet curtain.

After I created the first detailed blueprint of the box, I consulted Jouni Hirvonen for advice, and he helped me adjust my design to minimize costs and maximize stability, and ordered some of the materials needed. (Torx screws, metal angles, lumber, wooden boards and paint.) I bought the velvet curtain and LED lights myself, and borrowed the 23" 2333HD Samsung screen, speakers and RaspberryPi from TAMK's AV-kiosk.



PICTURE 12. Part of the first 'blueprint' I delivered to Jouni Hirvonen.

Building up the exhibition was done on-site at Gallery Himmelblau over the course of 2 workweeks, which is rather unusual. In the future I will most likely have to assemble my installations near completion already before delivering them to the gallery.

The first thing I did when starting was to saw various pieces of longer lumber down to their appropriate lengths, according to the planned design of the box. I then assembled these pieces together using torx screws and metal angles, forming the wooden frame.

In between assembling the frame, I also painted the wooden boards that I would later assemble on top of the frame to close the box up. I used a matte black ceiling paint, as it allowed me to use only one coating, was safe to use indoors, and quite durable as well.



PICTURE 13. The wooden frame in progress. (With the ceiling board placed on top, but not attached yet.)

After assembling the frame, I painted it black, and assembled almost all the boards except the one covering the electronics hull, again using torx screws. I then attached the LED strips to the upper part on the inside of the frame, and improvised a stand using torx screws, metal angles and leftover wood that could hold the screen inside of the electronics hull.

The wiring of the screen, the RaspberryPi, the speakers and the LED lights were all put in the hull behind the inner board. All wiring was plugged into an extension cord, which was lead outside of the box through a small hole in the side of the hull facing the backwall.



PICTURE 14. The electronics inside of the 'electronics hull'. This part was not visible to gallery visitors, as it was later closed off with another board.

After testing the LEDs, the speakers and the screen, I drilled on the last board covering the hull. The installation was now complete and ready for visitors to explore.



PICTURE 15. The finished installation. During the exhibition most of the lights in the room were off, but for clarity this picture was taken with the lights on.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the works of Reggio, Kelley and Rafman it became clear to me that dystopian works with depth and content are still relevant, and have the ability of exposing problems in our current-day political, cultural and economic systems. (Perhaps not entirely surprising, but reassuring nonetheless.)

What is more difficult to say however, is to what degree these works can truly affect society. Art has the important ability to create an initial spark of interest, and can serve as the birthplace for societal criticisms. An artwork can be a very useful and important first place to raise questions and express concerns.

However, I do not believe art can truly provide answers or solutions on its own, which is admittedly quite a big part of the puzzle. Finding solutions and mapping out these issues in a more clear sense is better left to the individuals themselves. And on a societal level this is perhaps best left to academic thinkers and writers such as philosophers. In the best-case scenario, dystopian art can be a good stepping stone for personal reflection though, which can hopefully then lead to action and reform within society.

Based on my analyses of dystopian artworks, I decided that collecting existing, non-fictional material and compiling this in a disrupted or distorted manner was essential for my own dystopian installation. (We Will Miss You at Gallery Himmelblau). Since I did not have the means to produce a work as all-encompassing as Koyaanisqatsi, I decided to use a method more directly inspired Kelley and Rafman, and collected material from various YouTube channels that seemed relevant to the issues of political disillusion and aggression that I wanted to explore.

Using this material I compiled a feverish videowork combining found elements of self-destruction, religious fanaticism and the glorification of violence, and I juxtaposed this with paintings from the early Dutch Renaissance and the Dutch Golden Age of painting, depicting similar behavior. The physical form of the

installation was also paramount, as it was one of the main tools for creating the tense physical atmosphere I was after.

I wanted to convey a sense of urgency and concern with the inability of humans to change their ways, and the repetitive nature of human irrationality, and to provide a reflective, through uncomfortable environment for the audience.

The feedback I received from fellow students and teachers suggested that the concepts of my artwork were quite favorably analyzed, interpreted and received by most. The work was somewhat confusing for a minority of people as well. The reality is, however, that this is almost unavoidable with art. Not everyone always relates.

I am a slow worker, which is something I do not think will change. I need a lot of time for analyzing my own work, and take a lot of time by going back and changing small details. I sometimes need to leave the work alone for a few days to gain some distance from it in order to gain a more objective view. It is a method of working I quite enjoy, and which also produces the best results. It does mean that I need to improve my planning skills significantly though, as I seem to systematically underestimate the amount of time I need to work on projects.

All in all, I was glad to have produced the most complete artwork I have made to date. I feel that this project has been very educational, especially on a theoretical level, and it fueled a desire to continue exploring the possibilities of installation art in connection to the 21st century dystopia. I would like to deepen my knowledge much further, and look forward to continuing my studies.

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PICTURES

PICTURE 1. Still photo of one of the opening shots (Reggio 1982)

PICTURE 2. Still photo of footage of an atomic bomb test (Reggio 1982)

PICTURE 3. Still photo of the falling rocket engine scene (Reggio 1982)

PICTURE 4. Rapping neo-nazi's from Mike Kelley's Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction series, which was used in the "Day Is Done" exhibition. (2004) Retrieved on 09.05.2019.

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PICTURE 5. Screenshot of YouTube comment posted in 2013, under a video on Day Is Done. Retrieved on 09.05.2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjINHhbfqMI>

PICTURE 6. Mike Kelley showing a photograph from his collection depicting a hazing ritual. (2010) Retrieved on 09.05.2019.

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PICTURE 7. Screenshot of part of the 4chan thread linked by Rafman on the online page for Still Life (Betamale). (2013) Retrieved on 09.05.2019.

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PICTURE 9. Still from 'warm it up exe That's a 10!' YouTube meme by H3H3. (2013) Retrieved on 09.05.2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbepN4dKLbU>

PICTURE 10. Still from 'We Will Miss You'. (2019)

PICTURE 11. Still from 'We Will Miss You', featuring a crop from Hieronymous Bosch's Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony. (2019)

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Screenshot of Google search popularity of the terms 'beta male', 'NEET' and 'incel' from 2004 onwards. Retrieved on 09.05.2019. Google Trends. <https://trends.google.nl/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=incel,beta%20male,neet>

