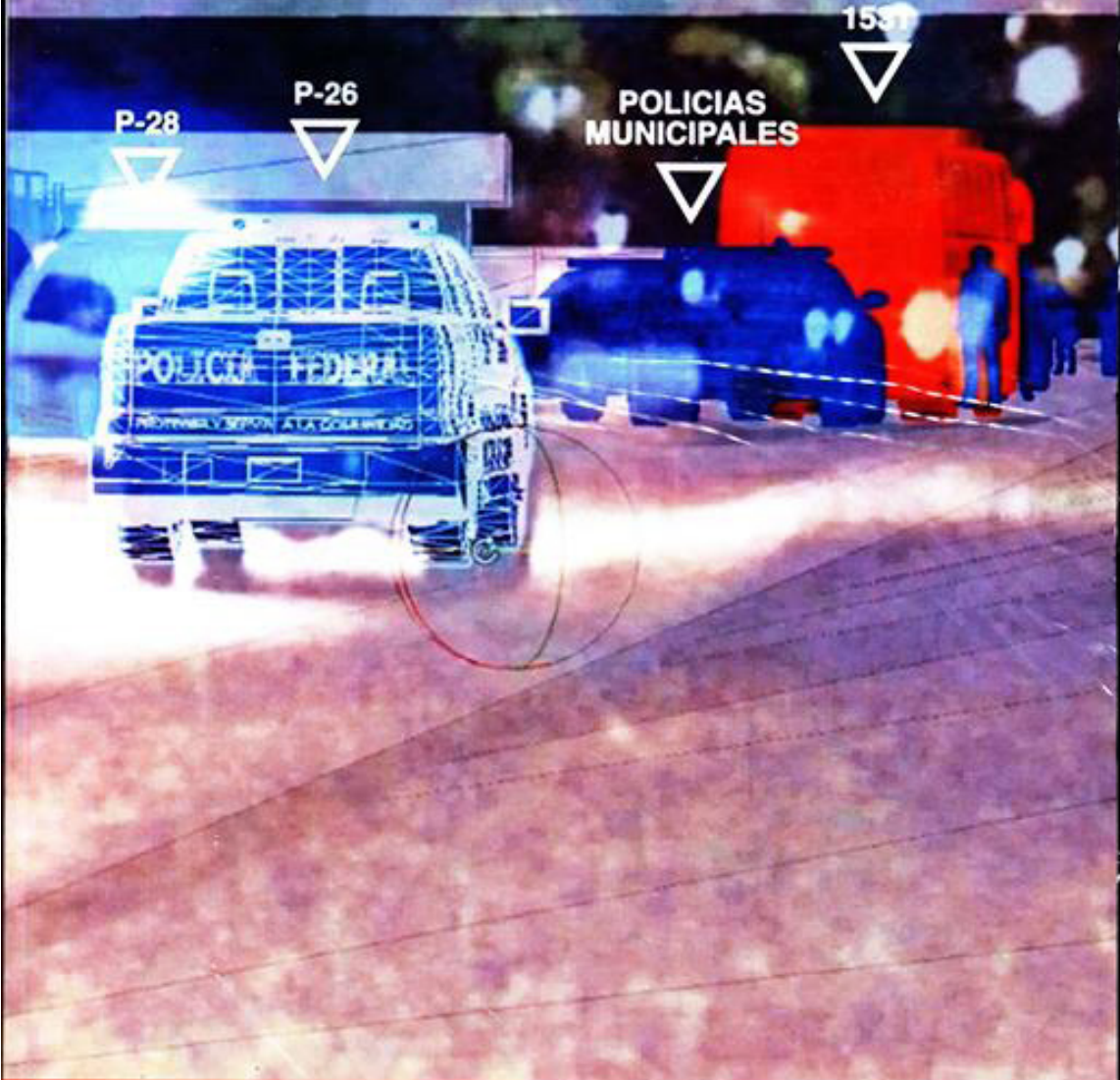


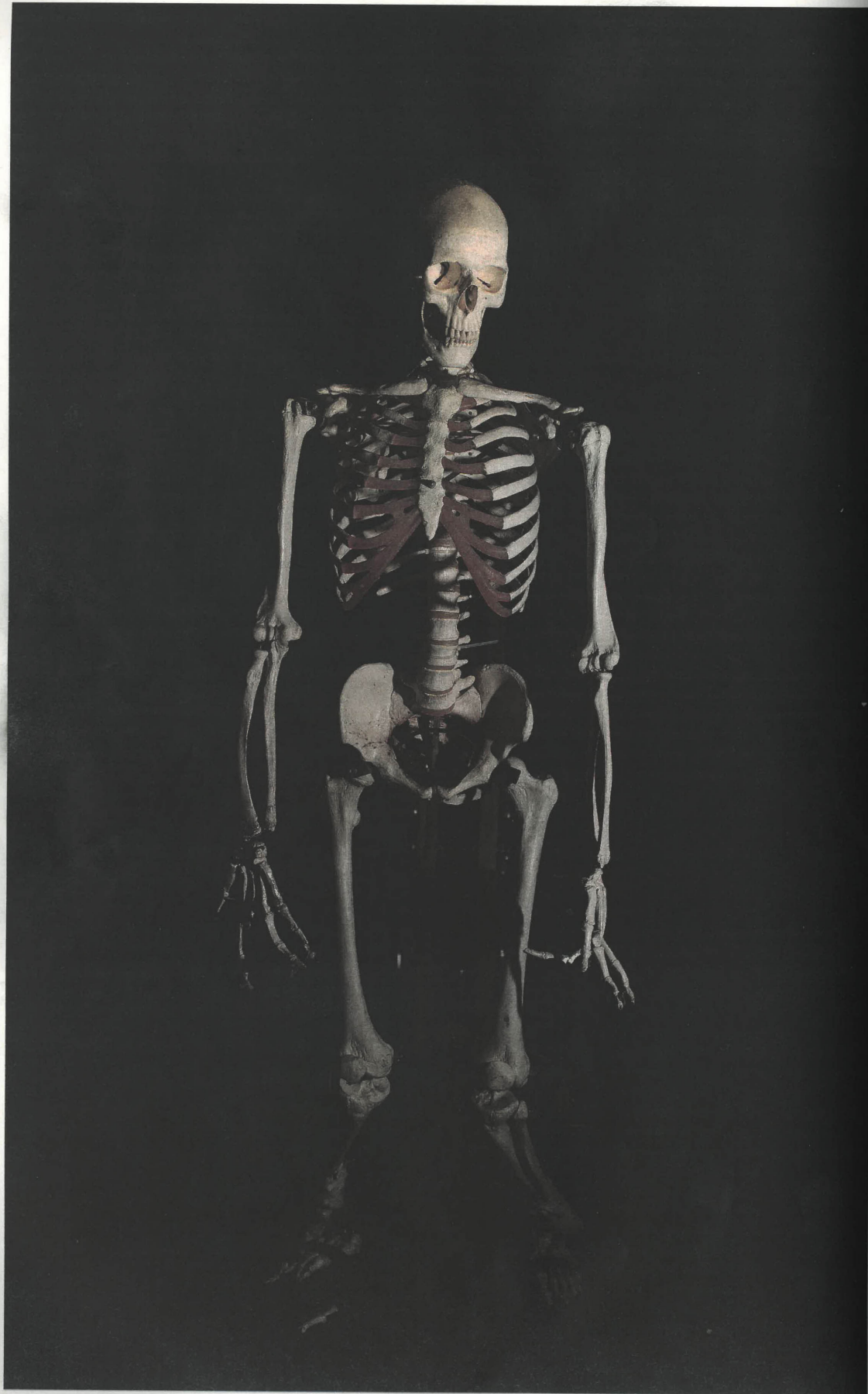
MOUSSE



Mousse
Contemporary Art Magazine

Issue #63
April - May 2018





Sturtevant, *The House of Horrors*, 2010. Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris collection. Courtesy: Estate Sturtevant, Paris, and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris / Salzburg

Maybe so, though I'm not exactly dealing with malevolent pet zombies. I'm thinking more like "dead," adverb, as in the absolute, or elsewhere more idiomatic deaths like "You're dead to me" or "That's dead on" or "I wouldn't be caught dead in that."

GHOST STORIES OF ALMOST NOBODY

BY SABRINA TARASOFF

Sometimes dead is better.
—Pet Sematary, tagline, 1989

Dead languages in the eyes of Anne Carson; *Funny Games*-type deadpan; dead reckonings with yourself as Saturn returns circa age twenty-seven; the drop-dead gorgeous during couture week; riding yourself of deadweight; having a deadeye for pleats; meeting your deadlines; *Deadtime Stories*; Goldie Hawn in *Death Becomes Her* screaming, "En garde, bitch!"; being dead serious.

And: the dead of summer. Particularly the more disillusioned ones. Like 2013, when the *only* note I wrote in a notebook labeled "Exhibitions" was "Art, I'm ghosting you." (At the end of the book, it also says: "Towards a Dead- Approach to Art," though "dead-" is missing its hyphenated end.) "Ghosting," noun, that modern dating dilemma all about ceasing contact with someone without explanation, had just started trending, spurred no doubt by all the anonymity afforded by technology's alienated condition and the advent of Tinder. (I was also dumped over Skype that year). My ghost

act was motivated by exhaustion, and by limits being hit in the total onslaught of value amassed in the abstract. Christopher Wool's painting *Apocalypse Now* (1989) had just sold the previous winter at Christie's for some inordinate record-breaking sum for living artists, which was particularly depressing considering how much more resonant the citation from *Apocalypse Now*, "Sell the house, sell the car, sell the kids," was with Antoine Dodson's "Bed Intruder" meme: "You gotta hide yo' wife, hide yo' kids, hide yo' husband." All I could think about was the production of art, the distribution of art, art's mediation, its financial fictions, art's auction estimates shattering some unseen center, its intense proximities, social networks, and pathological desires to be seen as a selfie of itself, which is to say dead set on expelling any or all aesthetic enterprising through an endless distribution of images, which to me, on Dodson's terms, were just "rapin' everyone 'round here." Inundation.

I was making up stories for months to explain the contusions.
—Amy Gerstler, *Ghost Girl*, 2004

Clearly, my ghost act was no Lee Lozano moment—I didn't drop out with a note giving anyone my "piece" of mind—nor did I disappear with any of the glamour Sturtevant did in her decade-long vanishing act. Though maybe I should have. When asked by Peter Halley what she did with her years away from art, Sturtevant replied, dead fabulous, "Oh, I played a lot of tennis, Peter."² Instead, a wine-infused Belleville soirée led to the collective decision by the Shanaynay team to take our June gloom to the countryside, organize a residency under the hysteric influence of the *Real World* franchise and, while there, cut all contact with the art world at large. Or at least go cold turkey for ten days from its systems of mediation, distribution, and/or any possibly indeterminate encounters with ever more self-aggrandizing forms of art-or-capital's

immateriality (cue Dennis Cooper: "No Mo' Pomo"). The rules of engagement were really quite simple. Amp up the art world's already fast pace to its Adderall-equivalent; have each participant create and open their own "exhibition" in just under half a day; revel in drunken, Rimbaud-endorsed openings during luncheon, then again at gin o'clock; permit all moments, as MTV's *Real World* goes, to be on record, voices recorded, duly noted, photographed, videotaped, but not without admonition; no texts, no press, no titles, and no documentation to be released for posterity. As far as contemporary art's "archive" goes, the Treignac residency was purely speculative, as close as it gets to being a ghost. The projects ranged from a snail race to a point-and-shoot filmed spur-of-the-moment horror film, RIP.

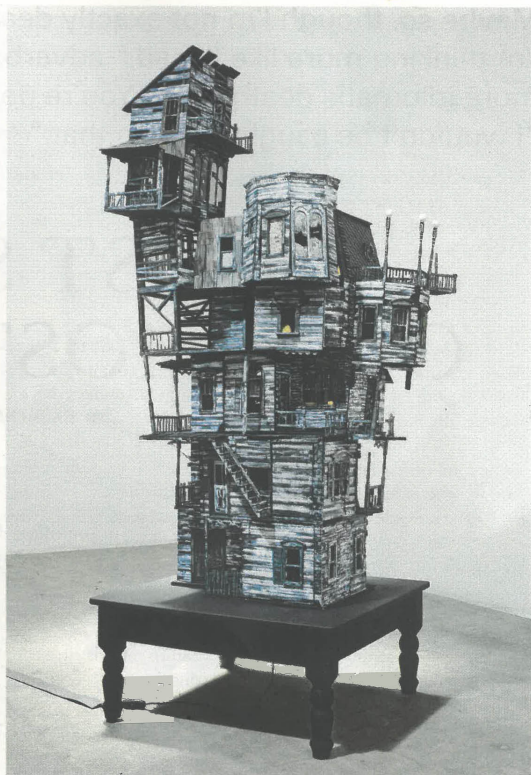
A while back, if I remember right, my life was one long party where all hearts were open wide, where all wines kept flowing.
—Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, 1873

The last act of this dispatch was a séance held by Charlotte Houette. I say "séance" though it was as much soirée, faux bloodbath, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Marilyn Manson dance party, catharsis, wake. She had gathered us inebriated youth in a stone-cold basement equipped with candelabra and a smoke machine to "commemorate" pieces of art that had formerly hung around Sam's house,

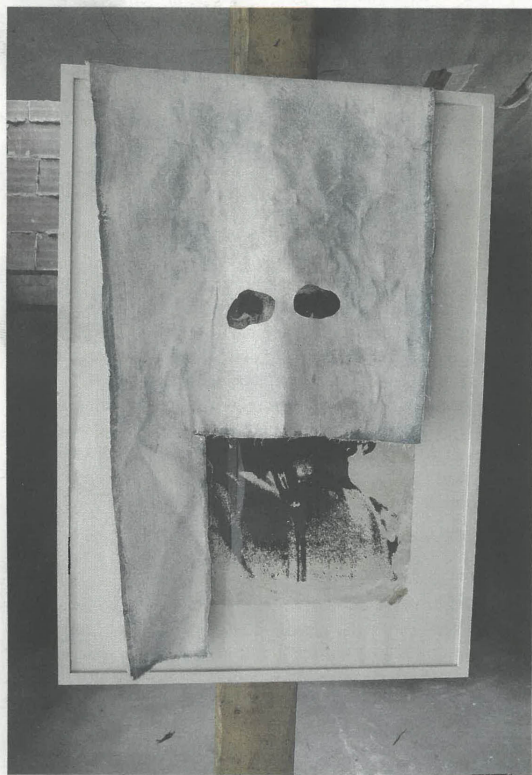
now declared dead by Houette and residing in the basement, sadly slanted and covered with homemade denim sheaths with orifices cut out for eyes, mouths. Thinking back, it was an eerie premonition of Valentina Liernur paintings to come, like those stitched-up, slightly emo denim canvases in *Aaaaaahhhhhh* (2015) (or for that matter in *aaaah...aaaah...* [2014]), which formalized punk as some



Richard Hawkins, *Stairwell Down*, 2007. © Richard Hawkins. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin / Cologne / New York; Greene Naftali, New York; Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



Richard Hawkins, *The Last House*, 2010. © Richard Hawkins. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin / Cologne / New York; Greene Naftali, New York; Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



Charlotte Houette, performance, residency organized by Shanaynay Paris at Treignac Projet, 2014. Courtesy: Sam Basu / Treignac Projet, Treignac



love child between suburban dandyism and Art Informel (Banjee girl realness?). Houette's gabardine and denim ghosts of Treignac's art-past floated off walls and pillars, pointing to the ghostliness of not only their own apparition but the whole production, our chosen isolation, the total absence of pressure to participate in the (actual) real world. *Sometimes, dead is better.* She cranked up the volume on a hidden soundtrack summoning the voices of artists, dead and alive, setting a séance into motion over an inkjet-printed Ouija board. The first name called? Marcel Duchamp (leave it to the French).

"But very strangely," as Charlotte wrote to me in an email recently, "We tried to summon M. Duchamp, but I remember that Clément Méric responded to us. Though that was very awkward, maybe don't mention that." (Sorry Charlotte!) But it relates—understood as some kind of a "test of form" à la T. J. Clark, Méric's voice appeared in the séance to, inadvertently, conjure the confused notions of "virtuality and visibility" that underwrite our present fictions. To clarify, Méric was an eighteen-year-old antifa leftist militant who was killed that summer outside a clothing store in Paris following an altercation with a group of alt-right youths. The clash occurred as both parties had arrived at the same sale, vying for the same deals on stylized skinhead garb such as Fred Perry and Ben Sherman. So many boundaries blurred here: the right and left wing's mutually exclusive cooptation of skinhead style, like a

conjuring gone wrong of clothing's semantic pasts; the marginalized finding mutual mediation in a marketplace filled with anachronisms and insensible violence, all spurred on by acts of political ghosting pushing youth to fringe acts; the CCTV's silent capture of superficially indistinguishable ideological spheres, attempting to validate their respective ontologies through—what?—a figure, which like the punny ghosts of hauntology "is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive."⁴

Although the channeling of Méric via Duchamp was simply a matter of being out of sync with the soundtrack; maybe there's something to this meeting of antifa and anti-art. It's difficult not to think of the rankness of the Duchampian gesture, the "I'm-gonna-piss-on-the-establishment" vibes of *Fountain*, the violence of the broken window in *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or the peephole visions of a sleeping (dying, dead?) girl in *Étant donnés* as a similarly blurred militant act, which now feels so coopted by institutional powers, the canon, maybe nostalgia. All things antithetical to the works' intentions—or at least molded, like Karl Marx's magic commodities, into something *other* under these forces (ditto Chris Wool, whatever you think about stencils). The Duchamp summoned in a museological context is ectoplasmic, a false apparition of a narrative whose center no longer holds in the context of contemporary art.

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1867⁵

No doubt there are some useful ghosts in Marx, ones that "haunt," with giggles and ghostly gasps, my experiences of gallery-going—particularly a recent visit to the Hammer Museum's spring exhibition *Stories of Almost Everyone*, curated by Aram Moshayedi. Although Marx's Disney-esque finance fictions are here placated under the much more pedestrian "stories of everyone," Moshayedi's exhibitionary stock is undoubtedly possessed by some devilry, which through art's largely administrative systems of belief and narrative, allows it to transcend this state of being *just* an "ordinary sensuous thing." The idea is that in our spooked zeitgeist of art's post-whatever condition, this transformation of an object to its dancing alter ego often happens via language-based interlocation within what Ann Philbin refers to as the "space of mediation."⁶ This mediation encompasses all institutional accoutrements tasked to conjure, translate, convey, or—more often than not these days—*forge* meaning between object and its idea (or alternately an artwork and its public). It's all about reification: wall text, trails of paperwork, titles, dates, materials, guest speakers, walk-throughs, audio guides. Moshayedi writes: "An art object's capacity for meaning is contingent upon a viewer's capacity to believe. This is the fate of contemporary art, one predicated on an agreement between all parties to willingly suspend disbelief and enter into a transaction of ideas."⁷

A stream of thought: to question the "space of mediation" closing in on the readymade object of art, as Moshayedi is requesting us to do in good faith, is to conjure and question art's *tropological* hauntedness; is to cue Emily Dickinson: "Nature is a haunted house—Art—a house that *wants* to be haunted" (my emphasis); is to consider what it "means" to haunt, to *frequent*—or be frequented by—a place, image, object, or idea, while cognizant of *haunt's* etymological origins in the *home*; is to understand the familiar or (re)appearances of the familiar as contextual to the longing to be feel frightened by what is most familiar to us. *Stories* impel us to consider this trajectory through a post-conceptual lens—that is, through figures of speech that have afforded art its abstractions by making language the point of entry current narratives that give it "meaning." Yet how does a spur-of-the-moment séance on an ink-jetted Ouija board, with nothing in the way of mediation,

summon similar "ghosts"? What of the readymade as iconography as opposed to metaphor? What, if anything, truly upsets, disrupts, spooks us outside of language's convenient relay?

Void of mediation, the readymade's sensibility (like Duchamp's pissy fit) is more a dispossession of form, its exigency, repetition, and doubling—toying with the exhaustions and limits of iconography—than an institution's knack for brand-managing its contents. Imagine the show's ghostly tropes exalted by pushing for a spookier locale, where deadness could become decor, or if scenographic cues were taken from the labyrinthine logic of spook houses. No, instead, the mood is chic home-haunt concept shop: a ghostly white baby grand piano intermittently slamming its own lid shut (the grand baby *boo!* to spook gallery-goers), admittedly out of order upon the day of my visit; a self-ringing bell—"a knell, a knell!"—and piles of dead, dying flowers; the museum's mail piling up; decrepit, dried-out wooden telephone poles. Golden helium letters, tracksuits, crystals. The exhibition's beautified flatline did little actual haunting past its verbal promises (those Isabelle Cornaro's sartorial crystal splatters are the exception, with their Douglas Sirk melodrama).

I left ruminating on this claim that meaning is contingent on one's *capacity* to believe, and reminded of a moment in middle school when one of the goth kids told me I didn't see the ghost that supposedly followed her around because I wasn't open enough—that I didn't have the *capacity of mind*. No doubt I walked away from that conversation, just as from this exhibition, having hit a limit on certain claims to immateriality made in the name of self-aggrandizement, be that of a teen girl's goth dreams or an institutional desire to act sovereign over art's legislative narratives. Just as my goth frenemy's ghost was at best an emotional support specter, a comforting presence that allowed her to hold onto her teen-girl dominion (think: "you-can't-sit-with-me-and-my-ghost"), the apparent desire for meaning (whose? what kind of meaning?) as well as the need to frame and narrate art's "ghosts" only conveyed unresolved institutional anxieties. Intentionally, based on Philbin's suggestion that Moshayedi was himself falling into skepticism—though to what end? These are stories of post-conceptual power, semio-capitalism, abstraction.

Facetiously or not, inspired most certainly by the museum's extra-curricular activities, such as Charles Ray's ghost story session, and those catalogue essays that made good use of horror's more absurd usurpations into the popular vernacular of contemporary art, the exhibition crept me with questions: what would "disrupt," "complicate," or "upset" the pretty banality of the Hammer's chosen fictions? Some ideas included: Sturtevant's rendition of Paul McCarthy's *Painter* (1995), complete with all of its *Pet Sematary* logic of bringing back the already instituted (though it "ain't the [artwork] that comes back"⁹); Richard Hawkins's haunted dollhouses, wherein what comes ready-made or prepackaged is "haunted-ness" itself as an iconography of dereliction or disuse, notably sharing a tagline with *The Haunting*, "Some houses are born bad"; perhaps a live, full-length screening of the 210-day hell coaster called *The Wheel of Life and Death* made by an anonymous

Rollercoaster Tycoon player (see "Rollercoaster Tycoon Sadist"⁹); the ghosts of ghosts of ghosts of Sherrie Levine's photographs—poltergeists, really—who disrupt with a sense of the Derridean *mal d'archive*, a tracing of information's inability to materialize because of its systems of distribution and reproduction; a séance by Roland Barthes to summon semiotics itself; the backdrop of eerie cracks and reverbs from Mike Kelley's *L'Esprit de Paris* (2002); some Pentti Monkkonen palm trees; screenings of Cameron Jamie's internalized pop mythologies (see *Spook House* [2003]); these ideally inside some structure built by Russ McKamey, founder of "extreme home-haunt" McKamey Manor in San Diego, one of America's scariest haunted houses; scattered copies of Cady Noland's *Towards a Meta-Language of Evil* (1989); with separate spaces reserved for the pop-hexed meaning that sweeps through Alex da Corte's *Die Hexe* (2014). There are more.

You don't get society without body and you don't get body without society. So much of human culture is an attempt to flee the body. We do want to be disembodied... to not acknowledge it or deal with it, to not place it at the center of our reality. But I think that it is. So the concepts are there, and it's for me to make it literal. On one hand I'm a fantasist, and on one hand I'm a literalist. It pleases me to take something that is a conceptual thing only, and say: What if it's not a conceptual thing only? What if it's physically real? And to me, real is physical, and so to incarnate it, is to make it as real as one can get.

—David Cronenberg¹⁰

Horror has always been at the forefront of expressing social anxieties by acting out, albeit often in campy costume, stories of virtually no one: "no one" as in those considered "nobodies," those with no voice, no socially recognized body, no governance—quacky stories of the marginalized, oppressed, loser-ish, monstrous, reclusive, ghostly, lackluster, failed. Those that "mediation" mostly collapses on—stories that aren't easily conveyed except through the immediacy of recognizable form moving through space, meaning moving like a ghost and discredited just as easily as those who lay claim to actually have seen them. So, more fantasist-literalists, please, like Sturtevant's ghost ride-cum-exhibition, last installed in the basement of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2013. Appropriating "iconic," semi-disturbing images from the just-past—that scene from John Waters's *Female Trouble* (1974)

where Divine is found licking dog poop or Paul McCarthy's infamous *Artist*—Sturtevant fucks with art's "hauntological" *idée fixe*. It's not only a rearrangement of art's recent history as a thrill-seeking encounter in doom buggies, but a rewiring of the ready-made as a matter of dizzied iconography (riding the loop multiple times over, one euro per *tourné*, gets kind of rollercoaster sadist-adjacent). Here, a visit to a museum can be about bracing yourself for what you know is around the corner but haven't yet arrived at: thrill of all thrills! The avant-garde-made animatronic moves you into a space of camouflage, or puppeteering, or theater—something not alive—but, well, not quite dead. John Waters, Paul McCarthy, Frankenstein, bats, and other visual tropes are resurrected as something other, slightly thwarted, to themselves. Hauntology? Maybe, though nothing here drones on. You just ride with it, out of sight.

Distance as not distance, distance as separation from the self. TV, Video cameras, computers, the internet, Sex without Mess, Always something opaque between you and experience, the erasure of mediation, a tremendous interference.

—"Elaine Sturtevant: L'Eternel Retour Des Chefs-D'Oeuvres," 1998

A favorite sin put on paper might just be the "sin of literalism" that John Miller saw in the works of Mike Kelley. To this list, add: Richard Hawkins, Cameron Jamie. Coproduced with the nonpareil Robin Rimbaud, aka Scanner, Kelley's *L'Esprits de Paris* (2003) exists within a space of mediation, if not one that arbiters for its own sake. Silences and city sounds collected in places of esoteric interest make for an ambient sound piece, premised on the idea that infamous mediums and psychologists, the Tristan Tzaras, Carl Jung, Friedrich Jurgensons, and Konstantin Raudives of the world, held habitats in those alleys and plazas—as did I. My ghosted summer was spent living beside the Montparnasse cemetery on 13, Place d'Enfer, named-so following the street's seventeenth-century collapse into the underlying catacombs. No proof, though I'd like to imagine Kelley included my home's crackles and drags in his piece. It might have sounded like the metro's rumbles, cemetery gates creaking open, a muffled echo of a conversation advanced from the courtyard. These "spirits of Paris" sound haunted not for their history nor for any hell-mouth, but for the virtual presences that frequent a place—places that are through these visitations abstracted, crumbled, dilapidated.

Like so, the susurrus, gargled sounds, and Grudge-like vocal fries of *L'Esprits de Paris* share with Hawkins a haunting by

hauntedness itself. The recordings are disturbing because they sound like disturbances that are unnameable and difficult to categorize in our minds. They class as the kind of reverberations—like involuntary memories maybe—that point to an empty or forgotten centre. Not unlike the store-bought or ready-made doll houses of Hawkins' *Third Mind* exhibition, all purchased by the artists only to be dismembered and pieced back together as new, deader versions of themselves. Again, this is as much about deadness, as its decorations—the houses mix the Proustian with the moral of *Death Becomes Her*: "This is life's ultimate cruelty. It offers us a taste of youth and vitality, and then it makes us witness our own decay."¹¹ The predicament of Hawkins' interiors is so very Goldie Hawn—in asking for immortality it is sees its inhabitants die, it gets to see itself disembodied, though all the same keeps its chic accoutrements. The doll-houses tests the limits of what Dennis Cooper once wrote on home-haunts:

While the Spooky House is unique in that it both allows for egg-headed interpretations and provides cheap, forgettable thrills for those who ask only to shriek giddily at carefully appointed moments, its appeal is basic—a longing to feel afraid of that which is most familiar to us. It's impossible to decorate or even daydream



Cameron Jamie, *Spook House* (stills), 2002-2003. © Cameron Jamie



Alex Da Corte, *Die Hexe (Act II Scene II)*, 2015, installation view at Luxembroug & Dayan, New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: John Bernardo

our homes into haunted houses, because we know our own limitations too well and true horror is unimaginable by design.¹²

Cooper wrote "Spooky Houses" in October 1998. Since then, the tagline for a recent documentary called *The Hunters* (2017) has taunted, "Haunted houses for Halloween have spawned a growing subculture of extreme 'full contact' terror simulations. *But how far is too far?*" The documentary follows the teams and audiences behind some of America's most extreme home-haunts, McKamey Manor amongst them, trying to understand where an individual's carrying capacity for fear, pain and exhilaration might go. Spook houses may have originated as the small suburban thrills of early trick-or-treaters, where a pale of fake-blood and a hand shoved into some icky substance could suffice as a scare, yet what more quaint by today's standards? The worst of the home-haunts include signing your life off on a waiver in case your semi-feigned kidnapping goes wrong or being water-boarded in a coffin gives you a heart-attack. The abuse is sexual, physical, and psychological, and intended to blur the boundaries between a cheap-thrill and its tipping point towards the real. The idea that gets all the airtime is that places like McKamey Manor are sadistic tourist-traps that mostly cater to their operators' dark desires. But I think the deeper idea is that (certain) consumers of scare-culture, and by extension any visual culture, are craving the intensity of experience they feel altogether desensitized to or distanced from in the real. This isn't a moral question about what we *should* see or have access to in the media or on our screens, but of how we relate to them, how connected we feel to our bodies. It's a matter of psychosomatics, of Disneyland-thrills that need to loop-de-loop just so much more

for the feeling to stay the same. *But how far is too far?* Moshayedi points out that "now, more than ever, it is clear that embedded within the desire for meaning in art is a latent desire for narrative, for some semblance of stories to give shape to an otherwise indeterminate experience."¹³ What about the reverse? What of an escalating need for affect, effect, FX? For indeterminate or nebulous encounters with art, which has nothing to do with formal abstraction but of viewing experiences that are difficult to put words to. Torture aside, a final note might land on Alex da Corte—his labor-intensive "exquisite cartoons,"¹⁴ which share with Hawkins, certainly Sturtevant, Levine, and maybe *The Hunters* a taste for seamless encounters with the uncanny. Da Corte's decorating impulse, precise and painstaking, makes something of Cooper's day-dreamed true horror. His installations are strange homes haunted by displaced meaning—meaning that seems to form against the backdrop of today's digital spheres, its inundated images. The exhibition *Die Hexe* (2015) was all about the arrangement of iconic artworks almost as if they were a collection of simple souvenirs or knickknacks placed lovingly around a room. Bjarne Melgaard doing Allen Jones, Mike Kelley, Haim Steinbach, and Robert Gober are all usurped into that realm of the familiar that we fear the most. (And what I would imagine a Jane Bowles interior to materialize as). Still, familiarity, when experienced "again and again and again," as the Derrida epigraph for the *Die Hexe* catalogue reads, is like repeating a word over and over only to feel it become strange in your mouth—foreign, unknown, unsettled. "Meaning" refracts between the objects and decor, changing the forms and faces of each—changing the way we might understand or read our recent-past in light of a future almost onset.

An epitaph:

The mutability of mutable things itself gives them their potential to receive all those forms into which mutable things can be changed. And what is this mutability? A soul? A body? The form of a soul or of a body? No, I would call it "a nothing-something" or "an is-that-is-not," if such expressions were allowed.

—St. Augustine

1. On July 28, 2010, NBC TV channel WAFF-48 published an interview with Antoine Dodson, a witness to a home intrusion in northern Alabama. The video went viral in mid-2010 after an auto-tuned remix of the interview was released by a YouTube user named *Schmoyoho*.
2. "Sturtevant, with Peter Halley," *Index*, 2005, <http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/sturtevant.shtml>.
3. Email from Charlotte Houette to the author, March 23, 2018.
4. Jacques Derrida, "From Spectres of Marx: What Is Ideology?," in *Spectres of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/derrida2.htm>.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 163.
6. Ann Philbin, "Foreword," in *Stories of Almost Everyone* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, University of California, 2018), 11.
7. Aram Moshayedi, "The Narrative Conceit," in *Stories of Almost Everyone*, 15.
8. Line from *Pet Sematary*.
9. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfAHs-CP28g>. From KnowYourMeme-thread: "On March 26th, 2012, an anonymous 4chan user started a thread

10. David Cronenberg interviewed in Adam Simon, director of *The American Nightmare: A Celebration of Films from Hollywood's Golden Age of Fright* (2000), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5v03a_zCSM.
11. Zemeckis, Robert. *Death Becomes Her*. Universal Pictures, 1992.
12. Dennis Cooper, "Spooky Houses," in *Smothered in Hugs: Essays, Interviews, Feedback, and Obituaries* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 267.
13. Aram Moshayedi, "The Narrative Conceit," in *Stories of Almost Everyone*, 15.
14. See Alex Da Corte et al., *Alex Da Corte: Die Hexe* (New York: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2015).

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