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Infinite Instruments

Betsy Ellison

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Infinite Instruments

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Betsy Ellison

May 2022

Washington University in St. Louis
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art

BFA in Studio Art
Capstone Thesis

Last login: Fri May 6 17:00:00 on console

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>run BZE.exe

Abstract:

Whether building websites from scratch, generating abstract video portraits with recursive machine-learning AI, mounting steel plate carvings with fishing hooks, or painting portraits of schoolgirls on skinned and tanned bunny hides, I seek to infiltrate the strange spaces where rationality and empiricist philosophy collapse into delirium and drift.

Machines and animals are both organized bodies. All knowledge can be broken down to constituent parts: cells, atoms, grids and codes. All constellations of these fundamental parts are fictions. Fragmentation and re-organization are frontiers for new knowledge.

By treating the objective as subjective, philosophy as poetry, and the concrete as indeterminate, we can begin to infiltrate the strange places in our minds that slip between the cracks. I'm invested in the place where data turns to fiction. By inverting grids and data structures on their heads, I stress the subjective assumptions of complex technologies. By doing so, I can speak about the violence embedded in our shared technological and historical landscapes.

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Q: What shape are a German Shepard's ears? I can picture it, but where is the image located?

A: Of course the brain isn't a computer, but it's better to think about it as one. It's just wet matter, with indistinct data storage and no central CPU. Mental images aren't real images. Like torchlight on a cave wall, like a cathode ray tube.

Like a self, like truth, like violence, your picture of the German Shepard's ears is all organization and association.

There are many ways of telling a story. Here are a few.

First and foremost: a story needs a subject. A subject is a stake in the earth. It's the axis around which narrative pivots. To declare a subject, certain other declarations must follow suit. The story can look like anything, so long as it follows the internal logic instigated in its structure.

I'm working from the classical definition of the subject in Western philosophy as something that can observe others and itself. By becoming a subject an entity gains emotion, consciousness, and relationships with other entities. It has subjectivity, feeling, reflexive self-perception, unique experiences, and unique formulations on those experiences. It is not observed but observes. Western intellectual history has established rigid divides between nature/culture, subjective/objective, reason/feeling. The entrenchment of these binaries, like any other sociological phenomena, encourages us to believe they are universal and true. But the more those divides are investigated, the more it all begins to collapse into delirium and drift. I'm aligning my sights to that strange place where philosophy dissolves into poetry. To maintain power as old structures entropy, order—order as in, reason, logic, control, extroverted/objective intelligence—must be maintained through rejection of plasticity, introspection, and subjectivity. Often this rejection takes a violent shape, through the suppression of ideas and behaviors that contradict ruling ideologies and architectures. The more simple and supposedly obvious an order, the more victimization lurks beneath it.

When objective reason collapses, it can be aestheticized, and its power can be co-opted on behalf of the de-subjectivized. I like bare bones tech, primitive HTML, concrete poetry, warp and weft, simple visual structures of organization. I've found I love the seriousness of diagrams, grids, simple interfaces, and static structures, and I love filling them with poetry. In my own work as an artist, I attempt to investigate the push-and-pull conflicts between machines, animals, poetry, and critical theory.

Infinite instruments: the idea of an instrument as something organized and purposeful. Infinity, oceans, chaotic movement. The collision between the organized and the disorganized. There's social potential in collapsing and remaking the self, freedom in negating and negotiating. Where does one thing end and the next begin? Identity must be formulated somehow. How do you pull out a subject from ever shifting tides of information? I'm not equipped to answer these questions, but I can hash out some crude diagrams to illustrate them.

>1.0_

>Images/Diagrams/Grids

Q: How do you find a dog? How do you know when it's found? Why does this nebulous thing hurt me so much? How do you wire its mouth shut?

A: There are many dogs with many teeth. There are many ways of telling a story. There are many stories. None of them make any sense and many of them are all the same.

When faced with chaotic space, it becomes necessary to find schematic lines around which to organize the drift and tides. For a subject to speak, arbitrary order must be treated as objective narrative. In "Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary", John Timberlake writes on how images condition understanding. Timberlake draws from the work of David F. Marks, elaborating on how mnemonic linguistic devices (ex. understanding evolution as a branching tree) create mythologies of reality that

stand in the way of simultaneous/parallel true concepts (for example, multiplicity, drift, or non-binary interpretation). Timberlake wonders how popular sci-fi images, landscapes, and affective tropes represent unspoken anxieties about the non-anthropocentric, and suggests that, via the “construction of artificial eyes” (new mental models), sight and interpretation can be a radical act. I’m intrigued by the disaffection of reducing lofty philosophy into simple mental models, and then re-shaping those models. Schematics and diagrams describe the constitutive elements of technocratic power. When they are laid so bare, they seem naked and pathetic. Philosophy becomes feeble.

From 2020 to 2022, I completed 15 intricate graphite drawings exploring and complicating the grid. Originally setting out to tell a simple stream-of-consciousness story, I published the first fifteen drawings in a zine titled *Here I am Again* (2020). The series went on through 2021, shedding the calligraphic writing and introducing increasingly ornate patterns and animal motifs, as in “Howling Dogs”, “Chimera”, and “Indirect Coordination”. I removed the calligraphic, textual element from “Here I am Again” and the series evolved from a zine narrative into an independent series of drawings, the first rendition of the *Infinite Instruments* title. *Infinite Instruments* complicated the act of storytelling, mystifying the narrative process into something evocative but indeterminate. Narrative was treated as an undercurrent, something that exists in the middle of the interpretive process, rather than something that structures it. The series culminated (for now) in “Mirrorpalace” (2022), a final ornate drawing constructing a room in a mind palace containing mirrors, pools, and references to a confrontation with the self, visual or abstract. All visuals circle loosely around motifs regarding Ovid’s description of the Greek myth of Narcissus.



Figure 1: Betsy Ellison, Howling Dogs, 2021.



Figure 2: Betsy Ellison, Indirect Coordination, 2021.

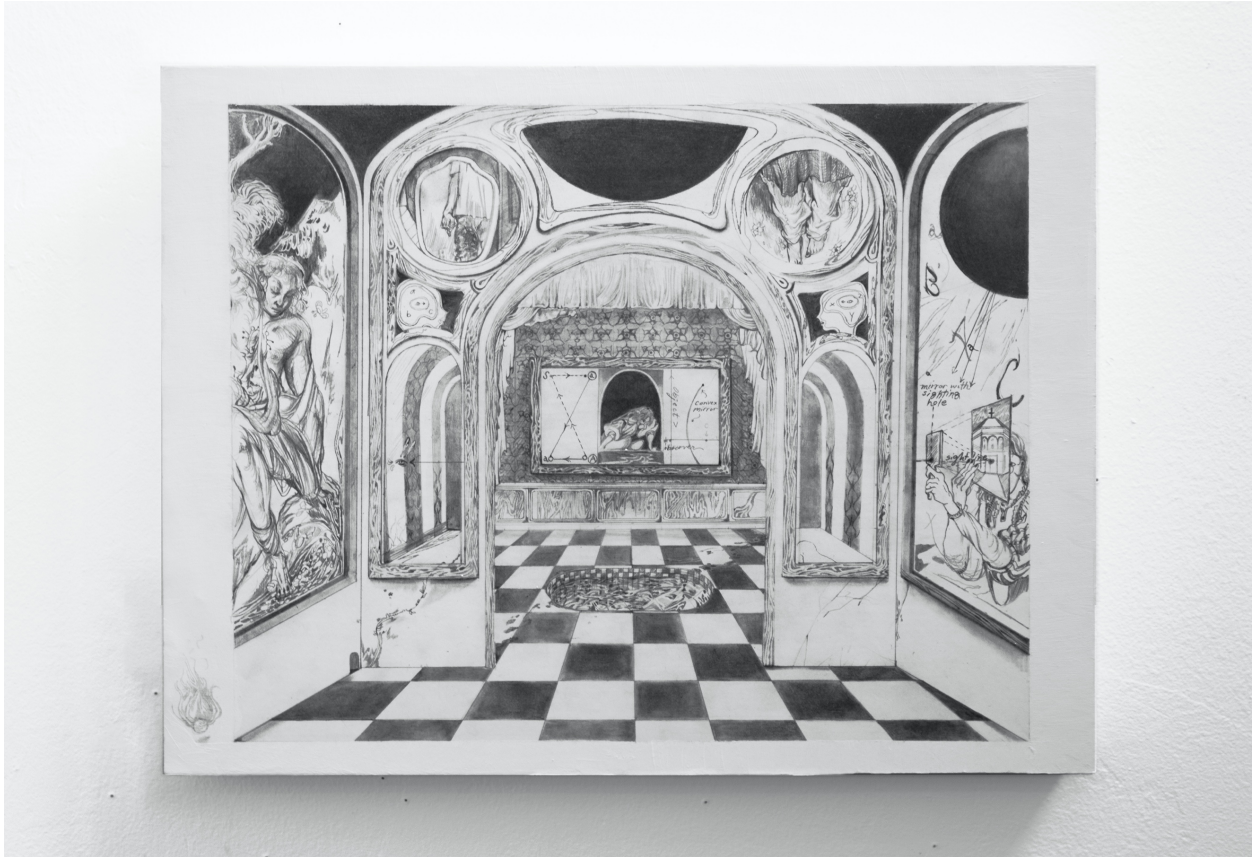


Figure 3: Betsy Ellison, Mirrorpalace, 2021.

All the drawings except for “Mirrorpalace” use a 2d grid composition, but this final drawing bends that grid orientation into three-dimensions and one-point perspective. Just as in “Dollhouse”, each panel, or cell, of the drawings contains a different universe: some patterns, some perspective, some animals.

Many of the drawings include images of animals: particularly dogs, birds, insects, and roadkill. Animals fill in as something indeterminate here, an interest in cultivating a symbolic library. An animal might be a kind of mental model. They carry cultural associations: a dog might stand in for obedience and undying love, a fly for decay and regeneration, an ant for coordination, roadkill for collateral

damage. Part of the process for generating any of these drawings is the collection of symbols and note-taking on their affective properties. There's a desire for meaning making.

Susan Sontag writes in “Against Interpretation” that “interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art” (Sontag 98). Drawings are media that exist in this sort of nebulous realm between the inward and outward gazing intellects—an emotional subjectivity of expression, and an intellectual subjectivity of reading and interpretation. Painter and illustrator Kyung-me’s *conjunctio i-vii* series takes a similar approach to organizing space. Her pen-and-ink interiors are rendered in crisp detail, every surface rendered in the same level of detail, so that background and foreground collapse into an ocean of subjectless information. A hyper-rendered interior nevertheless creates a *horror-vacui*. Like Kyung-me, my drawings wrangle with how a drawn subject might be constituted of highly sophisticated visual data yet remain resistant to interpretation.

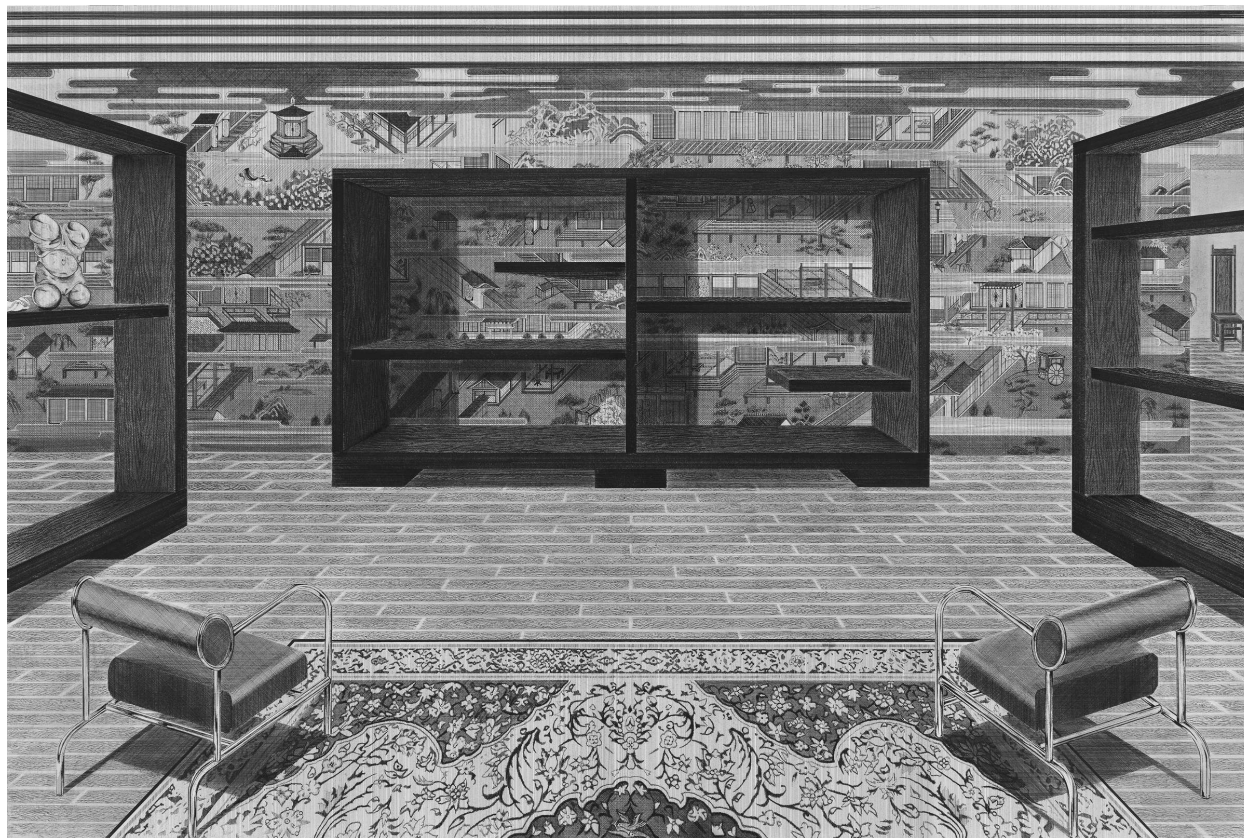


Figure 4: Kyung-me, *conjunctio iv*, 2019.

A graphite drawing, however ornate or intricate, is a void of material: the agent of the pencil and the substrate of smooth Bristol paper both disappear, become invisible. Drawing is about the disappearance of the vehicle, the most rapid way to ideate and communicate. Sketches, diagrams, drawings all serve for rapid dissemination and a shorthand for identity formulation. Drawing is a foundational, low stakes way to impose upon the other with an extroverted will, a power to conjure up more-or-less objective images in highly subjective territory. It's a way of charging and testing the generative capacity of a subject, a process for observing self-identification. The evolution of *Here I am Again* into *Infinite Instruments* displays a reckoning with formal structures and motifs; they serve as affective guideposts for extensions into other media to later reckon with.

>2.0_

>Digital Identity

Q: Can there be a stable subject online?

A: The body in conflict with machinery creates discharge, like the way you salivate when you put something in your mouth. Your dog couldn't just as well be an image of a dog after its component parts are shot apart by satellites and cathode tubes, atomized and reorganized, exchanging electric organ matter for hexadecimals and binary data structures.

There's a paradox at the heart of the digital medium: The screens and dynamic interfaces of the internet are shifting spaces, which feel as though they exist outside the normal material realm, yet the digital world is very concretely grounded in servers and hard binary code. The internet has been treated as utopian (as seen in Wikipedia, Sci-hub, torrent culture, Craigslist, Reddit, or the life and work of Aaron Swartz: all of them imagine the internet as a vehicle for disintegrating capitalist institutional authority into open-access mutualism), despite its development in DARPA and the Cold

War, or the ongoing collection of biometric data via monitored apps, or the consolidation throughout the 21st century thus far of Web2.0 capitalist empires. It's unfair to expect any terrain to be free of violence. But the internet offers a unique hope for freedom: new frontier via a dissolved self, a dissolute subject.

When we go online, we're surfing on fraught waters. Where do we locate the subject? It becomes necessary to build ourselves all over again, from the ground up. In the early days of the internet, if you wanted to exist, you learned HTML and made a website. Since 2010, Olia Lialina and her partner, Dragan Espenschied, have rescued nearly a terabyte of data from the now-shuttered Geocities archives. (Lialina and Dragan Espenschied) Every 20 minutes, a screenshot from one of the many thousands of micro-websites rescued is uploaded to a Tumblr account. These micro-sites, often caked in neon text and rainbow tiled backdrops, present a brave stand by individuals facing against the void. There's something guileless, handmade, almost tragic about some of these pages. Lialina and Espenschied have captured some very crude formulations of identity.

Ten years before Lialina started rescuing other people's HTML, she was making her own. Twenty years out from its publication in 1996, "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" is still the prototypical example of early net.art. The artwork is a browser-based, non-linear narrative, where clicking within the site leads to the browser subdividing and revealing evocative images and text about infidelity and loss of love, all against the backdrop of some unnamed global military conflict.

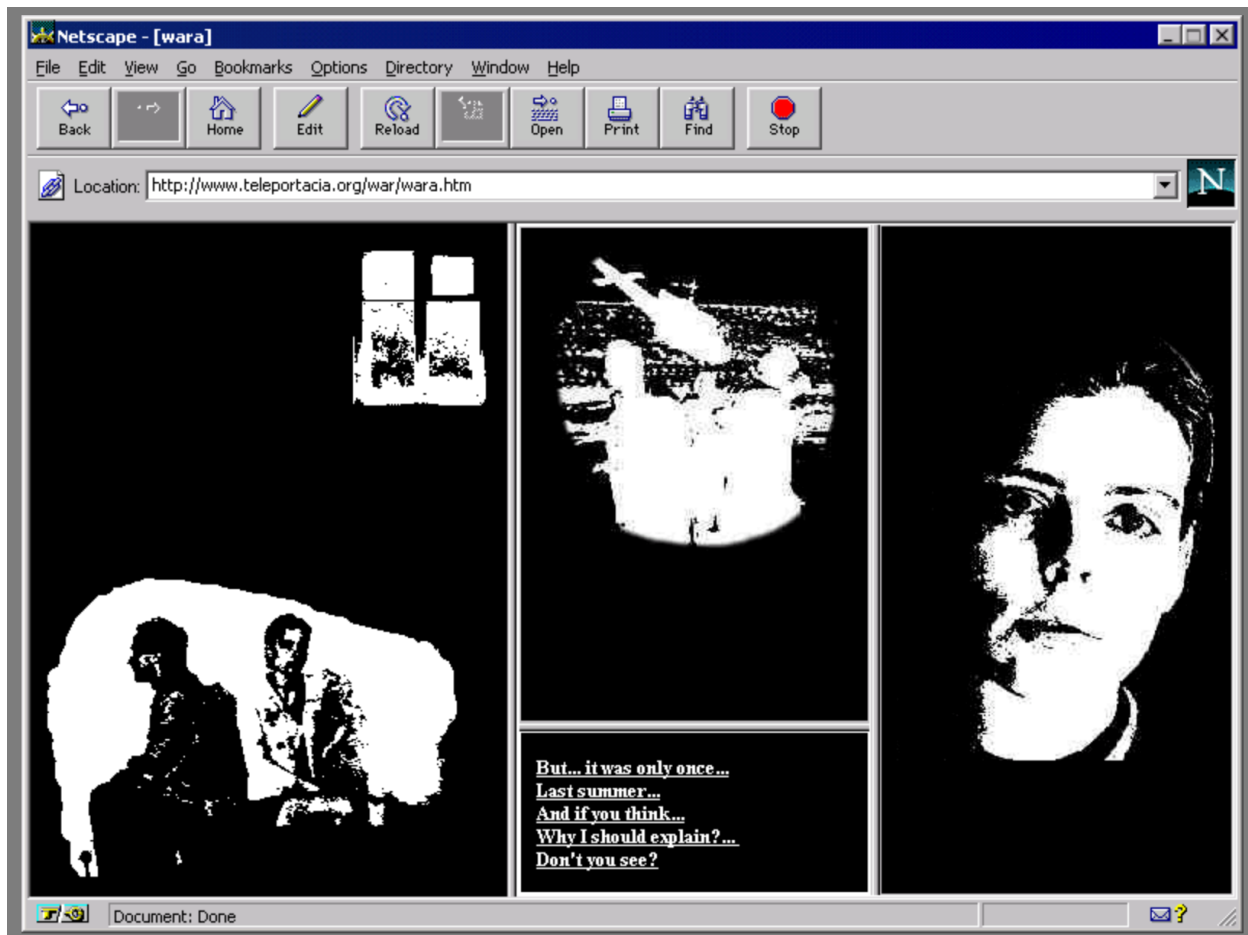


Figure 5: *Olia Lialina, My Boyfriend Came Back From The War (still), 1996.*

HTML is written start to finish, left to right, top to bottom. Usually, most simple websites are laid out using tables or a sequence of boxes, aka divs. The cells generated by the tables or divs are filled with content: text, image, video, hyperlinks. This is all to say, in its most basic form, identity on the internet is formulated through grids and rudimentary architecture. Rigid structure allows for nebulous content: feelings, ideas, assertions of individuality. We see these nebulous assertions in the geocities pages.

In this way, digitality applies similar frames of reference as my illustrated narratives. Content is ordered via a rigid left-to-right, top-to-bottom hierarchy. Yet the content within the cells can be nonsensical, emotional, abstract. In *The Dollhouse*, 2021, I wanted to occupy abstract space. I identified

a simple architectural model, a blueprint of an archetypal middle-class home, with the same layout as the one I had as a child. The dollhouse was coded using HTML tables and hypertext, in a single page straight-shot of linear code. Yet the user was free to bounce around between rooms, which contained “furniture” linking to poems and mini-games responding to the HTML.

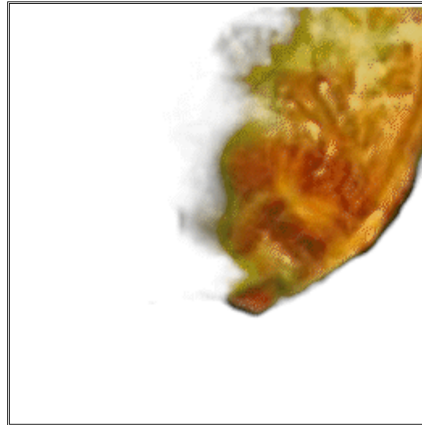


click [here](#) to begin



Figure 6: Betsy Ellison, The Dollhouse (still #1), 2021.

The screen assaults you with dazzling and terrifying images.

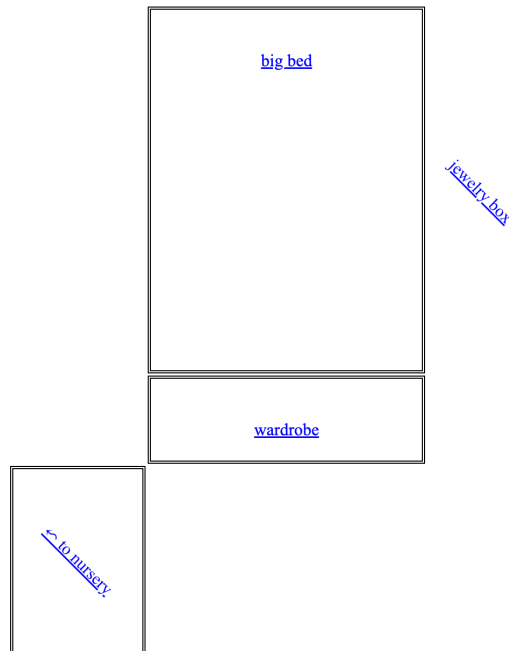


They change their outlook, entourage, and spin.



[BACK](#)

Figure 7: Betsy Ellison, *The Dollhouse* (still #2), 2021.



[BACK](#)

Figure 8: Betsy Ellison, *The Dollhouse* (still #3), 2021.

I wanted to charge the digital architecture with hidden messages in reverberating cells. Some spaces, like “Sister’s bed” in the nursery room, call back to some unspoken trauma via writing. Other cells link to conspiracy theory websites, surreal gifs of AI generated tanks, bizarre animals, or unsettling gifs of bugs, swarms, and germ clouds. The “Wardrobe” game is a subdividing choose-your-own adventure story that carries the browser to extremist corners of the internet. “Bookshelf” randomizes its content each time a button is clicked—each shell in the “shelf” contains a randomized array of words relating to nuclear physics, art, computational history, and philosophy, and each randomization conjures new associations between these dissociated terms. Non-linear narrative is expressed through the affect of places the web can take you, the way it quickly leads to paranoid dystopia. In this way, a friction emerges between our expectations of order and clarity in online spaces.

The inhabited web is just as muddled and emotional as other landscapes we inhabit: design and order, in their efforts to relieve that distress, generate as much anxiety and confusion due to the dissociation, abstract re-territorialization, and shadowy backdrops of violent institutions and wartime technologies all inherent to the internet’s architecture. The effort to understand and express oneself is as fraught with contradictions online as it is on paper.

>3.0_

>Citation and Fragmentation

Q: I lost both my eyes. They were gouged out. I don’t know how or what it was like because I couldn’t see because I was getting my eyes gouged out while it happened. How do I speak about this terrible thing?

A: The more violently a subject is displaced, transformed into victim-object, the more potent and powerful that return to subjectivity is. Reciprocal exchange, y’know? Battles for dominance. A desire to become a subject must be as powerful as the desire to destroy a different subject. In a story as in nature, something must die so that something else may live. These things meditate,

cultivate themselves within a person long before they can be expressed. Often this feeling moves through a single person and they aren't big enough to hold its entirety, they pass it on to others, a social movement ferments.

There is a space where the objective and the subjective collapse. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “Beneath all reason lies delirium and drift”. (Deleuze and Guattari, "A Very Special Delirium") There is a violence to that reason, and a peace to be found in that drift. All borders--geopolitical, personal, or technological--imply the violence of their constant maintenance. Intrusion is a violent act. The boundaries of the subject are redeclared and renegotiated against its own will. Violence is expansive, so I'm focusing here on one small island: the way violence emanates from one's struggle for self-identification. The struggle between entities for self-identification is on-going and all pervasive, whether that struggle is at a given moment within one's personal life, or within the technologies and histories of the landscape they occupy.

I became fascinated with Balthus' paintings. The aristocrat is known for his dream-like, erotically charged erotic portraits of too-young girls, the daughters of his servants, spreading their legs; the girls looking are askew and the powerful man is claiming his desire as sublime. (Pettigrew 13:51) In 2017, a petition circulated to remove these paintings from the Met, or at least re-contextualize their presentation. (Elkin) The girls occupy a strange space in the art historical canon—to keep them in the museums underscores the legacy of their abuser, but to remove them erases a history of sexual violence and abuse of power that is no less foundational to our culture than other, more palatable subjects.



Figure 9: Balthus, Thérèse Dreaming, 1938.



Figure 10: Balthus, Thérèse sur une Banquette, 1939.

In *Self Portrait, after Balthus*, I flipped two skinned bunny hides upside down, and painted myself onto them in the pose and uniform of Thérèse Blanchard, Balthus' then 13-year-old muse. These paintings are overlaid with two mathematical diagrams—one a Cayley graph, one an enlightenment era astronomical chart. The two rabbits are pierced and strung up with fishhooks; dangling from the right pelt from fishing twine is a flattened rabbit's face, a scrap of skin with the word "yours" in cursive, and a dried red rose. Surrounding the two hides are four steel plates, floated with fishhooks scraping against metal this time, etched with drawings of a rabbit running and the accompanying words:

"It was entirely possible to become the prisoner of another artist's vision. By living fiction, both seer and symbol are fused together, and both are blown apart."

Self Portrait is an attempt to transfer the burden of subjecthood after violation onto another, through rites of animal symbolism, and de-territorialization of complex mathematical models into floating, rune-like sigils.



Figure 11: Betsy Ellison, Self Portrait, after Balthus, 2022.

All violence, but perhaps especially sexual violence, robs a person of their subjectivity and turns them into an object, a victim. My act of self-portraiture is so minor that, without the title, it could go totally unremarked. But by virtue of that gesture and its smallness, I am able to align myself to a subject without speaking. Through citation of Balthus, I transfer the burden of subjecthood and its associated obligations onto another, already long objectified/victimized. Without knowledge of the role of self-portraiture, the painting still functions as a sigil for this particular victim of sexual abuse, who floats through time and history unguarded, her status as a victim always superseding her interior reality. Even in repose, Balthus' girls were being violated: their most private thoughts, behaviors, and movements were taken from them and turned towards a powerful man's gaze. Their transfiguration

into his subject carries a violent, primal power charged by the disgust and dread that these paintings still conjure.

Bunnies are the estranged domesticated cousin of hares—one is soft, docile, stupid, and cherished; the other is wild and clever, often hunted, a symbol of fertility and magical ritual. Underneath the black and white bunny furs, Therese is in repose, surrounded by the swirling characters of geometrical sense-making. Dissociated from its intellectual function, the graphs appear more like runes. Cayley graphs are used in mathematics to depict dynamic associations within groups, astronomical charts for simplifying nearly incomprehensibly large celestial movements. It really doesn't matter, though. The floating symbols could signify anything; what's important is that they create a wall, an obscured meaning, by calling upon the visual power of objective reason, which, when displaced, just gets in the way. De-territorialized intellect now serves as a wall between the viewer and the painting. Nature, culture: the bunny is stripped clean, its skin exposed, so is the math, only the girl is interior and contained. The ordered body of the rabbit has been fragmented and re-organized to suit my own purposes.

Self-Portrait borrows the aesthetic methods of fragmentation and animal symbolism that arose in *Infinite Instruments*, and the architectural, institutional critique of *Dollhouse*; it transports the same organizational concerns of my earlier work away from abstract space and into the sculptural. Details like the softness of the fur and the delicacy of the dangling rose conjure romantic associations, offset by the sharpness of the hooks, the way they pierce the skin and scrape against the metal. The metal is burnished to almost a mirror-like sheen, forcing the viewer to get intrusively close to the plates in order to read them, and in doing so see their own fuzzy, distorted reflection.

Storytelling operates here to not exactly reclaim or disrupt a historical narrative, but rather to personalize and mythologize it. There are limitations to fiction. The past can be re-organized, but

ultimately a trauma is always being elevated by being re-told. Once again, once a stake is placed in the earth, the axis of the earth shifts. A violence once enacted cannot be undone, but it can be mystified.

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Q: When you see me, do you see me at all?

A: When I see you, I see a dog.

Q: When you see a dog--

A: Like it or not, time marches forward. Like it or not, there are some things we just accept. Some schematics are worthier than other schematics. Some symbols just come at us. You are here, inside a machine you don't and will never understand, in a machine that can be explained, can be sketched, but only partially. Machines and psychosis, robot dogs with empty eye sockets, psychotic crimes understood in metaphors of virtual space, its place-lessness. These crimes that have been enacted upon you, these dogs you pet and dogs that bite you, they are all the same, much the same, just floating runes in cyberspace.

Simple structures are crucial for meaning making. The challenge is to maintain order. Forming new mental models, forming new associations. In the place where philosophy dissolves into poetry, a leap of faith must be taken. But however you hash it, the violence always leaks out. A series of intricate pencil drawings formed the foundation for a new way of thinking, a way that emphasizes fragmentation and linear organization as metaphor for machines, architectures, and their failures of sense-making. *Infinite Instruments* understands that a tidal wave of information must be organized into a fiction, that any imposed order will lead to associations and projected storytelling. This approach was translated from page to screen in *the Dollhouse*, which attempted to embody the contradictions of lived-identity in new media through the metaphor of a middle class home. *Self Portrait, after Balbus*

joins that critical lens and engagement with material space with the animal metaphors and calligraphic text present in *Infinite Instruments* and *Here I Am Again*. This time, the critique was historical, of the complex place sexual violence sits in art history. Violence is embedded in the our shared technological and historical landscapes. By splitting something apart, severing it from its original context, and re-organizing it into bizarre and obscure fictions, I can protect my chosen subjects through the act of mystification.

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Figures

Figure 1: Betsy Ellison, *Howling Dogs*, 2021. 11x14", graphite on Bristol paper. From Infinite Instruments series.

Figure 2: Betsy Ellison, *Indirect Coordination*, 2021. 11x14", graphite on Bristol paper. From "Infinite Instruments" series.

Figure 3: Betsy Ellison, *Mirrorpalace*, 2021. 11x14", graphite on Bristol paper. From "Infinite Instruments" series.

Figure 4: Kyung-me, *conjunctio iv*, 2019. 36x24", ink, graphite and charcoal on Arches paper.

Figure 5: Olia Lialina, *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War (still)*, 1996. Screenshot from HTML website, archived on Rhizome.org (Net.Art Anthology). <http://www.teleportacia.org/war/>

Figure 6: Betsy Ellison, *The Dollhouse (still #1)*, 2021. HTML website. [https:// final.glitch.me/start.html](https://final.glitch.me/start.html)

Figure 12: Betsy Ellison, *The Dollhouse (still #2)*, 2021. HTML website.

Figure 13: Betsy Ellison, *The Dollhouse (still #3)*, 2021. HTML website.

Figure 14: Balthus, *Thérèse Dreaming*, 1938. Oil on canvas. Met Museum. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489977>

Figure 15: Balthus, *Thérèse sur une Banquette*, 1939. Oil on canvas. Christies. <https://www.christies.com/features/Therese-sur-une-banquette-by-Balthus-9808-3.aspx>

Figure 16: Betsy Ellison, *Self Portrait, after Balthus*, 2022. Bunny skin, fox feet, steel plates, fishhooks, dried red rose, charcoal, ink, gouache.