Openings

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Interior Design as a Matrix

The space of the gallery was divided according to the general templte of a two-floor family duplex and functions *hypertextually* – that is, by guiding the visitor through from one room to the next. The ground floor stands for the kitchen and living room; the upper floor – bedrooms and bathroom; and the staircase connects the two. The space of domesticity encloses a temporality where its own nostalgic past and future unfold, linked by associations.

The re-divided space answers to the architectonic mode of a superstructure when dismantled down to its theoretical subsets – the social, psychological, ideological and grammatical elements of the structural whole. The general template becomes allegorical of the fears, woes and helplessness of individuals in Western societies. The disintegration yields a labyrinth of counter-reflections that disturb the familiar premises of the gallery, forcing a concrete separation between the various works on view. This affects viewers' circulation within the show, and not least their mode of viewing. No longer held in the remote safety of an outside perspective, their motions are registered from the inside, out of the experience of occurrences taking splace within.

The viewer's admiration of the design is mingled with a sense of vacuity. It is a house unfinished. The "bourgeois" interior of the apartment may strongly resonate with the presence of a house, yet it forfeits the missing presence of the gallery. The architectonic partitioning reflects a conception lacking in a center or hierarchy, where no definite distinction between entry point and exit can exist, nor between the positions of opened and closed, private and public, temporary and fixed.

In the tension that arises between the real and theatrical – between a staged apartment and a actual gallery space – the sole element capable of securing a continuity is that of movement.

Emptiness - between Anxiety and Strength

A space lacking in a clearly designated purpose is unsettling in its meaningless. We find it difficult to accept a space that has no definite function. Words too fail in relating nothingness and void. Vacuity we see as threatening in as much as it lacks a definite concreteness one may hold on to.

An empty space slows down the progress of time to become like a continuous echo, lending absence a power no lesser than that we associate with presence. Absence makes existence uncertain – from its particulars to its very being, which might shrink and collapse into a nothingness, a void.

Unlike spatial conceptions prevalent in the West, which see a room as a kind of container that can fulfill its function only once replete, the aesthetic approach of Zen Buddhism conceives of spaces as commanding a presence of their own, with void too having a function to fulfill. Space is like a metabolism of inside and out, where no static or fixed states are possible but only a dynamism that responds to ever-changing needs.

The title of the exhibition, *Half Full* – a reference to the trope of the glass half full or half empty – points to a mental state of indetermination, to a zone of the in-between.

Attoun lends a physical presence to that grey area, which stretches between a supposedly hermetic and self-contained realm of images and a class of things that can never be contained in them, and that the eye can't see: love and longing and a yearning for closeness and privacy.

The Philosophy of Furniture / Edgar Allen Poe

"[…] In short, the cost of an article of furniture has at length come to be, with us, nearly the sole test of its merit in a decorative point of view – and this test, once established, has led the way to many analogous errors, readily traceable to the one primitive folly.

There could be nothing more directly offensive to the eye of an artist than the interior of what is termed in the United States – that is to say, in Appalachia – a well-furnished apartment. Its most usual defect is a want of keeping. We speak of the keeping of a room as we would of the keeping of a picture – for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting, suffice for decision on the adjustment of a chamber.

A want of keeping is observable sometimes in the character of the several pieces of furniture, but generally in their colors or modes of adaptation to use. *Very* often the eye is offended by their inartistic arrangement. Straight lines are too prevalent – too uninterruptedly continued – or clumsily interrupted at right angles. If curved lines occur, they are repeated into unpleasant uniformity. By undue precision, the appearance of many a fine apartment is utterly spoiled.

Curtains are rarely well disposed, or well chosen in respect to other decorations. With formal furniture, curtains are out of place; and an extensive volume of drapery of any kind is, under any circumstance, irreconcilable with good taste – the proper quantum, as well as the proper adjustment, depending upon the character of the general effect."[1]

On Ghosts and Hosts

In one of the rooms, a neon light with the words *ghost/host* displays its lettering like some universal message directed at ghosts and other invisibles to come and dwell in the here-and-now. The metonymic proximity of *ghost* and *host* single-handedly becomes a gravestone that tangled life with death.

The word *ghost* encloses a double meaning of opposing connotations, denoting at once the world of ghostly apparitions, trickery and chimeras as well as something resembling the essence of the soul and spark of life, when spirit and body are one. Ghosts hark back to the tales of days gone by, which served as a means of mediating the dead to the world of the living, as a way of negotiating between supernatural phenomena and solid entities. Ghosts marked the point where the past broke into the present, carried by a conflict of forces between the imaginary and exterior elements, and manifesting the human need of reviving the past and its personal ad collective recollections.

Notwithstanding their manifestation as unwelcome guests that one would readily banish, ghosts provoke, by their very presence, essential questions on the nature of life and death. In this sense, ghosts are the embodiment of the body/spirit duality, both as present and absent.

Sounds and ghostly apparitions are often approached in much the same way, as things that claim a presence in the world through corporeal-like entities, however ethereal. Both carry the attributes of timelessness and abstraction, as well as the antitheses of matter and anti-matter, form and formlessness, and a body without a body.

In *Soundless system* a rack of vinyl records speaks its muted sounds through a series of tropes in image and text. We flip through the records randomly, intermittently – just like the voice of a man we hear who reads from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The voice enters our ears in seemingly random fragments, with no beginning or end. Although the recording is faithful to the book's full chronology,

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[1] Edgar Ellen Poe, ***The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*** (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 15.

the random hearing pattern detaches the passages from their original context, turning them into fragmented phrases.

Frankenstein as a Work of Minor Literature

When she published *Frankenstein* in 1818, Mary Shelley could not have known that her book would become the forerunner of a new literary genre. Yet science fiction, the genre of popular fiction she practically inaugurated with *Frankenstein*, would go on to become associated with a predominantly male world of readers ad authors, owing to the scientific connotation of its subject matter. Undoubtedly ahead of its time, Shelley's novel confronts the rising ethos of technology with humanism and its values – a dual thematic embodied in the book by a monstrous creature pieced together from the dead bodies of human and animals. Owing its existence to scientific invention, the creature is both dead and alive, and doomed to an eternity of pain and solitude. (Incidentally, the creature was brought to life in November, just as this exhibition.)

As to the character of Frankenstein, Shelley infuses him with both the romantic-era ideals of the sublime and the libertarian ideals of the Enlightenment, with its focus on the individual and personal freedoms. Those sets of oppositions are developed in the book along with a multilayered literary thematic which branches out into topics such as cross-gender language, a myth of modernity, the 'other' as embodied by a pieced-together monster, parenthood and the question of origin, and legitimate versus forbidden knowledge.

In the show, the literary myth of *Frankenstein* is transformed and reworked into a domestic-seeming environment that lays forth the problematic of the nuclear family while allowing, at the same time, for outside realms of literature and fantasy to seep in and inhabit the home – and not just in the form of adventure stories and book passages, but above all through the ubiquitous presence of the digital screens that pervade our private domain on a daily basis: computers, tablet and mobile phones.

In their collaborative book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Jules Deleuze and Félix Guattari coin a category of writing that they term *minor literature*.[2] Informed by ethical and political underpinnings, the concept addresses writers who assume a minoritary position with regards to the language they write in, that of a majoritarian territory that they themselves do not

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[2] J. Deleuze and F. Guattari, ***Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

inhabit and cannot lay claim to. Opting to write in a "major" language that isn't theirs', such writers – with German-writing Kafka being the chief example – operate a "deterritorialization" of that language into foreign territory, an act that of its nature voices the concerns and status of minoritary groups in society, albeit in a fragmentized and muted manner. It is thus that minor literature, claim Deleuze and Guattari, assumes a deeply political meaning, whether it sets out to be political or not.

Moving from language to gender, literary critic Shoshana Felman ties Shelley's unique position as a woman writer in a male-dominated literary world to that of a minor author. Commenting on the writings of Barbara Johnson, a literary theorist who dedicated much of her work to Shelley, Felman reexamines the latter's qualification of Shelley as 'minor' in the Bloomian sense – as regards her situation within the romantic circle of which she was part – in view of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature:

> Johnson is interested in how Mary precisely turns her minoritarian stance into a literary resource, how she makes her peripheral position an enabling vantage point, which makes it possible for her to see and to disclose aspects of the world that from the center would have remained unseen, invisible. As a woman writer facing a male circle, Mary, Johnson claims, is the unspoken bearer of an affirmation: assuming rather than denying her minority (her marginality of gender and of genre), Mary transforms this minority (this negativity) into a powerful new literary vision.

> Johnson's concept of "the minor" – used somewhat defiantly (against the grain) – rejoins the innovative vision of French thinker Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their collaborative book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. […] Every minor literature implies a similar (insider's) deterritorialization of the hegemonic (major) in which the minor writer writes. In Johnson's reading, Mary equally practices "a minor use" of the hegemonic codes of the romantic circle. Frankenstein's disguised critique of Percy Shelley is one example of such a perniciously seditious twisting or "minorization," "deterritorialization," of the territory of the major.[3]

Looked at as a work of minor literature, the impetus behind Shelley's reinvention of language, genre and thematic becomes clearer, as well as the complexities of a work of literature that speaks in several voices simultaneously, so as to exclude a definite and all-inclusive interpretative approach. Minor literature comes to express, through its deterritorialization of the hegemonic, the silenced and fractured voices of a host of collective minorities, doing so

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[3] Shoshana Felman, "Afterward. Barbara Johnson's Last Book," in: Barbara Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 139.

precisely because of its position outside life, because of its constant state of coming into being and disintegration.

Similarly to Kafka's monkey, the monster created by Frankenstein (or yet Shelley herself) is able to address the fundamental questions of otherness, alienation and subjugation. Both these literary protagonist adopt a middle road between total capitulation to the human agency and a struggle against its dominant and hegemonic position. Shelley's monster comes to adopt human patterns of behavior and communication, thereby forgoing its own. By this it undermines not just its own codes and identity, but those of humans as well.

The Terror of Information Systems

The start of the third millennium is characterized by a world increasingly fragmentized and flooded with information. The World Wide Web, now instrumental in determining the cultural and political agenda, provides unprecedented access to myriad databases, a development that, together with its crucial contribution to capitalist economy, has leveraged it to a global outlet for ideas, resources and desires. The advent of new media has confronted modern societies with questions of knowledge, identity and control, spawning a vast virtual realm still largely uncensored which, owing to the various platforms of social media – facebook, twitter, instagram, whatsapp and the rest – has changed the very way we communicate.

The new culture of online interaction is based on words, signs, images and other representations that, detached from their original context, have revolutionized the way we process and consume data. Gone is the slow contemplation, which gives way to momentary glimpses that grasp the essential before moving on – an acquired skill befitting the current information age. Outside appearances become the main priority as contents lose significance. As the eye flicks through outdoor banners, TV channels, news headlines, websites and instagram feeds, our gaze grows increasingly fleeting and shallow. Desensitized in the face of an overabundance of stimuli, it settles into a superficial level of engagement and a certain apathy.

As hierarchies and authoritative vantage points collapse, reality becomes a multi-layered representation weaved of information shreds and isolated bits of data, with no center or ends. The technological strides forward accelerate the expansion rate of this reality image, allowing in turn for a cross analysis of self, culture and society – of a pertinent questioning of authenticity, integrity, and modes of communication.

Attoun builds a 'set' environment that sets ready the conditions for a viewing experience where one looks without "looking deeply." It exploits a potential already inherent in our passive-aggressive mode of engagement with the images that surround us, an engagement without commitment. But it is also a mode of viewing that does away with strict definitions and hierarchical orderings, playfully tapping into contemporary culture's "mash-up" sensibilities; it twists, uncovers and sets ablaze the tonal and rhetorical potential extant in words and images.

Hypertextualization

The refuge that Attoun finds in the disintegration of vocabularies, in the shrinking of lexicons and in a mental setup where words and images are conjoined – verbally or by association – so as to accommodate political, economical, religious or documentary needs, draws her deeper into a realm of word-play abundant with historical, cultural and technological connotations.

One of the linguistic mutations laid out on the exhibition's operating table is that of hypertextualization, a concept where text morphs into image and vice versa. As a compound of Latin idioms, its universal implications continuously melt and fuse to form additional word-play, which provides Attoun with a means of kneading text and image into new formations. The concept of hypertxtualization validates and perpetuates the state of multitude and excess, and Attoun, rather than try to force things back into order, responds to it and suggests new objective schemes without falling into hierarchies.

The array of images included in the show was appropriated from multiple sources – online imagery, instagram feeds and books. Sourced from different unique origins, the images undergo a unifying process that, through the square format of a camera phone, alienates them from their point of origin to recreate them as monochrome pencil drawings. However aesthetic in its intentions, this undertaking betrays something of a contemporary colonizing gaze. To a degree, the partitioning we see of space, image and text approximates certain scientific practices of invasive analysis – dissection, exposure, evacuation, exploitation.

The liberty taken of appropriating existing materials, of synthesizing together literary sources and historical-cultural currents, allows Attoun to counter the idea of a "natural state" of language and to manifest the concept of hypertextualizarion both mentally and physically.

The visual and conceptual agglomeration in the space builds up into a subversive and anti-canonical stance, based on the realization that our current behavioral patterns reflect a reaction to changes in technology, science and culture. Seeing herself as a product of cultural-evolutionary developments, Attoun questions the fact of a reality beyond the codes of image and language, the mental processes that govern our perception, input and output, or yet the assumption of being tethered to forces on a universal scale which determine our choices for us.

Passageways

The further we progress in the show, the clearer it becomes that it focuses on the fractured, the broken; the more evident the preoccupation with the elementary formalism of violence and the structure of desire. The split identity that overlooks us from the drawings and objects reaffirms the basic urge of finding a zone of connectivity, of locating a route of reconnection. The drawings that crowd the staircase wall commit the viewers to an extreme range of closeness, which permits only a fleeting gaze as one brushes through. The comfort of prolonged viewing is forfeited for an up and down movement. As the viewer cannot take in the abundance of visual and textual data, it is grasped in passing, like a flat wallpaper mass that stretches wide and across without center or edges.

Owing to their hyperrealist technique, this mass of drawings converges into a blinding visual intensity, such that only a closer, lingering look can uncover in its weaknesses. The gratifying overview falters as Attoun uncovers the shortcomings of her own painterly and "technological" feat; what appeared to be a flawless impression now reveals itself as only a cover-up, a concealing layer cracking up under fractures that cannot be mended.

The mechanical and artificial vision that results from showing the exterior and interior together only deepens our disbelief in the illusory vision on display. But just like in *The Wizard of Oz*, the drawing of the curtain, to unveil the mechanism that was always there, doesn't altogether dismantle the illusory power, nor does it dispel our belief in a magician whom we still trust to show us the way back home.

By leading us from one point to another, passageways – such as entrances, staircases or corridors – may be said to function hypertextually. Since in both the real world and its virtual counterpart there is no single binary "knowledge," every bit of information represents a multitude of cultural baggages that cross each other horizontally and vertically, continuously joining other bits of data to form new information mutants.

Areas of passage can sometimes be conceived of as no man's lands, as zones of danger and solitude. But they allow us to understand a thing or two about the nature of the self, about social and cultural constructs that are mostly disguised by social conditioning, indoctrination, habit, systematic speech, misconception and delusory myths.

Thematic-Mathematic Wallpaper

A visual climax of the show, the bathroom on the upper floor exposes the failings of the illusionist façade. A graphic pattern that covers the space in its totality ties together the strands of fantasy literature, science fiction, metaphysics, mathematics and mysticism by way of a visual emblem repeated time and over.

The continuous pattern shows the signs of a tedious and monotonous labor, presenting its obsessed repetition of epilepsy-inducing units throughout the surface – all except one area left blank, where the missing bathtub would have been.

The 300 or so individual drawings, mimicking a 1970s-style pattern of ceramic tiles, were each reproduced by hand. Despite the realistic veneer, in their interstices the fallacy of the illusion slowly shows through, pointing at the gap between an outer layer and the menace it purports to enclose underneath. We move from admiring the feat of this excessive labor to a state of burdening unease. And as if that were not enough, by looking at the round mirror on the wall, the flickering illusion that covers the walls is made twofold.

The bathroom acts as a visual parable of the pursuit of truth beyond momentary illusions. With each individual tile drawn by hand, their laying together becomes a metaphor for parallel events co-occurring in perpetuity.

In Praise of Illusion

Painter René Magritte (1898–1967) based his visual vocabulary on unlikely superimpositions of images and captions, nonsensical couplings and witty wordplay. With a background in advertising, Magritte began to develop a painterly style where words and images are dissociated from one another, to be given new meanings. The ordinary objects that figure in his paintings – pipes, bowler hats, suits, curtains, furnishings, wallpaper and more – pertain to a materialistic realm of bourgeois life. But despite the reifying clarity of Magritte's figurative technique, they seem to float like

immaterial apparitions, haunted by a fleeting vacancy that undermines the whole: Behind every curtain, hat or door, a ghost might be lurking.

Magritte's inventivity and superimpositions create a state where we, as viewers, are perplexed to find things in painting that we didn't expect – as opposed to the material certainties proper to a realist style of rendering. There is a decisive moment in his paintings where the fantastical arrangements begin to uncover the false transparency of signifying systems at large; the illusion falters to disclose the visual code in its particularity.

The conceptual immediacy of Magritte's paintings owes much to the matter-of-factualness of his figurative style, which imparts a blandness that veers between sheer boredom and a near-prophetic lucidity. His laconic representations, which betray the influence of publicity posters, raise the question of technological progress with regard to mediation, communication and the economy of desires. Nowadays it is evident that the more technology progress, the more it tends to compress and instrumentalize communication into bite-size units.

Magritte, for whom the painterly technique was an instrument for expressing ideas rather than an exploration of the medium, admitted to a certain boredom he felt with regard to painting – a boredom likewise associated with the tediousness of bourgeois life. But it is precisely this bland objectification of ordinary bourgeois paraphernalia that gave him a concise means of illuminating the darker corners of the soul. Magritte acknowledged that the ideas he expressed on canvas follow from desire, and are motivated by it; a desire that – seen as a creative force – can never runs its course but only increase.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari speak of writing as propelled by an inner mechanism of desire, what they termed *desiring machines*.[4] They look at desire as a primary and active force that never tires, an inner motor that activates us as individuals and continues, in turn, to produce ever more desiring machines. As a perennial and unrelenting force that never attains satisfaction, desire only finds fulfillment in its own continued reproduction and multiplication – just like Attoun's frenzied wall of identically painted illusionistic ceramic tiles.

If desire and longing are an inexhaustible fact, we desire just as we breathe, involuntarily and without thinking. Desire is built into us. It is unconditional and directed at no one; it is man.

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[4] J. Deleuze and F. Guattari, ***Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*** (London and New York: Continuum, 2013), p. 106.