

# Masks of Folly:

## Portrait of the Idiot

by Grace An

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# Abstract

*Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot* is an MFA thesis exhibit by Grace An that creates a portrait of the Idiot or, fool. The Idiot is an exception, one who interrupts and blurs boundaries in the refusal of rationality. Using folly and profanation to ask questions. The mask as a concealment of intellect, ironically *unmasks*. Drawing from the concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin, the exhibit functions as polyphonic utterances by way of the multitude. Multi-voicedness and the cyclical nature of the *carnivalized folk*, removes the concept of the individual. The site of the Idiot, the carnival, is a space where power structures are temporarily suspended. Offering the character of the Idiot as an unfinalizable being.

**Key words:** Idiot, carnivalesque, multitude, polyphony, masks, folk

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to Idiots.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	1
<b>List of Figures</b>	6
<b>Introduction</b>	8
Portrait of the Idiot	8
The Village Genius	12
<b>Part 01</b>	13
Dostoevsky's Idiot	13
A Bakhtinian Methodology	18
Filmmaking	19
Medium	19
Digital	20
Potter's Daughter	22
Clay	23
Bear Cave	24
Parts of the Mask	25
Ears	25
Closed Eyes	26
Mouth, Open	26
Cheeks, Back and Red	27
Cartoons	28
Mishima	29
Breaking Pots	29
Carnavalesque	30
Folk and Cyclicity	32
Idiot Tiger	34
Trickster	39
Masks of Folly	40
Hahoetal	42
Polyphony	43
Multitude	44
Singularities	46
Marketplace	47
This is Hell	48
Profane	51
Refusal	52
Socrates	52
Fools	52
Clowns	54

Privilege and Deception	56
Gendering the Idiot	57
The Female Idiot	58
Gaksi	59
Modelling	60
Create verses Capture	62
4:3	62
Video Sculpture	63
Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase	64
Polyphonic Screens	667
Verticality	67
The Pile	68
Arbitrary Numbers	69
<b>Part 02: White</b>	72
White	72
In Pursuit of White	72
Moon Jar	73
Buncheong	74
Hwajangto	74
Colour of Sorrow	75
Pious People in White	76
Javex	77
Dansaekhwa	78
Interpretation	79
Piero Manzoni	80
흰	81
The White Corner	81
Colour of the Idiot	81
<b>Part 03:</b>	83
100 Days	83
Storyboarding	84
Village of Idiots	85
<b>Conclusion</b>	88
Ritual and Answerability	88
Disappearance of the Idiot	91
Is This It?	93
<b>Bibliography</b>	94
<b>Figures</b>	97

## List of Figures

Figure 01.	Fyodor Dostoevsky, <i>The Idiot</i> , 1867, pencil on paper.	133
Figure 02.	<i>Tiger and Magpie</i> , 1392-1910 (Joseon Dynasty).	344
Figure 03.	Chung-Im Kim, <i>Magpie &amp; Tiger 2</i> , 2004, 25.4 x 25.4 cm, ramie, hemp, silk organza, natural dyes, silkscreen printing, machine, and hand stitching.	366
Figure 04.	Nam-Seon Cho, <i>Geunyeokkangsanmaenghokisangdo</i> (근역강산맹호기상도), 1908, 46 × 80.3 cm, Korea University Museum, Seoul, South Korea.	37
Figure 05.	O Yoon, <i>Untitled</i> , 1973.	433
Figure 06.	Zadie Xa, <i>The Conch, The Sea Urchin, and Brass Bell</i> , 2017. Pump House Gallery, London, United Kingdom.	433
Figure 07.	Soo-Keun Park, <i>Women at the Marketplace</i> , 1963, oil on hardboard, 11 x 21 cm.	47
Figure 08.	O Yoon, <i>Marketing I—Hell</i> , 1980, mixed media on canvas, 131 cm x 162 cm.	48
Figure 09.	Hieronymus Bosch, <i>The Garden of Earthly Delights</i> (Hell detail), 1490-1500, oil on oak panel, 205.5 cm x 384.9 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.	48
Figure 10.	Victor Masayeva Jr., <i>Ritual Clowns</i> , 1988, animation (colour, sound), film still. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America.	555
Figure 11.	Rebecca Belmore, <i>Coyote Woman</i> , 1991, graphite on paper, 33 x 50 cm.	57
Figure 12.	Shigeko Kubota, <i>Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase</i> , 1976, super 8mm film transferred to video and color-synthesized video (color, silent), monitors, and plywood, 168.3 x 78.6 x 170.2 cm. Gift of Margot and John Ernst, Agnes Gund, and Barbara Pine. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America.	655
Figure 13.	Félix González-Torres, <i>Untitled (Lover Boys)</i> , 1991, blue-and-white spiral candies in clear wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 355 lb. The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. New York, United States of America.	68
Figure 14.	On Kawara, <i>April. 24</i> , 1990, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 46.4 x 61 cm, Gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America.	700
Figure 15.	Hye-Sok Na, <i>West Lake in Suwon</i> , 1896/1948, oil on woodblock, 30 x 39 cm. Korea Database Agency, private collection. Seoul, South Korea.	76
Figure 16.	Chang-Sup Chung, <i>Return 77-A</i> , 1977, ink and paper mounted on canvas, 130 x 130 cm. Fund for Korean Art. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America.	78
Figure 17.	Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1958, china clay on canvas, 100.3 x 100.3 cm (unconfirmed). Purchased in 1974. Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom.	800
Figure 18.	Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlov, <i>Village of Idiots</i> , 1999, animation (colour, sound), 12 minutes, film still. The National Film Board of Canada. Montreal, Canada.	855
Figure 19.	Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlov, <i>Village of Idiots</i> , 1999, animation	

- (colour, sound), 12 minutes, film still. The National Film Board of Canada.  
Montreal, Canada. 866
- Figure 20. Grace An, Idiot Masks, 2022, ceramic and rope, 25 x 30 x 10 cm.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 977
- Figure 21. Grace An, Idiot Masks #3 & #6, 2022, ceramic and rope, 25 x 30 x 10 cm.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 977
- Figure 22. Grace An, Descent of the Idiot, 2022, monitors and plywood,  
50.8 x 210.82 x 25.4 cm (colour, silent), 5 seconds.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 98
- Figure 23. Grace An, Descent of the Idiot (detail), 2022, monitors and plywood,  
50.8 x 210.82 x 25.4 cm, (colour, silent), 5 seconds.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 98
- Figure 24. Grace An, The Pile, 2022, 3D prints, 12.5 x 14 x 5 cm x 33.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 98
- Figure 25. Grace An, The Pile (detail), 2022, 3D prints, 12.5 x 14 x 5 cm x 33.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 98
- Figure 26. Grace An, Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot, 2022, installation view.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 99
- Figure 27. Grace An, Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot, 2022, installation view.  
The Ada Slaight Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 99
- Figure 28. Grace An, baek-il, 2022, animation (black and white), 1 min and 24 seconds,  
installation view. The National Film Board of Canada.  
The Ada Slaight Transit Gallery. OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. 100
- Figure 29. Grace An, Prototype, 2020, ceramic and acrylic, 11 x 12.5 x 4.5 cm. 100



# Introduction

## Portrait of the Idiot

The Idiot is a fool. But I prefer to use ‘idiot’ over ‘fool.’ When people hear ‘idiot,’ they lose *interest*. This may be because of the word’s ableist implications or its association with the novel.<sup>1</sup> Its etymology comes from the Greek word, *idios* to mean ‘private person’ or a ‘commoner.’<sup>2</sup> One who *refuses to participate*. “A simple man; a clown.”<sup>3</sup> The general use of the word was associated with the character of the fool before being used as an insult on one’s intellect. Someone unproductive and *useless* to society. The word functions as a concealment of intellect in the same way as the figure I am trying to depict. It is also for the word’s appearance in specific literature that I decided to choose it over ‘fool’. The fool is broad and can be interpreted as rogue, clown, jester, or buffoon (see ‘Fools’). A clown is often malicious and a buffoon, ignorant. Although performing acts of folly, the Idiot is not inherently foolish. Wearing a mask of folly, *affords time to think*.

The Idiot appears in multiple works of literature with various cultural portrayals. Including Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and the Korean Idiot Tiger (see ‘Dostoevsky’s Idiot’ and ‘Idiot Tiger’). However, this thesis will not exclusively be on the novel. Using Dostoevsky and other Idiots, I define what an Idiot is to me. Building off the wise fool archetype, the Idiot has broadly been known in fool literature such as in Shakespeare’s fools, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, and Desiderius Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*. I use a literature-informed methodology that serves as the groundwork for the creation of this portrait but will not include in-depth literature reviews. Instead, this exploratory thesis examines the figure of the Idiot in art, literature, folklore, folk arts, and the disciplines of animation and pottery.

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, that is.

<sup>2</sup> “Idiot,” *Merriam-Webster*, August 21, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “Idiot,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. V, H-K (Clarendon Press, 1933): 21.

In the chapter “Idiotism” in *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung-Chul Han explains, “Playing the fool, that’s always been one function of philosophy.”<sup>4</sup> If the Idiot has always been one function of philosophy, I would argue that it is for art as well. What better figure has been known to hold up a mirror to society than the artist? The Idiot is an exception. In tarot cards, the fool is unnumbered. Standing *outside*, observing societal behaviour and sometimes disrupting it. I say *sometimes* because at times, the Idiot *refuses* to participate. Referring to its etymology, the Idiot is a private person. One that keeps to themselves. So much so that they become a fool to others. It is funny to me that its etymology comes from *private* when the Idiot also turns private into public. Like the clown, to make aware the private ongoings of people into the public space (see ‘Clowns’). The Idiot is a figure that travels in. Not a tourist but an *outsider* coming in to expose the folly of human behaviour that already existed. Not necessarily changing anything. I think of Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of ‘outsideness.’ According to Miriam Jordan-Haladyn, “Bakhtin conceives outsideness as a governing principle of the utterance; that is that way in which the self and the other both experience their respective bodies as outside each other and as difference.”<sup>5</sup> Dostoevsky’s Idiot Prince Myshkin, is introduced on a train with no luggage and Shūsaku Endō’s Idiot, Gaston Bonaparte also arrives with nothing to his name in *Wonderful Fool*. The Idiot interrupts. But must be aware of power structures in order to know when to do so. Thus not removing hierarchies completely. The Idiot is a temporary pause, like the carnival (see ‘Carnavalesque’).<sup>6</sup> To show us a life possible. The categories of society are not respected. The Idiot blurs boundaries. Disrupting the rules we have forgotten to question. The Idiot does this by speaking

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<sup>4</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017): 81.

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Jordan-Haladyn, *Dialogic Materialism: Bakhtin, Embodiment and Moving Image Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014): 10.

<sup>6</sup> “This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.” See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984): 10.

liberally in everyday speech. In wanton truth and in multiple utterances. Like drunkenness or children. From its etymology, the Idiot is also a commoner. Belonging to the folk.

Thinking around the Idiot is not just to ask questions about morality but about a purely human experience. In falling for the Idiot's folly, we are taught lessons of humility. To care beyond the individual self. The Idiot is not an individual but a singularity. Han describes, "the idiot is not defined by individuality or subjectivity, but by singularity. As such, the idiot is similar in nature to the child, who is not yet an individual, not yet a person."<sup>7</sup> The Idiot embodies the multitude. He is not a hero with a linear narrative to be *understood*. Dostoevsky attempted to write about "a beautiful soul" in his Idiot. A childlike figure. But Prince Myshkin is not our usual protagonist with agency or goal. Thus, he fails as a hero. The Idiot does not spell things out clearly and neither does he afford us the opportunity to do so. Idiot art functions not to be understood and to move past from, but to revel. In all senses of the word: carnival celebration, to dwell; to rise up. Like focusing on the details of a painting to the point of idiocy, the Idiot questions everything yet does nothing. Using boredom, the Idiot pays attention to the banal matters of the world. Finding beauty in them and asking what seem like simple questions. While it would be easy to say the character of the fool does not take things seriously, the Idiot also takes things *too* seriously. The subject of the Idiot may not seem explicitly political and that is its irony. Issues surrounding race and gender may not be expected when talking about the Idiot. In its refusal to appear smart and in addressing relevant issues, the Idiot becomes a way to ask questions that are not acceptable to ask. *Masks of Folly* prevents the opportunity to perform identity and as a result, speaks about its problems. With satire, the exhibit, portrait, and even the text itself is written in the fragmentary nature of the Idiot. Using Bakhtin's terminology, this text stands *alongside* the work.

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<sup>7</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 86.

The Idiot is not *stupid*. *He* withholds intellect (see 'Gendering the Idiot'). The Idiot is actually in defence of stupidity. Not as an insult on someone's intellectual capacity but "a deliberate stupidity"<sup>8</sup> To reverse the constant strive for rationality. Gilles Deleuze says, "stupidity (not error) constitutes the greatest weakness of thought, but also the source of its highest power in that which forces it to think."<sup>9</sup> Idiotism praises stupidity and folly. In the age of smartphones, smart cars, and smart homes, folly refuses late capitalist and colonialist attempts to make us smart. Rejecting the Romantic notion of the Enlightened individual. And hyper-individualised algorithms that prioritise identity. Instead, the Idiot returns to the multitude. Makes dumb again. The Idiot is a "modern-day heretic" and, "etymologically, heresy means 'choice.'<sup>10</sup> So ultimately, "Idiotism represents a practice of freedom."<sup>11</sup> Using heresy and profanities, the Idiot works in the removal of the individual. Blurring categories of identity. Masks of folly become the perfect apparatus in manoeuvring systems of representation. Shattering the image of a perfect, whole, and completed being. In order to reach humanity. Urging us to think of life as a becoming. Offering the Idiot as an unfinalizable being.

By creating a portrait, I use the Idiot to think through ideas. In the lens of theory, criticism, autobiography, and form. As a character that takes on different names, the subject of the Idiot is used in different ways. Including a methodology. At times, there may be concepts and ideas that seemingly have no correlation. Using history and different examples in art and literature, I create a portrait of my version of the Idiot. The way we write our characters illuminates problems in the different ways of being. The Idiot's main task is to ask questions. Which in turn, allows us to ask questions about ourselves and the way we live. In materialising the Idiot by way of masks, the character of the Idiot becomes a site of possibility.

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<sup>8</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays," *University of Texas Slavic Series*, no. 1, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 403.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968): 275.

<sup>10</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 83.

## The Village Genius

A pub in front of campus named “The Village Idiot” was recently changed to “The Village Genius.” This change is funny to me for several reasons. A genius is actually exclusionary. There is no village genius for the genius does not *stay* in their village. The genius is individual and aspirational. The Idiot would laugh at this. An Idiot is an Idiot *because* of their village. Even the hesitation around the word acts like the manner of the Idiot.

Although etymology does not necessarily outweigh a word’s meaning over time, ‘idiot’ has been used in literature for longer and before its appearance in psychology. It was only in the 19th century when the word ‘idiot’ was used clinically in a short-lived classification system. The hierarchies of mental capacity have historically been colonial and racial. With the attempts to ‘educate’ specific groups of people and make ‘civilised.’ ‘Make like us,’ meaning ‘to make White.’ It has been used to justify slavery and residential school systems in Canada. For this reason, I am sceptical of today’s binary category of disability, along with other categories of identity that are used as umbrella terms. It is difficult to talk about ableism in the same language as race, for example, because it does not consider capacity and debility. In this way of thinking, one is either abled or disabled, ableist or not. One cannot *become* abled or disabled. The cause of disability in the first place (which is often political), is ignored. Categories of identity do not recognize degrees of marginalisation. I am not attempting to revitalise the word with a new given meaning or to even urge others to start using the word in a new context. ‘Idiot’ has been used in different ways and alludes to specific references. I am not using ‘idiot’ to describe someone with an intellectual disability but a figure who challenges systems of power and pretension. Someone who is deceptively wise. Like the Idiot, I like how my work is often not explicitly political. Only to those who listen, or those who are tricked into listening to the fool’s speech.

## Part 01

### Dostoevsky's Idiot

Dostoevsky's Idiot, Prince Myshkin is not a wise fool nor a malicious one. He may not even be a fool at all. A moral character, Myshkin is an Idiot because of the way others see him. His incapacity to understand social norms. Similarly to the other Idiots I examine, Myshkin questions the lives of his surrounding characters. However, his role is not satirical or ironic. Myshkin does not *poke fun*. He is a naive fool with no goal. Like other Idiots, he is aimless. Myshkin's kindness and understanding amounts to nothing. However, through the failures of Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky reveals the social and political failures of humankind. Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* is about a seemingly ordinary man who finds beauty in ordinary things. Who has a deep love for the world and stops to appreciate them.



Fig 01. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 1867.

The fact that Dostoevsky made a sketch of his Idiot means he must have had an appearance in mind when imagining this character ([fig. 01](#)). In his drawing, the Idiot is smiling. Prince Myshkin's naivety is childlike and expresses his love for the innocence of children in the novel. He gets affected by simple things and expresses sadness freely. Despite his disregard for his own

appearances, he gets overwhelmed by the beauty of others. Especially in his love for Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova and Algaia Ivanovna Epanchin. However, it is not only with Myshkin's female love interests that we witness him being overwhelmed. His detriment is that he cares deeply for everyone.

He is also oblivious to material goods. Along with beauty, he finds wealth not in money and status but in others. As he says, "one might find a wealth of life even in prison."<sup>12</sup> In this moment, Myshkin describes witnessing an execution; this may refer to Dostoevsky's own near-execution experience in front of a firing squad in 1849.<sup>13</sup> Being poor is vital in both *The Idiot* and Prince Myshkin's character. This is emphasised in the embedded story of "The Poor Knight," a novel within a novel. Of a poor and simple knight who refers to Don Quixote (an Idiot) and foreshadows Prince Myshkin's fate. Dostoevsky's Idiot has no history, no family. He is a nobody. As Bakhtin describes, "which is sufficient only unto its own moment, which is valid only as past, or as future, or as present in relation to past or future, is for [Dostoevsky] nonessential and is not incorporated into his world. That is why his characters remember nothing, they have no biography in the sense of something past and fully experienced."<sup>14</sup> Some readings of the text interpret Myshkin to be an idealised human being but rather than a perfect person, I see him as an empathetic one. Not as a moral character to aspire towards but as a warning tale. If you are too kind and see the good in everyone, you will become an idiot. Dostoevsky's Idiot sympathises with everyone he meets. Giving too much and getting nothing in return. Ultimately, Dostoevsky's Idiot fails in the death of Nastasya Filippovna. His actions are a purposeless sacrifice. In attempts to be the purest being and to get rid of the ego, Myshkin becomes egoless, a non-being. Proving that a pure being does not exist and to pursue it is futile. *The Idiot* is about Prince Myshkin's failures.

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<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Dell, 1958).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky. The seeds of revolt, 1821-1849* (New Jersey, Princeton University, 1976): 124.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *Theory and History of Literature, vol 8*, ed. trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 29.

The most impure, flawed person is shown in the character of Nastasya Filippovna. Myshkin loves her because she has suffered. Nastasya is a 'lost woman'. Algaia Epanchin is her opposite. Like Parfyon Semyonovitch Rogozhin is to Myshkin as his double. Algaia is wealthy, intelligent, educated, good, and innocent (or at least with the appearance of being so). The central figure of the novel, Prince Myshkin, cannot be *The Idiot* without others. Moreso, as Bakhtin states, "according to Dostoevsky's plan Myshkin was already the carrier of the *penetrated word*."<sup>15</sup> An essential polyphonic trait of the Idiot appears in what Bakhtin calls "mass scenes" in Dostoevsky's works. A conglomerate of voices speaking over one another, separate from the author (see 'Polyphony'). To Bakhtin, and "according to Dostoevsky, all is simultaneous, everything coexists."<sup>16</sup> This polyphonic interdependence of the characters is why Bakhtin argues Dostoevsky's work to be a Modern Menippean satire. There is no individual in these grand scenes. The characters' speech exists "*alongside* other consciousnesses."<sup>17</sup> It is in this space, in the multitude of voices and bodies where the Idiot lives; the carnival (see 'Carnavalesque'). As Bakhtin makes clear: "It is as if Dostoevsky's landscape is animated and illuminated by the ancient public square's spirit of carnival and mystery: in the streets (outside) and in his mass scenes, especially the parlor scenes (inside)."<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky's Idiot is found, not in the individual or even landscapes, but through the conversations. This is not only in *The Idiot* but also *Notes from the Underground*, *Poor Folk*, the *Double*, and in his short story, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. "In the central figure of the Ridiculous Man there are clear traces of the ambivalent-serio-comical-image of the 'wise fool' and 'tragic clown' of carnivalized literature," Bakhtin notes.<sup>19</sup> A man's decision to commit suicide is halted by a little girl. Which somewhat counters the plot of *The Idiot*. Yet both figures struggle with understanding humankind's beauty

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<sup>15</sup> Dostoevsky, 242.

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 29.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 32.

<sup>18</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 249.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 150.



and the sublime. Exemplifying that the Idiot is an everchanging character, defined by others and his circumstance.

Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's novels "deal with a man's 'becoming.'"<sup>20</sup> But my thesis is not just about the story of *The Idiot* nor is it about Dostoevsky as a writer. I think Bakhtin would agree with my analysis that somewhat distances Dostoevsky's personal life from his characters. That Dostoevsky wrote "*above* personal style and *above* personal tone."<sup>21</sup> Rejecting the belief that he inserts his own opinion into the voices of his characters. Bakhtin believed "Dostoevsky was capable of representing *someone else's idea*."<sup>22</sup> In this way, Dostoevsky is "more a philosopher than a poet."<sup>23</sup> This thesis doesn't really address the obvious philosophical questions of the novel that are asked with the Christ-like figure of Prince Myshkin. If anything, this thesis is actually about Bakhtin's writings on Dostoevsky. And the characters in the novel, not as individuals and metaphors, but their dialogues with one another. Dostoevsky writes on overall human behaviour rather than individual characters, even in a novel centred around a singular character. While Bakhtin's texts are sometimes as misunderstood as literary analysis on Dostoevsky and Rabelais, the same goes for my project on the Idiot. Bakhtin's use of the medium of the novel to ask larger questions is what I am trying to do with the character of the Idiot. The main difference between Dostoevsky's Idiot and the one I attempt to describe is that Prince Myshkin does not deliberately disrupt. His role is in observing societal behaviour as an outsider. Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri writes, "Dostoevsky's tragedies simply stage the unresolvable contradictions of bourgeois life and culture in late-nineteenth-century Russian society. The unbelievable becomes real, as in a carnivalesque ritual, and the suffering of life is exposed to the laughter and tears of the spectator."<sup>24</sup> Whatever social commentary that reveals is

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<sup>20</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 392.

<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 15.

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 85.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 23.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004): 210.

not intentional to the character. Myshkin does not criticise the state and capitalism directly but shows it by revealing the suffering caused to the novel's characters, who are often at the mercy of societal standards they cannot properly navigate. Prince Myshkin may ridicule others such as idealists, atheists, and the wealthy, but does not hate them. The Idiot is about the human. Bakhtin writes, "Dostoevsky sees first and foremost its 'roots' in the human being."<sup>25</sup> Along with the Idiot, his stories are about the common, ordinary people. *People of the soil*. Specifically in the manner in which he captures everyday life.

While Dostoevsky is known to have been a Russian Nationalist and criticised Nihilism, his novels criticise the state and his figures are some of the best examples of Nihilist behaviour. Dostoevsky believed in the ability for Christianity to challenge power structures. He also understood that those ideals are not always possible. Shown in the failures of Prince Myshkin and his character's inability to be happy. The same notion of Christianity cannot be applied to every region and time. For example, many Christians in Korea view Buddhism the same way Christianity is viewed in North America. Often corrupt and conservative. A position Japanese writer Shūsaku Endō spoke from in his Idiot novel, *Wonderful Fool*. Christianity for some, offered the liberation of hierarchical oppression that the religion of Buddhism enforced. Which is in stark contrast from the way Buddhism is viewed in the West. Dostoevsky's Nationalism should also not be understood in the same lens that Russian Nationalism would be interpreted today. He was wary of rationality and progress in Russia brought forth by an Enlightened Europe. He was critical of Capitalism. This is why his Idiot characters don't have or give up all their worldly possessions. He believed in the eremitic life. He believed in the common. In his Idiot's deep love for people. Shown by polyphonic dialogues in his novel.

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 95.

## A Bakhtinian Methodology

I utilise what Miriam Jordan-Haladyn calls a ‘Bakhtinian methodology.’ A Bakhtinian methodology is dialogic, polyphonic and interdisciplinary. Throughout my thesis I connect Bakhtin to various components of my work, including animation and Korean mask dances. In *Dialogic Materialism: Bakhtin, Embodiment and Moving Image Art*, Jordan-Haladyn explains the way a Bakhtinian methodology is especially useful for engaging with moving-image art, because of the manner in which such works “draw upon multiple genres and media in the creation of contemporary moving image art.”<sup>26</sup>

Bakhtin’s concepts inform the conceptual underpinnings of my thesis project. His ideas around the carnivalesque, polyphony, dialogism, chronotope, heteroglossia, the grotesque, ritual laughter, and others, appear directly and indirectly throughout my text and help frame my exhibition. Especially in regard to the structuring of this written thesis. It has been written as a series of interconnected yet also fragmentary texts that, in true Bakhtinian fashion, makes it impossible to discuss one idea, theory, or visual language without engaging with others. Resulting in a methodology that borrows from others. Through a Bakhtinian framework I am able to explore the ways in which different mediums — ceramics, sculpture, 3D animation, and 2D animation on charcoal and paper — work together in my project, with the exhibit presenting them in dialogue. Jordan-Haladyn writes: “The use of a Bakhtinian framework therefore parallels the interdisciplinary potential of moving image art, providing a less discipline-bound examination of art forms that defy a strict disciplinary or material categorization.”<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin’s writings informed all of the work in the exhibit, helping me produce an installation that is made up of multiple utterances.

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 2.

## Filmmaking

Even outside of theatre, the way I work is similar to that of film. Animation and filmmaking inform my practice. Therefore, I often work long-form and in durational series. Which is probably why I enjoyed writing. I categorised my tasks in pre-, production, and post-. Organising my thesis chapters as a shot list. So when I experiment in sculpture, my way of making remains similar to how I approach film.

Filmmaking is dialogic. Others are needed. Even in independent films, one cannot create in isolation. While this can be said to other disciplines, film does this better than any other medium (see [Part 03](#)). Work made alone is a monologue. Animation is laborious and process-based. Creating the ceramic masks was meditative and quiet. Making a film was to enter a polyphony of voices. A choir of mismatching speech. Sharing ideas, whether they are positive or negative.

## Medium

The decision to work in ceramics speaks to my parents, genealogy, and tradition. Although I work in different mediums, animation is what I identify with the most. I normally work in 2D but decided to work in 3D to have it respond to the ceramic masks. My video sculpture piece wouldn't have asked the same questions about physicality and material if it were animated in 2D (see '[Video Sculpture](#)'). I present the digital mediums as physical in my sculpture and 3D prints. The wood in my sculpture was necessary for it to become an object in space. The 3D printed pile further questions this relationship between physicality in digital and analogue mediums. This dialogue of incompatible languages was important to the exhibit. Which resulted in an accidentally interdisciplinary show. The reason I did not create an exhibit using only my primary discipline of animation was because screens and digital objects were not suitable as the sole medium for the Idiot. There were answers I could not find in the digital. The digital masks can be seen as an experiment in *aura*. The ceramic masks are a conjuring. Or is it

the other way around? The choice to use clay as an Earthly material also fits conceptually as a fleshy medium (see 'Folk and Cyclicity'). Bakhtin discusses the importance of the symbol of the mask to the fool — fool's mask. Which I will explain later, is a strong component of folk arts and the carnival.

My father believes ceramics have foundations in drawing. The digital and analogue mediums in my exhibit start with drawing. They are also both durational and associated with the 'low.' Fitting for the Idiot. It creates duration. I believe animation does not just prioritise drawing but more importantly, motion. Traditional, hand-drawn, 2D animation, in which I work, is not strictly a digital medium. In my own work, I utilise many analogue techniques. Prioritising the element of time.

An independent animation filmmaker is required to have various skills across pipelines. It is an interdisciplinary practice by nature, stretching from image to sound. It often invites me to experiment with other disciplines. "The use of a Bakhtinian framework therefore parallels the interdisciplinary potential of moving image art, providing a less discipline-bound examination of art forms that defy a strict disciplinary or material categorization," says Jordan-Haladyn.<sup>28</sup> As a less narrative-reliant (not completely a non-narrative) filmmaker, I don't consider or work within genres. Instead I play with style, media, and material in each film. The interdisciplinary divergence in my thesis work may seem unusual to my practice but it is still one trajectory. Medium does not define my practice. Yet I always remain in the realm of animation. I try to avoid treating mediums recklessly. Without respecting disciplines. Animation actually takes medium very seriously.

## Digital

To work in the digital means to play with representations. Digital art doesn't require too much depth—literally and figuratively. All you need is an image, you can throw out the

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<sup>28</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 2.

negatives, *keep the scans*. Although I admire the ephemeral nature of the digital, there is no weight to consequences. Everything can be undone. There is no closure. It is perpetually present. I am weary of being influenced by technology. Creating digital work for the sake of the *new*. Digital for the sake of digital. I don't like to think about how technology affects my work. But affordances matter. Just as the knowledge of material and skill is important to me. I am not interested in the limits of a tool or its social impact but how it serves my project.

In French, *digital* relates to the fingers. *Tactility*. So it is funny to me that digital mediums and the internet have become associated with the immaterial and absence of space. The internet is a space. Maybe a censored, monitored forum replacing what was once the public square (see 'Marketplace'). In finding readymade monitors, hauling them around the city, and printing 3D models, I learned that working with digital mediums requires more than just the fingers, but the whole body. Animation means to 'bring to life,' but that life has to come from somewhere. Animation depletes you. There are very physical repercussions to the trade: carpal tunnel, eye twitching, jaw clenching, and in my case, even fainting.

In this text, I use digital art as a general term to encompass work created using a computer. And 'digital masks' as the 3D modelled masks on Autodesk Maya. I'm interested in the role of film/video and computer-generated objects' in a gallery space. Questioning the notion that the relationship between physical and digital objects is separate, as if not the same. I do this by placing various 2D and 3D objects in the ceramic masks, digital '3D' masks (which is 2D in the form of a video within an apparatus), and 3D printed masks. The ceramic masks would be widely understood as 3D and material but the 3D printed masks disrupt this balance further. The Pile is digital, actual 3D, but computer generated. Arguing that the digital is utterly material.

## Potter's Daughter

I am not a potter. Ceramics require devotion, a commitment I'm not willing to make. A question I often asked myself throughout this process was whether I even had the right to make pottery. My father is a potter. Knowledgeable in making glazes and firing at perfect temperatures. He helps with strenuous tasks around the studio, such as kneading clay. Yet without my mother, he remains idle. When my mother moved on to textile work, he attempted to work alone and frequently got frustrated. My father knew what he was lacking but did not admit it. He has been on perpetual hiatus. Seeing his daughter in his studio, my father must have reckoned with his own practice. He happily returned to his role as technician and teacher. His beloved right to nag and bicker. Although I am not a potter, I grew up alongside clay my whole life and am only now becoming a ceramicist who doesn't spin a wheel. Just as I am a filmmaker without a camera.

“Upon seeing the lump of clay that shot out of her body, she promptly began to mold it relentlessly in order to keep it pure and fine.” Like Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, my mother carefully wished for me to become an artist.<sup>29</sup> Moulding me in her image of an artist to make up for what she saw as her own failures. Painting, reading, dating liberally, and living alone. She never revealed it but was disappointed when I became a cartoonist. My mother hoped for me, individual expression while my father taught me the foundations of drawing.

As I near the end of my 20's, the desire to reject my parents and therefore pottery, now seems pointless. In my efforts to rebel with computers, I inevitably circled back into their arms with minor wounds of experience. And without the mastery of the craft. Genealogy is not destiny, neither is it a choice. Is it my obligation to continue the legacy of unfulfilled dreams? To be a mediocre potter? I feel the burden of generational duty. My parents would laugh at this.

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<sup>29</sup> This is one of my mother's favourite books and suggested I read it too.

## Clay

One of the lessons I've learned from my parents while working in their studio was to have responsibility for clay. Once fired, it cannot be turned back into clay. If not produced responsibly it turns into garbage. *What a waste of clay* — my dad says it's important to use as little clay as possible. Whether this was said out of fear of his daughter using all his materials or a meditative philosophy, I'm not sure. Objects need to be light and hollow on the inside. He says clay is one of the most *natural* mediums, whatever that means. Clay is not something to conquer. Along with respect, I was asked to be faithful to the clay. I probably wasn't. In hand-drawn paper animation, I use materials liberally. It is one of the only areas in my life where I am able to do so. Is there inherent beauty in materials? Immanuel Kant would maybe say yes. When working with clay, most of the choices made are out of the fear of it breaking. Ceramics are structured by so many rules yet limitless. Clay is forgiving and frustrating at the same time. How can it be hard yet so fragile? Clay is ridiculous. When working in the third dimension, one cannot trust their eyes, they need to continuously touch. The repetitive tasks in clay turn you into a fool. Continuously smoothing then adding texture, repeat. Reduce then add until you're not sure what you're doing anymore. Aware of shrinking, I had to start large. Decisions, not precise. Julian, my primary supervisor, told me to go too far — to a *stupid* degree. These masks taught me to care too much about details.

The original mask, in which the mould I used for the clay masks was made out of, took a long time to create. Sculpting repetitively, details were not added to it, but instead added only afterwards, once out of the mould. With each mask unique. I would lay a flat sheet of kneaded clay and gently let gravity push the clay into the pockets of the face. While sculpting in clay was delicate, creating the mould was harsh. It was large and heavy. It dried quickly. It required me to sand and hose it down with water outdoors, in the summer heat. A lot of sanding. Then slip was added (see [Part 02: White](#)). Painting and sculpting are similar in many ways.



Every fire was unexpected. I knew colour would turn out differently, regardless of my plans. This is the nature of high-fire ceramics. Although normally not a very spiritual person, I couldn't help but pray to the kilns. There may have been something to this. In the final fire, within the same kiln, most of my father's mugs broke. Yet my masks turned out fine; 9 out of 10 of the masks, that is. Which is an unusual ratio for a first-time potter. As I excitedly and foolishly pulled out each mask, my father said he was scared of me. After sculpting my first clay mask, I called down my parents to see. Immediately as a joke, my mother started to rub her hands together and bow in succession, praying to the mask. My father complimented them but not me. They talked about the masks as if they were alive. In complete disregard for their creator. Even to myself, once finished, did not seem like work I created.

Finally, I dyed rope with expired coffee my mother had collected from hotel rooms. I also wanted to have it a little frayed. The rope is something I had always wanted. It smelled like coffee in the studio for days afterwards.

## Bear Cave

I spent the spring and summer of 2021, in my parent's home recovering from a surgery that removed two benign tumours from my right hip. At the mercy of my parents, I became a child again while learning how to walk. Secluded in a pandemic 3 hours from the city, I spent those months indoors, bearing witness to my body relying on time. I spoke only in Korean and was forced to slow down. Listening to the sounds of a knife slicing cabbage, scissors cutting fabric, an axe chopping wood. Watering perilla seeds for summer barbeques while Korean television narrated the disparity of vaccine distributions in the background.

I would not have decided to work in ceramics if not for this visit. Working in clay was a return home, one that I've never lived in. Not having seen my parents for a year due to the pandemic, and not having lived with them for over 10 years, enduring my parents became a part of my methodology. Reckoning with family, destiny, and memory deeply changed my research

trajectory. Working in relative solitude and witnessing the folly of my parents, taught me humility, withdrawal of careerism and loss of individual self. In the many conversations with them, I learned the virtues of being an unsuccessful artist.

This work required 4 trips to my parent's studio in rural Ontario. Possibly 4.5, if considering the transport of the work. Before this, I made an effort to visit maybe once a year. The first trip was at the beginning of 2021, post-surgery. I started my conversations with Julian. Immobile, all I could do was read, which I didn't mind. Surrounded by endless trees and unseen pottery, I couldn't help but think, *my parents are Idiots for living this way*.

The second trip, I started production on the masks. I was heavy and made arrangements not to return to the city for a while. Once the masks were drying, I returned to Toronto for appointments. On the third trip, we heated the house on a cool summer night. Fire #1: I created what was known as the ceramic masks I presented during the colloquium. When I returned, many months had passed. The masks looked different than I had remembered. It was winter and I was lighter and happier. I had finished the majority of the digital component of the exhibit and started production on a new film (see [Part 03](#)). Fire #2: It was winter and we benefited from the additional heat. With each fire, the masks got smaller and smaller. Lighter and lighter.

## Parts of the Mask

### **Ears**

Ears are a strange shape. Resembling the handle of the mugs my father makes. Their articulate designs are functional as if a labyrinth into the brain. Many Asian cultures see large earlobes as a sign of wealth and good luck. The ears on my masks are probably at fault for the being mistaken as Buddhas. But they have also been mistaken for my ex-boyfriend, and me. Large ears are for listening and thinking, deeply. The ears are important.

## Closed Eyes

As a teenager, I painted a mural of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in front of my highschool's philosophy classroom. When painting Sartre's eyes, who had one blind eye, my English teacher pointed out that the philosopher had one eye towards the world and another, internally towards the self. This reminds me of the *gaksi's* downward looking eyes and that of the Idiot Tiger's (see '[Hahoetal](#)' and '[Idiot Tiger](#)'). The eyes are aware but at rest and sleeping. Byung-Chul Han says, "shutting one's eyes offers a symbol for arriving at a conclusion."<sup>30</sup> Most writers I admire have insomnia but I sleep very well. I can fall asleep in most places and often sleep 10 hours at a time. I worry I won't ever be intellectual. As goddess of folly, Moria says of sleep, "the most precious of all things."<sup>31</sup>

## Mouth, Open

*"So it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying."*<sup>32</sup>

The mouth is open but not speaking, a silent speech. The Idiot's mouth is at ease, without the compulsion to speak. He does not care to express himself. Yet in his parodying discourse, "distance it from the mouth' as it were, by means of a smile of deception, mock its falsity and thus turn what was a lie into a gay deception."<sup>33</sup> The choice to leave the mouth open was one of the first choices made when planning these masks. Initially, I planned on having sound but I think it works better in silence, waiting for audiences to respond. "Capitalism dislikes silence..."<sup>34</sup> because, "silence gives rise to listening."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 71.

<sup>31</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly* (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), 42.

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): 129.

<sup>33</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 402.

<sup>34</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 37.

Stress from corporate workplaces gifted me with the habit of jaw-clenching. At my desk, I would do jaw exercises and leave my mouth open, looking like an idiot. Some exercises require you to intentionally clench as hard as you can, then release.

### **Cheeks, Back and Red**

Originally, the cheeks were made to be more circular. But once I added more texture to the white, I embraced its rough and *natural* appearance. Natural, as in, revealing the clay body. The rough application of the white slip was thick and coated with a knife (see [Part 02: White](#)). Then I would remove it from the cheeks. It felt like reversing wasted years.

The back of the mask is most of what I looked at when I started to create them in multiples. Making sure it was thin and even. Continuously gliding it over with a wet sponge. After a while, I began to do this quickly. It was almost rhythmic and I knew what directions to move in. First the lips in a circle. The nose, the eyes, circling to the forehead, down to the cheeks in several loops, that connects to the chin, then finally the ears. Why did I leave the back of the mask unglazed but glossed? Because I had to.

The red is a recipe built by my father. Possibly with iron. He uses this colour in his own pots and mugs. Which is why I opted for it rather than a brighter red like my prototype ([fig. 29](#)). Red resembled the clay body when wet. With slip being a type of clay, I didn't want the masks to look too far from how I looked at them when sculpting. Minus the gloss. The glaze had to often be mixed. When brushed on, it dried almost instantly. I used an old bamboo brush that looked like it was meant for ink. With a wide base and narrow tip. It wasn't efficient. I could've used a more precise brush. The brushstrokes were meant to appear effortless, but not without care. In one stroke. One stroke, over, and over again. Although, this is hardly evident.

Some areas, I had wiped off too much of the glaze. Others, I had applied too much. Causing it to drip. I had little control over much of the final output. The masks are messy and imperfect. Not demonstrating the full discipline required to make them. There may have been an easier, more accurate way to create them. Either with a lower cone or different glaze. They

didn't have to be made this way. Since they are not meant to be rinsed or eaten out of. But my father knows one way of doing things and I wanted to follow along.

## Cartoons

The cartoon, like folk arts, is a medium of the Idiot in that it functions as a mask. Masks being the symbol of the folk, the medium of cartoons conceals 'serious art.' They work in the manner of the carnival, reversing the order of 'high' and 'low' art (see 'Carnavalesque'). "Sharing the playful dynamism of the carnival spirit is the self-reflexive animated cartoon, particularly that of the comic genre."<sup>36</sup> Terry Lindvall and Matthew Melton compares the cartoon to Bakhtin's carnival in "Toward a Postmodern Animated Discourse: Bakhtin, Intertextuality and the Cartoon Carnival": "Bakhtin's notion of carnival provides an inspired model for analysis of comic genres like the animated cartoon, genres often overshadowed by more 'significant' cinemas."<sup>37</sup> Although very different, pottery and cartoons have this in common too. While both have made their way into gallery spaces, pottery has difficulty removing its 'craft' title. Similarly, the cartoon cannot remove its commercial aesthetic and its purpose as entertainment. When in the gallery, it is only referential and used to comment on commercialization. Maybe there is no point defending cartoons. Even my choice of word in 'cartoon,' makes fun of the attempt to turn comics and animation into higher forms of art. To call myself a *cartoonist* rather than an animator, and animator instead of artist or filmmaker, is intentional. I prefer to be ignored by gallerists, curators, and networking artists who ignore cartoons. What's funny to me is that as well as having 'low' status in common, pottery and animation are both incredibly laborious crafts. This is an important quality to recognize in the Idiot. Working very hard, only to be

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<sup>36</sup> Terry Lindvall and Matthew Melton, "Toward a Postmodern Animated Discourse: Bakhtin, Intertextuality and the Cartoon Carnival," *Animation: Art and Industry*, ed. Maureen Furniss, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994): 63.

<sup>37</sup> Lindvall and Melton, 63

disregarded. To be used or laughed at. Perhaps pottery, folk arts, and cartoons do not demand to be taken seriously.

## Mishima

I have always been weary of black lines. I understood them to be the distinguishing factor between low and high art. My father told me to use shadows instead of lines. Art teachers suggested coloured lines. Yet I would continue to paint in black or sometimes brown lines. Even if that meant having to cover them up afterwards. Later influenced by the way of C.A.F.K.A. (cartoons aren't for kids anymore), I started to use the black line liberally. The thick black line is fundamental to cartoons. The line layer on celluloid film consolidates the paint layer. Maintaining a cartoonish look in my work is important. The goal is for the audience to laugh first then realise the Idiot has something to say. The mask of the Idiot is meant to conceal intellect and wisdom. Disregard for the black line is meant to confine cartoons to children and commercial work. In the ceramic masks, it was important for me to utilise the technique of *mishima* for this reason. As well as it's connection to Korean Buncheong pottery. "Mishima is a decorative technique of Korean origin. An incised area or line is filled with plastic clay of a contrasting color. When partially dried, the surface is scraped flush, revealing the design underneath."<sup>38</sup>

## Breaking Pots

Potters often toss one object from their recent fire to test the durability of the whole. Working in clay is largely about not having it break. Instead of thinking of aesthetics, the potter's goal is to be wary of cracks. A crack is a disease. It can appear at any stage of the process and will grow unless remedied. I find these limitations liberating. In most traditional Korean mask dances, the mask is destroyed after the performance to prevent bad luck. Following this

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<sup>38</sup> Glenn C Nelson, *Ceramics: A Potter's Handbook* (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960): 195.

superstition, I decided to participate in ceremonial breaking. I broke the original mask which I made the mould out of after all masks were created. It was uneventful and I didn't feel a thing.

## Carnavalesque

The carnivalesque is a space where class and power structures are temporarily suspended. Appearing in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and François Rabelais, the carnival setting blurs boundaries and unites separations. “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid,” describes Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>39</sup> An important act of the carnival is decrowning. What is sacred is stripped of power: Kings are de-crowned, monks are deprived and lustful. What is holy is profaned, made fun of; rules are temporarily suspended. As Bakhtin writes:

It is to some extent ‘life turned inside out,’ ‘the reverse side of the world’ (*monde à l’envers*). The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*.<sup>40</sup>

Free and familiar speech is public dialogue that is held regardless of class, removing distances. This inspires new ideas, often with laughter. It is dialogue that is found in everyday life, ordinary speech. Laughing through grievances. Who, through carnival, become a type of Idiot. Remembering its etymology, the Idiot exists amongst the public sphere of the people. From Romantic individualism and the push towards hyper-individualism today, there is a disappearance of festivals that has carnivalesque qualities (see ‘Disappearance of the Idiot’). Bakhtin lamented the absence of this carnival space and therefore, free and familiar speech:

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<sup>39</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 123.

<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 123.

Carnivalization made possible the creation of the *open* structure of the great dialogue, and permitted social interaction between people to be carried over into the higher sphere of the spirit and the intellect, which earlier had always been primarily the sphere of a single and unified monologic consciousness, a unified and indivisible spirit unfolding within itself (as, for example, in Romanticism). A carnival sense of the world helps Dostoevsky overcome gnoseological as well as ethical solipsism. A single person, remaining alone with himself, cannot make ends meet even in the deepest and most intimate spheres of his own spiritual life, he cannot manage without *another* consciousness. One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone.<sup>41</sup>

In the carnival, the individual is not prioritised. In contrast to a singular voiced monologism. Everyone has a voice. In actuality, another's speech can be taken and parodied. The high is reversed with the low with the switching of roles. The fool becomes a king. In Korean mask dances, performers ridicule aristocracy by wearing a mask. In the carnival, this becomes acceptable. Dongchoon Lee draws the similarities of the Pongsan Mask Dance to Bakhtin's carnival in, "obscene expressions, homonyms, puns, number play, antonyms, and rhetorical expressions [which] lend themselves especially well to analysis in terms of Bakhtinian carnival."<sup>42</sup> When Bakhtin talks about the carnivalesque, he highlights the importance of folk culture and its ability to unite common people and subvert power structures.

What is important in carnival time is that it is temporary. The carnival eventually ends. The carnivalesque doesn't actively seek to make change but creates dialogue by enacting possibilities. Of imaging authority stripped of power and profaning the sacred. Rules don't count and customs are suspended. There are no consequences. Not that class dynamics do not exist but that they don't matter in carnival time. Play reveals existing disparities. The carnival is an unmasking. In the present moment of the carnival, everyone is a participant: the carnival is *lived*. Compared to theatre, there are no spectators. "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.

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<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 177.

<sup>42</sup> Dongchoon Lee, "Medieval Korean Drama: The Pongsan Mask Dance," *Comparative Drama*, vol 39, numbers 3, 4 (Western Michigan University, 2005-2006): 276.



While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit.”<sup>43</sup> However, the carnivalesque can exist outside the carnival in a carnival spirit or, carnival sense of the world. “*Carnivalistic mesalliances*. A free and familiar attitude [that] spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things.”<sup>44</sup> To make carnival means to *make strange the world*. This is the Idiot’s spirit. The carnival is the site of the Idiot.

## Folk and Cyclicity

Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of the cyclical nature of the folk which is important to understand his surrounding ideas and therefore many of the concepts I address in my work. To go back to the etymology of ‘idiot’ coming from common, the Idiot belongs to the folk. As Bakhtin defines as, “the all-embracing common life of the whole human race.”<sup>45</sup> Folkloric qualities in my exhibit are most strongly presented in my accompanying film, *baek-il* which is an adaptation of a Korean folktale that features the Idiot Tiger (see ‘Idiot Tiger’ and ‘100 Days’). But also in the material and the symbol of the mask which draws from elements of Korean folk culture (see ‘Masks of Folly’). Particularly Hahoe masks, which are visually similar to the ceramic works and come from folk origins (see ‘Hahoetal’).

To Bakhtin, themes of the folk, folklore, folk arts, and folk culture are connected with reincarnation. It is regenerating and renews life: “love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, stages of growth.”<sup>46</sup> This is the basis of Bakhtin’s concept of the *grotesque* which is defined by his Rabelais series that outlines writer François Rabelais’ artistic method. Specifically in the way he depicts the human body, clothing, food, drink and drunkenness, sex, death, defecation, and gluttony. And the fool’s laughter is at the centre of it. Bakhtin’s Rabelais series

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<sup>43</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984): 7.

<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 123.

<sup>45</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 239.

<sup>46</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 225.

reveals how the crude realities of life are interconnected. The stages of life from fertility to death, is a continual process of rebirth. In the setting of everyday life, vulgarities like laughter, chewing, drinking, yawning, and farting brings the body back to earth. In describing the “material life of the body,”<sup>47</sup> folklore lowers humans to an earthly plane where it is made utterly aware that *a body is a body*. In contrast to the Romantic notion of the individual. The grotesque is an utterly human concept. Folly gives bodily form. The folk removes ego. It produces new growth: “Growth is not tied down here to a specific *individuum* as his own growth; it exceeds the boundaries of any individual personality. Everything in the world is in the process of growth, all its objects and phenomena, the whole world grows.”<sup>48</sup> The folkloric body is not in static isolation. But it is always moving. For this reason, I had the digital masks in my exhibit constantly looping. Animation was required for the monitor sculpture, compared to static images. In order to depict him as an ever changing, mobile character. Looped for cyclicity. This is trait of the Idiot. I did not want to end the videos in a smooth loop. For it is in the nature of the Idiot to end, abruptly.

Laughter and profanity are a coming down back to Earth. And what better medium than clay to depict the Earthly body. The Korean word for *clay* is also used for *soil*. It is *dirt*. I look towards the Trickster figure who uses dirt as renewal (see ‘Trickster’): “What tricksters in general like to do, is erase or violate that line between the dirty and the clean. As a rule, trickster takes a god who lives on high and debases him or her with earthly dirt, or appears to debase him, for in fact the usual consequence of this dirtying is the gods eventual renewal.”<sup>49</sup>

*Carnivalized folk* is “folklore that predates class distinctions.”<sup>50</sup> Folklore passes on stories of morality and myth using humour, told by people despite and in spite of class. Regardless of class. Using familiar speech and conversational language passed on by many

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<sup>47</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 55.

<sup>48</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 239.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998): 177.

<sup>50</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 105.

mouths. Folklore is cyclical in the sharing and repeating of stories but also in their characters. The Romantic hero is whole and fixed but the folkloric figure is not an isolated one. The Idiot is not static, never finished. Compared to the folly of the Renaissance or of Medieval Enlightenment, I draw my portrait from folk laughter: “Enlightenment laughter is primarily mocking and satiric – subverting the folly of the hierarchy in its feasts of fools, asses, and administrators – medieval comedy affirms, renews, and revitalizes the old, bringing forth new birth, life, hope, and laughter.”<sup>51</sup> Enlightenment humour is in reference to and relies on hierarchy in order to parody it. What Bakhtin and I borrow from low comic folk art is the subversion of hierarchical power structures using laughter. This is embodied by the festival of the carnival. Therefore in constant renewal and becoming, the Idiot becomes an unfinalizable being. This concept is similar to Nietzsche’s eternal return. But Nietzsche is beyond the scope of this thesis. So I will leave it at that!

### Idiot Tiger

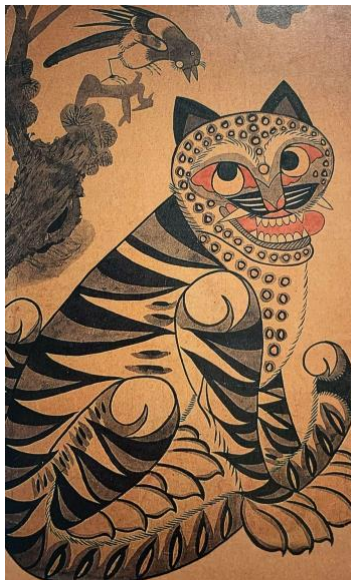


Fig 02. *Tiger and Magpie*, 1392-1910 (Joseon Dynasty).

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<sup>51</sup> Lindvall and Melton, 63.

When thinking of the Idiot, I think of the tiger. In Korea, the tiger is a contradictory yet ubiquitous figure. Known as the Idiot Tiger in English, the tiger often plays the role of the fool in Korean folklore. Drawn in a foolish appearance with its eyes apart and tongue sticking out ([fig. 02](#)). His role is both positive and negative. Both a hero and antagonist. The Korean tiger is a mountain spirit. Its symbol was used as a ward for disease and demons. In other cultures such as India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia, the tiger is also a mythical symbol and sometimes deity. However, unique to Korea, the tiger becomes an Idiot. Simultaneously worshipped and profaned. This was most likely in attempts to turn fear into humour. To transform the fear of the tiger into something funny, when tigers were more rampant in the Korean peninsula. Folklore was used as warning tales for children.

The tiger has also been used to represent the wealthy, the people, the nation, and even the Korean spirit at large. Idiot Tiger is often depicted smoking. Associated with wealth and leisure. The aristocratic tiger is lazy and oblivious to the hardships of life. He is a privileged character that is made fun of. But this is not always the case. Perhaps more familiarly, the tiger is also seen as a brute force. Military power and the nation. The Korean military used to wear embroidered badges of the tiger as a sign of loyalty. Civil rank and scholars bore the crane, symbolising eternal life. This is ironic yet related to the tiger's depiction as a foolish aristocrat. What is most interesting to me is how the figure of the tiger is deeply connected to Korean people's sense of collective identity. If the tiger as the wealthy and military might is made fun of, why is the tiger also used to represent *the people*? This was so common that Korea was referred to as the 'Land of Tigers' or country where people talk to tigers. One creation story describes the people of Korea as being born from a tiger dressed as a monk. This self-parodying familiarises all of these contradictory bodies that wouldn't normally get along. It is *grotesque*. The Idiot Tiger is used to speak about oppression upside down and from all sides. "Tiger is a reflection of

society and oppression,” says artist Chung-Im Kim.<sup>52</sup> Both oppressed and oppressor. Tiger folklore makes fun of nationalism as separate from the folk while recognizing that it also belongs to it. The Idiot Tiger carnivalizes.

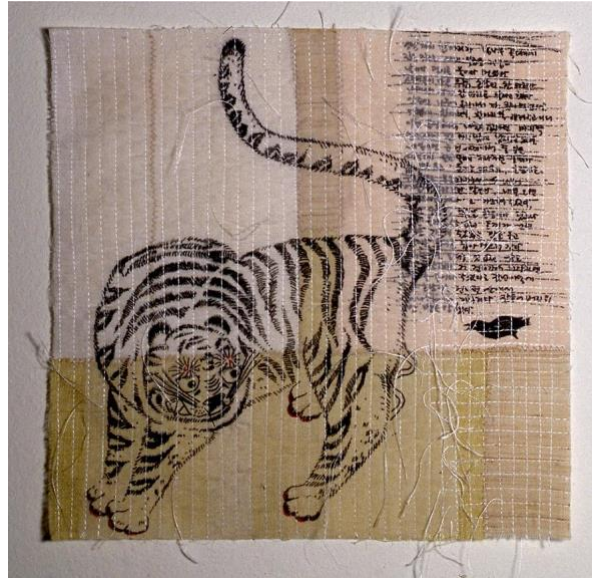


Fig 03. Chung-Im Kim, *Magpie & Tiger 2*, 2004.

Chung-Im Kim described the tiger as the “bridge in-between upper and lower classes, [that unites] by laughing together.”<sup>53</sup> Kim described having folk influence in her earlier *bojagi* pieces that often involved scenes of the Idiot Tiger and magpie (fig. 03). *Bojagi* or *jogakbos* are Korean textiles that are often hung. Which is also the medium my mother works in. ‘Jogak, jogak,’ meaning ‘piece by piece’ are fragments that make up a whole. Usually from scraps of *hanbok*, traditional Korean garment. Using the Tiger and magpie folklore, Kim draws from the tiger as a symbol of power, authority, and money. The tale of how a ferocious animal was outwitted by a tiny magpie. Yet the exposed thread in Kim’s magpie and tiger indicates folklore as a story continually being weaved in each retelling.

<sup>52</sup> Chung-Im Kim, personal communication, Toronto, 28 October, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Chung-Im Kim, 2021.

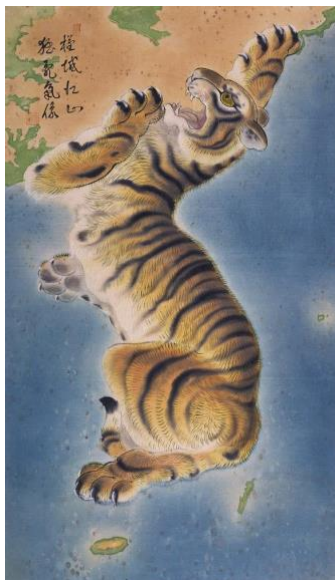


Fig 04. Nam-Seon Cho,  
*Geunyeokkangsanmaenghokisangdo*  
(근역강산맹호기상도), 1908.

The identity of the tiger as representing Korean collective consciousness, resulted in efforts to eradicate the tiger during Japanese rule. In the “varmint extermination project,” of 1910-1945.<sup>54</sup> The massacre of tigers paralleled Japanese imperial rule, strengthening Korean people’s association to the tiger. The tiger as a symbol of a strong nation became one of hope, perseverance, and also grief. “This is because the ferocious tiger had been adopted as the symbol of Korea and Korean nationalism under Japanese rule: the independent nation and Korean ethnic identity were both symbolized by the tiger.”<sup>55</sup> Quite literally shown as a “zoomorphic mapping in contrast to Japanese imperialism. This went against the Japanese geologist, Goto Bunjiro’s drawing of Chosŏn [present-day Korea] in rabbit form, which defended Japanese Manchurian territory in 1903. The nationalist Choe Nam-Seon, as a founder of *Sonyeon* magazine in 1908, utilized the imaginary topography of colonial Korea in the form of a vigilant tiger, used as a colonial tactic of psychogeography against Japanese imperialism” (fig. 04).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Yongwoo Lee, “Taxidermy of Time: Tigers as Chronotope of Continual Coloniality in Korea,” 2 or 3 *Tigers*, ed. Anselm Franke and Hyunjin Kim, 2017, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, 7.

Scholar, Yongwoo Lee describes the tiger as chronotopic. Embodying continual coloniality. More specifically, the taxidermy tiger, who is preserved in time. This near-extinction of the tiger comes with a loss of understanding in the Korean landscape and identity.<sup>57</sup> Tiger folklore often starts off with “once upon a time, when tigers used to smoke...” Since then, tigers must have quit smoking. Recently in South Korea, there has been an effort to contemporize folk culture through reimagining Korean folk arts with the symbol of the tiger at its forefront. Emblematic in the song popularised in 2020, “Tiger is Coming” by LEENALCHI. In the song, there are multiple voices overlapping each other. Waiting for the tiger’s return, “The sky is falling and the tiger is coming down.” The 2 or 3 Tigers exhibit at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2017 and accompanying publication, describes the tiger as a “liminal figure.” Similar to the North American Indigenous Trickster (see Trickster). In the mythologization of extinct and endangered animals, is the tiger merely a referential symbol? What is hoped for the tiger’s return? Wealth? Protection from pandemics? National power? Collective folk power? What will he then be used to represent? The Idiot Tiger is not an Idiot because he is a stupid character, but because of his contradictions. Being subject to various human interpretations, is foolish. Perhaps this is the tiger’s trick.

The tiger changes from tale to tale. He is deceptive, greedy, impatient, and malicious. Sometimes, the tiger is merely a foolish animal to remind us what makes us human by comparison. The tiger is also generous, understanding, and ultimately misunderstood. I see the tiger’s role in folklore as revealing the behaviour of humans. Once we are capable of understanding the tiger, do we understand these stories are not about the evil or foolish tiger but humans. In my film *baek-il*, meaning ‘100 days,’ I animate the story of Ungnyeo, bear woman (see Part 03). Where a bear and tiger must quarantine in a cave for 100 days in order to become human. In the story of Ungnyeo, the irony is that the tiger is more human than the bear

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<sup>57</sup> The remaining Korean, or Siberian tigers went north to Russia, which are actually a subspecies bred by Mongolians with their local tiger population.

who eventually becomes one. Acting as a sort of folk subversion, I incorporated elements of Bakhtin's folkloric grotesque into my characters. I often see a shallow interpretation of the Korean tiger and wanted to defend the folly of the Idiot Tiger. In most tales, the tiger continuously maintains one task. Intervening in human affairs. This questions the moral dichotomy of dumb animal (tiger), and intelligent human. Playing with the position of the fool between the animal and human as continually shifting. It is foolish of us to assume animals want to be human. The tiger as a transitory figure makes showing *baek-il*, in the Ada Slight Transit Gallery, a fitting space (see [Part 03](#)).

## Trickster

The trickster that appears in many Indigenous cultures in North America, often in the form of a coyote. Similar to the Korean Idiot Tiger, the Trickster Coyote is almost a mythical being. My main basis of the Trickster comes from Allan J. Ryan's *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Which looks into the humour of the Trickster figure in visual arts. The text is written in a dispersed manner, with non-sequential quotations of writers and artists inserted throughout. In the manner of the Trickster and arguably, the Idiot as well: "Trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Tricksters is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities."<sup>58</sup>

The Trickster *pokes*. The Trickster is mischievous like the rogue, clown, and fool (see ['Fools'](#)). Also greedy, deceptive, gluttonous, a thief, and sexed. Using mockery and irony to make fun of others. But he is not entirely malicious nor does he perform like the clown. Like the Idiot, the Trickster is above rules of morality and uses his position to comment on social behaviour. The Trickster is a rule breaker and boundary tester. And he (as it is most often 'he'), lives between chaos and order (see ['Gendering the Idiot'](#)). But unlike the Idiot, holds the position of creator and destroyer.

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<sup>58</sup> Hyde, 7.



Like other fools, the Trickster also has been compared to the devil: “The Devil and the trickster are not the same thing, though they have regularly been confused” (see ‘This is Hell’).<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Trickster does not act in isolation. Allan J. Ryan’s description of Trickster of having ‘multiple voices’ is similar to that of Bakhtin’s polyphony: “At once open-ended, unfolding, evolving, incomplete, the narratives and a multiplicity of authoritative voices.”<sup>60</sup> The Trickster, like the Idiot, is polyphonic. As Gerald Vizenor further explains, “The ‘trickster is a comic discourse, a collection of utterances in oral tradition.”<sup>61</sup>

### Masks of Folly

The mask is an obvious symbol for the persona because of its ability to conceal or disguise identity. Masks best function in displaying multiple and various identities. Therefore, it makes sense they are seen in so many different cultures’ ritual practices. So, what is a mask? “A form of disguise or concealment usually worn over or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being.”<sup>62</sup> Taking this definition of masks, I am not making masks. Here are the general parts of the mask’s functions: (1) to disguise or conceal identity, (2) to enact or establish another being, usually in the form of a face, a *false face*, (3) to be worn within or as part of a performance, (4) in a carnival, theatre, or ritual setting. Rather than a disguise or concealment of identity, my masks remove the self altogether. The act of concealment is still present in depicting the figure of the Idiot. The notion of the word *idiot*, and its *character* acts as a mask. The right “not ‘to be oneself.”<sup>63</sup> By hiding intellect, wearing a mask of folly affords us time to think. The figure of the Idiot is a mask and by utilising irony and folly, rips off other masks. Ironically, *unmasking*.

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<sup>59</sup> Hyde, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999): xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Gerald Vizenor, quoted in Ryan, xiii.

<sup>62</sup> Paul S. Wingert, "Mask," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 10, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 163.

Almost always, the mask is worn to perform for someone other than the self. It is not an expression of self but a hiding of the self. The mask is worn for others. It is not an imposed, performative disguise. But a choice to bear a new identity. Become someone else. Performing rejects oneself. It functions as both a metaphor and inductor for the self. Instead of using these masks to 'establish another being,' I am conjuring a new persona in the form of a portrait.<sup>64</sup> What makes these different is that the mask-objects I am working with, are not meant to be worn but hung or displayed. By removing the performer, these mask-objects are not animated but remain a dormant portrait. This is a non-functional mask. It is meant to be hung as decoration. The wall wears the mask. It is heavy and one cannot see through it. It is folly in both definitions of the word. Foolish and ornamental, descriptions that are often insulting to artists. It is not meant to be used for the purposes of performance. The mask with deep ties to folk culture, belongs in the place of ritual (see 'Ritual and Answerability'). Being used in mourning, harvest, and ceremonial practices. Because of their varied uses, I could not provide an in-depth context to multiple cultures' masks. Rather, I will discuss the role of the mask specific to my exhibit and the influence of Korean shaman masks. However, my masks do not serve as a ward or performance. I will speak on this later. To Bakhtin, the mask is about movement and joy. His description touches on several aspects of my thesis project:

Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. Of course it would be impossible to exhaust the intricate multiform symbolism of the mask. Let us point out that such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are per se derived from the mask. It reveals the essence of the grotesque.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Wingert.

<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

## Hahoetal

Initially, I did not have Hahoe masks in mind when creating the test mask for this project. I later made the decision to pursue this connection. Hahoe is a folk village in Korea. *Tal*, means mask. Hahoetals are a series of masks with a set of characters, connected to a set of stories performed with music, theatre, and dance. Its name also means ‘returning’ or, ‘coming back around’. Fitting Bakhtin’s cyclical description of folklore nicely (see ‘[Folk and Cyclicity](#)’). The performances are open and done publicly. Some of the characters include: the scholar, shaman, warrior, nobleman, bride, and fool(s). Here is a brief description of the legend of the Hahoe: a deity approached a sculptor in a dream to construct 12 masks. But had to do so without being seen by other humans. So he barred off his home with rope. Eventually, his girlfriend missed him so much that she sneaked past the rope while the sculptor was working on the last mask, the mask of the fool. Right then, he died on the spot. And the chin of the *imae* (fool’s mask) was left unfinished. The girlfriend became *gaksi* (see ‘[Gendering the Idiot](#),’ ‘[Gaksi](#)’).

There are actually two fool masks. The deceptive fool in the *choraengi* and the wise fool, *imae*. Which I associate with the differences amongst idiot, rogue, clown, fool, and buffoon (see ‘[Fools](#)’). The *choraengi* is mischievous. *Imae* is naive. However, one may wonder why my Idiot was visually based on the bride over the fool in the *choraengi* or *imae*. The *gaksi* (*gaksital* or, bridal mask) is the most popular, a deity. I’m not the first to reinterpret this mask. Before primarily focusing on woodblocks, artist O Yoon created masks similar to Hahoetals ([fig. 05](#)). And Canadian artist Zadie Xa as well, in her 2017 exhibition, *The Conch, Sea Urchin, and Brass Bell* ([fig. 06](#)). It was also famously featured in the comic series turned television series, *Gaksital*. Which also looks to be a combination of the unfinished *imae* and *gaksi* mask.



Fig 05. O Yoon, Untitled, 1973.

Fig 06. Zadie Xa, The Conch, The Sea Urchin, and Brass Bell, 2017.

Commonly, these masks are made of wood. It is not common to make masks out of clay because you cannot wear them. They are heavy and fragile. Although, it is common to hang them. Even though the influences are obvious, my masks are not a recreation of traditional Korean masks. They are not supposed to be and do not serve the same purpose as a ward or performance. In Korea, artists responsible for creating these masks were believed to be summoned by deities. Regarded as mystics but still a commoner. Similarly to the village idiot. This was not a noble task. The craftsman would need to abandon their individuality.

## Polyphony

Polyphony is a musical analogy used by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe multiple voices in the work of Dostoevsky: “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels.”<sup>66</sup> In music, polyphony consists of simultaneous yet individual melodies. It makes sense that Bakhtin would use polyphony as a metaphor to describe a multitude of voices. To Bakhtin,

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<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 6.

“music is the metaphor for moving from seeing (such as in ‘the novel is the encyclopedia of the life of the era’) to *hearing*.”<sup>67</sup>

In Dostoevsky’s novels, in particular *The Idiot*, a multitude of characters each with separate consciousnesses are united by an event, a mass scene. In which the variety of personalities interact and coexist while simultaneously speaking. Although titled around the central figure of Prince Myshkin, *The Idiot* is not based around an individual hero but rather on the multitude of surrounding voices (see ‘Dostoevsky’s Idiots’). Even individual characters’ speeches are multi-voiced. Within the chaos of opposing voices, the purpose of polyphony and the core of Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy is to achieve a dialogue of truth, to unravel societal disparities. An example of polyphony is Nastasya Filippovna’s birthday party, where various men bidding for her marriage, their families, uninvited guests, and Rogozhin’s drunken entourage literally speak on top of one another. These scenes have *carnival spirit*. “Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a fully realised and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero.”<sup>68</sup> By polyphony, Bakhtin’s concept inspires the giving of voice. The permission to answer back. I utilise elements of polyphony throughout this project, especially in creating a portrait of the *Idiot* with the use of multiple and repeated faces.

## Multitude

It was important for these masks to be made in a serial production and in multiples. Multiple masks produce a polyphonic quality (see ‘Polyphony’). As if the repetition of faces speak to one another. Interrupting and overlapping. Although serial productions are common in ceramic disciplines, this conceptually fit with the element of the *Idiot* that *embodies the multitude*.

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<sup>67</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 430.

<sup>68</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 63.

Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri outline the characteristics of the multitude in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. The multitude are not the people, “the crowd, the masses, and the mob.”<sup>69</sup> A crowd, mass, or mob is passive. The people are the “*tyranny of the majority*.”<sup>70</sup> Who unify under a single cause or identity. In contrast to *individuals*, “the multitude is composed of a set of singularities.”<sup>71</sup> Singularities cannot be defined under a category of identity whether that is nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. That risks producing sameness and becomes susceptible to manipulation.

What emerges within this attempt is a fear of challenging existing categories and identifying with experiences outside those assumed boundaries. Power and colonialism cannot fit into a cohesive narrative of victim and victimizer. People cannot be divided from those with privilege and those without. Thinking of collective struggle in terms of singularities and the multitude highlights the strengths in differences and collectivism without using vague terms such as ‘community’. Which has been adopted into meaning pretty much anything: “the term community is often used to refer to a moral unity that stands above the population and its interactions like a sovereign power. The common does not refer to traditional notions of either the community or the public.”<sup>72</sup> A utopic sense of community and justice relies on an us and them binary. The false sense of community is idealistic and recreates existing systems of power. Therefore, the “multitude is a class concept” as outlined by Hardt and Negri.<sup>73</sup> As well as “also a concept of race, gender, and sexuality differences.”<sup>74</sup> Even Bakhtin credits the creation of hyper-individualization to capitalism: “The process of separating out and detaching individual life-sequences from the whole reaches its highest point when financial relations develop in

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<sup>69</sup> Hardt and Negri, 100.

<sup>70</sup> This concept is one explored by Alexis de Tocqueville in the first volume of his *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Hardt and Negri, 99.

<sup>72</sup> Hardt and Negri, 204.

<sup>73</sup> Hardt and Negri, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Hardt and Negri, 101.

slaveholding society, and under capitalism.”<sup>75</sup> Whereas the multitude is plural. Apparent in Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque. “The multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself.”<sup>76</sup> By embracing multitude, polyphony removes the individual.

## Singularities

Once removed from the mould, each ceramic mask was sculpted independently from one another, without reference. Every mask has unique differences in their form, markings, and glaze. The masks are singularities. Whereas the digital masks are identically reproduced. The repetition of faces reflects the multitude of voices. Altogether, a polyphony of utterances waiting for a response from the viewer. I marked each mask with ‘安’, the same stamp my parents use.<sup>77</sup> It felt conflicting yet humbling to create something beyond myself. Smart technology personalised to every individual that erases the Idiot, actually does the opposite. Singularity can also be used to describe the advancement of technology to the point it becomes self-aware or, ‘smarter’ than humans. “Artificial intelligence [that] transcends human intelligence, potentially erasing the boundary between humanity and computers.”<sup>78</sup> Folly reverses the Neoliberal capitalist and colonialist attempts to make us smart, educated, civilised. That emphasises the notion of the Enlightened, Romantic individual. The isolated, genius artist who only prioritises self-expression. Giving over to the multitude removes ego. Again remembering *idiot’s* etymology, Hardt and Negri’s definition of the multitude connects Bakhtin’s concept of carnival to the common: “This is the logic of the multitude that Bakhtin helps us understand: a theory of organisation based on the freedom of singularities that converge in the production of the common. Long live movement! Long live carnival! Long live the common!”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 215.

<sup>76</sup> Hardt and Negri, 100.

<sup>77</sup> ‘An.’

<sup>78</sup> Chris Toumey, “singularity,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 1, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Hardt and Negri, 211.

## Marketplace

The marketplace is a forum for democratic speech or even gossip. It doesn't have to be the marketplace. It can be the street, the theatre, taverns, or cafés. Similar to the carnival spirit, the open space of the public sphere invites commoners to talk amongst one another. What Bakhtin would call free and familiar speech of the carnival, where people can commune regardless of class. This setting for dialogue amongst the people, encourages questioning and eventually, collective action. The public square, in the way that it had once functioned, may no longer exist. Replaced by online discourse, mesalliance space for dialogue is disappearing.

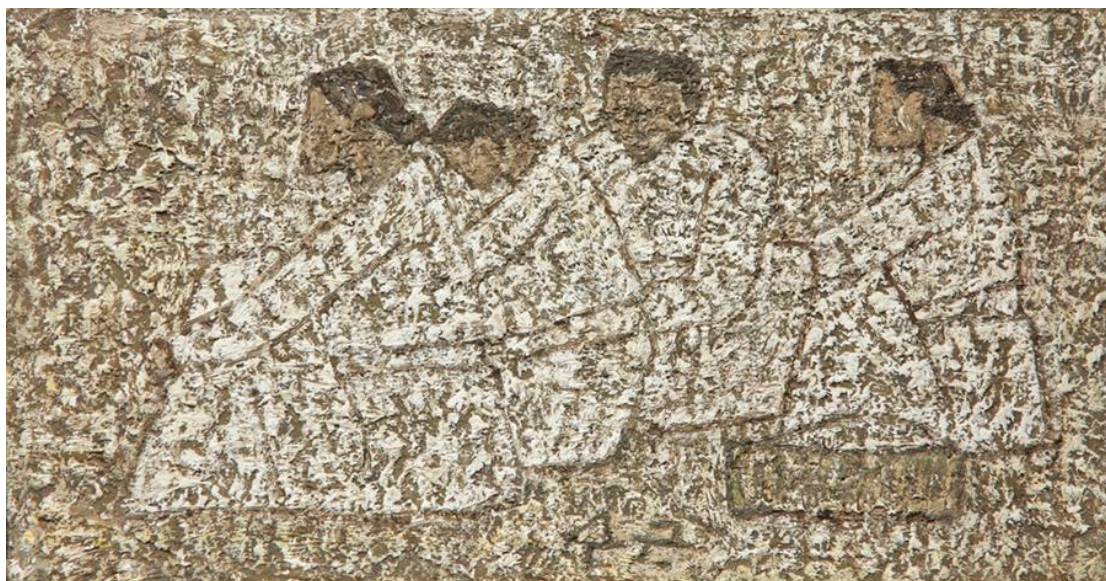


Fig 07. Soo-Keun Park, *Women at the Marketplace*, 1963.

I will describe Park Soo-Keun's *Women at the Marketplace* to talk about this space in which the Idiot functions ([fig. 07](#)). The bodies of four women, dressed in white, sit casually on the ground facing the same direction. Their skin colour is similar to the background. An earthy brown and white. Lines and even the painter's signature blends into the painting as a whole. Done in an almost pointillistic style, this painting is similar to that of Park's other work that translates to paintings and murals. Which often shows commoners or women in their daily lives. The brushwork appears carved out as if Park was revealing what had already existed. It cannot



be read that this is a marketplace without the piece's title. So why did I choose this work to talk about the setting of the marketplace? It is because it depicts a scene of everyday life. The movement and noise of the composition demonstrate the public sphere in which I describe. These bodies are not rendered as individuals. Donning white garment, the colour of the folk and Korean collective identity (see [Part 02: White](#)).

## This is Hell

I cannot think of a better artwork or series of works that depicts a fleshy multitude of utterances than Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490-1500 ([fig. 09](#)). It is riddled with symbolism and a hellish polyphony. There is not enough time to go over all the details of each painting of the triptych, yet alone make the comparison to another work. However, I will briefly look at the polyphonic qualities of Bosch's Hell, the right panel of the series, and O Yoon's *Marketing I—Hell* ([fig. 08](#)).



Fig 08. O Yoon, *Marketing I—Hell*, 1980.

Fig 09. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Hell detail), 1490-1500.

I have chosen to look at the two works together because O Yoon had been one of the primary artists I had looked at over the course of my research. Including his woodblock prints of the tiger, and *gaksi* mask (see '[Hahoetal](#)'). His interpretation of Hell is done in a style he is not normally known for but was very likely in reference to Bosch's work. Translating Bosch's Hell into a Korean and Buddhist context. His work in general, aimed to show the political turmoil of Modern Korea in the 1980's and even viewed it as a method of political resistance. In the multiple layers of Hell, O Yoon illustrates monks and wealthy figures as clothed, authoritative bodies.

Both works simply put, have themes of consumption. Surrounded by nonsensical bestiality, in Bosch's Hell, order is turned upside down. While this consumption is that of lust and sexual pleasure, O Yoon interprets the chaotic mass of Hell as a consumerist one. O Yoon's work can simply be read as a critique on capitalism and American soft power over post-independent Korea. With the clashing of the bold Coca-Cola logo, apparent on the left of canvas, and reference to popular Korean ice cream brand, Bravo Cone. Messages of consumption are advertised throughout with texts, "drink, drink," and "eat, eat!" O Yoon's *Marketing I—Hell* even looks like an advertorial poster with graphic text at the bottom that translates as, "is the creation of consumption science and art?"

However, I am most drawn to the troll holding up a body by their hair. To a flaming mirror that shows an artist painting. My initial thought is to assume this is O Yoon depicting himself as an artist. Or the conflicting image of a Western artist, bearing a beret. In which he simultaneously acknowledged and rejected throughout his practice. I assume this because this image is placed in a similar position to Bosch's own self-portrait as 'Tree-Man'. I mention this because both figures are out of place. They are self-reflective, either through a literal mirror or sideward gaze. To return to the Idiot who I argue exists in a carnival setting similar to Hell, these self-portraits stand in as the position of the Idiot as an outsider amidst chaotic mass.

Polyphony is Hellish. What these works tell us about multitude is important to the ideas that surround the Idiot.

If multitude and polyphony are linked to Hell then the pure, isolated body belongs to Heaven. The most important difference to notice in Bosch's triptych is that the bodies (human, animal, and deity) in Heaven, compared to Hell and Earth are shown as individual. The separation of the monolithic body is the original profanity. Multitude is seen to be the work of the devil. The process of deindividuation is a fall from grace. In other words, what makes us human.

In the New Testament Exorcism of the Gerasene Demoniac, demons exorcised into swine refer to themselves in the plural. "The demoniac is at once both 'I' and 'we.'"<sup>80</sup> A concept even Dostoevsky was aware of in the appearance of demonic multiples in his 1873 text, *Demons*. Shown in both paintings, Hell has festival spirit. There is a link between carnival, multitude, and Hell. Ironically, the subjects of these Hell landscapes don't appear to be suffering but rather, bored. They have resigned to their fate. Suffering is routine. Hell is business as usual. This is actually in contrast from O Yoon's other work where figures appear famished, in trance, prayer, and rage. Signature of the Reality and Speech or the 'People's Art' movement that he prominently belonged to. In some ways, Bosch does this too. Centre of the panel, there is a person resting their face, disaffected by the vulgar reality that surrounds them.

Today, we see a loss of festivals (see 'Disappearance of the Idiot'). With only an illusion of community. Although my work has a connection to my family, their practices, and culture, my interest around the multitude comes from feeling an absence of community. It is a longing for collective strength that goes beyond the categories of identity. Byung-Chul Han criticises the Neoliberal flattening of culture. Arguing that digital communication is designed to keep us apart. Driven by hyper-individualism, he argues we are losing the capacity to form communities.

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<sup>80</sup> Hardt, Negri, 138.

Carnival and festival spirit is being replaced with “a hell of the same.”<sup>81</sup> In Bosch and O Yoon’s paintings, Hell is plural yet its inhabitants are bored. Showing that the most Hellish fate is when nothing changes. Summarised by Elvis Costello’s 1994 song, “This is Hell”:

This is hell, this is hell  
I am sorry to tell you  
It never gets better or worse.

### Profane

Profanation is the main task of the Idiot: “*Profanation*: carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc.”<sup>82</sup> Using carnival mesalliances, profanation describes the Idiot’s questioning nature. Debasing sacred falsities with laughter. “Profane means profanum, in front of the temple.”<sup>83</sup> To be in front of the gods. “Profanation’ means taking things that belonged to the gods.”<sup>84</sup> However, this does not mean secularisation. Nor a flattening. In excess profanation and flattening of culture, the Idiot’s role declines. There is nothing left to challenge because everything is rendered the same. The Idiot is left with no opportunity to speak. As Han explains, “The profanation of culture brings about its disenchantment. Today, the arts are also increasingly rendered profane and disenchanting. Magic and enchantment — the true sources of art — disappear from culture, to be replaced by discourse.”<sup>85</sup> An abundance of images and information removes mystery. However, the Idiot disenchanting to re-enchant. Profanation can also return the body to an earthly plane, a bringing down to earth. *To take on flesh*. To make human again (see ‘Folk and Cyclicity’).

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<sup>81</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Daniel Steuer, 2020): 33.

<sup>82</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 123.

<sup>83</sup> Hyde, 156.

<sup>84</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 53.

<sup>85</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 24.

## Refusal

My portrait of the Idiot is not smiling but instead has rested eyes and an open, relaxed jaw. This is specifically against the tradition of the Idiot that smiles, laughs. Even the Korean idiot tiger, who has its eyes apart and tongue sticking out, is dressed in folly ([fig. 02](#)). However, I argue that the Idiot is a rested spirit that does not participate in acts of rejection but instead embraces acts of refusal. To Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “refusal is not just a ‘no.’”<sup>86</sup> In criticising the academy and social science research, they argue that refusal can reverse colonial gazes. “Refusal, by its very existence and exercise, sets limits on settler colonial knowledge.”<sup>87</sup> The refusal to participate in Capitalism and colonialist research becomes an act of resistance. Han describes the Idiot as a “figure of resistance.”<sup>88</sup> By acts of refusal, the Idiot becomes so.

## Socrates

In many cases, what I am describing in the Idiot is Socratic irony. Pretending to know less. In the setting of a dialogic symposium, Socrates is known to use self-mockery and the concealment of intellect to reveal truth or expose others. Bakhtin describes Socrates as “the central hero of the genre (the dialogues).”<sup>89</sup> As Julian says, Socrates is the original Idiot.

## Fools

I interchangeably use traits of the rogue, clown, fool, buffoon, and even Trickster to describe the Idiot. This may be confusing. I will go over the main differences in these figures which explains my decision to name my portrait, the Idiot. However, this is also a futile task. The Idiot does not have a defined set of characteristics. Contrary to what I attempt to do in this thesis. There will not be large claims or rules. This is not a manifesto but a portrait. This will not

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<sup>86</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, ed. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014): 244.

<sup>87</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 245.

<sup>88</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 83.

<sup>89</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 24.

name any new theories. The Idiot has always been here. So this is contradictory and misses key elements at times. Bakhtin differentiates what he calls dialogic categories of the fool:

We have the level-headed, cheery and clever wit of the rogue (in the form of villain, a petty townsman-apprentice, a young itinerant cleric, a tramp belonging to no class), the parodied taunts of the clown and the simpleminded incomprehension of the fool. Opposed to the ponderous and gloomy deception we have the rogue's cheerful deceit; opposed to the greedy falsehood and hypocrisy we have the fool's unselfish simplicity and his healthy failure to understand; opposed to everything that is conventional and false, we have the clown—a synthetic form for the (parodied) exposure of others.<sup>90</sup>

The Idiot is seen in many archetypes and possibly extends to the *madman*, *hermit*, and *beggar*. In short, the Idiot is in all categories: rogue, clown, and buffoon. Or more precisely, there are traits of the Idiot in all of them. The Idiot is a fool but not all fools are Idiots. The main difference being, the Idiot is intelligent and has a sombre nature. The rogue is intelligent as well and takes on the Idiot's quality of the outsider. Bakhtin emphasises, "between the rogue and the fool there emerges, as a unique coupling of the two, the image of the *clown*. He is a rogue who dons the mask of a fool in order to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels, thus unmasking them by not understanding them."<sup>91</sup> Like the rogue, the clown is malicious. Clowns and jesters perform. They have outfits as caricatures for the purpose of spectacle and comedy. They are rude, taunt, and mock audiences. The clown and fool are naive. The buffoon and fool are simple-minded. The buffoon's folly is not intentional. However, the wise fool is similar to that of the Idiot. In Shakespeare, "the fool is usually detached from the main action, but he is not irrelevant to the theme of the play."<sup>92</sup> Until the emergence of the melancholic fool, the wise fool. Which transformed the fool to philosopher. Robert Hillis Goldsmith explains,

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<sup>90</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 162.

<sup>91</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 405.

<sup>92</sup> Goldsmith, 40.

The wise fool of our study was not always so blunt in his truth-telling or so direct in his ridiculing of folly as was the philosopher or the poet. And unlike the typical buffoon, he was more often ironical than scurrilous in his critical comments. The difference between these spokesmen was essentially a difference in temper and tone. Irony of manner is as old as the comic spirit and one of its earliest manifestations.<sup>93</sup>

The history of the court jester in the mediaeval period became a desirable occupation because it granted security, time for leisure, and the freedom to tell the wanton truth. As long as he disguised his wits. This is the jester's privilege that applies to all of these fools. Bakhtin describes:

They grant the right *not* to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not 'to be oneself'; the right to live a life in the chronotope of the entr'acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage—and finally, the right to betray the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets.<sup>94</sup>

Although similar, these figures use satire, irony, and parody in different ways. What they have in common is their utter outwardness. Using folly to turn private life into public. "These figures are laughed at by others, and *themselves* as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather."<sup>95</sup> These fools belong to the public carnival. Within these differences, I build my portrait of the Idiot. Using what Hardt and Negri describe as, "Rabelais's laughter and Dostoevsky's tears."<sup>96</sup>

## Clowns

In French, an animator is a clown. Reinforcing my claim that animation is a medium of folly. The illusion of movement that conceptualized animation was initially associated with magic and trickery. With the first screenings of animated shorts often in a carnival setting. It is

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<sup>93</sup> Goldsmith, 11.

<sup>94</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 173.

<sup>95</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 160.

<sup>96</sup> Hardt and Negri, 210.

no surprise then that the first animations are on the subject of clowns. Such as Émile Reynaud's 1892 *Le Clown et ses chiens* and Émile Cohl's 1908 *Fantasmagorie*. Cohl belonged to Les Arts incohérents (Incoherents) movement which was a play on the term les arts décoratifs, meaning crafts. The Incoherents utilized humour, satire, and 'childlike' drawings or low art to reject rationalism. I mention the clown because they are similar to the Idiot and the Trickster (see 'Trickster'). Like the Idiot, clown, and Trickster, artists have played the role of the fool. Such as Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and "animator-artist Emile Cohl's clown, the character being an 'incoherent' theophany of the incoherent artist."<sup>97</sup> Utilising humour as a tool to challenge or hold reflect current realities. Humour is a form of survival. To make life livable. Humour can be deception, like a mask. As Barbara Babcock is quoted in *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, "the trickster and the clown have become major metaphors for the artist in this century with its increasing self-consciousness of the creative process is no accident. They have been artists for a long time."<sup>98</sup>



Fig 10. Victor Masayesva Jr., *Ritual Clowns*, 1988.

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<sup>97</sup> Lindvall and Melton, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Ryan, vi.



In Victor Masayesva Jr.'s *Ritual Clowns*, Masayesva not only presents the clown in describing the Hopi clown but with the use of experimental medium and nonsensical animation is also used to show folly of the clown (fig. 10). Multiple frames are montaged in square format to illustrate the clown as an overseer of people. Animated figures of the Hopi clown are overlaid on top of live-action footage, appearing alien or as an outsider. The Hopi clown “pokes.” Using reflection, the clown works reversely using a public mask to remind others how to behave in private. Swinging in by rope, the clown disturbs harmony but is one with the people. Like the artist, holding up a mirror to show us who we are and what we should not be.

## Privilege and Deception

The position of the Idiot is a privileged one. In describing the rogue, clown, and fool, Bakhtin explains:

Essential to these three figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege—a right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation. Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask. The rogue still has some ties that bind him to real life; the clown and the fool, however, are ‘not of this world,’ and therefore possess their own special rights and privileges.<sup>99</sup>

Yet Idiotism is admitting when one is wrong. The idiot admits they have not read a book, or does not know something when people are talking about it in conversation. The trickster lies, but “when he lies and steals, it isn’t so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of myth and property and, by doing so, open the road to possible new worlds.”<sup>100</sup> Sometimes the Idiot pretends to know even less in order to go unseen. An intentional deception.

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<sup>99</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 159.

<sup>100</sup> Hyde, 14.

## Gendering the Idiot

Figures of the idiot or fool are traditionally male. This may be because of the privilege inherent in their character. It allows them to travel and refuse to participate in societal expectations because there are less enforced upon them. The occupation of the clown and jester have traditionally been male to serve other men (see 'Fools'). These histories and other factors led to the untrue assumption and stereotype that women are not funny, which explains the absence of women in fool character and female Idiots.

In terms of the First Nations Trickster figure, most are again represented as male (see 'Trickster'). However, as Lewis Hyde notes, "it is often said that the well-known tricksters are not male but androgynous, or at least of indeterminate sexuality."<sup>101</sup> When analysing gender in the Trickster and Indigenous art, Allan J. Ryan quotes Gary Farmer on the differences of humour in Indigenous men and women: "Mohawk actor Gary Farmer says that 'indigenous women don't take themselves nearly as seriously as indigenous men do... but they take issues more seriously.' This may be why he feels 'their humour is much more layered.'"<sup>102</sup>



Fig 11. Rebecca Belmore, *Coyote Woman*, 1991.

<sup>101</sup> Hyde, 335.

<sup>102</sup> Ryan, 64.

This is certainly the case when looking at Rebecca Belmore's *Coyote Woman*, which presents the Trickster coyote as female (fig. 11). The coyote woman lays nude in an inviting pose yet with a sinister expression, her tongue out and eyes squinting – as if participating within a world of symbols while making fun of it. If Trickster and fool characters are in the position of an outsider looking in, the female trickster can be seen as an ideal embodiment.

Gender in the Idiot and figures alike is a whole area I wish I could go more into. My mask-objects are not necessarily a gendered portrayal. This is to remove any interpretation of my masks in a gender-specific lens, especially a binary one.

### The Female Idiot

Examples of the female Idiot do exist. They usually take the form of a *madwoman* or other disturbed female figure. The goddess of folly was presented as female in Desiderius Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*. *Folly* meaning *foolish*. In French, *folle* is the hysterical woman. Bearing phonetic similarities to folly. It is important to actively exclude the troubling history of female hysteria, which represented a societal means of taking away the voice of women. The female Idiot has voice. If the Idiot deceives, hides his intelligence in order to reveal the folly of others. women are particularly suited for this because the act of appearing less intelligent is something women, in numerous societies, are well versed in – not as a means of malicious deception but as an act of survival.

Two central characters of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, integral to the carnivalization of their world, are Prince Myshkin (the Idiot) and Nastasya Filippovna, the love interest of the novel (see 'Dostoevsky's Idiot'). She is described with uncompromising beauty and madness simply for being unapologetically honest and living in excess luxury. While both characters defy societal expectations of others, Natasya is limited within her boundaries of class and gender. Who she decides to marry is a central issue of the story because within this choice she is able to exercise her own agency. In the moment of Natasya's hesitation upon Prince Myshkin's proposal, there is

a possibility of redemption. Yet she continues her self-destructive behaviour and decides to choose a man who would later be responsible for her death. Although Prince Myshkin is the protagonist in Dostoevsky's novel, I keep returning to the character of Nastasya Filippovna who, instead of being portrayed as a fallen woman, ends up as a representative of all women who are branded as wicked. She disregards Prince Myskin's forgiveness. She does not want it. Nastasya's recklessness and complexity is in the nature of the Idiot. In some ways, her tragic and gendered constraints allow small acts of freedom that she is able to enact within her boundaries. Such as burning money. Yet her gender means that, whereas "Myshkin is in carnival paradise," she is "in carnival hell."<sup>103</sup> Perhaps women can only be Idiots when the role of gender disappears. The carnivalization of a woman's life, turned inside out, does not have the same effect because they do not have the initial privilege of living without gender. A woman's life under patriarchy is already turned inside out. When women are foolish, they are mad. And like Natasya Filippovna, carry the burden of becoming a melancholic figure.

## Gaksi

The character of the bride is a quiet one, submissive and grateful. Judith Butler describes the figure of the bride to be without an identity, "She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence."<sup>104</sup> Arguing that the bride's task is in reproducing a family name. Like many readings of Nastasya Filippovna, the bride turns into a tragic figure. Although not described as mad, the *gaksi* is a contradictory figure with different interpretations. Usually performed by men, the *gaksi* is a comedic caricature of the reserved character of the bride that makes fun of the social performance of not only brides but women with imposed innocence. Exemplified by flirting audaciously in one scene while shyly wrapping her hair behind her ear in the next, the performance of the *gaksi* makes it known that the bride and the woman generally,

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<sup>103</sup> Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 173.

<sup>104</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 50.

are a performance – and a foolish one. The *gaksi* mask is commonly crafted with a closed mouth and eyes looking down. Compared to the mask of the concubine or young woman, the *gaksi* never talks. The forehead marking representing the purity of a bride was removed in final versions. It must be remembered that the *gaksi* is also a respected deity that protects the Hahoe village and, consequently, all other Hahoe masks. One that got appointed that title by peeping on her boyfriend (see ‘[Hahoetal](#)’). She often appears last in performances. She is the star of the show.

## Modelling

Starting with a base of primitive polygonal shapes (a sphere) on Maya, details and vector points were continually added. I outlined the initial shape based off a photo of my ceramic mask but followed it loosely and later abandoned this reference. Once I finished a smooth, symmetrical mask, I went back in to de-symmetrize it. Similarly to ceramics, the original mask in which I made a plaster mould out of, had to be as smooth as possible. To be able to remove it from the mould later on. Constantly wetting and sculpting the clay with a sponge. However, once out, I was able to sculpt each mask individually, liberally adding texture.

In both techniques, the initial urgency towards to the smooth makes me think of Byung-Chul Han’s definition of smooth in relation to beauty. “It embodies today’s society of *positivity*. What is smooth does not *injure*. Nor does it offer any resistance. It is looking for a *Like*.”<sup>105</sup> The smooth is excessively positive and immediate, offering no resistance. What is smooth does not require reflection or thought. It is narcissistic but lacks inwardness. “The art of *the smooth* abolishes such [contemplative] distance.”<sup>106</sup> In the case of my masks, the smooth is what causes *sameness*. It serves as a base, then texture is added afterwards in the desymmetrization, and re-moulding of each mask. Distance is added.

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<sup>105</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>106</sup> Han, *Saving Beauty*, 3.

Modelling the digital masks was less accurate than it appears. Yet, still a lesson in patience. The process was liberating and I often worked free-handedly or, as close as free-hand as you could get working digitally. It is very much like sculpting. Often, I wanted to reach into my monitors and mould the mask with my hands. But I had no choice but to click each vector, point by point. I found freedom in its constraints. Modelling the 3D masks was a surprising experience in this way. Although liberating, the process was still methodical and meticulous in its approach. Yet I had less control over the model than what is expected of digital mediums. This may be due to a lack of skill in Autodesk Maya. But these masks turned out different than what I imagined it to look like. I let it become its form until there was nothing else I could do. This was similar to the way I approach ink or conté drawings, the lines are drawn in one stroke. Which gives the drawings a fluid and effortless feel but are done over, and over again. I had created the initial base of the model multiple times.

The amount of labour required in both digital and ceramic masks was also, surprisingly similar. What I found interesting was the initial reaction to my 3D printed digital masks. Which had almost always been about the relationship between the ceramic and digital masks, as if the digital ones required no labour at all. This was surprising to me because the creation of the digital masks had so far been more taxing on my body. Once finished, I felt the appearance of the digital masks looked more carefully crafted than the ceramic masks. Which raised questions of craftsmanship and manual touch.

This took longer than expected. I revised to the point of obsession, adding details that couldn't possibly be detected in video, especially in the expired monitors I chose to use. While modelling, I fell in love with my masks. Lost in a sea of vectors. When focusing on a screen, one often forgets to blink. My eyes were twitching. I lost sleep and for weeks, I was dreaming in quads.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> In 3D modelling, it is preferable to model in strictly quads or triangles (3 or 4 edges and vertices).

## Create verses Capture

Some had asked why I decided to create the digital masks rather than capture using photogrammetry. Simply put as an animator, I tend to favour *creating* over *capturing* in filmmaking (see '[Filmmaking](#)'). I am a filmmaker who does not use a camera (usually). Excess vector points stress me out. Photogrammetry would have allowed me less control over my model and it would have ended up as more of a replica of the ceramic masks, which I didn't want. Capturing them would have also introduced a question of indexicality that is not necessary when comparing my choice of mediums. It would have become referential to the ceramic masks, prioritizing the clay medium. Capturing was unthinkable to me, not even an option.

### 4:3

Let's move onto the aspect ratio of the video component or why I decided to work in a square-like format. Recently, there has been a resurgence for 1:1. Largely influenced by social media (Instagram) and the smaller screens of cell phones. The move away from the standardized HD format (high-definition, 16:9) is a result of the blurring of divisions between cinema and personal computers. Watching films are not exclusive to the cinema anymore. As more aspect ratios are introduced for personal entertainment, devices' categorization between work and leisure also overlaps. Extending to the blurring of divisions between work and leisure. While some screens are getting wider, such as games as they become more cinematic, some screens get smaller or taller. Writing and coding on a computer opts for a vertical format. In general, aspect ratios are being considered more seriously.

The progression towards a wider screen in cinema is now being challenged with the return to 'older' aspect ratios. This rejects the evolution of technology and human progression as linear, continually improving. Although it is a personal preference of mine, the SD (standard definition) aspect ratio is not just nostalgic of pre-HD (high definition) times. The point of view is condensed for the viewer yet signals a close examination of the images on screen. Just as the

Idiot's inquisitive role. Victor Masayeva Jr.'s 1988 *Ritual Clowns* exemplifies this in visualizing the trappings of the public square (fig. 10). Imitating ventriloquism or puppet theatre. The first examples of animation which held its place in the carnival, used this mini stage too.

## Video Sculpture

Originally, I did not think of the monitors as a sculpture but it became one (fig. 22). The initial decision was to simply have screen apparatuses present in the exhibit, either in the form of stacked CRT televisions or SD monitors. To follow some of my favourite artists, the stacked placement would have directly referenced filmmakers and video artists who bring the apparatus into the gallery. Specifically the repetition of the frame and in the way they make video material (see 'Polyphonic Screens'). While the ceramic masks have cultural and historical influences, the video sculpture draws from tradition. I am referencing artists Chris Marker, Chantal Ackerman, and Nam June Paik. At least, these were the artists I originally thought about. In the end, my piece ended up looking visually similar to Shigeo Kubota (see 'Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase').

What was supposed to be a stacked placement, changed to favour a vertical arrangement (see 'Verticality'). The stacked televisions felt disingenuous, and anachronous. So, I switched to SD monitors, then projections, then back to SD monitors (see '4:3'). I purchased a dual monitor arm that would have displayed the screens in two rows and could be installed onto the walls of the gallery. But the look was too commercial. Like an advertisement or lobby television, simply there to present information. It wasn't showing verticality. Ironically, the presence of the apparatus was lost. This led to the construction of the wooden stand.

Although the apparatus is hidden in the tower, its presence is made known or at least, appears more intentional. Even the stand itself had changed from being bare and exposed to one that covered the frame of the monitors, thanks to secondary advisor, Haru Ji. What would have been hidden with a black curtain became a freestanding wooden sculpture, similar to Kubota's



1976, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*. Haru said the square windows of the sculpture were too logical, unlike the Idiot. However, I think it's funny that the Idiot would function within such a rigid structure. Once completed, I was happy to discover that without the monitors, the sculpture looked like a puppet stage. This theatrical, stage-like quality spoke to the themes of animation and the carnival.

### Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase

When looking at my video sculpture which I've titled *Descent of the Idiot*, one may immediately think of Shigeko Kubota's 1976 *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* ([fig. 12](#)). This thought is correct. Because of the obvious visual reference, I wanted to dedicate this entire section on Kubota and this piece.

Marcel Duchamp's 1912 *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* epitomises movement. To me, I always think of this painting as the basis of in-betweens in animation. Which is a medium that largely concerns itself with articulated motion. Kubota's homage to Duchamp is one that greatly appreciates his work. She translates his painting into video while introducing new concepts in sculptural form. Kubota brings Duchamp into the third dimension while also remaining in the second.



Fig 12. Shigeko Kubota, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1976.

Kubota's use of wood to hide the apparatus is the most striking part of this piece. Kubota explains that this was to hide the company logo: "I buy the Sony TV, but I didn't want to show it to Sony. I thought a wooden box is better to hide the company's name. Natural, organic material to the video, like, you know, shining movies, light coming from the box. Beautiful. Magic I thought."<sup>108</sup> The 'natural' material of wood, in which Barbara London describes as "humble," abstracts video.<sup>109</sup> The presentation of TV apparatuses with wood, blurs the boundary between the digital and the natural or, physical. It changes the way we think of digital images. Images on screen are the least important part of this sculpture. We don't think of these squares as televisions. Kubota creates a new object. Making viewer's utterly aware that video is an object. What draws me to Kubota's work is her ability to create objects. It is her video sculptures that speak to me the most. Along with the low resolution of the SD monitors, the wood adds a subtlety to the 3D modelled faces. Allowing the digital and more material pieces (or, the

<sup>108</sup> "Here is Every. Four Decades of Contemporary Art," MoMA.

<sup>109</sup> Barbara London, "Shigeko Kubota: (1937-2015)," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 63 (Spring 2016).

different methods of construction) in the exhibit, to speak to one another. Last minute, I decided to paint my sculpture white. It blended into the space more. I thought the glow of the monitors would be more bright but they were dim. Maybe we're too used to looking at screens that we dismiss them. I learned a lesson on what impact the presence of the apparatus makes. The construction of Kubota's sculpture was done by Al Robbins; the construction of my sculpture by my father. With my video sculpture, I too started off functionally. To hide the monitor's logos. However it is funny that I did not initially think of Kubota when embarking on my own piece. Originally, the plywood was simply meant to be used as a stand. It would have been covered by curtains, blending the monitors into the gallery space. However, Haru suggested I cover them up. I'm not sure if she was thinking of Kubota's work but this is when I made the connection.

Just as Kubota was reinterpreting Duchamp, I am reinterpreting Kubota's reinterpretation. My goal was not to update the work. In Kubota, the same video is playing at the same time. I disrupt this, adding a new aspect of disjointed rhythm, characteristic of the Idiot. Kubota demonstrates motion in Duchamp with Super8 film and the TV apparatus. I use 3D animation on a computer monitor. Animation creates the pixels of a video rather than capturing it with a camera (see 'Create verses Capture'). The nude body is not important to me and neither do I think it is to Duchamp or even Kubota. The figure is merely a reference for motion. When I talk about Kubota's work, in some ways, I am also talking about my own.

## Polyphonic Screens

Think again of the drunken banter of Dostoevsky's artisans, each accenting the same word a slight different way and each saying something different. Think of the flicker of a grainy and scratched film, or the static of an old video: something is gone. Not only does all media decay, but to top it off artistic speech itself is not precise and cannot capture every nuance. Because of the impossibility of communicating everything, we often fall into accepted usages, dull, boring (or worse repressive) conventions often couched in dialectical terms of black and white. But this is not in fact the way reception actually functions. The living world is a world that is always changing moment by moment. What we say and think at each second passes and is replaced with something else, this is the eternal return of the world. Art is merely a vehicle for representing this.<sup>110</sup>

Miriam Jordan-Haladyn makes the connection from Dostoevsky's polyphony to the multiple screens of Chris Marker. I utilise what Jordan-Haladyn calls 'polyphonic screens' in my video sculpture. As a collective dialogue or "multitude of utterances."<sup>111</sup> The expired apparatuses speak to multiple chronotopes of the past and present. Independent voices emerge and mingle yet always say something different when they return, often miscommunicating.

## Verticality

The placement of the monitors vertically responds to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of Dostoevsky's chronotopic verticality. Referring to a vertical organization of morality with heaven atop and hell below. Not to argue that the *Idiot* belongs in a vertical plane but rather simultaneously vertically and horizontally, moving in all directions. A message, narrative, and melody are horizontal. Harmonies are then vertical. The upright construction of the pure image of man is one that the *Idiot* seeks to disrupt. In this way, the *Idiot* is not a revolutionary. He simply adds to harmonies by making aware that the vertical exists in the first place. Or turns them upside down. The fool lives in a vertical world. To Bakhtin, the "most profound and

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<sup>110</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 114.

<sup>111</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 16.

consistent attempt to erect such a verticality was made by Dostoevsky.<sup>112</sup> In the end, our Idiot, Prince Myshkin falls down the stairs in a near-death epileptic episode. This is the Idiot's decent.

### The Pile

The pile of 3D printed masks were a later addition to the exhibit (fig. 24). I am a careful artist. I had sketches and plans set in place. 6 ceramic masks, 6 digital via monitors, and 6 drawings. Once the order of my ideas were firmly set in place, I decided to dump it upside down. Order was created then not respected. The pile is an interruption.

These are the same models as the ones used in the video sculpture. I liked printing them. It recognized the labour of my modelling. I can notice the details of my model and appreciate the intentional asymmetry that goes unnoticed on screen. It was nice to see the back. The size of the masks are not that significant. I set them as approximately half the size of the ceramic masks. Similar to the test masks (fig. 29). They are the size I saw them on screen. Smaller just made sense to me. And it was obvious that they would be white (see [Part 02: White](#)).



Fig 13. Félix González-Torres, *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, 1991.

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<sup>112</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 158.

Lately, I have been seeing art getting mistaken for shrines. Piles of organic material on a gallery floor, undyed hanging tapestry, and projections that can get away with poor film quality. Piles are both shrine-like and profaned, like garbage. Félix González-Torres does not do this. In his *Untitled* series, González-Torres somehow maintains a sad and quiet quality in his piles (fig. 13). Utilising profanation to speak about the ephemerality of life. As well as this being the most unplanned piece, my pile was ironically the most expensive piece to produce. I thought it would be funny to make a pile of very expensive plastic. It may not be obvious that they are expensive. The value of the masks go down in multiples. Remembering the lessons of my parents telling me it requires labour and discipline to make art, I rebelled by participating in mediocrity. And I understand it now. Although, I will probably never fully let go of equating discipline (and suffering) to art-making (and practice). After all, I come from a mother who carefully sews *jogakbo* by hand, and a father who physically exhausts himself for pots that will never be used. I, too, will never be able to replace drawing each frame by frame with a poor camera. Only every once in a while, I get a glimpse of freedom and dump everything into a pile. The pile doesn't seem necessary so why did I do it? It's costly and doesn't add much to the theoretical framework of my exhibit. It just had to be done. It is probably the only piece in my exhibit that is fully contradictory. I could say that in my question of the digital and analogue, these plastic masks bridge the mediums I use. That the pile better illustrates the mass of the multitude. But the pile is just a pile is just a pile...

### Arbitrary Numbers

Conceptual artist, On Kawara makes fun of our attempt to find symbolic and maybe even spiritual significance in numbers. In the *Today* series, On Kawara addresses our deep desire to seek personal meaning in the order of numbers or dates (fig. 14). But, “the paintings simply state

the date and year in which they were made.”<sup>113</sup> Karel Schampers describes the paintings as “a date which does not evoke direct memories or associations. All dates/days are basically alike.”<sup>114</sup> They are fragmented documents of the artist’s daily life. The most mundane artworks. Yet while these paintings stand in as records of the artist, On Kawara completely removes the personal. The work “reveal nothing of On Kawara's opinion of that time. He stays out of the picture, refraining from any comment and interpretation. He has no specific intention. Unhindered by On Kawara's presence, the beholder can integrate his own experiences into the date paintings and invest them with his own memories.”<sup>115</sup> While looking for a quote by On Kawara, I found it impossible to find an instance where he spoke. This is when I discovered that “he refuses interviews, never attends openings, there are no photographs of him, his biography is sparse in the extreme, simply stating the number of days he has lived; in short, he is the great unknown or, as he puts it: ‘I am not existing.’”<sup>116</sup>

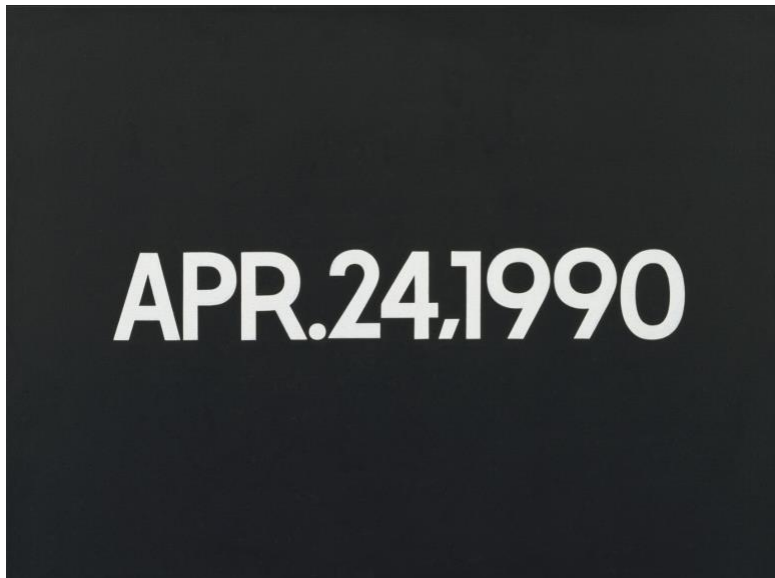


Fig 14. On Kawara, *April. 24, 1990*.

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<sup>113</sup> Karel Schampers, “A Mental Journey in Time,” in *Date Paintings in 89 Cities*, 1st edition (Rotterdam Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1991), 199.

<sup>114</sup> Schampers, 200.

<sup>115</sup> Schampers, 200.

<sup>116</sup> Schampers, 198.

Numbers in my exhibit don't mean much. They are not significant beyond practical and personal choices. In my masks, the plan was to have 6 in each medium – as Julian said to me, “6 is an ideal arbitrary number” (although he now believes that may not be true). When making the ceramic masks I numbered them for recording purposes – although I would later give them nicknames. This numbering did not indicate the order in which they were made or, necessarily, how they would be displayed. Inside the masks, may have carved conflicting numbers, which greatly confused and upset my father. While speaking to him in Korean, I understood the categorization of the masks in Korean.

Order in which they are exhibited:	Order in which they were made:	Name I've given them:
#1	#2	ii (ee)
#2	#3	ssam (rhizome)
#3	#9	o (man)
#4	#6	yuk (devil)
#5	#7	chil (god)
#6	#8	yul (mtl)

The number 2 in Korean sounds like ‘ee’ or ‘ii’, which is conveniently the same in Roman numerals. 3 sounds like *ssam*, which is ginseng, a rhizome – and I like Deleuze and Guattari and ginseng chicken soup. The number 5 sounds like ‘o’ but it is not actually the fifth mask. I lied. The fifth mask was ugly and I really wanted to exhibit 9. It was nice looking and 9 is a good number. I knew I wanted to have 5, 6 and 7 – like the Pixies’s song, “Monkey Gone to Heaven”:

“If man is five  
Then the devil is six  
And if the devil is six  
Then God is seven”

I have an affinity for monkeys because the monkey is mine and my mother’s zodiac sign. But really, I just like the song. The number 8 sounds like ‘yul,’ like the Montreal airport. I didn’t plan on admitting this but there it is.



## Part 02: White

### White

This section is about the colour white and its various interpretations in the context of my masks-objects. This is not about race. When referring to the White race, *White* will be capitalised. Instead, I am concerned with the colour white as it is experienced as a material. The history of Korean ceramics is burdened with the pursuit of white and then later, in rejection of it. This examination determines my decision to use white in my ceramic masks ([fig. 20-21](#)). Histories and art movements such as the White Monochrome in Europe and South Korea speak to the various social-political contexts in which the colour white is used. In reviewing these perspectives, I argue for white as the most fitting colour for the Idiot.

### In Pursuit of White

The history of Asian ceramics is haunted by the pursuit of white. The constant pursuit of a pure *white* in Asian ceramics cannot ignore its colonial and imperial relations. These conditions determine what objects are in demand. From urns due to Chinese influence and teapots during Japanese rule. To make white pottery as affordable as possible, new ways of constructing white had developed into the main styles of Korean ceramics.

Early Korean ceramics had a large Chinese and Buddhist influence making the majority of objects created at this time catered to Buddhist rituals. Such as the production of urns when cremation was widespread. At this time, the use of kaolin was popular, which was abundant in Korean and Chinese soil. Kaolin is used to create porcelain. The clay body of kaolin is composed mostly of clay and creates a *pure white*. It is often called *China clay* in English. When the demand for this style had risen in Japan and Europe, a more economical production was needed. Bone ash (calcium) and silica was added to European pottery to create what is known as *Bone China*. *Some say actual bones were used.*

While in Korea, pottery had shifted to respond to the demand of white arising from Japanese tea ceremonies. Leftover kaolin was used to create slip. This was a recreation of the prestigiousness of white that would be more affordable. Although, still relatively expensive. To achieve porcelain's semblance, *hwajangto* slip mixes materials to create an outer appearance of white, a white mask. Covering the brown and red clay to appear white, slip pottery was more accessible and sold publicly. The use of slip further inspired techniques of Buncheong pottery, such as *mishima*, which would determine a unique aesthetic in Korean ceramics (see '[Mishima](#)').

Two methods of imitating porcelain were therefore created. While buncheong applies white like paint or makeup externally, European bone china achieved white internally in the clay body. White slip is deceptive and therefore a natural material to use on masks. *Hwajang* in *hwajangto* is used as the word for makeup. In Japanese kabuki dance, white paint applied on the face replaces the function of a mask.

Slip in today's buncheong pottery, although containing kaolin, doesn't attempt to be porcelain. Buncheong is a distinctly Korean style that emerged while Japan and China were not looking. While porcelain was shipped for trade, *hwajangto* was the result of leftover kaolin. Slip is therefore the choice of the common craftsman and was the domestic ware of the people. Style and material in Korean ceramics have been determined by economic, colonial and popular rituals of the time.

## Moon Jar

The pursuit of white is materialised in the Moon Jar. A popular shape in Korean ceramics which is built by combining two halves together. Traditionally, it attempts to be perfectly symmetrical and a *pure white*. The Moon Jar holds significance in Korean pottery and has recently been used as a metaphor for the unification of two contrasting bodies (or nations) into the singular wholeness of the colour white.

## Buncheong

Qualities of Buncheong pottery became the recognizable features of Korean ceramics. Buncheong can be recognized by asymmetry, free hand brushstrokes, coarse etchings and a rough inlay technique known as *mishima* (see 'Mishima'). Buncheong pottery is utilitarian and embraces the natural. It does not attempt to be decorative or ornate but to display material in its most unaltered state, acknowledging the material's potential. The Buncheong tradition is what my parents were taught in and how I consequently learned to view ceramics. Although function lays at the foundation of Buncheong pottery, I borrow its techniques not only in the use of white slip, but inlay etchings and free-hand brushstrokes.

## Hwajangto

I used a thick slip of white rather than a glaze with more flux to maintain a presence of white. Creating a heavier appearance with visible brushstrokes. Slip contains clay so its application becomes a part of the clay body. It is "a prepared slip that is halfway between a glaze and a clay."<sup>117</sup> Whereas the red was applied as a high-fire glaze. I preferred slurry to a luxurious kaolin to remove association to porcelain. Kaolin is purer or contains less material. It is also harder to come by in Canada while more common in Korean soil. This resulted in years of Korea being the centre of the production for Joseon white porcelain to trade with Japan and China.

*Hwajangto* slip paired with a reductive decoration technique is characteristic of Buncheong pottery. Although known more for its blue-green stoneware which developed into Goryeo celadon, Buncheong pottery is often seen with a rough application of white. Thick layers of slurry from a material called engobe or slip is cheap and its gloss imitates the commonly sought-after porcelain. Its imperfect application utilises natural material by reduction.

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<sup>117</sup> Nelson, 335.

I applied the slip with a wide, handmade brush on my masks. Although applying the initial coat erratically was enjoyable. It was frustrating to repeatedly apply then have to later remove the white. I didn't understand why my father made me do this besides the fact that is how it's done traditionally (see 'Parts of the Mask'). I alternated from using a small and a big brush depending on when my father was in the room. After firing, I couldn't tell much of a difference. A used brush covered in slip does not have to be cleaned with water but dried, then flaked off. Attempting to remove the slip off the bristles was a past-time in the studio. Contrary to the mask's purpose as an object to conceal or perform, I wanted to reveal parts of the clay body to respect my parent's practice. This method is to avoid artificiality and decoration. Revealing the material is honest, like the Idiot. The choice to not cover the mask completely in white comes from the desire to achieve an amateurish yet natural look. Ihn-Bum Lee writes,

It is often said that in Korean art, 'the lack of refinement causes the broken form', and reveals 'the form of a childish adult' or 'the beauty of simplicity and dullness'. Often it is said to exemplify 'non-technical technique' or 'non-artificiality'<sup>118</sup>

## Colour of Sorrow

Founder of the Mingei movement, Yanagi Muneyoshi had an infamous theory on the use of white in Korea that led to the development of *han*. *Han* is a sense of collective Korean identity surrounding deep injustice and grief. To describe a "collective feeling of suffering."<sup>119</sup> Although difficult to define, *han* is used to describe vengeance, hatred, and sorrow deriving from Japanese occupation of Korea. However, I would not associate the word with *shame* because it is commonly used in the context of post-war Japan and the Japanese Diaspora in the English

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<sup>118</sup> Ihn-Bum Lee, "On the Debate about the Colour White," in *Asian Aesthetics*, ed. Ken-ichi Sasaki (NUS Press, 2010): 73.

<sup>119</sup> Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, "Korean *Han* and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow,'" *Korean Studies*, vol. 41 (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017): 257.

language. Sometimes, *han* is used in the experience of womanhood but not exclusively.

Muneyoshi posited that the use of white in Korean art was the colour of *han*.

Mingei is a Japanese folk-craft movement that attempted to organise Korean arts. In the creation of a word and also in rejection of it, *han* developed as the controversial word it is today. Scholars such as Sandra So Hee Chi Kim argue that *han* is not a biological or a cultural concept but a Japanese colonial construct. And in using the word, surrenders Korea to Japanese colonial history as their fate. The word binds Korean people as tragic, arguing that the myth of suffering is an inherent trait amongst Korean people. Which is romanticised when looking at art by Diasporic artists such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who is often written about as a tragic life.

In the English language, many have adopted the term for Diasporic conditions to define a loss of identity. However there is concern for the word to describe Korean identity, wholly shaped by tragedy and colonial history. The *Idiot* does not use white as a sorrowful colour, nor a colour of national identity. The *Idiot* cannot be bound to national identity. Even if Dostoevsky sometimes aims to do so (see 'Dostoevsky's Idiot').

### Pious People in White



Fig 15. Hye-Sok Na, *West Lake in Suwon*, 1896.

It has become known that Koreans commonly wore white that they were called the *baik-ui-min-jok*, the pious people in white.<sup>120</sup> The people in white who eat red food. White garments, although worn in mourning, have been mistaken as a colour of grief. “Yanagi had mistaken Koreans’ favourite casual white clothes—made of thin raw silk or cotton—for mourning garb, and misinterpreted white as a symbol of pathos.”<sup>121</sup> Feminist Korean painter Na Hye-Sok, “insisted that if white was a sorrowful colour, then Korean’s conventional clothes should be reformed to be more colourful.”<sup>122</sup> By adorning colour, Na argued that Korean people may eventually move away from this perception of being tragic figures. Yet this was not reflected in her paintings ([fig. 15](#)).

### Javex

I come from a family particular about cleanliness. I was often told stories of my grandmother who, after being introduced to Javex, would use it on everything. No matter how poor, my grandmother sent my father off as a young boy, with the brightest, whitest t-shirt. As if it would wash away poverty. The smell of bleach lingering.

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<sup>120</sup> Lee, 71.

<sup>121</sup> Lee, 72.

<sup>122</sup> Lee, 72.

## Dansaekhwa



Fig 16. Chang-Sup Chung, *Return 77-A*, 1977.

Dansaekhwa, the monochrome movement in South Korea, asked questions of nationalism and identity in South Korea during the mid-'70s. The period of the Dansaekhwa movement was a time of economic development in the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee. The administration promoted Korean artwork and businesses in an attempt to strengthen South Korean nationalism. What was determined 'Korean' was largely influenced by the growing US military presence and anti-Japanese sentiment. The mass conversion towards Christianity, resulting in the disappearance of shamanistic and Buddhist practices, left a lack of identity and faith. Making Koreans at the time wondering if the imperial times had left at all. Dansaekhwa artists, pressured to create nationalist work, attempted to find truth in art instead. White monochrome work in Korea is largely shaped by the desire to, not find a national identity, but a cultural commonality post-independence.

The Dansaekhwa movement was defined by an attempt to understand Korean identity during this turbulent period. With the return of post-war Korean Diaspora who studied abroad in Japan and America, there was a shift in Korean art. Although there was a pressure to remain

in a folk-art tradition, Dansaekhwa artists questioned this national association and Western influence. Which pushed towards abstract, non-functional art. Between these two colonialisms, Dansaekhwa attempted to understand Korea's lack of identity by returning to material. Using the colour white and the *natural*. In Korean art, Ihn-Bum Lee believes, "the notion of whiteness is about the naturalness and the formlessness of Korean art: white is accepted as the ultimate colour, that is, the naturalistic colour, not as a sort of signifier. In this sense, white reveals certain metaphysical assumptions; namely the non-dualism, nothingness, and emptiness of Korean art."<sup>123</sup>

## Interpretation

As we've seen so far, the representation of white is diverse. It exists at the threshold of the economy, it is spiritual, emotional, racial, cultural, national, and even colonial. To treat the colour white only by these factors is to not see the colour's full role in art. Burdened by multiple representations, white can also be nothing. A nothingness. A null o. A pure immanence, A LIFE (see 'Piero Manzoni'). The pursuit for a pure white is not to translate #FFFFFF but a reduction of colour. White can become colourless. As a blank slate like a canvas, white can depict a pure neutral.

White plays a role in its rejection of interpretation. Susan Sontag's essay *On Style*, mentions Jean-Paul Sartre's review of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* where he refers to the novel as a "white style."<sup>124</sup> A writing style that attempts to remove style, "anti-metaphorical and dehumanized." "What Roland Barthes calls 'the zero degree of writing.'" The question of white is one on interpretation. White challenges form and content. It challenges the idea that the surface level meaning matters more than its actual surface. Best depicted by the work of the white monochrome movement in Europe. To Lucio Fontana, white is so. In 1946, Fontana wrote "The

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<sup>123</sup> Lee, 73.

<sup>124</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001).



White Manifesto,” signed by 11 other artists, declaring for art which is “stripped of representation” and “unsullied by our ideas.”<sup>125</sup>

### Piero Manzoni



Fig 17. Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958.

Piero Manzoni demonstrates white as an illogical colour ([fig. 17](#)). To create, “an integrally white surface (integrally colourless, neutral in fact) completely unrelated to any pictorial phenomenon, to any intervention extraneous to the surface value: a white that is not a polar landscape, an evocative or beautiful material, a sensation or a symbol or anything else: a white surface that is a white surface and nothing more (a colourless surface that is a colourless surface), better still that just is: to be (and total being is pure becoming).”<sup>126</sup> Manzoni’s *Achrome* is not about the original, nor the individual. There is no story, no narrative. Just the pursuit of purity. “There is nothing to be said: there is only to be, there is only to live.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Lucio Fontana, “The White Manifesto,” *Art Theory*, 1946.

<sup>126</sup> Piero Manzoni, “Free Dimension,” *Azimuth*, no. 2 (Milan: 1960).

<sup>127</sup> Manzoni.

## 흰

Writer Han Kang meditates on things that are white in <sup>흰</sup><sup>128</sup>, *The White Book*: newborn dress, snow, rice, moon, dog, paper, linen sheets, clouds, bone, blank, blanc, and silence...

### The White Corner

I grew up above a convenience store named The White Corner which would dictate the rest of my future's relation with race. When my mother immigrated to Canada, she arrived separately from the rest of the family. She described her arrival to be on the day of the first snowfall that year. Witnessing her new home, covered in white, she set her screen name as @whitetoronto for her blog and email. My parent's first business and my first home was the building painted in white on the corner of Roncesvalles, The White Corner. In recent years, it has been mistaken as racist name. This is funny to me. White is humorous, white is as mundane as the snow on the ground. Perhaps just like the way my mother saw it at the Pearson airport.

### Colour of the Idiot

This is a lengthy section on what may seem like an insignificant part of my project is actually necessary to understand the Idiot. What started as a section to justify my use of the colour white in my masks became an obsession of all things white. And my portrait of the Idiot would obsess over colour and form to the point of Idiotism. What colour is more foolish to overthink than the colour white? Because the thing about white simply put by Gilles Deleuze, "white includes various intensities, while remaining essentially the same white."<sup>129</sup> In a time when there seems to be no time, the decision to interpret or even refuse to over-interpret when viewing art, is an intentional choice. The status of white has ties to history and tradition yet has

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<sup>128</sup> White.

<sup>129</sup> Deleuze, 36.

the appearance of being blank for interpretation. The Idiot functions in this way as well. For this, I say that white is the colour of the Idiot.

## Part 03:

### 100 Days

In the fall of 2021, I was accepted to the National Film Board's (NFB) 13th edition of Hothouse, an animation apprenticeship program in Montreal. Where I proposed a film on the folklore *Ungnyeo*, bear woman. Featuring the figure of the Idiot Tiger. Although an unplanned addition, I decided to include this film and its accompanying materials to this thesis as a secondary or accompanying exhibit. The film touched on similar themes of folklore, numbers, and laughter. Utilizing circular compositions with the material of charcoal. However, it also speaks on subjects beyond the scope of this thesis such as the pandemic, womanhood, and Diaspora. This section will speak of the film and its exhibit only in relation to the Idiot and the main exhibit of *Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot* (fig. 26-27). Further detail on technical details and my creative process will appear in the film's dossier publication.

While considering folkloric elements Bakhtin describes in his Rabelais series, the film takes my writing and research on the Idiot into play. The production of the masks informed my research on Bakhtin and the Idiot but my animated film was where I took the theory into practice. Taking what I learned and returning to my main medium. It revitalised my love for animation and allowed me to understand where my fascination with the Idiot came from in the first place.

The film, *baek-il* meaning '100 days' was my first post-MFA project, although I was still working on my thesis. Making *baek-il*, put into practice what I was writing about the Idiot more than it had done in my thesis. Throughout my research, I was figuring out who the Idiot is and what about the Idiot I wanted to say. By the time I got to making my animated film, I was through and through, making Idiotic work. While relevant, this story is separate from the masks. So it made sense to include it in an accompanying exhibit rather than curating it together. The film and its original frames were exhibited in the Ada Slight Transit Space, on the way to the

main exhibit at the Ada Slaight Gallery ([fig. 28](#)). Although for the final film, it is not the most ideal presentation, lacking appropriate outputs for music and sound. This liminal space seemed a fitting place to exhibit an unravelled film. The charcoal frames covered a wall in two panels while a projection of the animation played in between. Uncovering a film that embodies this thesis work in a space that is moving, suits the liminal figure of the tiger (see [‘Idiot Tiger’](#)).

## Storyboarding

Storyboard sessions are a humbling experience. When presenting my film to the NFB, I had prepared depths of conceptual background. Yet when it was time to present, I had decided to abandon my notes and live out my film through its boards. At that moment, the conceptual underpinnings didn’t seem to matter. I had to show my research through my story and its drawings. Through its movement.

In dialogue, constant interruptions didn’t come off as rude (see [‘Filmmaking’](#)). In the short amount of time allotted, there was enough time to speak and to respond. To stretch out all ideas. Obsessing over details in a language that was mutually understood. While understanding the labour of animation. There was a care and generosity that I didn’t experience in academic colloquiums. Storyboarding to a group is revealing vulnerabilities. To show bad drawings, act poorly, and share an incoherent (in my case, a convoluted, story). If done well, you get out of it feeling utterly shattered. In a storyboarding session, humour is taken seriously. It was profound to be in a room full of filmmakers who thought of all the ways to best deliver a joke. All while looking at poor doodles of cartoons slapping each other. Intellect is abandoned. “That’s cool” is a proper feedback to receive.

## Village of Idiots



Fig 18. Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlov, *Village of Idiots*, 1999.

I will now look at Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlove's 1999 film, *Village of Idiots* as another example of Idiotism. The animated short is based on John Lazarus's adaptation of a Jewish folk tale, centered around the singular figure of Shmendrik. Shmendrik holds many traits of the Idiot I discuss. He is lazy and a wanderer who leaves his small town of Chelm in pursuit of new knowledge. Until he learns that, "Wherever you go, it's just like staying in the same place." Although brief, and seemingly unnecessary, it is in his stop to rest that demonstrates Bakhtin's qualities of folkloric art. In his journey, Shmendrik is reliant on corporeal functions such as gluttony, sleep, and laziness.



Fig 19. Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlov, *Village of Idiots*, 1999.

In *Village of Idiots*, Shmendrik is not the Idiot but rather, the village. Idiotism is best represented by the crowd of nagging old women putting out the fire, a clumsy Shmendrik started. The scene starts with Shmendrik climbing up a roof mid-argument with his wife. Fighting each other off. Shmendrik is out of breath but his wife doesn't appear to be, as she continuously nags and wags her finger quickly. The camera follows Shmendrik's movements as he checks to see his wife is gone before starting work on the roof. Shmendrik's movements are clumsy, cutting to close ups of him pasting slats on the roof, barefoot. The roof is very creaky. He places the sole of a shoe and cuts to another close shot of his arm, clumsily reaching for nails. Until Shmendrik accidentally nails his foot. This part switches back and forth from mid to close shots of anticipating his mistake. The camera moves to Shmendrik yelling then back to his foot as he holds it. The next shot cuts to his hammer falling off the roof with a quick camera move down to a child trying to catch it, in a change of perspective. The child misses it, then starts to cry. Cut back to Shmendrik. He is still holding his foot, jumping in pain. Then the scene cuts to a closer of him sitting on a chimney. As he blows on his foot, smoke from the chimney comes from under his butt. His wife comes out of the house with smoke following. Raising her arms and yelling, "FIRE, FIRE!" She turns to look at five, old, running women, looking exactly like the

wife. Carrying buckets of water in a single-line. Hectic horn music begins with a sound similar to a siren, but is not a firetruck. The women are coordinated, passing buckets and tossing water on the house in a busy, circular motion. All simultaneously yelling different things. Using smoke, the camera transitions back to Shmendrik on the roof, getting splashed with water. The daylight sepia tone of the film turns blue at night, resuming Shmendrik's voiceover narration. The camera follows Shmendrik and continues to do so throughout the film for he is the protagonist. However, it is the village that makes the Idiot. As Shmendrik says in the beginning of the film, "Outsiders called Chelm The Village of Idiots, but our rabbi said we were a village of natural geniuses with our own way of figuring things out."

It doesn't matter whether the hero is Shmendrik from Chelm or another Shmendrik. Every village is the same. The film has elements of the double which is seen in Dostoevsky's work and arguably in works where the Idiot appears. This may be because of a cyclical quality of the character. There is not one example of the Idiot that encompasses all traits. The Idiot is chronotropic. In the virtues of staying put, Shmendrik learns his existence is not his alone. Nor is it to his family, village, or even present-time: "You ever have that strange feeling that everything has happened just like this, a long time ago?"



## Conclusion

### Ritual and Answerability

When thinking of Carol Duncan's notion of the art museum as ritual, the white walls of a gallery make an exhibit a neutralising space. While criticisms toward the White Cube are warranted in its decolonial analysis of the museum, this presentation also has its benefits. White creates silence. Creating space to view art as a ritual but also as an act of profanation. The mundaneness of white makes fun of passersby who forget to speak in a gallery. The Idiot masks will laugh at and *for* them. The sterile space of the gallery is funny to me. It is funny to take the fool *too* seriously. Unlike the Western theatre with stage and audience separated, I prioritised a circular setting where passerby are confronted. They are not deliberate attendees but engaged with and made fun of by masked performers. The entrance way signalled the start of a temporary, carnival space (see 'Carnavalesque'). Finally seeing the exhibit installed in a gallery, I questioned the relationship *between* the work. And between myself as artist, the artwork, and observer's experiences. This is finally Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism at play. Witnessing the ceramic masks set up, it felt utterly dialogic (fig. 26-27). Originally, I had wanted them all on one wall but while working with the Ada Slaight Gallery, it made sense to have them envelop the room. As if the masks are speaking to one another, voices bouncing off each other. While I addressed most of Bakhtin's most known ideas and terminology in my paper, I did not speak of Answerability. Until setting up, I finally found out how it worked into my exhibit. I take from, not so much Bakhtin's own writing on Answerability, but Miriam Jordan-Haladyn's descriptions of responsive utterances in the gallery space. Where a willfully embodied speech is required to respond to an artwork's utterance. Jordan-Haladyn writes: "The way we respond to a text and how our response is manifested in both thought and act — both of which are material processes

that involve the embodied interaction of the self with the material world — is the focus of what I term *dialogic materialism*.”<sup>130</sup>

Answerability is the link between ritual and the gallery. Answerability does not mean the work is *interactive* because it does not feed a message to the viewers. Similarly, the gallery cannot be experienced in isolation. Even if alone in a public space. This works similarly to sacred objects. I ask, can an artwork or object become sacred without being activated by dialogue? I was unable to speak of ritual until now because an audience, including myself, was required to activate the work. The viewer completes the artwork. Jordan-Haladyn speaks of this in how a response to an artwork is manifested materially through the body. Artworks seek an *active* response. Art is a vehicle, “an instrument of ritual,” as Susan Sontag says.<sup>131</sup> In this way, art can also become a vehicle as a sort of time travel. Considering dialogic materialism, “the artist speaks, but the observer may not receive this artistic message for years. With any text there is constant dialogue between past-present-future; each generation conceives of different messages in receiving the text, but over time a text also consists of the responses it has accrued from various points of contact.”<sup>132</sup> The viewer must answer *willingly* to fulfil a dialogue. To Duncan, “in art museums, it is the visitors who enact the ritual.”<sup>133</sup> This is Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia: “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.”<sup>134</sup> Like rituals, art can be a backwards glance or one that looks towards the future. It is a dialogue not only taking place in the present. This creates new meanings in different chronotopes, different time-spaces.

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<sup>130</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 22.

<sup>131</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001), 10.

<sup>132</sup> Jordan-Haladyn, 29.

<sup>133</sup> Duncan, 12.

<sup>134</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 428.

In *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Duncan writes:

“Ritual is associated with religious practices — with the realm of belief, magic, real or symbolic sacrifices, miraculous transformations, or overpowering changes of consciousness. Such goings-on bear little resemblance to the contemplation and learning that art museums are supposed to foster. But in fact, in traditional societies, rituals may be quite unspectacular and informal-looking moments of contemplation or recognition.<sup>135</sup>

This is what I believe to be the beauty of rituals. It's *unspectacular* and *useless* symbolic gestures. Korean culture is riddled with pointless customs and rituals which sometimes have nothing to do with belief or faith. Even I am unaware that I participate in them, regardless of its origins. Partaking in passive rituals is a collective act. Where a sense of identity is no longer prioritised. Ritual removes the individual as Byung-Chul Han notes, “those who devote themselves to rituals must ignore themselves. Rituals produce a distance from the self, a self-transcendence. They de-psychologize and de-internalize those enacting them.”<sup>136</sup> Therefore, the absence of ritual is the loss of the collective.

Ritual is embedded in all three pieces of my exhibit and even my practice. The meditative labour and repetition that is inherent in ceramics. Connection to Korean mask dances. The constant state of motion of the screens. Ritual decisions of placing *The Pile*. It was the last piece I installed. Late at night, my feet hurt and my hands were blistered. Yet I carefully worked on the ground with a placement that felt sacred. There is a certain ritualistic quality of my work in the way a certain level of potency required for the mask to be activated. For they cannot be worn, a response is required to take over the material. What I mean when I say rituals are *useless* is that they do not produce results. In a capitalist sense, “it does not produce anything.”<sup>137</sup> Capitalism does not benefit from the useless. Han writes, “where everything is subordinated to production, ritual disappears.”<sup>138</sup> The uselessness of rituals is similar to studying art. Art is useless and

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<sup>135</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 8.

<sup>136</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 7.

<sup>137</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 13.

<sup>138</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 42.

therefore extremely important. In the temporary space of an MFA, the uselessness of a fine arts education challenges ideas of capitalist productivity. To me, this is what makes it valuable.

School is meant to make a fool out of you. The Idiot too, is useless and lives in excess *luxury*.

The Idiot will, “*make use of the useless.*”<sup>139</sup>

I was most saddened not by the attempt of viewers to *understand* my exhibit but for it to be *understood* quickly. In a rush to understand, “nothing is *comprehended.*”<sup>140</sup> Witnessing the masks are meant to be contemplative and ritual viewing allow silence and deep contemplation, “making *lingering* possible.”<sup>141</sup> To dwell and revel. I wondered whether this was possible in a gallery. According to Duncan, it can be said nearly all experiences of art is ritualistic. Which can be unspectacular. However, there is a removal of a magical quality in the loss of festivals. Han argues that “works of art are no longer displayed on the festival road, but in museums. Exhibitions are not festivals, but spectacles.”<sup>142</sup> In this setting, “nothing lasts or endures.”<sup>143</sup>

## Disappearance of the Idiot

Today, Byung-Chul Han believes Idiots have “vanished from society.”<sup>144</sup> In the temporary space of the carnival, the Idiot may be vanishing with the disappearance of the festival. This is consequently “the loss of any capacity for illusion, semblance, theatre, play, drama.”<sup>145</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin also believed that the carnival was disappearing in the Renaissance with the development of the festive court masquerade and staged theatre. An elevated stage that removed the dialogic quality of the carnival, reinforcing hierarchies. To Han, with this loss comes the loss of rest and the capacity to linger. “Rest belongs to the sphere of the sacred.”<sup>146</sup> The festival space

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<sup>139</sup>Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 52.

<sup>140</sup>Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 69.

<sup>141</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 41.

<sup>142</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 71.

<sup>143</sup> Han, *Saving Beauty*, 81.

<sup>144</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 82.

<sup>145</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 86.

<sup>146</sup> Han, *Saving Beauty*, 38.

of the carnival is a site of ritual. While this may appear as an act of profanation, without the sacred, there is nothing for the Idiot to profane. This is also what Dostoevsky warns us in *The Idiot* in his critique of Nihilism (see ‘Dostoevsky’s Idiot’). Although with Christian overtones, Dostoevsky’s criticisms apply to hyper-individualized apathy that exists today.

Amongst the abundance of performative days that recognizes every category of identity, festivals have been replaced with ‘days’ that does not celebrate but grieves. Although this recognition is important, the aspect of communal celebration or even *communities* at large, are disappearing (see ‘Multitude’). Remedying problematic traditions by removing them flattens all causes for celebration, rendering them the same. Holidays, a wedding in casual clothes, or “awareness” days become all the same. Bakhtin, who largely influenced my ideas on the profane, acknowledged the importance of rituals in everyday life, yet outlined the symbolic differences. Crediting it to *magic*: “Ritual and everyday life are tightly interwoven with each other, but there is already an interior boundary between them; bread in a ritual is already no longer the actual ordinary bread that one eats every day. The boundary becomes ever sharper and more precise. Ideological reflection (the word, the symbolization) acquires the force of magic. The isolated object becomes a substitute for the whole.”<sup>147</sup> Han argues similarly that the loss of festivals and rituals results in no mystery, illusion, or romance. No more sacred, no time for leisure. The carnival is no longer temporary. It has turned into spectacle and has thus flattened to constant work-time:

The festival begins where the pro-fane ordinary time (literally: the time before the holy district) ends. It presupposes a consecration, which separates the holy and the profane, is suspended, all that remains is ordinary, transient time, which is then exploited as time for work. Today, the high-time has disappeared altogether in favour of the time for work which has become total. They are only short interruptions of the working hours.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 212.

<sup>148</sup> Han, *Saving Beauty*, 69.

Fitting for this conclusion, with the loss of festivals “we are losing the capacity for closure.”<sup>149</sup> For this reason, my portrait of the Idiot closes its eyes with jaw slightly open, at rest (see ‘Parts of the Mask’). However, it is hard to say whether the Idiot will ever vanish because this character does not exist. He is in a constant state of becoming. Using laughter and folly to ask questions in times we need it most.

### Is This It?

My thesis is somewhat contradictory. Encompassing too many categories or not enough, depending how one sees it. In attempts to capture this sensitive character, I ended up asking questions about myself as an artist and how to live life. The Idiot relates to art not only as an embodied portrait and medium exploration, but as a methodology. The Idiot speaks to the position of the artist as an outsider. Not only as the artist’s inquisitorial nature but as a figure who is able to work within contradictions. Idiotism as a methodology asks the artist to question themselves as an individual. The Idiot questions the artist as genius. If the Modern artist was an intellectual, then the present-day one can be an Idiot. To me, those questions were of name, generational duty, East/West, and low/high categories. Subsequently asking questions about medium and material relationships. Which allowed me to think about where I place myself as an artist and how I create. My work as an artist has continually returned to idiocy. In the repetitive nature of animation, to my tendency to hide behind a mask. In what was a year in my life thinking about Idiots, the Idiot taught me many lessons. I haven’t figured it all out yet but I must be closer now because I am making Idiotic work. The Idiot showed me what was possible but then, the Idiot would remind me not to take myself so seriously.

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<sup>149</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, 27.

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# Figures



Fig 20. Grace An, *Idiot Masks*, 2022.



Fig 21. Grace An, *Idiot Masks #3 & #6*, 2022.



Fig 22. Grace An, *Descent of the Idiot*, 2022.

Fig 23. Grace An, *Descent of the Idiot* (detail), 2022.



Fig 24. Grace An, *The Pile*, 2022.

Fig 25. Grace An, *The Pile* (detail), 2022.



Fig 26. Grace An, *Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot* (installation view), 2022.

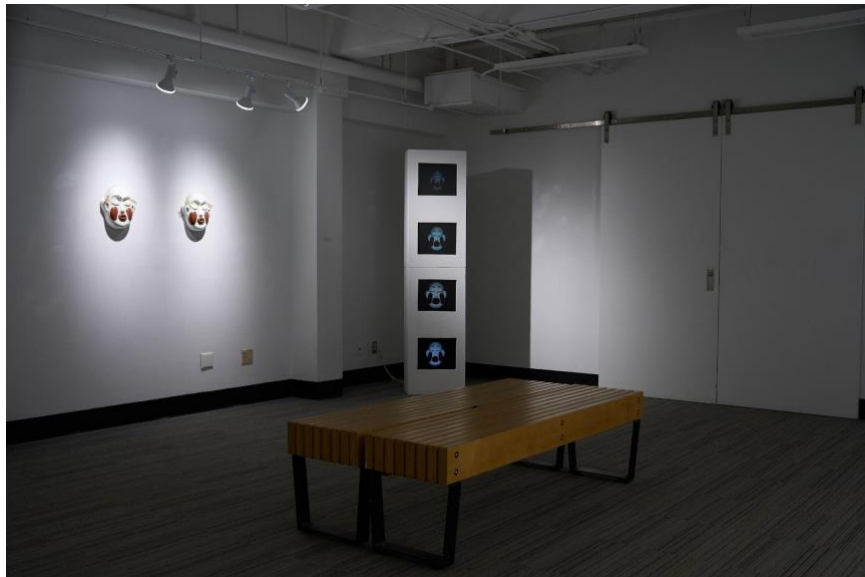


Fig 27. Grace An, *Masks of Folly: Portrait of the Idiot* (installation view), 2022.



Fig 28. Grace An, *baek-il* (installation view), 2022.



Fig 29. Grace An, *Prototype*, 2020.