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The Treasure Hunt:

A reflection in 3 parts

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Preface

This paper consists of three texts, each dealing with one of the works on display in my PhD exhibition: *Hooked*, *DUG*, and *Garfield*.

The first text, 'Laws for Bugs and Flies', is an edited transcript of a conversation with Jan Verwoert (critic, writer on contemporary art and cultural theory, and professor at Oslo National Academy of the Arts) about the video installation *DUG* (2018-20).

The second text, 'Videogames, Techno-pessimism and Orcas', is an email conversation with Sabeth Buchmann (art historian, art critic and the head of the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna) about the video installation *Hooked* (2021-22).

The third text, 'Digressions on Garfield' is about the most recent work that is part of the exhibition: *Garfield* (2022). This short essay also constitutes a preliminary attempt to situate the project, in the context of my own work as well as some wider artistic and cultural contexts.

My reflection took this form because my research approach – which was originally more investigative – increasingly became more self-reflexive about questions of narration. As a result, I found it very difficult to reflect and felt increasingly insecure about my own writing, particularly in relation to my own work. That changed when I revisited *The Boy Scout Project* – a project I had done a long time ago.

The Boy Scout Project (2000-02) was a seemingly arbitrary research project, or research for no reason. Its pretext was a red jacket I had bought at a thrift store in Hamburg. I chose it because its intense red colour reminded me of a formal element of some of my paintings of the period that I had called 'placeholders', symbolizing a binary relationship of absence and presence. Because of the inscription 'Catholic Retreat, 1968, Staten Island' on a sewn-on patch on the back of the jacket, I thought it would be possible to trace its origin. This eventually led to several disconcerting

excursions in the U.S. across Staten Island, full of ghostly encounters and strange observations. The final result was an image archive and several associative image arrangements on Homasote bulletin boards.



Corner Display, UCLA New White Biennial 2001, *The Boy Scout Project*, 2000-02

I was struggling to describe and reflect on my current artistic research practice, but eventually – through a series of conversations with my supervisors and other colleagues – I was better able to understand and describe what was happening at the time of *The Boy Scout Project*, and what it had meant to me since. So revisiting that project from the distant past helped me to also reflect on what I was doing in the present.

However, this difficult undertaking was only possible because of the generously insightful feedback I received from my supervisors, Rike Frank and Mike Sperlinger, and the wonderful conversations I had with Sabeth Buchmann and Jan Verwoert over the past few months. Even though they are conversations which start out from different works, these texts bleed into each other and there is a degree of repetition. If some topics and references recur across the texts, I hope it is because I am beginning to recognise their centrality to my work, not only during the PhD but stretching back two decades.

Laws for Bugs and Flies¹

A conversation between Jan Verwoert and Jan Peter Hammer about the two-channel video installation *DUG*

*Our conversation took place in an apartment in Berlin in early May 2022 and is one of many conversations over the course of the last year. Our conversation revolves mainly around the form, context and realization of the video *DUG*, but also around storytelling and the editing process.*

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory. He is currently Professor at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, as well as holding positions at Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam of the Arts, and the de Appel curatorial programme, Amsterdam.

JV: Jan, in your work you look at economies, economies of time and value, economies that measures the value of time in terms of goal-orientated behaviour. In *Hooked* you look at the parallels between (post-Hippy-)ideas of spiritual pursuits and videogame design in how both are built around the notion that you must do whatever it takes to “get to the next level”. In *DUG* you portray a black market economy in which people literally “sell the value of cultural time”, in that you show how treasure hunters in post-Communist Bulgaria dig for antique relics, and enter them into a global market for luxury items. What’s special about your approach though is that you do more than just show how these economies work, you document how worlds clash in the process. On one hand, you, for example, give viewers an idea of what it means for an antique object to travel from a field in the Bulgarian countryside where it has rested underground for centuries, to an auction in Munich. All of that is strictly organized. On the other hand, you have a way of portraying the encounter with the artefacts that makes me realize, wow, they come from somewhere else, they speak of the immeasurable time of antiquity. There is something really mysterious about the cultural temporality they embody. So you run with an idea one of the treasure hunters you

¹ Quotation from an interview in the video *DUG*

interviewed proposes: that the artefacts might actually have entered the earth when an alien civilization landed on the planet. So these artefacts are time bombs, if you will, entering into a rigidly structured economy of financial rewards. Treasures are monetized, but they continue to be really strange objects ripe with alien time. In your films, you make it very clear what's going on, but there's always something more in them than merely analysis. You look at the objects, you look at the people, you abstain from judgement. In *Dug* you're out there in the countryside with someone who's looking for stuff. The experience comes through. There is a capitalist economy of time where antiquity gets monetized, there's an immeasurable ancient alien pocket of time. And in the middle, there's the treasure hunters and you with the camera and the microphone, in the field, figuring out what's going on.

JPH: When I made *DUG*, I hadn't thought of the videogames yet, but I think it's interesting to see it from this direction. Vencislav Gergov, the Bulgarian archaeologist I interviewed indeed explains how the ecology of treasure hunting works as a form of underground economy. He describes the living conditions in an impoverished countryside. He talks about the lives of the people, who lost their jobs when the Soviet industry collapsed in the 1990s and had to become freelancers and eventually a sort of a mafia structure took shape. Some of them are looking for treasures at archaeological sites and are able to source an income. The antique coins, jewellery etc. they find, they then give to a network of dealers who bring them to the auction houses in Munich. (There must already be a videogame based on exactly that situation.)

JV: And it's Roman stuff, or where does it come from?

JPH: Most of the finds, are Thracian, Greek or Roman. But in this part of Bulgaria, there are prehistoric layers underneath the antique layer. You have a lot of prehistoric settlements, which are extremely interesting. What you find is an extremely rich material culture and new information, which can challenge our idea of history. This is something I try to put to use as an element of the story, but which I thought would go too far at that point. As said, in the interview Gergov describes the ecology of the treasure hunter – how treasure hunters operate, how they fight for survival in a situation which is quite deprived. There are no opportunities. And then you have these metal detectors, which are destructive because they focus your senses on coins or

metal objects. And they foreclose the possibility of these objects becoming part of a Bulgarian museum, and of other more sustainable economies. In the case of Ratiaria, treasure hunters destroyed a whole city, which could have been a magnet for international tourism. There they destroyed entire temples and streets. Ratiaria was the biggest Roman city in this part of Europe and well preserved until fairly recently. And you think, okay, what are these different systems? What is the one of archaeology which tries to create this knowledge? Okay, it is also destructive in some way, they dig up stuff, you cannot not destroy, you kind of have to – you try to get the knowledge out, to have descriptions, to have knowledge, to create a whole narrative. But at the same time, you have the treasure hunters who are incentivized to find certain objects which have a price, for which the same or similar object was sold somewhere else. And they are looking for a similar object with no consideration of what gets destroyed in the process, meaning there is this vicious feedback of supply and demand. So you have these different systems at work here.



Filmstill, *DUG*, 2018-20 (treasure hunter at Ratiaria)

JV: It's the epitome of an extractive capitalist economy then, right?

JPH: Everybody knows that this is what it is. However, it still surprising when you witness it. Later in the process, I visited an auction for antique art and artefacts in Munich called Gorny and Mosch. Gergov had mentioned Munich auction houses and I saw a catalogue of this particular auction house in his house and also in the trunk of

Petro's car. The auction house is well known for its half-yearly coin auction, but the one I went to was for antique art and artefacts. The auction took place in a sort of large office room on the first floor in the back of the showroom. Before you could enter it, you had to pick a number which you would hold up to bid for something. The situation was this: you had the people in the room; you had the collectors connected via telephones to employees sitting in front; and you have people who bid online. The online bids show up on a computer watched by someone employed to communicate them to us. The auction lasted exactly 8 hours without a break and went really fast. It's a tough day for the auctioneer. He works like a machine. Soon it became clear to me that the people in the room were only interested in specific object categories: one would bid for Roman keys, the next would bid for jewellery and antique toys, another for fishing hooks and sewing needles. They were not interested in other artefacts. I presumed that many of them were experts or antiquity dealers themselves and had a close knowledge of the market and knew each other. Then you had the people on the telephone. They would usually bid for things in a higher price range: antique vases, busts, sculpture, jewellery, weapons etc. The people connected via the internet, on the other hand, became active when objects with an erotic motif came up for sale. Anything which portrayed a naked woman or erect penis jump-started a fierce bidding competition. The people in the room seemed to find this ridiculous and embarrassing, shook their heads or broke out in laughter. To sum it up, many peculiar dynamics were involved in determining the prices. I would be surprised if the calculations of those bidders accurately reflected the archaeological and historical value these objects have or had. For archaeologists and historians, on the other hand, the object is only as important as the information it can reveal. However, this information and signification is highly dependent upon the excavation context, namely where and in which relations to other objects, bones, architecture etc. it was found. Otherwise, an artifact is usually mostly mute. For dealers and collectors, it's the other way round. To acquire any exchange value, an object needs to be rarefied. It needs to be completely preserved and fit the taste of a certain group of market participants. Since the trade is restricted in basically all countries, questionable origins and sales after certain dates have to be artificially concealed. That is what I mean with opposing forces. It reminded me of David Graeber's definition of currency and of Marx's famous term of commodity fetishism. According to Marx, a commodity's production context – here human labour – needs to be abstracted and I thought something similar happens with those

archaeological artefacts. You have two or three days to see and study the objects before they are auctioned. After seeing the antique leftover laying around the pillaging holes in Bulgaria, it was striking to see them again in the auction house showroom. The smaller objects on display had a price or number tag attached. That completely changed their aura. I was stunned!

JV: How did it actually happen that you got involved? Where did your research begin?

JPH: The starting point for my project was the mediatized destruction of archaeological sites in Syria. The emergence of ISIL not only ended the Arab spring, but a common belief in a quasi-natural democratization through information technology – Facebook. This belief goes back, at least, to Marshall McLuhan and U.S. counterculture, which in my view ended the truly transgressive idealism of the Hippie movement. With ISIL's media-savvy propaganda and novel awareness of performativity, suddenly this darker side of the Internet emerges. There was this new stage. The mainstream media immediately linked the appeal of this new phenomenon of extra-statecraft to the experience in videogames. But, if you will, the same could be said about these poor treasure hunters in Bulgaria or the coin collectors.

JV: You did an interview with an archaeologist from Idlib at one point, I remember, which however so far only exists as unpublished research material, right?

JPH: Yes, he came as a refugee to Berlin where I had the chance to speak with him, on the condition of his anonymity. In the interview, he speaks about the reality of being a museum director in a war zone. To protect his museum, he had to collaborate with the Shia courts. At the same time, for him, Islamic fundamentalists are the biggest danger for archaeology in Syria. This shows how complicated the situation had become. On the other hand, a supporter of the opposition, he is absolutely frustrated with the regime, which he blames for the population's alienated relation to archaeology, but at the same time, he also has to collaborate with them to protect the country's cultural heritage. After the interview, I thought that one needs to be extremely precise to get all the nuances, because it's so complex and I felt I was not able to do that. Then I decided to make first the film about the situation in Bulgaria.

JV: Based on his life experience, did he say more about the politics of archaeology?

JPH: Well, he said that he had to leave because he couldn't continue with archaeology because, unlike some of his colleagues, he had no other source of income to sustain his practice. But he continued to support them, for example by smuggling equipment into the country to document endangered sites and monuments. For archaeologists, who are involved in protecting, documenting or preserving history's traces, it is paramount to have the right equipment and use the right methods. If you try to preserve artifacts and don't have the know-how, you easily destroy what you want to preserve. Therefore you need scientific methods and high-end equipment. But what if you cannot afford this? You need climatized spaces, you need the institutions, etc. In Syria, you often don't have this. Therefore immaterial culture, traditions, songs or poetry become prominent. But this also means that you have an entirely different relation to the past as such. In the West on the, on the other hand, you have this appreciation and fetishization of material traces and I think, even if archaeology does disentangle itself from its colonial past – from narratives of the cradle of civilization etc. – the value of historical artefacts still remains a function of the way the capitalist imperialism narrates itself, of how it describes its identity and history.

JV: So these questions form the wider horizon in which you develop your works. Yet, after talking to the archaeologist from Idlib, you realised: "I cannot grasp this with enough precision. So, I have to stop here and pursue the research in a different place and talk to different people". And that took you to Bulgaria, where you then started talking to treasure hunters. While the bigger questions are up in the air, you talk to very specific people about what they specifically do. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing does something similar in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, no? She spends time with people who gather Matsutake mushrooms in the postindustrial forests of the Pacific Northwest, many of whom are Asian-Americans who may have actually acquired their knowledge of forest life during the time they fought as guerrilla. So Lowenhaupt Tsing portrays the situation in terms of a "para-capitalistic" periphery: the skillset that the people who do the Matsutake gathering have is not strictly speaking capitalist. It comes from somewhere else, it has a different origin and history. She then carefully describes how the status of the mushrooms changes from being foraged – based on clandestine or traditional knowledge by people struggling for economic survival – to being entered into a global supply chain, as a delicacy, i.e. as a luxury good. In a very similar way, the treasure hunters you interviewed in Bulgaria seem to

live on a similar threshold: they supply items to a capitalist supply chain which then become luxury goods, but the way these things come out of the earth and the way the people who dig them up actually live and operate and are in the countryside is also something else...

JPH: The film shows very different aspects of the situation. Some are indeed more clandestine. One treasure hunter, for example, only agreed to be interviewed if we didn't show his face. So I have only a few words, he said. So I also talked to Gregorov, the archaeologist I already mentioned about the situation, as well as other people who are not in the film but were talking about treasure hunters or were involved somehow in treasure hunting... Gergov describes it really well. What is fascinating is that the auction houses which are really far away develop this kind of remote force in a place, which is very different and makes people occupy themselves digging for treasures because there's no other opportunity for them. The market—supply and demand, has this force which reaches to the end of the world.

JV: But there is something particular about the moment when things are moving in response to the demand. You get in the car with a treasure hunter, and it's a rough off-road ride. You get out into the field, and as you film him you make me see, damn, this person knows the place, knows how to move, knows exactly where he's going, and where he needs to be looking. He doesn't talk much, he protects his secret from persecution, but from the way he moves you can tell how familiar he is with the place...

JPH: It's powerful. I think so too. I didn't specifically focus on this, but that was also my feeling. The treasure hunters wanted to show us these places. And there is certainly expertise stemming from looking for coins, or comparing coins with those in the auction house catalogues and being in a specific place. Then you know something about that place. You find a particular coin of a certain historical period and you connect this to your environment and world. I am pretty sure the treasure hunters are fascinated by their finds in some way. It's not just the price of the coin. It's also this connection with that great environment. Your new knowledge connects you with the environment and the history under its surfaces.



Filmstill, *DUG*, 2018-20

JV: What were the implications of entering the scene yourself?

JPH: We made sure that we don't put the treasure hunter in danger. At some point Gergov, who sat in back seat of the car, mentions a name of somebody Petro, the treasure hunter who was willing to be filmed for money, probably works for and Petro is obviously very annoyed by this, that's one moment. Gergov didn't care, he mentioned lots of names of people who are involved – experts and dealers he thinks are profiting from this treasure hunting activity. I was interested in how this underground economy is related across borders to Germany. The difference of wealth. There was a farmhouse for sale, a huge farm, and the price was 5,000 Euros. When you compare this with Germany, you think, okay, this is very different.

JV: Does it matter when you introduce yourself as an artist? Does that ever play a role?

JPH: The thing is that, there, art has a different meaning. Therefore you automatically become a documentary filmmaker.

JV: Ah! The situation turns you from an artist into a documentary filmmaker. What does that imply?

JPH: You prepare your questions. You think about what you can ask. You try to figure things out, to navigate this information. But it's also normal. In this case, I had to have a translator and communicated a lot with him. Interviewing Gergov, I focused also on prehistory because he kept coming back to it, he is an inspired man. He mentioned some stuff which interested me on a different level. In the museum in Pleven, he first mentioned this little object which he says represents a spaceship. And I wanted to come back to this. It was said ironically, but then I thought maybe there is more to it. Shortly afterwards he claimed those prehistoric goddess figures would had inspired Henry Moore and Picasso. I found this interesting. Obviously, there is a link between primitivism and modernism. Maybe there is some interesting connection I can make. I wanted to have some material of this in the film and enquired in this direction. You are not just asking questions – you map a territory, you try to construct what could be the story.



Spaceship, replica of a neolithic artifact, terracotta cast, 2018

JPH: And this gives you the reason and motivation to keep asking questions?

JV: Exactly. You want to construct a potential story. With the archaeologist from Idlib, this was difficult. But with Gergov, it was something I could connect with. One example was when, at the end of the video, he hints at the possibility of an alien contact in the past because the settlement he excavated must have been exposed to very high temperatures, higher than those of a natural fire – that would be reason why was so well preserved. He creates this mystique around it and I liked that. For me, it's not a problem. For me, it's an element to connect it to other themes.

JV: He becomes a storyteller. He becomes the author of his own historical account?

JPH: Yes, the interview became important,. It had to do with the overall atmosphere and led to the introduction of the interim titles, which refer to Bogdanov's 1908 Bolshevik sci-fi novel 'Red Star'² about a communist society on Mars and the aliens who visit Earth. Which has another timeline, another concept of history—scientific Marxism. I connect this only loosely to ask how the figure of the alien is connected to utopia, but also to dystopia – to the technological dystopia of the market which controls you via metal detector signals, on the one hand, and the primitive forms which seem to be so precise and outside of history, on the other.

JV: A larger narrative.

JPH: Yes. Somehow outside of this European-centric history; they are not part of this register and that alone makes them utopian.

JV: You find something that's breaking away and pointing towards another timeline where the past turns into science fiction. Where there's a futurism in the past, where the possibility of a completely different story becomes apparent.



Filmstill, *DUG*, 2018-20

² *Red Star – The First Bolshevik Utopia*, Alexander Bogdanov, 1908

JPH: That would be great. But it's a cliché at the same time – the ancient signs, that are so different that they can signify the future at the same time, is also a volatile trope in itself.

JV: But in that moment, it's not coming from you, it's coming from the person you interview. He becomes the storyteller... You relay the story, pass it on, put it into circulation. The film has been shown in exhibitions, but it also has been screened in film festivals. What do you think about this change of format?

JPH: I'm not really part of the film ecology let alone the film industry. At festivals, films are shown once, but in many different places. The art world has some advantages. The audience is prepared to see other qualities in a work and has a different attention span, which I prefer. *DUG* was first a single-channel film first, but I later turned it into a two-channel video installation, which I like much better. The rhythm is better because the interim titles interrupted the flow of the images too much.

JV: Can I have a word from you as editor? There is one side to your practice where you go out into the field, ready to record what happens in the process of encountering people and situations. And there's another side of you where you work through the footage you have gathered, trying to grasp what it would take to make the images talk.

JPH: Exactly.

JV: Is the researcher and editor in you the same character, Jan? Or are they wearing different hats, using different faculties of the mind?

JPH: It's between keeping the lens open and keeping the whole thing under control, as if it would have been written in one piece. And this can make the process a bit difficult and slow sometimes. On the one hand you think "everything is possible" – and then it flips to the other side, and you think "everything is forbidden."

JV: So does the joy and agony of working as an essay filmmaker consist in living between two epistemologies? One being the epistemology of the script, which is linear, and needs to show one thing after another, to organise a narrative. The other epistemology being that of pictorial thinking where everything connects to everything: regarding a particular subject, a single powerful image can give simultaneously give

all the aspects which, in the text, you would have to unpick step by step. How do you navigate through this kind of field of tensions between the delirious richness of certain images and the task of having to do a linear montage?

JPH: I didn't study film or scriptwriting, but I have understood that to keep the attention of the viewer over a certain duration, one needs to apply narrative structure – the form of how this journey unfolds. Okay, in an art context you can also not care about this. But I usually want to tell a story where you have this form of development and closure. In respect to these two videos, I am more on the storytelling and filmmaker side. Because, when you start getting into a narrative which has to do with subjectivity, there are other things which are possible. You can also go back, but if you establish a story, as I tried with *Hooked* where you follow a character, things can become more concrete. This identification with a figure or a voice is crucial to have this guided, subjective journey. That interest in the narrative was also important for my earlier work *The Boy Scout Project* [see below]. I became a sort of character and I saw my experience a bit like in a film: I could open the lens, but also look from the outside on what happened, and could ask why I have this or that experience. Even if it was just choosing and arranging images in a tableau, and I was ultimately not able to fixate these thought and ideas.



Filmstill, *DUG*, 2018-20 (Vencislav Gergov)

JV: So the script writer in you thinks of dramaturgy as a basis for giving me access, as a viewer? I can understand what's going on by following characters? I follow a driver through the movie?

JPH: Yes.

JV: But still the scriptwriter finds himself shouting back at the images, when they start talking more loudly than the script would allow?

JPH: I don't believe that images have meaning. They are so open and only become meaningful when they appear in a particular place of experience within a story, a form in which they appear. For me, a lot of video art, when you have this emphasis on a supposedly purely visual language, is not so interesting. I think the anchorage of experience, in a script is necessary to unlock a meaning of an image. If you have a consistent plot, a film that allows you to identify with its characters, things become more concrete. I also like photography, but you cannot compare the fabric of a story with photography. There is a different quality to it.

JV: So we've reached a point in the conversation where you're stressing the importance of montage. I remember, in a previous chat we had, you were also emphasising the hypnotic character of certain objects or images that confront you with a riddle you need to figure out. So they get you started, and send you off on the journey of researching what they could mean?

JPH: Well, I got into research-based film-making because I was bored with painting. I needed to take the next step. Besides painting, I was already interested in video and conceptual art. I was also reading philosophy and thought about my practice in linguistic terms. It needed to go somewhere; I was trying out a kind of ritualized painting practice. I guess it needed to go into a form of writing.

JV: So first there is the experience, and then comes the attempt to make the experience talk through montage?

JPH: *Hooked* works in this way. There's a character, but that character is a personification of a conflict happening on another level. A historical battle, if you will, which he relates to in one way or another. In game design, you have narrative play on

the one hand, and behaviouristic or cybernetic logic of control in videogames on the other. *Hooked* poses the question, what that means in general terms. Secondly, there's a sort of a reflexive meta level, I hope, between the narrative and the content. For me, it's a narrative that theorizes narrativity under technologically new conditions.

JV: There is the narrative, there is a drive with a driver. But in your movies, it's not like you cut everything into shape to fit the narrative, right? You go into strange details. There are detours. You allow for things to have multiple connotations. There's a lot of subtext. You don't spell everything out. You permit clusters of realities to pull themselves into shape. Some stuff remains mysterious or really strange. So, exceeding the narrative structure, you also allow some material and images to do their own thing to some extent, right? You're not making standardised television documentaries. You have a lot of respect for the moment when materials start to speak in their own particular language.

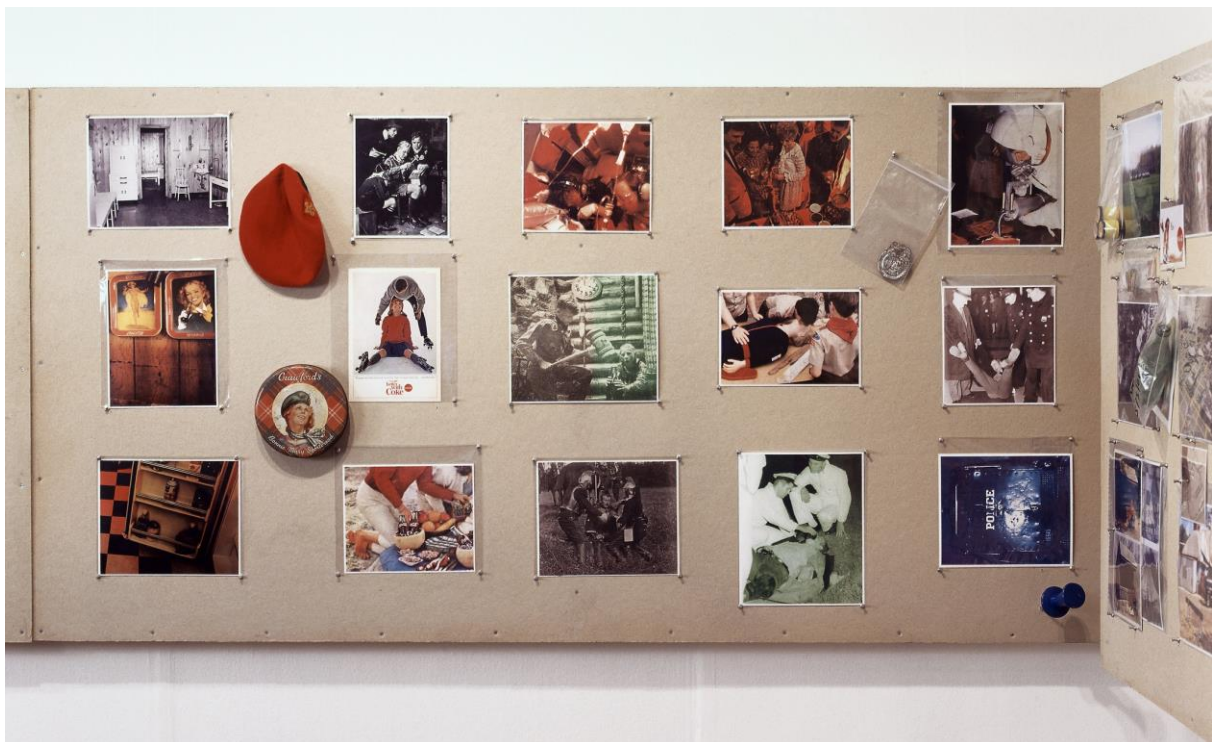
JPH: I think this has to do with the fact that what I'm aiming at is not easy, like putting beads on a string. I don't have that script which would make it everything clear. It's an organic process, if you will. I am not able to do this in writing either.

JV: So on one end we have the script, and on the other end, there are moments when images get magnetized. In these moments you allow yourself, and myself as the viewer, to be pulled into certain magnetic fields, and start zigzagging across image clusters in a montage. So we go from "boom" over there, to "boom" back over here, back and forth. I'm assuming this magnetic motion emerges once you started shifting image blocks and stuff around in your work, right? It feels like a zone of intensity configures itself in the editing that allows for connections between things to suddenly become tangible...

JPH: There are images or distances between images, or ruptures between images etc. or the way how they register – if they document something, or if they themselves become a metaphor opening up a new reading of the next image or sequence or text. This can become very complex, but can also be experienced in the blink of an eye. That's what's great about film, that temporality in which you see something and experience your understanding of it at the same time. That is fascinating. You experience your understanding, or better you see your understanding seeing. Yes,

that is something I find really fascinating, definitely. And I am not talking about images as a unity, but also elements within the image, these other elements within the images. This text where they do not fit the reading, when they have a certain kind of surprise that suits the surprise.

JV: It makes complete sense. In a previous conversation you told me that what initially got you started, made you give up painting and pursue a form of research-based filmmaking, was a project that you never actually managed to finish – *The Boy Scout Project*. Many years ago, you found a boy-scout jacket in a second-hand shop in Germany that was decorated with strange Christian symbols. You wanted to understand what they meant and where the jacket came from, so when you were in the U.S. you embarked on a wild goose chase to track down the former owner and research the religious context of the symbols. The project catapulted you into a new universe of pursuits of experiences and images confronting you with cultural dynamics and a mayhem of symbolisms that never quite align neatly, but themselves form a strange montage of meanings.



The Boy Scout Project, 2000-2002

JPH: That project was bound to fail because I didn't know enough about writing and filmmaking – I didn't even know that it was that what it was after. I then got interested in film theory and

got more knowledgeable, but narrative as such or narrativity was not something I explored. *The Boy Scout Project*, was, for me, that experience. As I said, I saw myself as a sort of a character in a film and looked at myself from the outside. But later when I arranged the images which I had found in the process, a lot of what I had experienced was impossible to capture with that technique. I had to memorize these thoughts and ideas so I could come back to them in a different form later. These thoughts sometimes appeared in the arrangements, but most of the times fell through the cracks.

JV: What opened the door to a multidisciplinary practice of research was a project that as you say, was born to fail?

JPH: It was an intense time, very inspiring. I thought, okay, you come from a certain cultural background with a certain perception of art and culture, and then maybe you come out at another place. That, I thought, was interesting. I wanted to involved myself in something that seemed not to belong to me and to look at the misunderstandings. That was very important – to do things which I thought had nothing to do with me and see where it led me to. Later, if you come out, you can look back. But it was this idea at the beginning of *The Boy Scout Project* to jump into the unknown and see what happens.

JV: It doesn't belong to you and you're never going to own it. But you're going to be confronted by the experience, anyhow.

JPH: Yes!

‘Videogames, Techno-pessimism and Orcas’

A conversation between Sabeth Buchmann and Jan Peter Hammer
(translated from German by Jan Peter Hammer)

The video Hooked takes information from the last two years of Daniel Patrick Dukes' life as its starting point. Dukes was an American homeless man who hid at SeaWorld Park Orlando the night of July 5, 1999, and was found dead the next morning in the pool of the orca whale Tilikum. As it later turned out, Dukes had also broken into the mansion of famed game designer Richard Garriott two years earlier – apparently for no apparent reason other than to sleep in his bed for a quarter of an hour. These events open the way for a pseudo-forensic narrative that intertwines videogames and game design, Eastern religion, counter culture, behaviourisms, and neuroscience.



Filmstill, *Hooked*, 2018-20



3D-reconstruction of the Mosul Museum in Iraq, containing antiquities that were destroyed by Islamic State in 2015, The Economist, 20 May, 2016

JPH: My artistic research project at Oslo Art Academy started in 2016 with the formulating of the project application, and even though almost none of what I wrote in it appears in *Hooked*, I think there are a few connections. My original project draft was mostly about archaeology and digitization. The Syrian Civil War and the spectacular images of the destruction of ancient sites in Syria and Iraq were on my mind at the time. This conflict not only buried the 'Arab Spring' and supposed democratization through the influence of social media such as Facebook, but very publicly cast doubt on universalist conceptions of history. According to ISIL's propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, archaeology was an invention of the West to undermine Islam as such. I was particularly interested in the stark contrast between ISIL's proclaimed iconoclasm concerning ancient monuments on the one hand, and their apparent iconophilia concerning mediatized violence and masculine self-promotion on the other. *Vice News* compared these to music videos, for example, and ISIL as an organization with internationally operating corporations ("like Nike"). ISIL recruits would perceive the war as a videogame. Of course, after Trump and ongoing experience with this new quality of political and ideological conflict and its amplification through the Internet, much of this no longer seems so surprising and topical. To my eyes, ISIL seemed like it was moving on an entirely new stage. I was then overtaken by events, even though *Hooked* is set in the past.

SB: *Hooked* follows on thematically and methodologically from your previous work *Tilikum*³: this 2013-15 docufiction can also be read as a pseudo-forensic narrative about an orca whale that drowned its trainer in 2010 at SeaWorld Orland, a marine theme park in Florida. In an essay on this and earlier works of yours, I tried to capture the linkage of behavioural science, neurobiology, cultural studies, and philosophy of science that I think is characteristic of your working method.⁴ Once more the whale presents itself as a central motif. In so far as it is a mythically charged animal - the leviathan of the sea - which, as in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* published in 1851, slips from the role of the hunted into that of the hunter as the emblematic victim of brutal greed for profit. As I wrote at the time with reference to the art scholars Ariane Koller and Anna Pawlak, it is an allegory of the struggle between "the whale as the embodiment of archaic, untamed nature and the technically skilled industry that is exterminating it," in which early modern "spectacle culture" and the "scientific need to explore nature" collide. Still, I read *Tilikum* less in the then-and-now perspective of Animal Studies than as a kind of meta-narrative about the psycho-political dimension of behavioural theory and AI research in the context of the entertainment industry. Is *Hooked* therefore a continuation or dramaturgical intensification of *Tilikum*, insofar as you locate Duke's fate in the now omnipresent, post-factual gamer reality?

JPH: Yes, that's right, after *Tilikum* I wondered what it would have been like if Dukes had been made the protagonist of the film, instead of Lilly, and eventually that thought, led me to take up the subject again. In addition, as mentioned, there were certain points of contact with my research topic in Oslo. But apart from that, I was also attracted by the form as such. *Tilikum* begins like a conventional documentary and then becomes more experimental and, I hope, more poetic. John Lilly first emerges as another grey scientist in the service of the U.S. military and then reinvents himself as a Counterculture- and New Age guru. *Hooked*, on the other hand, begins with the question of what might have caused Dukes to want to swim with *Tilikum*. This is the quest my alter ego wants to solve, just like in a videogame or

³ See appendix for more information and Vimeo link to view this earlier work *Tilikum*.

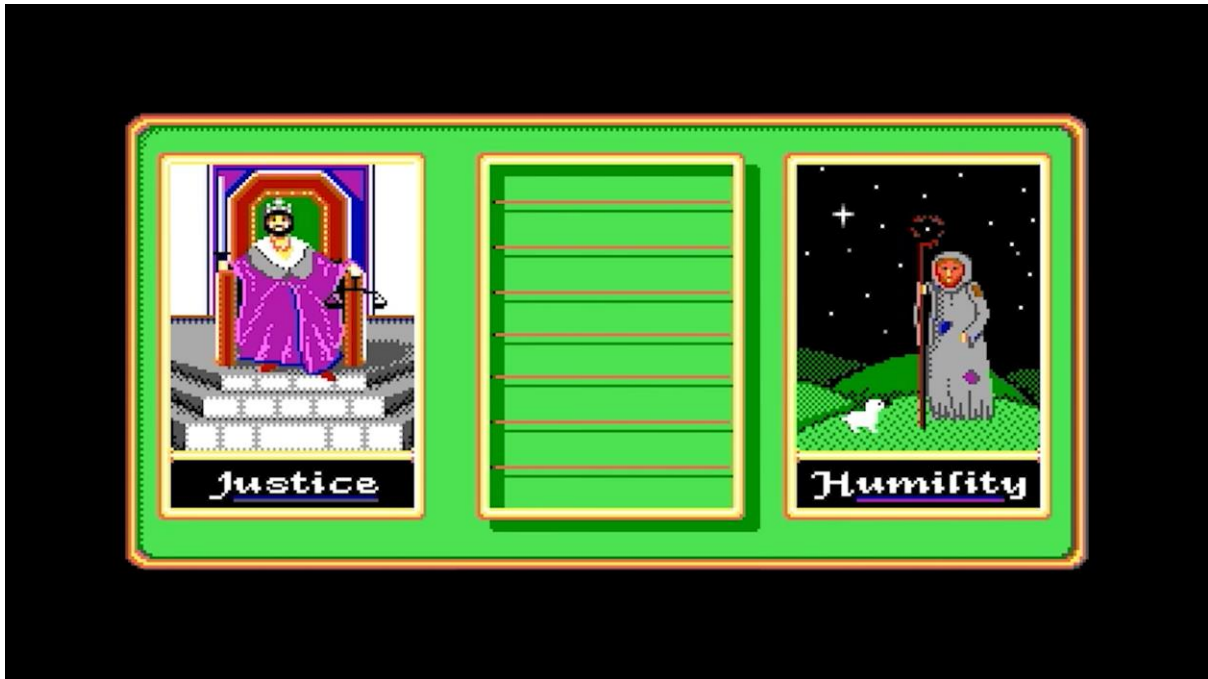
⁴ Buchman, Sabeth, 'Allegorical Essays', *Jan Peter Hammer*, Mousse Publishing, 2017

noir movie. To solve the case, he triangulates the various clues and themes, some of which already appear in *Tilikum*. This involves connections between game design and religious cosmologies, or as you say, explanatory models from behavioural theory and AI research.

SB: What function do the connections you make have? Do they constitute the object of your investigation, or do they rather form a methodological tool that helps you to analyze the thematic field in your film? At the same time, the thought occurs that you are locating the core of modern and contemporary conspiracy theories here.

JPH: To locate the core of contemporary conspiracy theories, I would have had to delve deeply into the social discourses of the U.S. and their roots and address them. However, *Hooked* does address one, I think, important aspect of conspiracy theories. The world in the videogame is organized differently, ontologically, from the reality we are used to; thus it brings with it new possibilities, perceptions, and ideas. I think there is a connection between this new technological nature and transhumanism, which is a continuation of colonialist frontier thinking coupled with racist beliefs. In the critical feminist gamer scene, racism is therefore often understood as a problem on the narrative level, which is of course true. In a racist and patriarchal society, all popular narratives are initially shaped by this spirit, repeating, naturalizing, and reinforcing the same cultural codes. In *Hooked*, however, the question is more about what happens at the level of game mechanics. How do these seemingly intelligent, responsive worlds affect our sense of self? What subjective thoughts do they fuel? The so-called echo chambers on the internet are basically based on the same principle as videogame engines. They link reward systems with narrative and cultural content.

SB: Does that mean in your eyes that conspiracy theories are produced and spread systemically? Because the characteristic perception that everything is connected with everything is no longer based on the assumption of contingent processes, but on the conviction that intention and system are behind it. In this respect, does your film create a programmatic ambivalence between intentional or causal and speculative or random chains of phenomena and events?



Filmstill *Hooked*, 2018-20

JPH: Yes, that's why I think it makes sense to deal with such questions narratively. Fiction film depends on suspension of disbelief – we give them a benefit of the doubt to enjoy them. The starting point of *Hooked* is that in the mind of Daniel P. Dukes, my hero, the role-playing videogame *Ultima Online* and his everyday life might have become mixed up. Dukes was homeless and probably suffered from schizophrenic episodes. This is, if you will, the canvas. Therefore, the narrator, who is a mixture of detective and my alter ego, first has to analyse *Ultima Online*, and in doing so he comes across facts and coincidences, which then prove or disprove Dukes' delusion. However, they suggest other things as well. So we're dealing with different levels. *Ultima Online*, one of the very first so-called MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) already has a lot of technical features of social media etc. – a bit like the 'metaverse' in a nutshell.

SB: The investigative documentation of the events thus presents itself as a reconstruction and analysis of media user behaviour. Is your film also a plea for a behaviourisms-critical revision of the significance of behavioural research for the success of social media? This brings us back to the role of John C. Lilly, in whose failed research project – 'People Talking to Dolphins' – behavioural psychology and physiology were central.

JPH: I would rather say an attempt of reconstruction by literary means. It's about events that already lie so far in the past. In the intro, evidence and statements emerge to justify a retrospective investigation about, for example, whether Duke's death was religiously motivated; or whether he, like John Lilly, really wanted to contact extraterrestrials via orcas. But that's complete speculations – and why is the narrator so interested in the delusions of this homeless man in any case? *Hooked* works more like a parable that emphasizes narrative over contingent context. Media user behaviour suggests that one can use media like a tool. In early interviews Steve Jobs often made the point in early interviews of saying that Apple makes tools, not entertainment, in order to distinguish itself from videogame producers like Atari. But this differentiation is not self-evident. He was probably aware of this and therefore had to emphasize it explicitly. Photoshop, or my video editing program, may be tools at first, but network-based applications – which are what we mainly deal with nowadays– demonstrate that we are going in a different direction. It is, in my view, no coincidence that videogames are at the very beginning of digitalization and today are often considered incubators of cryptocurrencies and all sorts of other 'financial tools', as well as gamification as such. Even 20 years ago, there were studies about how gamers develop lopsided combinatorial skills and are therefore particularly suited for jobs in the financial industry. Secondly and much more crucially here, they have a strong tendency to misconstrue competition and capitalism as immutable laws of nature (John C. Beck, Mitchell Wade).⁵ During my research, I became depressingly aware of how omnipresent this mindset is and how vehemently it is defended by neoconservatives, the alt right, and Silicon Valley libertarians.

In contrast, the scenario is set in the 1990s, which seemed like an idyllic time: videogames were not yet sleek but had a poetic quality, and the Internet was still full of promise. In this 'still unsullied' scenario – in which, however, Garriott had already moulded himself into a multimillionaire and Dukes had completed his descent from the middle class – the reconstruction, if you will, sets in. In looking for reasons for Dukes' unusual behaviour, the narrator encounters information that symbolizes, or

⁵ Beck, John C. & Wade, Mitchell, *Got Game: How the gamer generation is reshaping business forever*, Harvard Business School Press, 2006

better theoretically anticipates, the future just described. Which, on the plot level, raises the question of whether Dukes might have been some kind of medium. These structural moments first appear when it comes to the 'Eight Virtues', which represent a real innovation in the genealogy of videogames.

In order to map 'moral' behaviour in *Ultima IV's* gameplay, Garriott has to incorporate a complex 'alignment system' into the code, which he claims to have been inspired by a documentary on Hinduism and its cosmology. In reality, it is a typical monitoring, detection and evaluation system. Such a system, of course, starts from a truncated definition of morality, namely the dilemma of how deeds can be morally valuable if their goal is to receive some reward – say, to go to paradise or to be resurrected. Apart from that, this 'alignment system' works like a mix of the Chinese 'social credit system', for harmonizing the behaviour of citizens, and a Corona Warning app. So we see that what makes for a more lifelike and narrative gaming experience simultaneously involves social control.

The reaction to my video *Tilikum* was often that “this only concerned the past, behaviourism had been debunked and replaced by cognitivism and later by neuroscience.” This is true, of course, but it is here that later building blocks of neuroscience first appear. Even if they were misunderstood, they help to place the events I document in later theories. Moreover, another implication of *Tilikum* was that biopolitical dispositives and culturally inscribed beliefs often persist even when scientifically debunked a long time ago. To return to your question, everyday life on the computer is, to put it bluntly, reminiscent of a Skinner box experiment.⁶ Behaviourism could not grasp or address the subject because it had neither psychological nor cognitive theory: rewards and punishments refer only to the very basic needs, usually food and avoiding pain from electric shocks. In an environment pre-structured by Big Data and user profiles, however, this critique runs aground, meaning behaviourist ideas take hold again, albeit on an infinitely more complex

⁶ A Skinner box (also known as an operant conditioning chamber) is a laboratory device used to study the behavior of animals. The operant conditioning chamber can be used to observe or manipulate behavior. An animal is placed in the box where it must learn to operate levers or respond to light or sound stimuli in order to receive a reward. The reward can be in the form of food or the removal of noxious stimuli such as a loud alarm. The chamber is used to test specific hypotheses in a controlled environment.

level. The same applies, incidentally, to AI, which consists predominantly of reinforcement learning – ultimately, behaviourist beliefs are realized here.

SB: Additional question: In this context, how do you see the role of Animal Studies in posthumanist discourses today?

JPH: I know little about Animal Studies, but I find it extremely inspiring to see animals in their otherness and to try to understand them. To do this, we need to deconstruct and abandon our anthropocentric view. It is obvious that this, legitimizes and metaphorically condones domination and exploitation and, by implication, destruction of all other life. This became particularly clear to me when I visited SeaWorld park in Orlando. That's why I was so drawn to the subject. On the other hand, I find the relationship between animals and computers that is often drawn in this context problematic. I would agree with N. Katherine Hayles, who in her book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics* refers to the fact that Oswald Wiener was aware early on of the danger of cybernetic processes taking on a life of their own and, according to Hayles, recognized in this a threat to the liberal subject. Referring to Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto', Hayles nevertheless comes, in my opinion, to a critical conclusion about Haraway: that in affirming this self-sufficiency with the aim of dissolving the patriarchal-humanistic code of the liberal subject, Haraway overlooked – despite conscious strategic feminist essentialization – the difference between abstract and embodied intelligence. At any rate, this is what I read from Hayles' argument, and would also make sense in light of the developments described above.

SB: I also ask because your argumentation amounts to a retrospective or anticipatory localization of the events traced in the film within today's digital or net cultures, and thus elevates information-technological conditions to the source code of all behaviour and action. This is also the aim of your remarks on advanced control technologies. In my eyes, *Hooked* suggests a connection between these conditions and schizophrenic or paranoid subjectivation, which, as in the case of the orca, also affects the perception of animals as companion species. This could also be read in a critical tenor, and finally also as a decidedly techno-pessimistic perspective of your film.

JPH: I did not know a lot about Animal Studies when I came up with the Tilikum theme. My first pitch for the project was about the polarizing discussion in the media that the death of SeaWorld trainer Dan Branchaud had caused in 2011. The issue was whether the orca Tilikum could be held responsible for it. I thought this debate was a good way to analyse the political spectrum of U.S. society and the so-called culture wars. Many involved in this sometimes heated discussion called for the immediate killing of the whale. Some participants said that animals are not capable of guilt; others said that the captivity had led to Tilikum being psychologically disturbed; and still others said that he had taken revenge for his exploitation, that he was a kind of 'Spartacus of the captive animals'. These different references to animals are, in my opinion, also reflected in SeaWorld's representation of their orcas: on the one hand as a top-of-the-food-chain predator and on the other hand as a cuddly panda of the seas. Incidentally, after Duke's death, Duke's parents sued SeaWorld for damages on this very ground. So that was my first contact with Animal Studies. Then, when I was making the film at SeaWorld, it struck me that while these affectively effective representations are based on anthropocentrism, they are also based even more strongly on systemic imperatives. These also, contrary to what many proponents of Animal Studies would have us believe, cannot be isolated. Capitalist imperatives such as competition, profit maximization and accumulation inevitably lead to placing exchange value above use value, or profit above animals and people. Every corporation, no matter how supposedly 'socially responsible' or 'environmentally sound,' follows the laws of the market in order to survive. Accordingly, at this economic level, as in behaviourism, there is no distinction between animals and humans – and even before any cybernetic abstraction. SeaWorld's ethos, as with all corporations, is based on a normalization and naturalization of capitalist imperatives. Here, this happens only in a particularly literal way, in which no opportunity is omitted to draw analogies between animal training or operational conditioning – the world of work, child rearing, wage motivation, and incentivized consumerism – and to present them as universal.

In order to describe today's network cultures or information-technological conditions of behaviour, one would perhaps first have to establish what they are not. First, I would say, there is no transgressive collectivity or general intellect inscribed in

informational networking, as parts of the left still believe. In this respect, source code would be a more apt description than network or infrastructure, in my opinion. We are dealing with an interface between organic existence and code rather than an interface between animal and machine; the distinction between machines, animals and humans is becoming obsolete, the one between owners ('humans') and workers ('machines/animals') is sinking further into general consciousness. To cut a long story short, I find the socio-political effects of social media or the crypto-euphoria frightening. Moreover, I find the technoid aesthetics that are becoming more and more present in art usually ideologically questionable or opportunistic. I wouldn't say I'm generally techno-pessimistic, though.

SB: Does it make sense in your eyes to read *Hooked* in terms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 2003 essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading (Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You)'?⁷ In other words, as a programmatic "reparative reading" of the phenomena you describe in the film? In her essay, Sedgwick criticizes paranoid readings of Western criticism, that is, readings focused on suspicions of power and violence. She counters this with a reparative reading in the sense of an analysis of the how and why of certain patterns of action and behaviour.

JPH: I didn't know Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's text before you brought it to my attention. I agree with her that paranoia and theory can be similar or identical – if you approach them, you also run the risk of falling into paranoid patterns yourself. But Duke's identification with *Ultima* could theoretically have been a playful affirmation. The narrator, or my alter ego, makes analogies. He is more interested in the field that emerges than in the individual references.

SB: In fact, *Hooked* resembles classical documentary – that is to say, linear and causally-argued – but at the same time has a fabulatory quality more characteristic of non-linear essay films. What is it about this form, which is ambivalent in my eyes?

⁷ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading (Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You)', *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Dukes University Press, 2003

JPH: The film focuses on Dukes at first, but then starts revolving more around theoretical questions, and then comes back to Dukes' story. That could be seen as quite linear or as circular, and I'm not entirely happy with that either. If this reminds me of essay film, it's probably because the film switches back and forth between four different levels, and my point was precisely to focus on the overlaps and breaks that occur.

The plot begins and ends with Duke's death at SeaWorld Orlando. In between, there is an attempted explanation based on Garriott's assumption that Dukes had an obsessive relationship with *Ultima Online* and was stuck in the fantasy world of the game, as if on a psychedelic drug. I was interested in why Garriott could come to such a conclusion at all, so I took it more literally than it was most likely meant. This method could be described as a paranoid reading. That being said, I triangulate a couple of very different topics that can only be understood in a certain order because they build on each other. I think this is the same with my other films: it's about arguments that have to be constructed successively. That involves argument and dramaturgy. When it works, it results in a kind of maelstrom, where narrative and theoretical description enrich each other. Unlike a traditional documentary, however, I'm not really interested in facts, but want to use narrative and theoretical means to construct something like a machine – a kind of Frankenstein – and make it seem plausible. For this I triangulate a series of events and themes. The most obvious of these is the triangle: Dukes - *Ultima* - Skinner Box. The neuroscientific theories that are used today to explain compulsive media user in behaviour are then tied to this keyword: dopamine.

The second triangle is: Dukes - Garriott - Lilly. This one is quite speculative. First, there would be the Hare Krishna temple in Coconut Grove where Dukes spent his last two months and which was just around the corner from Lilly's former Dolphin laboratory. A devotee of the temple reported in a *Miami Post* newspaper article after Dukes' death that Dukes had conversed with birds in the temple garden in a language he had invented himself. And then I found the testimony of a used car salesman from Austin who may have known Dukes. The latter recalls that Dukes, like Lilly, believed he could make contact with aliens through orcas (dolphins in Lilly's case). Lilly's visionary dreams, which he describes in his books, are very enigmatic.

He writes, for example, that his contact with dolphins actually serves the higher purpose of asking extraterrestrials for assistance, because otherwise the existential struggle between organic and artificial intelligences could not be won. That Lilly thereby more or less intuitively sees something similar to Katherine Hayles when she distinguishes between computer intelligence (Wiener) and embodied intelligence (Maturana) is no coincidence. Lilly at this time thinks one can reprogram the human biocomputer through 'Satori'. Moreover, through yoga and meditation, the compulsive and binary 'ego- programs' and 'downer programs' that Lilly knows all too well from his scientific experiments could be neutralized. The solution is to escape 'consensus reality' through meditative letting go.

This also makes sense in terms of Duke's trip to SeaWorld via Miami in more ways than one. Garriott's '8 Virtues' demonstrate that information technology and religion interact in yet another way. In the development of videogames, religious rules, rituals, and cosmologies can be networked with game mechanics or represented through interactive play. Around the same time, and probably nearby in Austin, Dukes becomes interested in Buddhism because a Buddhist employee at the fast-food chain Veggie World advocates for the homeless, of which Dukes is one, giving them food and letting them stay in his house overnight. Of course, you can say that these connections are far-fetched. But as I said, the point was to create a field of simulation.



Filmstill, *Hooked*, 2019-22

SB: Does your film ultimately imply a simultaneously documentary-deconstructive meta-narrative of those fictional narratives from which video and computer games are built?

JPH: There is no timeline in computer games. You interact with the virtual environment and in doing so you determine what happens in time. But I wouldn't speak of meta-narratives. In a movie, for example, an opening scene, background, set, etc. only suggest a place; in videogames, the place is constructed as such. The description is integrated into it, so to speak. So, among other things, we are dealing with a coordinated network of such places that can be extended to moving elements. The different game dramaturgies and narratives can be inscribed in very different ways, but certain conditions must be met. Depending on the game, game designers choose a suitable game engine. This provides the technical requirements, which also have a lot to do with computational optimization and pre-structure the game. Games can represent the world differently than narratives. Chess is initially an abstract process, but it also represents a battle.

In role-playing videogames like *Ultima*, the narrative establishes its own rules but also disguises the game mechanics and, figuratively, the game engine. You might

say: okay, those are the rules of the game. In *Hooked*, however, I reverse the question or rather generalize it: if *Ultima* represents a world, then it represents a world behind which there is a complex machinery. This was the basic idea I came across when, in relation to behavioural psychology, I became aware of the different effects of feedback, such as flow experience, game addiction, gamification, etc. Dukes, who is supposedly affected by *Ultima* and *Ultima Online*, can thus be imagined as a robot, a paranoiac, or a warrior and martyr in the war against the machine and artificial intelligence(s). Lilly had, in my opinion, at least temporarily understood himself in this way. The narrator, who encounters circumstantial evidence that there may be a connection between Dukes and Lilly, tends to assume the latter, but also considers the other possibilities, as well as the hypocrisy in Lilly's actions and self-mythologizing. It would go too far here to analyse the exact reasons, but the question that concerns me in *Hooked* is whether there is not a deeper connection between Lilly's hypocrisy and the inverted narrative structures in *Ultima*. Let's say that Dukes wants to shake off not merely the schizoid game mechanics, but the compromised narratives that drive and result from the game.

Videogame theorist Rachel Wagner⁸ shows that game engine matrix, the apocalyptic game narratives built upon it, and ideological radicalization are all correlated. I would not want to apply this to Dukes, because this is about a different time, but also because it is not known whether he was an avid gamer at all. The discussion of videogames and violence is also really reductive. But Wagner is convincing about how the structure of many videogames often reflects and amplifies closed ideological loops, not just through their narratives but even their game mechanics.

Second, of course, I tried to draw formal analogies between role-playing videogames and film. The narrative character has to solve a puzzle. I blend the evidence, or things found close to Dukes' body by the police, like playing cards: Lord Jagannath, computer circuit board, cowboy hat.... They are clues, but how they relate to the sequences with the actor is complex. The actor is not embodying Dukes in a direct way and the objects he carries – such as a branch which plays the role of a gun – are also a blending or displacement of elements from Dukes' story with elements

⁸ Wagner, Rachel, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, Routledge, 2011

from *Ultima* and other videogames. A former neighbour later testified about Dukes that even when he lived with his parents, he spent a lot of time outdoors, building little wooden boxes. I imagined him as a modern Walden figure when I was filming.



Firearm, 2021, 3D-Rasin-Color-Print (NFT) material: uv-rasin, seize: 133 x 41 x 12cm,

Digressions on *Garfield*

Garfield is the last of the three works I completed for this exhibition. It is a digital print of an arrangement of images and documents related to the tragic event which catalysed the invention of the metal detector in 1881. Coming out of the experience of the previous two works, it presents a reconsideration, working notes and thoughts in process etc. As such, this work forms a counterpoint to the other two.

Moreover, Garfield is further related to The Boy Scout Project, a much earlier research and archive project, which – I came to understand during the process – has become the basis of much of my artistic research project in Oslo.

I titled this short essay 'digressions' because my mode of thinking and working is often digressive. I like how elements can infect the whole, but if you tend to lose yourself in detail you have to retain the capacity to zoom out and refrain from overly quick interpretation – to leave some empty space around them. This way of thinking also corresponds to Garfield: a small work compared with DUG and Hooked, which for me has to do with zooming out and reorientation.



Chickamauga battlefield, archive material

Garfield initially came out of filming *DUG*. At first, I was not interested in metal detectors in the slightest and I didn't know anything about the impact they had had on the process of excavating and archaeology. In the beginning of my artistic research project in Oslo, I focused rather on digital technologies, laser ground scanning, 3D modelling and photogrammetry, which are increasingly important in the field of archaeology and museology. But when I went to Bulgaria and interviewed the local archaeologist Vencislav Gergov in Telish, he talked a lot about metal detectors and how destructive the availability of cheap metal detectors became in Yugoslavia after the fall of the Berlin wall.

This conversation raised a question as to whether the so called "treasure hunter invasion of the 1990s" could be regarded as a form of transition from Fordist to post-Fordist labour, as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello describe it in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.⁹ In this case the metal detector needed to be regarded not as a tool but rather a guiding-device – a form of 'servomechanism'. At the same time, I wondered if such considerations on my side were simply the result of my preoccupation with digitality?

As already mentioned, I was thinking of virtual archaeology initially, but then I got more interested in digital and non-digital augmentation – not only in technological but also in psychological terms, the affective interrelation between our minds and technology. Augmentation here did not mean *Pokémon Go* – here in Bulgaria, augmentation was happening through the invisible hand of the market, the rules of supply and demand, national and transnational inequality and the effects of deprivation. In the Bulgarian countryside, some people are so impoverished that they are intensely connected to the price paid in Western auction houses for Thracian and Roman coins and other archaeological finds. So somehow the environment is augmented by possibility – namely the possibility of finding something of value.

*

When I started to researching metal detectors, I found a huge amount of video footage online. There is a peculiar culture around metal detectorists filming

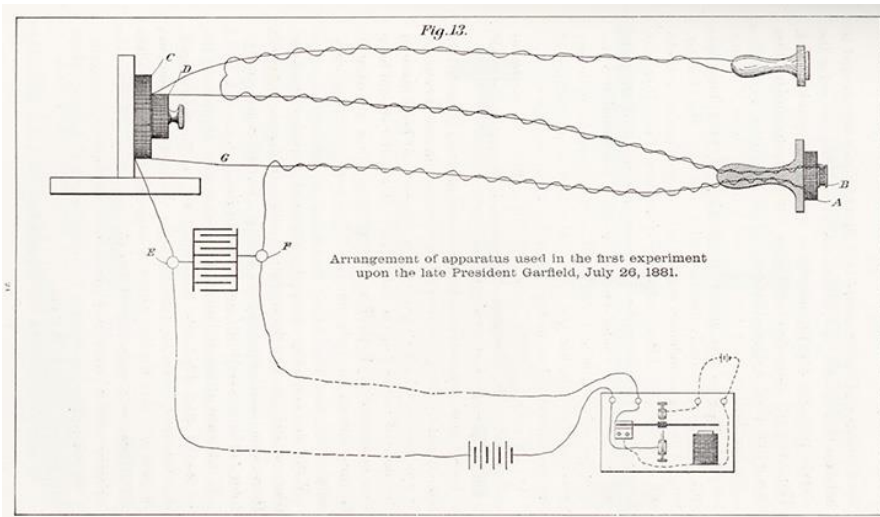
⁹ Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso, London / New York, NY 2007

themselves whilst looking for stuff. They even have their own YouTube channels. Then I came to understand that while they look for ancient coins in Bulgaria, in the U.S. – where they don't have hoards from antiquity – it's gold nuggets and the bullets from the American Civil War which are the major focus. Since the 1960s detectorists have been searching the old battlefields for bullets and removing them, erasing this material trace of past events.

*

It was an emergency situation: the U.S. President, US President James A. Garfield, then only six months in office, was shot at a Baltimore & Potomac Railroad Station by Charles J. Guiteau, a disgruntled and delusional office seeker on September 19, 1881. The doctors couldn't remove the bullets lodged in Garfield's chest and they were too afraid to operate. For several weeks Garfield's condition fluctuated before it deteriorated.

Hearing about tragic injury, Alexander Graham Bell, who 5 years earlier had patented the telephone, began thinking about possible ways to help the President. During experiments for a device to cancel out the interference of induction on a telephone line, he had found that when two overlapping flat spiral coils were positioned so as to silence the inducted tone, the passing of metal across the overlap disturbed the balance. Bell informed the doctors about his plan to locate the bullet, set up a temporary laboratory in DC frantically trying out various coil designs, battery powers, and other arrangements to increase the range of what would become the first metal detector.



Drawing of the metal detector used upon US President Garfield, archive material

When Bell managed to extend the effective range of the induction balance to three and a half inches, he brought his apparatus into the White House. First one doctor, then another moved the instrument over the Garfield's body. However, something seemed to be wrong with the balance, the range seem impaired – so that only a sputtering sound was heard, and the experiment had to be ended for fear of tiring the President.

Bell returned to his lab and now tried out his earlier plan of flat overlapping coils, instead of conical ones. This gave range of fully five inches, at which distance a bullet gave a clear tone. The White House agreed to a new trial on the following morning, but instead of the sharply localized sounds detected in trials with bullets both before and after, he heard a feeble sound over a considerable area of Garfield's body. On inquiring at the White House the next day, Bell found that the mattress of Garfield's bed was supported by steel springs. But he experimented with a duplicate of the bed and found that the springs did not materially affect the hearing distance, nor did they explain the large but limited area of sound.

When I stumbled on this tragic chain on events, I couldn't help but marvel at the irony: basically all the bullets that missed former Union General and Civil-War-hero James Garfield in the battles of Shiloh and Chickamauga have by now been dug out of the ground and trees by relic hunters equipped with metal detectors – but it remains a mystery why the bullet in Garfield's own body couldn't be detected.

*

Many years ago, I read a text by Mieke Bal about James Coleman, whose work I liked very much.¹⁰ Almost twenty years later, during the making of *Garfield*, I saw Bal give a talk about Peter Friedl at KW. What she said seemed to me similar to what she had written about Coleman, about the relation between art and knowledge – that she had an aversion to what she called “propaganda art” and argued that art needs instead to be political in a form that *activates a knowledge*.

I thought that was interesting, because I agree that James Coleman really activates thinking – and Friedl also in a way. For me though, twenty years later, I thought there was potentially something conservative in this way of thinking about art in terms of knowledge. Of course, art somehow relates to this privileged knowledge of academics – but for me the conflict is rather how you articulate your *own* thought process, rather than just activating the knowledge of others.

I struggle with this problem in art: the feeling that as an artist you create forms, but they are only understandable if there’s already a discourse established and the impression that you can only relate to that discourse. You need to have the right timing – you have to follow the right books and so on, and then you make a work which relates to these ideas. If you’re not too late, if you catch the wave, then people will understand – otherwise no one is interested. To be clear, I love that art is now more politically engaged than twenty years ago. However, the hierarchy between art and knowledge production seems to have reappeared in a different form, and I wonder if the emphatic alignment with contemporary issues sometimes has to do with career pressures and the challenge having to create your own market.

Coleman, in my view, created a form, which was really new and had something to do with repetition and signification. When I first saw Coleman, it was the work *INITIALS* (1993) at *documenta* in 2002. That got me interested in the *nouveau roman* and Maurice Blanchot – how a text becomes a stimulant of a thought process which becomes independent of the text. With Coleman, you really had to see the work a couple of times through repeated viewings. I had already experiences

¹⁰ Bal, Mieke, *Memory Acts: Performing Subjectivity*, Bojmans Bullitin, 2001

something similar with David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* a year earlier, which became much more interesting the second time. You had already built something in your mind, these mnemonic technologies, where you begin to compare and rehearse your own thoughts.

In the nineties I had read Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. I don't know how much I understood of it, but some of my ideas reading it – about the relation of speech to writing – I could rehearse when watching James Coleman: I could look at myself as I was watching it. It was not at all an abstract, but rather somehow a very physical experience. It came as a surprise that art can do that.

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A small image in the lower right corner of *Garfield* looks like a stamp, but it is in fact an ad for a metal detector from the 1960s. It relates to the commercialization and repurposing of the metal detector in the mid and late 20th century. After first appearing as a medical tool, the metal detector is replaced by X-ray in the 1890s. Only in the 1920s is the first commercial hand-held metal detector for locating metal in the ground patented, and shortly after that came the first walk-through metal detectors to prevent factory theft. At the end of WWII, the metal detector was used for the first time to find landmines.

The wide popularization of the metal detector as a tool for hobby archaeologists takes place in the 1950s and '60s. In the U.S. and England in the late 1960s, metal detecting becomes a mass phenomenon. In 1975, a New York Times article reads:

Tons of spent munitions and historic artefacts beneath the corn rows and wood lots that were once the bloodiest battlegrounds of the Civil War have attracted a 20th century army that is well equipped and bent on collecting souvenirs. Toting portable, battery-powered metal detectors[...] – broom-sized refinements of World War II technology.¹¹

¹¹ „An Army of Relic Hunters is Despoiling Civil War Battlegrounds', *New York Times*, August 12, 1975, Page 31

Although metal detectors were probably not the first thing on his mind, Marshall McLuhan seems to poignantly describes them in an image he uses in *Understanding Media*: “By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions.”¹² The metal detector, far from being a simple *tool*, seem to channel a form of enjoyment, one not only related to the past. In an early phase of my research, I found numerous interviews with metal detectorists, who all describe an intense and long-lasting emotion of happiness after a precious find.

The author of the 1975 *New York Times* article neatly relates the metal detector signal to slot machines. The metals detector is thus not only an extension of our sensory skills but a relay between a generic desire and our *self*. For me *Garfield* is a first attempt to depict this transition from tool to servomechanism, and to reinscribe in retrospect.

*

Another lens for considering the metal detector is as a prosthesis. Metal detectors create a peculiar phenomenological experience which I think can throw a light on augmentation. Functioning as a work tool as well a recreational gadget, metal detectors are marked by a quality which we see nowadays a lot in relation to social media, motivational learning software etc.: they help to make otherwise boring and tedious labour more enjoyable.

During my parallel research for *Hooked*, I found similar observations related to games and the function of virtual rewards. At first a virtual reward seems to be a contradiction: how can something that seemingly amounts to nothing be rewarding? Behaviourism understood that when you want a conditioned dog or a dolphin to perform a longer sequence of tricks and you can only reward him with food at the very end, you need to communicate to the animal that she or he is on track and that the reward is coming. B. F. Skinner named this the ‘bridge signal’. It is similar, for example, with the beeping of the metal detector: you have that feeling – maybe I’ll

¹² *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan, 1964

find it, maybe not... Searching is related to chance and the unfolding of this process is itself rewarding.

As I point out in *Hooked*, neuroscience relates this phenomenon to a calculus named 'reward prediction error'. Reward prediction error calculates the relative value of an achievement in relation to one's here and now. The emotional response to achievement or failure relates naturally also to its probability. However, it's more interesting that such a calculus is always based on a reference context. Otherwise, you cannot define an affective goal – the signposts all relate to a destination. This applies to short-term tasks as well as lifegoals. When playing a videogame this context ranges widely too, and it is also how algorithms exploit user profiles – simply speaking, they tabulate biographical, chrononormative and situational data along our browsing paths and constantly refine our profiles to determine the signals they send us, in an endless feedback loop.

*

At the time I encountered Coleman's work, I was working on a piece called *The Boy Scout Project* (2000-02). It was an archive project in which I collected many photographs which were specific to different topics – there was not yet a real subject, it was a 'research without a cause' if you like. But there were certain research threads which emerged: it became about Boy Scouts, about American culture, about second nature, about signification of images, and so on.

I collected images which related to these topics, including lots of images of Boy Scout first aid training. I was interested in those because they were training images, staged situations, but at the same time representing a possible emergency. Those images became a good relay to connect other images, a catalyst for other meanings which could hook onto them. It was in a way my first real editing work, but without a script – just looking for these metaphors and for pieces of evidence speaking to each other. The problem with this, of course, is that it is happening in your head, but it is not a given that it is intelligible to anyone else. That was the starting point, the moment I realised that I'm ultimately interested in narrative – because I needed to make this path walkable for others. For this you need a development, a form of going forwards and backwards to connect content and to hold the viewer's attention.

In the case of *Hooked*, this became difficult because the initial plan for it didn't work out and I had to adapt. Perhaps I'm still under the spell of this process, because the editing was such a dreadful experience. It was originally a double projection, but I thought the two screens made it too disjunctive – it's already disjunctive, but it became even more disjunctive – so finally I edited them into one. For me, *Hooked* is not an essay film in the mode of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. Instead, it has a somewhat rigid linearity. You have these blocks of research, but you have a narrative development, which works as a synthesis. Like in a noir film, the narrator detective explains how he gets interested in the case and then goes back in time to solve it. In the end, Dukes comes back to SeaWorld, to the crime scene. Here the mode of the video changes: it becomes more fictional, the voiceover is talking about the alignment system in *Ultima*, but now also supports the suspension of disbelief. Dukes experiences the world as a videogame, in a sort of epiphany. So the work itself becomes more narrative and fantasy than essay.

The one-screen projection works better because I needed to create this idea that you are following the story *as a story*, not as material, presented to you in a certain order, even if part of the narrative is about theory. That for me was the challenge – this synthesis of thinking and storytelling, where events become significant on a more theoretical level. I have on the one side the plot, but I have also the idea of a *form* and to create a certain kind of effect belonging to a meta narrative.

*

Because the editing of *Hooked* was exhausting and became itself a form of addiction, I didn't feel ready to entire into a similar process again. Therefore, *Garfield* remained a sort of storyboard – a tableau you can read chronologically from left to right.



Advertising for metal detector, archive material

James A. Garfield was an American President, so his every step is documented and even fetishized, unlike Dukes of whom one knows very little. Out of this sea of images it was relatively easy to piece together a timeline showing the main event. You have an image of Garfield as a still young civil war general, an image of him as president, the assassin Charles J. Guiteau, the gun he used, the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad railway station where the shooting took place, the bullet, a symbolical newspaper illustration showing the injured President stirring a boat through the stormy sea. Most of these documents are etchings from books and newspapers: I didn't want to create rebus or complex associations which would break them up into polysemic material.

As mentioned earlier, *Garfield* is about zooming out of the research process and about the right spacings. As said, I tend to lose myself in details – it's also a strategy. Knowledge cannot be distinct from yourself. We think knowledge, but knowledge thinks us first. In a way *self-reflection* became the topic of my research project. Questions were piling up, which had rather to do with meaning-making than with truth. However, there were still the historical facts and discourses to which one could retreat.

Appendices

I have included information about two works of mine which are related to my PhD project, but are not part of it, in case these are useful for reference.

The first is a video, *Tilikum* (2013-15), which predated my PhD research but has many connections to it, particularly to *Hooked*.

The second is an image from *Crew Members*, a series of terracotta sculptures I have been developing in parallel with *DUG*, but which ultimately did not form part of the final presentation.

Appendix I: *Tilikum*



Tilikum (2013-15)
<https://vimeo.com/118525264>
Password: Dukes

The multimedia project *Tilikum* deals with the linkage between instrumental sciences with economic principles. Starting point of the story is the brutal death of the animal trainer at Sea World Orlando, Florida. In 2010 the bull orca *Tilikum* suddenly stopped to obey the commands of his trainer Dawn Brancheau, and instead dragged her underwater, drowned- and dismembered her in front of a terrified audience. Going back in time, the video then focuses at the genealogy of operant conditioning and scientific training methods, first developed in the 20s and 30s by American Behaviourists. In late 1940s the new technical and theoretical possibilities of neurophysiology, linguistics and computer science started to scrutinize the behaviourist approach of black-boxing the mind. Yet instead of questioning the behaviourist's ideological bias (Chomsky), the new generation of scientists immediately translated it into a universal code of rational choice models and refined interrogation techniques. The second part of the video then tells how the discovery of dolphin- and whale intelligence was also deeply intertwined with the new research and atmosphere of departure. And while Allen Dulles declared a new era of brain warfare ambitious scientists started to believe that dolphins would be soon able to speak the English language.

Appendix II: *Crew Members*



Crew Members (2019), terracotta casts

Crew Member is a series of 7 terracotta casts busts and objects inspired by chalcolithic deities found in the North-West of Bulgaria as well as Alexander Bogdanov's science-fiction Bolshevik novel 'Red Star' published in 1908 about a Communist society on Mars.