SWAMP
PROTOCOL

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David Atlas
Iain Ball
Lara Joy Evans
Samuel Capps
Holly Childs
Lea Collet and Marios Stamatis
core.pan
Porpentine Charity Heartscape
Marija Bozinovska Jones with MBJ Wetware
Will Kendrick
Rachel McRae
Benoit Ménard
Sarah Montet
Anni Nöps
Eva Papamargariti
Jakob Kudsk Steensen
Viktor Timofeev
Kyle Zeto Thorne

SWAMP PROTOCOL

Swamp Protocol is a protean compression of data by 18 artists working across digital media, installation, performance, machine learning, music, film and poetry. At arebyte Gallery, it is remixed and presented as a site-specific film installation including a spatial 8-channel sound work by producer and genre fluid DJ Anni Nöps.

It is the first project by **Most Dismal Swamp**, an experimental art platform and record label simulating and exploring a contemporary ecology that has come to be defined by the hallucinatory entanglement of multiple logics, systems, temporalities, and realities: a mixed-reality paradigm; a pervasive, horizonless *swampscape*.

Swamp Protocol focuses on the endemic habits of orientation that characterise life in the *swampscape*: How does one, or indeed a community, engage with an environment of this nature (and vice versa)? What can be learned from the emergent rituals and tacit procedures necessary for navigating such a shared space? Is there a collective rationality emerging from the digitally altered states wrought by the swampscape? Some kind of Dank Enlightenment?

A version of *Swamp Protocol* can be watched online at www.**mostdismalswamp.com**. And a digital release of music by Anni Nöps featured in *Swamp Protocol*, will also be available via **Most Dismal Swamp** and across all major streaming platforms.

Further projects of **Most Dismal Swamp** include *Whale Fall*, an online presentation and gallery installation at Gossamer Fog, London, launching 29 March; a digital release by producer Jennifer Walton out 29 March; an ongoing series of Dismal Sessions hosted online, featuring audio-visual mixes by artists and musicians; and a free launch party taking place at Dreambags Jaguarshoes, London, 29 March from 10pm, featuring live music by Anni Nöps, Jennifer Walton, Exploited Body, Astrid Gnosis, Iceboy Violet and Mang, as well as live visuals by Laila Blebleble and Joey Holder.

Among his numerous publications and journals, the 19th century poet, philosopher, and 'patron saint of swamps', Henry David Thoreau documented the occasion of his near-complete physical immersion into one of the various swamps he explored. Content and up to his chin in mud; sense and thought disoriented in the thick tangle of a 'dismal' environment. Content amid the indistinct and wild slurry. Content in 'scenting the wild honeysuckle and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes.' Such ardent immersion exemplified his unorthodox approach as a scientific thinker – a rational materialist that would earnestly describe 'a swamp as a sacred place, *a sanctum santorum*'.

Thoreau's method defined him as a committed immersant within a reality set apart from, and in resistance to, the insatiable progress of the world of western modernity: For the improper ground of the marshes and their pestilent dangers such as malaria, or 'swamp fever', was often proven as 'the great original obstacle to progress'. Yet, importantly, his method was not one devoid of systematic reasoning, nor removed from enlightened public discourse. Through his experimentally multi–modal work encompassing romantic poetry, political essay, personal reflection and historical analysis he forged a speculative mission that sought to explore how the poetic, the scientific, the human, the nonhuman, nature, and culture might be re-ordered and re-combined by his perception of the swamp as a potent space of elemental transformation:

> *Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps… When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest woods the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp… out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey.*
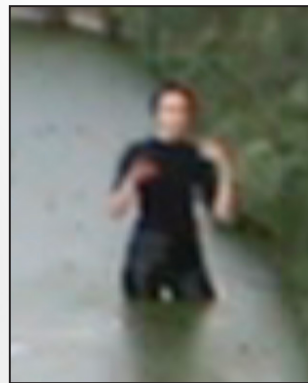
The aggregate appearance is of dignity and dissoluteness:
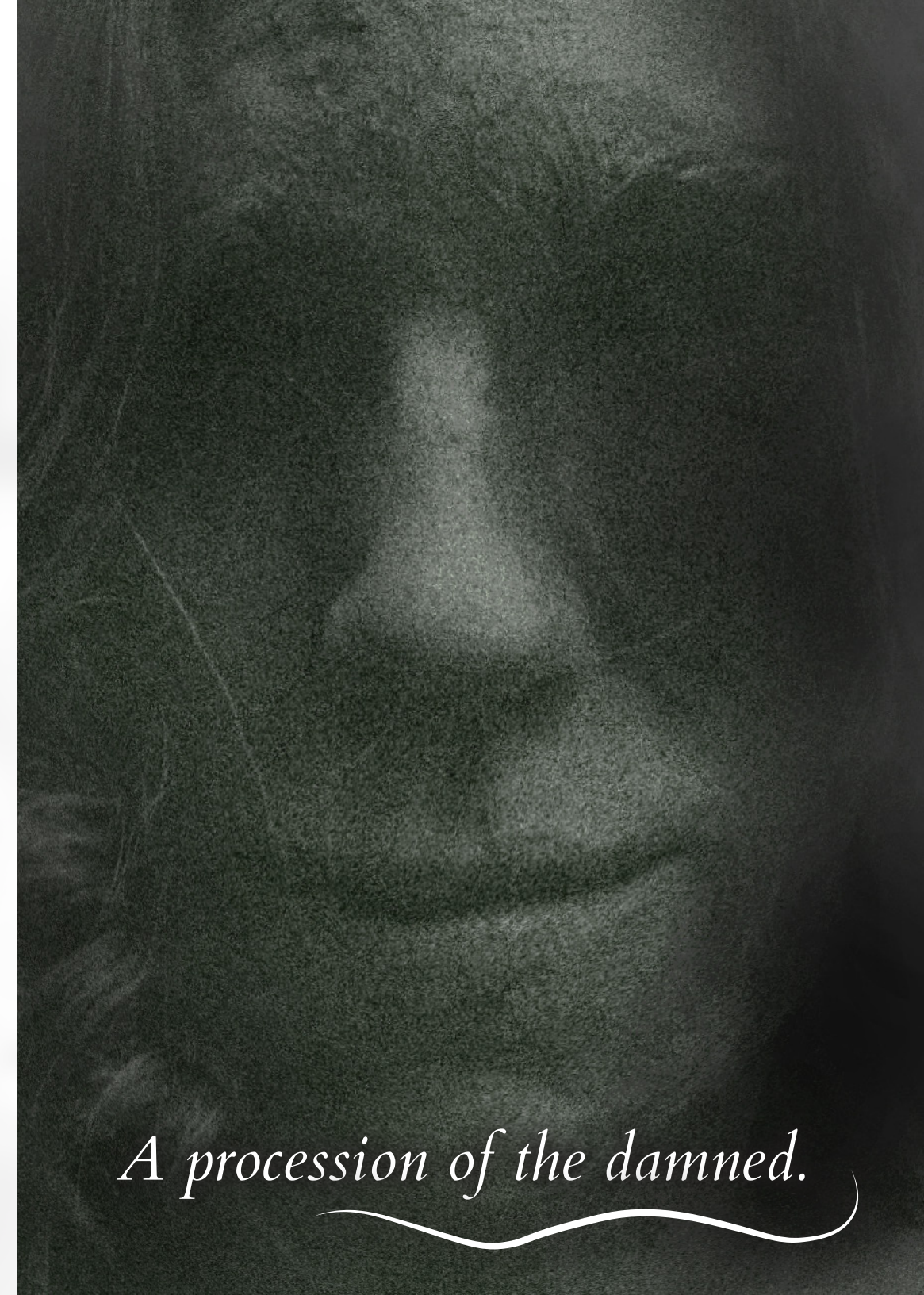
the aggregate voice is a defiant prayer:

but the spirit of the whole is processional.

This view from the swamp; from the faithful immersion into its deep, ancient bogs, provides a perspective infected by an intense intimacy. From here Thoreau sees in the tangled weeds 'healing herbs'; in the intoxicating swamp gas and miasma, the 'night thoughts of earth'; in the swamp, a 'temple'. And conversely, from his perspective a suspicion of modern institutions is fermented: 'what would become of us if we took our walks in a mall?'

Reverently submerged in the vegetal morass, in the noise of the swamp, Thoreau's approach and protocol can be understood as an inflection of that other 'strange science' which Michel de Certaeu named *mystics*. In his two-volume analysis of 16th and 17th century Christian mysticism, *The Mystic Fable*, de Certaeu uses the term *mystics* (la mystique) in the delineation of a field of practice to be understood in terms of systematic disciplines such as physics, mathematics, or optics. Among the aspects of *mystics* that de Certeau outlines, attention is paid to it as 'a manner of using received language *differently*'. It is this (mis)use of the established language, symbols and concepts of their faith that marked the mystics as heretics: those who defy the orthodoxy of the church not by any desire to destroy it but to *transform* and *mutate* the institutional narratives and practices that dominate their spiritual life. Their heresy was thus not destructive in character, but speculative. Such transformations were practiced through a radically intimate commitment to their faith; an immersion into the ecstasy of divine communion that the church saw as undermining their authority as mediator of the gospel. Sense and thought disoriented in the ecstatic intoxication of divine experience. Religious doctrine tainted with *mystics*' use of the deviant views of science, philosophy and direct, personal experience.

A procession of the damned.

Mystics, in the 16th and 17th centuries as outlined by de Certaeu, was like a distributed laboratory or think-tank engaging the unsanctioned and disparate voices of those creating new, experimental forms of reason – both lay and specialist. (The voice of the layman is important here, as the figure of the amateur is someone defined primarily by their love of a subject that is not beholden to professional or sanctioned standards – a valuable example is the field of fan-fiction, where fans that are so deeply embedded in the universes of narratives of popular fiction that they develop their own unsanctioned texts to supplement the canon)

Both the work of Thoreau and that of *mystics* then, are examples of truly 'experimental sciences' with their subjects so deeply immersed in their objects of study, that their practitioners, and their disciplines, as Thoreau suggests, are fundamentally recreated. Their product was a *new corpus*; a re-combined, re-constituted, re-formed, re-fictioned language and system. As de Certeau calls it, a 'teratological language'; a monstrously chimeric conjunction and mutation of given forms. While the practitioners of *mystics* produced their heresies, Thoreau in his temple-laboratory worked towards the creation of an 'eco-logic' by transforming the traditional (western) pejorative view of the swamp.

Outlining these unorthodox 'sciences' will shed light on the emerging *dank enlightenment*.

By the damned,
I mean the excluded.
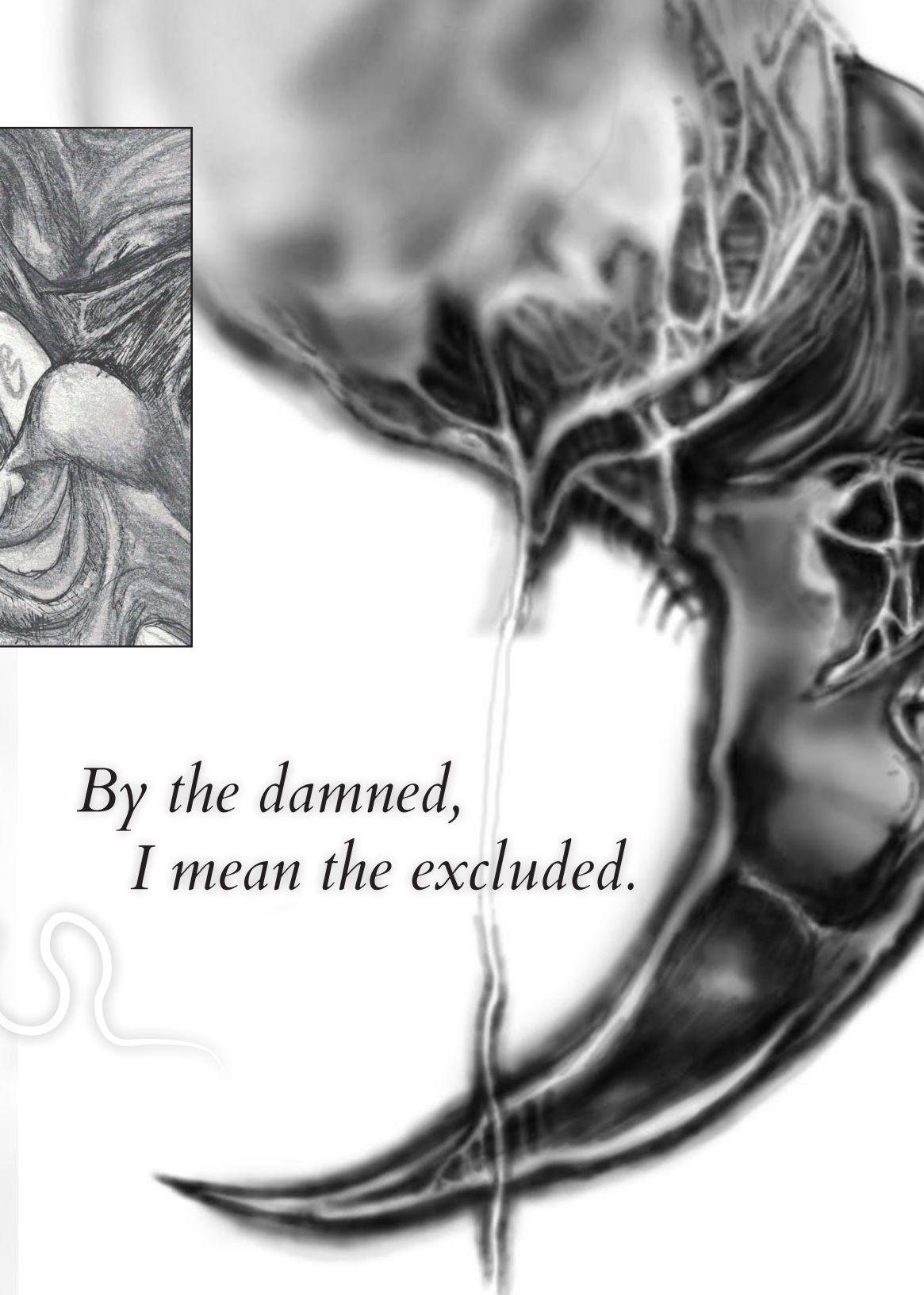
So, since Thoreau validly asked 'what would become of us if we took our walks in the mall?' what has become of the mall? Well Thoreau may already have offered an answer that pushes towards a means to imagine a contemporary dank enlightenment:

> *let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place which we call reality.*

This is to say that the characteristics of swamps might provide a useful lens with which to re-consider the contemporary world and its institutions: 'the bogs and quicksands of society'. Perhaps this manifests not only in the swamp's physical makeup, but also in its histories, lore, and cultures.

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in 1990 outlines an analytic framework that foregrounds the relations between global cultural flows he terms 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes', 'financescapes', and 'ideoscapes'. To this can be added a term that describes a pervasive contemporary ecology that has come to be defined by the entanglement of multiple logics, systems, temporalities, and realities: *swampscapes*.

An essential characteristic, key to *swampscapes*, is their anomalous constitution 'in a classificatory order predicated on a hard and fast distinction between land and water, time and space'. Simultaneously solid land and fluid water yet also neither, *swampscapes* embody a topology of muddy indistinction, and a taxonomic heresy that disallows the easy separation and parsing of solid forms. This is relevant for understanding a contemporary condition that has supplanted the teleology of modernity and the fragmentation of postmodernity with the *entangled simultaneity* of multiple, nested logics: a quantum ecology that blurs, combines and superposes fact and fiction, nature and culture, technology and the occult, past and future, authentic and synthetic, work and play, science and mysticism, self and other, dry silicon and wet biology, online and offline, human and nonhuman.

*We shall
have a procession
of data that Science
has excluded.*

First used in 1903, and later gathering traction as a term oft employed during Donald Trump's US presidential campaign, is the politician's call to 'drain the swamp'. Historically used to signify the desirable reformation of a corrupt state by whomever declares it, the phrase can be used for and against anything the user determines to be corrupt. It refers to the drainage of swamps for the purpose of stopping the spread of malaria, transmitted by mosquitos. Trump's contemporary usage is demonstrative of his frustration and inability to grasp the complex and multivalent nature of the contemporary world. The thick tangle and miasma of other worldly perspectives is just too complex and this 'swamp' must be drained to allow the foundations to be laid for securing the progression of a singular political-cultural narrative motivated by his own narrow worldview. Anything 'unorthodox' that contradicts such a position is invariably denounced as FAKE NEWS.

What this call to drain the swamp embodies is the failure to adapt and become attuned to the impossibility of a consensus reality (especially in an age of accelerated global communication). Rather, to look to the model of the *swampscape* already described: reality is a composite of *multiple and simultaneous* realities; a mixed-reality biome. To re-use a 2017 *Wired* headline: mixed reality is the new reality. The *swampscape* as a mixed reality system composed of an adversarial slurry of data, images, models, narratives, post-facts, myths, conspiracies and claims to truth can be likened to what James Bridle in his 2018 book *New Dark Age* calls 'the grey zone'. In a passage from the book, the words 'grey zone' have here been effectively replaced by 'swamp':

> *What if we choose to appropriate the swamp for ourselves? Somewhere between the jihadis and the military strategists, between war and peace, between black and white, the swamp is where most of us live today. The swamp is the best descriptor for a landscape inundated with unprovable facts and provable falsehoods… The swamp is the slippery, almost ungraspable terrain we now find ourselves in as result of our vastly extended technological tools for knowledge making… The swamp cannot be defeated. It cannot be drained or overrun – it is already overflowing.*

Battalions
of the
accursed,
captained
by pallid
data that
I have
exhumed,
will march.

In the *swampscape* myriad realities and virtualities are simultaneous and indistinguishably entangled, and re-inforced by the emergence of tribal communities operating within 'filter bubbles'; their technologically accelerated superposition is what constitutes reality rather than a single dominant narrative or claim to 'truth'. The *swampscape* is thus a necessary image, a model even, that can be re-claimed for orientation within such an environment. What specific opportunites does this model offer as a tool for (re)negotiating our thick present? What conceptual tools are afforded by *thinking with and from the swampscape* as a model for this world?

The adverse navigational conditions of swamps, with their uncertain terrain that swallows the tracks and restricts the progress of those who aim to forge a path through these spaces, have long been a subject of aberration in western cultures. But, with the *swampscape* model, we can explore the disorientation associated with the swamp's erasure of 'established classical concepts of vista, horizon and landscape' as a modality of *re-orientation*; as a condition for *thinking in multiple dimensions*. That is, a form of Thoreau's multi-modal and speculative 'eco-logic' re-formatted for the 21st century. Such thinking could help to develop methods of navigating the hyper-baroque trans-architectures of extraterritorial geopolitics, fictional infrastructures, legal mystifications, ambient intelligences, weaponized automated media, and adversarial virtualities...

Some of them livid

and some of them fiery

and some of them rotten.

Michel de Certeau wrote of the discipline and discourse of *mystics* as being a 'reaction to the vanishing of truths, the increasing opaqueness of the authorities and divided or diseased institutions'. Similarly, many contemporary artists, across various media, are reacting to the conditions of the *swampscape* wherein the manifold claims to have access, or the means to access, truth, through the 'red pill' of a specific narrative or another that is more 'real' than others. Many online tribes offer their gospel as a 'red pill' that when digested will allow one to see through the false claims of other perspectives (most worryingly this is directed at the views of feminism and diversity by other frustrated yet organised communities such as the highly toxic 'incel' subculture).

The approach of these contemporary artists, can be proposed as forming the implicit, distributed and diverse project of a dank enlightenment. While the enlightenment is familiar to us as an enterprise engaged in the uncovering of truth using the advances of science and reason, it has all too often been abused and hi-jacked as a political tool (or even as an alibi for more nefarious political decisions). In the last few years, another subculture of right-wing thinkers have coalesced around the discourse of a dark enlightenment – essentially a full reversal of all that was valued (if not practically implemented) by enlightenment progress such as democracy and egalitarianism. Such abuses of enlightenment are perhaps to be expected when it invites a diverse world to seek truth; to pursue the reality of things. Perhaps the invitation is enough to fracture the world as extremely as it presently is; to accelerate the *swampscape* of multiple and simultaneous realities.

But, like the distributed laboratory of *mystics*, some contemporary art is experimenting directly with and re-inventing 'contemporary language'. Not just the words but also the concepts we employ and the images or models we call upon to think of the world and its future. Traditional concepts and images passed down and inherited are not so much being destroyed, but more in line with the transformational practice of a heretic, being mutated. To do so requires an amphibious form of thinking that immerses itself in the multiple and simultaneous dimensions of a *swampscape* comprised of superposed logics such as that of science and mysticism, fact and fiction…

And with this re-figured and 'teratological language' a new form of reason is emerging, for such a language is a system for thinking with the world; parsing it and acting upon it. A war of images is taking place: from the images of what the future will look like, composed by silicon valley or a mysoginist and racist president, to the appropriation of popular culture in 'meme warfare' such as the alt-right's use of Pepe the frog. And they work to propose a singular claim to truth for a dominant group of people. The images of a dank enlightenment on the other hand are inherently composed of the *swampscape*'s noisy polyvocality; composed with a multi-dimensional thinking (which might otherwise be called speculation).

If the 'night thoughts of earth' influenced and helped form Thoreau's 'eco-logic', then the night thoughts of the *swampscape* are the heretic's armament for a dank enlightenment, an immersive strange science that seeks to operate in multiple and simultaneous dimensions.
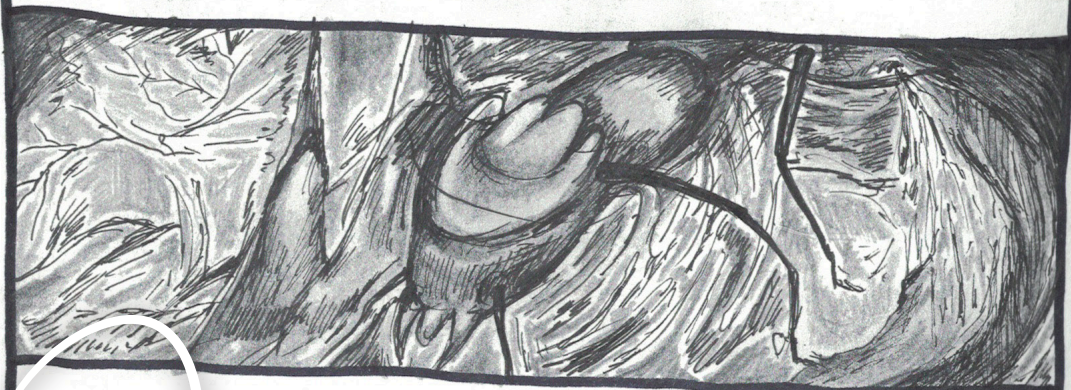
The datum is buried:
it may sprout some day.
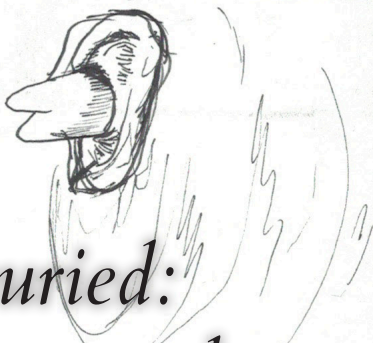
Rumi Josephs
IMMENSE GOTHIC VALUE MODEL

A current crisis in cultural production which could be described as 'the decline of the ability for the new to emerge' is forcing cultural insight and trend forecasting agencies to seek increasingly speculative models for creating value. Insight agencies trade on discovering areas of cultural experimentation where the new is emerging. Recognising the cultural significance behind what is being created in these 'hot zones' means that agencies are able to translate cultural production into cultural value. In other words, they complete a circuit between cultural production and the creation of new markets. Is it possible to use the swampscape — this immense gothic sink where nature haunts itself — to design a radical new strategy of value production?

> *"The present may be considered the age of the Dark Enlightenment: the rejection of modernity's rationalistic Enlightenment by those who have been led to submit reason and life to the ferocity of financial mathematics."*
> *— Franco "Bifo" Berardi*

In the Dark Enlightenment that Bifo describes, economics and death are deeply connected in the apocalyptic unconscious. The Enlightenment is rejected by those who are bound into an economic programme which has death as its ideal form. But rather than a return to rationalism, Bifo calls for us to seek out places where "the silence of God resounds as chaos". The profoundly felt silence of God in the gothic wetlands make it a place of mind and chaos. In the space left by the silence of the Christian, European God who thinks like an architect of the world, the subconscious of some other chaotic mind stirs into the murk. The swamp is a hypothesis for as yet unknown, unthought markets in the non-human unconscious.

The swamp is always in the process of losing its identity, running contrary to the modernist view of history where chaos resolves into order. Financial products in the 21st century have become prone to fantasies of decentralisation, collapsing ownership formats and distributed modes of organisation, power and authority. Do the swamp's diagrams of chaos offer an escape from Dark thanatropic desires? It is clear that the agency must become volatile, unstable and foster the conditions for its own mutation. Always partially formed, contingent, constituted from what is available. A temporary apparatus of nested logic haunted by its intellectual property.

Design studio, media outlet, cultural insight consultancy, artists residency, curatorial platform, research department, trend forecasting agency, dark kitchen of marketing and brand strategy, or scrambled fractional representations of corporate identity as a form of camouflage? All visual communication for the agency becomes camouflage of one form or another. Clients have their preconceptions satisfied while the agency gestates value models for which stability and control are utterly corrupted.

SWAMP ANGELS

Lea Collet and Marios Stamatis
www.leacollet.com / www.mariosstamatis.com

Viktor Timofeev
www.viktortimofeev.com

Holly Childs
www.hollychilds.com

Benoit Ménard
www.benoitmenard.com

Lara Joy Evans
www.larajoyevans.com

Marija Bozinovska Jones
www.marijabozinovskajones.com

Porpentine Charity Heartscape
www.slimedaughter.com

Jakob Kudsk Steensen
www.jakobsteensen.com

Eva Papamargariti
www.evapapamargariti.tumblr.com

core.pan
http://core.panpsychism.online/

David Atlas
www.instagram.com/demonsanctuary

Samuel Capps
www.samuelcapps.com

Will Kendrick
www.willkendrick.co.uk

Kyle Zeto Thorne
www.studioarkhive.com

Anni Nöps
https://soundcloud.com/anninops

Iain Ball
www.iainball.com

Rachel McRae
www.remcrae.com

IMAGE CREDITS

All images courtesy of the artists and Most Dismal Swamp
Anni Nöps canal images by RJM Vanderheyden

COMMISSIONED TEXT *'Immense Gothic Value Model'*

Rumi Josephs
@body_drift

SWAMP PROTOCOL CREDITS

Editing, neural transfer, VFX
core.pan

Camera Operator
Ollie Furlong

3D Henry/Star modelling
Hannah Rose Stewart

Additional neural transfer
Karo Castro-Wunsch
Hannah Rose Stewart

Performers
Sarah Borga
Harry Bix
Natalia Janula
Max Berendt
Aimée Neat
Rumi Josephs

Graff
Alexis Milne

Metalworks
Finley Rose Stewart

References
Quotations from Charles Fort, The Book of the Damned, 1919.

Most Dismal Swamp

Most Dismal Swamp is a mixed-reality biome, an art platform, a multi-scalar mystic fiction, a forecasting laboratory, a long tail, a transitional ecosystem, a party, a cognitive scaffold, a bad dataset, a curatorial MMORPG, a memeplex aggregator, a planetary weirding studio, and a record label.

It is a model for parsing, navigating, and elaborating a Dank Enlightenment: globally variable synaesthesia across multiple and simultaneous dimensions.

www.mostdismalswamp.com

arebyte Gallery

Following in the long tradition of artists experimentation with new technologies, arebyte Gallery has led a pioneering art programme in its London gallery since 2013, to much acclaim.

From web-based work to multimedia installations including Virtual/Augmented Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Computer Generated Images and 3D printing, the gallery commissions multiple voices in digital culture from emerging, as well as more established artists, across the UK and internationally.

At the forefront of today's digital art scene, arebyte has been listed as one of the seven best new galleries in London by Time Out (2018) and curated the UK's first Yami-Ichi at Tate Modern (2016).

Its art programme has been praised in major press including BBC, Sky News, Fox News, The Guardian and VICE.

www.arebyte.com

2019 Programme:

home

arebyte Gallery's 2019 programme takes the idea of home as its point of departure. Continuing on from last year's theme Islands, the programme this year extends towards the peripheries and returns to the centre, becoming more personal and abstract in the process.

The programme reflects upon ideas of redevelopment of urban spaces and otherworldly sites of discovery, the disconnection of marginalised bodies, new ecologies for future ways of living and looking beyond locality as a means of integrating change, as well as resisting the homogeneous nature of corporate systems and challenging ideas surrounding labour, leisure and existence.

Home is relational, emotive, nostalgic and warm, but equally can be impossible, scary and unstable. The artists in the programme disrupt and confront the limits of what these situations mean in our present, our future and our digital homes.

Thinking about recent western-global political and social upheavals, the artists embrace and subvert technology as their means of interrogation, and posit new ideas to imagine our collective, prospective futures. Within the exhibitions, spaces of home are unpacked as spaces of transition – of gender, religion, futures and reality – but also spaces of resistance and power.

With an increased use of sharing economies, and the rising number of people working from home, our relationship towards the objects we spend time with have changed and as a consequence so too have the communities and lifestyles we operate within. The home itself becomes a consumer entry point for a vast new economic territory of invisible infrastructure of big data, with the monopolising of private activities to benefit corporate advancement as the overbearing approach. The rules governing the space of everyday life now exist through this colonising of privacy.

Through this questioning of corporate systems, political ideologies, industry and freedom, the programme ruminates on fact and fiction, on histories and futures, and on belonging and alienation. The home becomes a metaphor for thinking about the future of our societal advancement, economic drives and consumer-led lifestyles. Home is a way to speculate on fictions for prospective ways of alternative living and thus acts a framework for enabling and empowering communities both in real life and online.

arebyte