ABSTRACT

We live in a time where everything, everywhere seems to be happening simultaneously, and indeterminately. Worldwide events expose themselves to us 24/7, from the major issues to the trivial. Sociopolitical unrest, economic instability and natural disasters are part of our everyday, as are the daily updates of some US celebrity or a Burkina Fasoan in Ouagadougou. At the same time, the same technology also adds more diversions – in the form of nonstop entertainment – to lull and ease our anxieties away. The rate in which these come to us is astonishing in acceleration and quantity, and in their stroboscopic appearance, they often leave us in states of confusion and bewilderment.

This research is a study on the current age that we live in: an age of confusion, of anxiety, of uncertainty. In examining the symptoms, the exegesis will employ a multidisciplinary approach – from information and social theory, to literary and cultural studies, to contemporary art discourse – primarily to highlight the interdependency of the issue. These are bound via a single framework known as the 'oscillation' – a characteristic of our current condition, where we constantly renegotiate and reorient ourselves (between modernist and postmodernist values, between hope and despair, between reality and illusion and so on) – as formulated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.

The studio practice aims to provide more than just a rhetoric to the dilemma. Highly self-conscious of itself in light of years of postmodern irony and skepticism, the series of drawings in this research allude to the aforementioned oscillation through using handwriting as their main visual code, done in a manner which blurs the distinction between writing and drawing. Ultimately, the work also endeavours – in all modesty – to serve as a reminder of art's redemptive potential.
DECLARATION

I hereby certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made to other material, the research paper and exhibition submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of M Fine Art (Research) VCAM comprise only my original work.

Krishnamurti Suparka
22 May 2012
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INTRODUCTION

_The world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence._¹

We live in a time where everything, everywhere seems to be happening simultaneously, all at once. Our constant exposure to events; trends, music, news – from multicitporate outlets up to microbloggings – occurs at an amazing rate; both in acceleration and in quantity. The internet, arguably _the_ medium of choice for communication of this age, significantly contributes to this phenomenon. Word and image travel around the globe indeterminately, as previous time spans and physical distances cease to exist. Everything, everywhere is now _here_; in front of us, projected onto the screens held in our palms; revolving in the transient yet constant present that is cyberspace. All virtually exists, here and now, inside its boundless plane. Past, present, and no doubt the future, are equally accessible in real time. An overcrowding of the present is inevitable. In an already heterogeneous, real present, our encounters online mean additional workload. More things to negotiate, more things to manage, more things to bear. More strain.

_The Future, Today_ stemmed from a personal disillusionment with the current state of the world. It came from a demand to find a stable ground, a solutive measure to the increasing cacophony that characterizes our daily lives. My first experiments in writing – that is, the incorporation of my handwriting in my drawings – were genuine attempts at wanting to discover the course of the research [fig.1]. Over time, I found that the outcome of these tests were satisfactory in many levels, some of which were unintentional.

One of these was the fact that it became almost therapeutic; spending hours, days, and sometimes weeks; focusing on a single drawing [fig.2]. The purgative nature of the stream-of-consciousness writing was a useful exhalation method, while the shift in the valuation of time allowed greater opportunity for reflective pause and – ultimately – inner renewal.

Whether these can or cannot be felt by others is a different matter, since the primary device – writing – was chosen precisely for its elusive and open-ended properties. Despite the inherent private, diaristic process of its production, the end results distract attention away from its more personal and obscured content. This kind of paradox is a situation which will become more familiar as the exegesis unfolds.

Since the early days of the research, the relationship between the exegesis and the studio practice has always been conversational, where the progress of one would lead to the development of the other. This, in my opinion, is how The Future, Today as a body of work is best understood. Whenever there are gaps or links that are missing from one side, a closer inspection on the other should reveal what is required, and vice versa.

This exegesis is divided into five chapters, each addressing different areas that the studio practice encapsulates. The first chapter, Notes On A Changing World, is an overview of some of the causes that marked the beginning of this research. It looks at literary texts, recent world events, as well as sociopolitical and cultural analysis that are related to (or indicative of) the aforementioned 'contemporary disorder'. The imposition of the rather journalistic/pragmatic tone of this chapter is deemed necessary, to establish a point of departure that is based on tangible evidence; ones that can be felt by most; in order to highlight the urgency of the matter.

This is followed by the second chapter, To Name The Unnameable, which situates the studio practice in relation to the background of the preceding chapter. The chapter title is a reference to a Salman Rushdie quote, “A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep.” Such an heroic statement ensures the removal of any trace of modesty left, but the play here is one of a clear and conscious impudence – tongue firmly in cheek – in reference to Modernist values (particularly to Romantic gestures and narratives), or perhaps more appropriately, towards that tendency to revisit Modernist values which I have seen in recent years.

Examples within the scope of art/music/cinema will be discussed – ideas such as the Sublime, 'damaged romanticism', Remodernism, New Sincerity, Altermodern and so forth – as well as Metamodernism, whose theory of the 'oscillation' provides another suitable framework for this research. A closer inspection on the works and ideas by Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Agnes Martin, and Michael Haneke will take place near the end of this chapter.

The Hand That Writes is the third chapter, where the writing aspect of the studio practice will be discussed at length. Writing's connection to drawing, to writing per se, the role of the scribe, cryptography – these are some of the ideas to be explored in different depths – as well as their connection to the artwork. Artists and figures whose encounters/experiments with text informed my thinking and practice will also be discussed.

The Vocabulary of Disorder is the fourth chapter that probes further into the visual components within the studio practice; ones that are outside the writing element. This chapter shall explain how they are designed to

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2 S. Rushdie, speaking four days after a fatwa was proclaimed in Iran due to the controversial nature of his Satanic Verses book, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1905167_1905168_1905160,00.html #ixzz1dhBo3XA, retrieved 15 November 2011.
address three defining factors or characteristics – noise, information, speed – which, in their undue states today, are emblematic of contemporary chaos.

The fifth and concluding chapter is The Audacity of Stillness, a summary of my research findings. I use ‘stillness’ in an expansive fashion to include similar implications – silence, interval, pause – and consequently of quietude and ataraxis. The chapter shall show how, in a world where mobility, activity and acceleration are regarded supreme, stillness hides great possibility of incorporeal renewal.

_The Future, Today_ draws its core ideas from a diverse pool of valuable sources. Some survived sufficiently into the final version, some deserve better than the limited exposure this exegesis allows, while others would have to be content with reaching the bibliography.

To the predecessors, whose works are unequivocal in shaping the logic and the aesthetic of this research – Simon Morley, Chris Marker, John Ralston Saul, Naomi Klein, Mark C. Taylor, Damon Young, Robert Hassan, Nicholas Carr, Chris Hedges, Tiziana Terranova – my sincere gratitude and respect.
NOTES ON A CHANGING WORLD

“The world has changed,” pondered curator Jeremy Lewison on the preceding pages of the 2004 *Art in the Age of Anxiety* exhibition catalogue. “We live currently in a state of uncertainty. Aside from the political, religious, and military conflicts, recent years have seen a tsunami in South East Asia, hurricanes in New Orleans, earthquakes in Pakistan, famine in Africa, trampling of pilgrims in Mecca, bulldozing of communities in Palestine, the segregation of Arab and Jew by the construction of a replica Berlin Wall... All this is eloquent testimony to a new era of anxiety.”

Fundamental to this is our global interconnection – our relationship with the rest of the world, bound by information technology – where, as Robert Hassan noted, “causes and effects can reverberate throughout the entire system” – in ways far quicker than before, a situation which is historically unprecedented until now.

There is always a positive and a negative to everything surely, and in this case is no different. In the past few months we have seen the power of social media and networking at work; gathering masses in defining world events; from the Arab spring that overthrew decades-long dictators, to Occupy Wall Street (which just arrived in Melbourne and Sydney at the time of this writing) and more recently in the eastern Turkey earthquake, where SMS-ing, Facebook and Twitter proved themselves worthy in saving lives, mobilizing aid and solidarity.

Yet for those of us not directly affected by the events, life goes on as before, immediately once the sensation is over. Sure they may still be bubbling under, in and out of our perception depending on media coverage, but in terms of relevance they often do disappear as quickly as the fashion that they've become. It is tragic, but this seems to be how it has become, as we enter the second decade of this century. There are times when I feel that part us – our feelings, our emotions, our opinions – are somehow no longer ours to control. Our connection with the world has allowed us to become part of a global consciousness; complete with its own shared beliefs, conventions and norms that may not always be compatible with ours; yet we might feel obliged to conform to and abide by them.

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This, I believe, is one of the main causes for our shared emotional turbulence. Our 'era of anxiety' is one that is caused by our over-exposure to events around the globe. From the trivial to the critical, things can easily pile up on our screens, and they embed themselves as layers and layers of thoughts. The realities we face on a daily basis – either online or offline – often contradict one another, and while we may choose to ignore it on occasion, there's no denying of the (after) effect they embed on our minds. Turning a blind eye does nothing to change our initial awareness of it, and by refusing to resolve the issue from within, such pretermission would certainly heighten the anxiety.

A similar sign of distress to that of the opening paragraph was expressed by über-architect Rem Koolhaas, in a brilliant rambling essay called 'Junkspace'. The piece (published in October, described by Fredric Jameson as “an extraordinary piece of writing that is both a postmodern artefact in its own right, and a whole new aesthetic”) used the term 'Junkspace' to address the built environment, and eventually reality, “on the point of fusing into a kind of... indeterminate magma.” Another description tells of the essay as “a strange combination of a critical analysis of modern consumerism and a radical existentialist poem”, which I think is not far from the truth. Let us examine the excerpt below:

Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction … A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, …permanently disjointed. Seemingly an apotheosis, spatially grandiose, the effect of its richness is a terminal hollowness... Junkspace is beyond measure, beyond code … Because it cannot be grasped, Junkspace cannot be remembered. It is flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen saver, its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia. Junkspace does not pretend to created perfection, only interest... The aesthetic is Byzantine, gorgeous, and dark, splintered into thousands of shards, all visible at the same time: a quasi-panoptical universe in which all contents rearrange themselves in split seconds around the dizzy eye of the beholder. ...Junkspace's modules are dimensioned to carry brands... Brands in Junkspace perform the same role as black holes in the universe: they are essences through which meaning disappears … Junkspace will be our tomb. Half of mankind pollutes to produce, the other pollutes to consume … Junkspace is political: It depends on the central removal of the critical faculty in the name of comfort and pleasure. … Comfort is the new Justice. Entire miniature states now adopt Junkspace as political program, establish regimes of engineered disorientation, instigate a politics of systematic disarray. Not exactly “anything goes”; in fact, the secret of Junkspace is that it is both promiscuous and repressive: as the formless proliferates, the formal withers, and with it all rules, regulations, recourse …

Koolhaas's text was an early key precursor informing my research, both in theory as well as in its adoption into the studio practice. Its monologic, stream-of-consciousness mode of quasi/pseudo-intellectual ranting managed to combine both the rational and the irrational into one work, which makes the experiencing of it a rewarding experience (and here I used the word experiencing selectively, to distance it from 'mere' reading).

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7 Ibid.
The kind of visual and verbal density (and paradoxically, sparsity) that 'Junkspace' produces is similar to another key influence, Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Beckett's trilogy sees verbal language being taken on strolls around the peripheral limits of comprehension. This is not to say that the text is incomprehensible in its entirety, since – unlike the more primeval ventures of Kurt Schwitters and Concrete Poetry for example – the words and expressions are still recognizable (despite me reading the English version rather than the French), but it is their arrangement within the sentences, structured in such a way that disrupts the reader's train of thought so frequently, that force us to constantly realign the focus our attention, maintaining us at bay and unease.

Such method of narration is certainly far from new these days. Today – ruptured, multilinear structure and disjointed storytelling – is already part of the norm, having met the same limpid fate as any other pioneering efforts of the avant-garde. We already know too well how translations for the mainstream can only be successful if it speaks in the true language of the mainstream, and that is consumption. This is where resolution loss starts to emerge. In the context of Beckett and Koolhaas, gone are the reflective and inquisitive nature of the texts, the moment their narrative devices are being co-opted and appropriated by, and into, the mainstream.

The speed in which they are being delivered today greatly differs from their predecessors'. Part of multi-narrative storytelling's charm and success is determined by its ability to suit the needs of the 'click culture' that is its audience. Our present age is one where our attention is so accustomed to persistent dividing and segmentation – through our multitasking and hyperlinking – that in order for a spectacle to be successful, it needs to be able to hold our gaze for longer than a few mere seconds. This is why things seem to go faster and faster in the world of the moving image, for example. Editing has gone super fast to keep in pace with the film's – or the video's/ news package's – tempo. Faster here also means faster change in scenery and action, faster progression, faster culmination.

Instant gratification. Has it always been like this? If not, when, and how did it start? No doubt that the Internet plays a significant, if not instrumental, role in this. As connection speed continues to increase, comes the reduction and elimination of waiting periods. Things started coming to us much quicker. Images load better. Gone are video bufferings. New books on e-formats. Low-priced goods with free shipping in less than a week. All of these via a single click.

I spoke to a number of people during the research, having impromptu discussions regarding the issue.

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10 “For a long time Beckett could not work out where to go after Joyce, what a man for a teacher, who tried again and again to cram the whole of human experience into a single book. One day Beckett realised that he would go the other way, he would reduce, minimise, remove those fictional artifices with which other writers sustain their work: plot, character, drama, until all there is left is ‘a fable of one fabling to oneself alone in a room’.”, in D. Prescott, 'Samuel Beckett: The politics of vegetables', *Ceasefire Magazine*, (10 February 2010), [http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/features/samuel-beckett-the-politics-of-vegetables/](http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/features/samuel-beckett-the-politics-of-vegetables/), accessed 25 October 2011.
Most of them – family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances – do realize it to be a recognizable occurrence in their lives and that it seemed as if they are rendered helpless, incapable of resisting that temptation to click. It might be worth noting that many of these are academics and professionals who are prominent (and widely acknowledged) in their respective fields.\(^\text{11}\)

I too, am by no means immune to this. Working on this research alone, the times spent gathering information online has been arduous, considering my natural impulsive drive. The fact that I know I can flick another tab open on my browser to take me elsewhere besides the research is an urge so often hard to resist. Too often have I found myself in a position where a dozen web pages are open without me knowing why I had them in the first place.

“We are born interruption-driven,” said Maggie Jackson, adding that it is how “humans stay tuned to their environment.”\(^\text{12}\) Melbourne-based philosopher Damon Young concurs, finding it “most striking are the distractions we enthusiastically choose... Whether it's digital entertainment or the fickle world of online friendship, we often seek distraction.”\(^\text{13}\) Paraphrasing Heidegger, Young also mentioned that “the preoccupation affords a reprieve from the anxieties of life, which confronts us in moments of repose.”\(^\text{14}\)

Film critic Roger Ebert borrows a French word to describe said reprieve: frisson. A brief, sudden moment of excitement. “You're clicking here or clicking there, and suddenly you have the OMG moment,” he wrote in his blog. “A frisson can be quite a delight. The problem is, I seem to be spending way too much time these days in search of them. In an ideal world, I would sit down on my computer, do my work, and that would be that. In this world, I get entangled in surfing and an hour disappears.”\(^\text{15}\)

Ebert is not alone in this. A 2010 survey of 1,700 participants showed that “the average Australian employee spends less than two-and-a-half days per week actually doing their job. The rest of the time is spent navigating a virtual forest of information” and “only about half of that information is relevant to getting the job done.”\(^\text{16}\) Five years earlier, The Guardian reported a similar study on British workers. The psychological exam noted that the “distractions of constant emails, text and phone messages are a greater threat to IQ and concentration than taking cannabis.”\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{11}\) Simply to defy any myths or preassumptions that the effect is exclusive to a certain (i.e. less educated) social group.


\(^{14}\) Ibid., p.13.

\(^{15}\) R. Ebert, 'The quest for frisson', Chicago Sun-Times, (29 May 2010), http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/05/the_french_word_frisson_descri.html#more, accessed 1 September 2011.


Two sides of the same coin to be highlighted before we move on. The first is our natural drive to escape from reality, or “to flee our private demons”\(^\text{18}\) as Damon Young said, while the second is technology's role in becoming “the perfect, addictive distraction”\(^\text{19}\) which supports it. Our life currently sees both increasingly morphing into a single face. This is where, in my opinion, it starts to pose as a problem.

“A public that can no longer distinguish between truth and fiction is left to interpret reality through illusion,” wrote former war correspondent and Pulitzer Prize recipient Chris Hedges. “The worse reality becomes,” he adds, “The more people seek refuge and comfort in illusions.”\(^\text{20}\)

In 1985, the late American critic and social activist Neil Postman wrote:

Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision... people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. In 1984... people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.\(^\text{21}\)

Postman's collation of the two texts above still resonates loudly in our age. Contrary to his oppositional model however, I see both Orwell and Huxley to be equally correct in their predictions, even completing one another. Both oppressions could have easily come from the same source, as thinkers like Naomi Klein, John Pilger, Noam Chomsky and John Ralston Saul would argue.

Chris Hedges adds another voice to this matter:

Those who manipulate the shadows that dominate our lives are the agents, publicists, marketing departments, promoters, script writers, television and movie producers, advertisers, video technicians, photographers...public announcers, and television personalities who create the vast stage of illusion. They are the puppet masters...[N]o cultural illusion is swallowed as reality, without these armies of cultural enablers and intermediaries. The sole object is to hold attention and satisfy an audience.

These techniques of theater...have leached into politics, religion, education, literature, news, commerce, warfare, and crime...[N]ews reports...become mini-dramas complete with a star, a villain, a supporting cast, a good-looking host, and a neat, if often unexpected, conclusion.\(^\text{22}\)

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18 D. Young, op.cit, p.15.
19 Ibid., p.16
22 C. Hedges, op.cit, pp. 15-16.
He then summarizes – in homage to Ralston Saul in *Voltaire’s Bastards* – that “a society that cannot distinguish reality from illusion dies.”23

Hedges is not the only one sensing the urgency. His quote brings to mind Paul Virilio’s suggestion, following a prediction by Albert Einstein, that an unbearable catastrophe has struck the planet – that we are the victims, today, as we speak, of an informational explosion, a bomb as destructive as the atomic bomb.24

Indeed Virilio’s prolific career has seen him preoccupied with the exploration of ‘the accident’ as an ever-impending, inevitable consequence of our technological progress. He has a good reason of course, after all, Hannah Arendt did remind us that progress and catastrophe are another two sides of the same coin.

Throughout this chapter I have deliberately maintained a journalistic approach to put an emphasis on the reality of the issue. Despite all the different opinions or terminologies that the thinkers, theorists and scholars quoted here use, in my view they essentially are identifying the same condition.

Following this argument, I will encase these varying situations and sentiments in the context of the postmodern condition, where – if we take this chapter and its examples as indicators that postmodernism’s self-fulfilling prophecies are now beyond a critical, boiling point – then it is only natural before we start longing (and indeed in many cases we have seen examples of) for the very things we had readily and voluntarily undone – deconstruct – during those years.

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24 Virilio is referring to Albert Einstein’s statement in the 1950s that humanity would have to face three kinds of bombs: “The first bomb, the atomic bomb, ...manufactured in the United States... dropped on Hiroshima... in 1945. The second bomb was the information bomb. The third bomb was the population bomb set to explode in the twenty-first century.” See: J. Armitage (ed.), P. Virilio and F. Kittler ‘The Information Bomb: a conversation’, *Angelaki*, Vol.4, 2, (London: Routledge, 1999), p.81. In Virilio’s reading, the information bomb is a “technological and political weapon... largely the product of US-military and America-owned multinational firms.” (ibid.). The effects of this bomb are “the acceleration of world history and unprecedented technological convergence together with the appearance of “real time,” the disappearance of physical space, and the rise of “technological fundamentalism,” and “social cybernetics”. (ibid)
TO NAME THE UNNAMEABLE

In recent years, developments in social theory, philosophy, cinema, and art practice indicate that a growing shift from the previously ruling postmodern mindset is taking place. Characterized by a non-resisting acceptance of modernist values, this occurrence is not centralized to any particular geographic or singular origin. Rather, it can only so far be identified as cross-cultural and inter-continental, resembling the globalized nature of the world they are responding to.

This chapter surveys some of the examples that directly inform the research, thereby to establish the research position in its contemporary context. Artists and filmmakers whose works and ideas I have adopted will also be discussed in the latter half of this section.

My initial proposal for the Masters program was regarding an inquiry on the Sublime. As a concept, the sublime's capacity to encompass “what takes hold of us when reason falters and certainties began to crumble” was considered appropriate to facilitate the research palette. The release of publications regarding the sublime – Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (2006), Whitechapel Gallery's Documents of Contemporary Art series *The Sublime* (2009), Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska's *The Sublime Now* (2009) – as well as Tate Gallery's 2010 symposium *The Contemporary Sublime* had me convinced that the sublime should indeed be the focus of this thesis.

As my research progressed, I discovered that as a concept, the sublime was too restrictive if I were to remain cognisant to the research aim, which – until this realization – I had only assumed that the sublime could contain. The sublime is an idea which had endured centuries of exploration, interpretation, implementation, misimplementation, and other forms of twists and turns throughout the course of its own history. Its ability to address qualities of breathtaking conditions – of the conflicting sense involving awe and terror, attraction-repulsion, pain-pleasure, enchantment and horror – is historically proven, and it is in fact one of the main reasons for my resignation from it.

One example of the sublime's (mis)appropriation that I found disheartening was in its exercising in the form of war propaganda, from the 1934 Nuremberg Congress as seen in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph Des Willens*,

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to the massively televised 'shock and awe' bombarding of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies. Add to this is its exploitation of viewers' emotions in Hollywood war/disaster/science-fiction, or even other forms of entertainment today for that matter. These last few points are precisely what Chris Hedges had alluded to earlier, when he spoke about the blurring between reality and illusion. The Hollywoodian formula of engineering audiences' emotional response through spectacular; and most importantly entertaining; presentations of thrill have perversely seeped into how we now view war or disaster reportations: as war and disaster porn.

That said, there is no denying of the sublime's role and significance in this research. The course of the research may have shifted, but the play of conflicting emotions that is the heart of this historically influential concept remains intact and unaffected within my work.

During my Honours, I spent some time focusing on the notion of ruins. Revolving around the same premise that binds this research, my adoption of ruins at the time was to render it allegorical to our civilisation: in homage to depictions of the apocalypse and similar scenarios that mankind has produced throughout the ages, from Dürer prints and watercolours to contemporary science-fiction.

To my surprise, I learned that ruins did already have its own subgenre; a focus field of its own. It made perfect sense to then discover that it was a branch of Romanticism, after my years of regarding highly (among other similar artistic endeavours with special attachments to architectural and environmental decay) Caspar David Friedrich's Das Eismeer [fig.3]. Interesting to note that, in a slightly inconvenient revelatory twist, an idea of a 'ruin value' – Ruinenwert, where the preliminary design of a building aims to be more aesthetically pleasing and everlasting once it collapses – was in fact formulated by the German architect Albert Speer, during the conception of the Hitler-sponsored 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin.

It was around this time that I came across an exhibition catalogue called Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion. By then I was already aware that in the last few decades, Romanticism in its many 'neo' forms and guises has never really left building. Prior to the said exhibition, there were already others – Romantic Detachment at the P.S.1 in 2004, Wunschwelten/Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art at Schirn Kunsthalle in 2005, Idyll: illusion and delusion touring exhibition in Germany (2002-2008) – that illustrated its enduring attraction. Damaged Romanticism, on the other hand, was different in the sense that it is aware of postmodernism's resentment (and ridiculing) of its heritage, Romanticism.

This realization is reflected in the works exhibited which, according to curator Terrie Sultan, were “neither nihilistic nor utopian.” Conjuring what might be described as an appropriated modernist optimism, they focused:

on how initial disappointment can be mitigated, so that rather than descending into disillusionment, hopelessness, and despair, what begins as morbidity can be transformed into optimism, laughter, or even creative resurrection. [T]hey... illustrate... an 'aftermath aesthetic', determined by the feelings and actions engaged in after the deluge, heartbreak, or devastation of life... 27

And I do think it is timely, for us to reorient and reconstruct all the available options we have ceaselessly attempted to demolish in the postmodern years. David Harvey had told us back in 2000, that postmodernism, “as a set of discursive practices over the last two decades has been to fragment and to sever connexions. In some instances this proved a wise, important, and useful strategy to try to unpack matters … that would otherwise have remained hidden. But it is now time to reconnect.” 28

My work is situated within this territory; the philosophical/conceptual/aesthetic/sociocultural sensibility that came out of the still burning ashes of postmodernity; a sensibility that is currently still questioning its own validity, in the face of its overimposing, powerful and influential origin.

This infantile, still questioning aspect is evident in my own process of producing the artwork. Prior to the decision to employ my own handwriting, a simple application of a single line on a piece of paper would require a ridiculous amount of time staring at the surface in an unproductive procrastination block.

Could this be the result of decades working under postmodern scrutiny, out of fear and reluctance for tampering 'unfashionable', even 'dirty', modernistic themes without any hint of irony? Could this be that, in addition to my now easily-swayed contemporary self, following years of techno-conditioning? All I know and remember was that during this period, the difficulty was not because there were no ideas to choose from. The difficulty was due to the fact that there were too many of them. My incessant exposure to ideas, images, sounds – taste – had caused me to become incapable of finding my own voice. The world seemed so rich and occupied already with attractive and relevant things without really needing more to add to the congestion.

It was here that I decided to move on to using handwriting. By actually writing words, letters and sentences; the initial hardship, the procrastination; is no longer an obstacle [fig.4]. It was liberating for me to work by using this method [fig.5]. The underlying ideas – along with everything else – would literally be applied, manifest within the artwork regardless of accessibility/legibility. This alone, in my record, is enough indication of this experiment's success. That the writing is done in an obscurantist manner is a strategy to conceal certain parts of its content [fig.6].

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27 Ibid.
Based on the responses I have had so far however, viewers were still able to find *something* that satisfies them, despite the limited access. This, for me, speaks so much about how things are operating in real life. No matter how much knowledge we have, there will always be things that remain mysteries, unknown to us.

Our quest for something *beyond*, the desire to discover more, has been a drive since the beginning of history. The object of that search may change over millennia, but the *urge* will no doubt stay. Happiness, solitude, prosperity, contentment, satisfaction – we constantly wish for these, striving to achieve them through whichever means that suit: knowledge, wealth, faith, relationships, freedom. These are things that, in our time, are increasingly rarefied, their once-free attainability now lost in a sea of commodification. That their essences would undergo forms of loss and evaporation has been one of the most discussed subject during the postmodern era.

One of these essences is related to the *immaterial*. It is interesting that the definition found in the dictionary regarding the word 'immaterial', alongside “Having no material body or form”, is “Of no importance or relevance; inconsequential or irrelevant”.  

The word itself was first recorded around 1350 – 1400 from the Medieval Latin *inmaterialis*. At the time, its definition was “not consisting of matter, spiritual”. It was only in the 1690s – the period that marked the beginning of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason – that the word's meaning ‘expanded’ (i.e. reduced) with the additional “of no essential consequence, unimportant”.

This is the “dictatorship of reason” which John Ralston Saul so often evangelizes against, and it is a stance that my research is also in concurrence with. The above example's explicit dismissal of other human faculties – sense, intuition, ethics, creativity, memory and so on – is clear and blatant ignorance, most particularly in our age today, where the human is in dire need for a more balanced and proportioned nurturing of all her or his inherent qualities.

The drawings in *The Future, Today* do invite varying degrees of viewing. At times they can appear commanding, while other times they seem impassive. Such fluidity is important in order to avoid it from becoming another form of dictatorship. But there is another, far more definitive cause to this lack of viscosity, and it correlates directly to the landscape of the thesis. This fluidity is in fact the direct result (and simultaneously a reflection) of the distraction, the procrastination, the indecisiveness, and the uncertainty which characterize the scope of the research.

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Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker are two academics based in the Netherlands who, in 2009, co-authored a journal article called 'Notes on metamodernism'. Slowly and confidently gathering support from scholars, critics and practitioners worldwide, Notes on metamodernism has now migrated into a webform of the same name. In defining the term 'metamodernism' itself, Vermeulen and van den Akker wrote:

> The ecosystem is severely disrupted, the financial system is increasingly uncontrollable, and the geopolitical structure has recently begun to appear as unstable as it has always been uneven. [N]ew generation of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction... and pastiche in favor of... reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. These trends and tendencies can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, ...characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment. We will call this structure of feeling metamodernism.\(^{31}\)

My encounter to this text came after I had investigated most of the points above, which was most gratifying in its aptitude and timeliness. Of all the inconsistencies I had found and experienced throughout the research, the discovery of metamodernism's oscillation was perhaps the single most significant. It assures and validates a condition which – until then – I could only identify through its symptoms. In UK Frieze Magazine's September 2011 issue, Vermeulen mentioned that:

> thinkers today have taken it upon themselves to begin the process of rewriting, indeed of reconstructing, History. Sloterdijk et al appear to once again seek to rethink History, reconceptualize the present and re-imagine the future by (re-)connecting the dots between previously deconstructed points of view. To my mind, a few debates stand out: the renewed appreciation of grand narratives, of transcendence, of optimism and sincerity, ...the rediscovery of affect and... even, craftwo/man-ship.\(^{32}\)

Artists and practitioners whose works are related to the ideas in this chapter are numerous. The next few paragraphs feature some that I encountered during the span of this research.

In *Damaged Romanticism*, captivating landscapes of desolation and abandonment are pivotal in Leipzig painter David Schnell's expansive oil painting [fig.7], the apocalyptic post-industrial wasteland in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky [fig.8], and Florian Maier-Aichen's counter gravitational photographic nightscapes [fig.9].

Luminaries such as Bill Viola, Doris Salcedo, Gerhard Richter, Olafur Eliasson, Mike Kelley, and James Turrell were part of Documents of Contemporary Art's *The Sublime*.


Worth special mention here are Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose seascapes series constantly reminded me of the kind of Rothkoan void/horizon that I wish to address in my drawings [fig.10]; Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiar's dimensional Sufistic paintings [fig.11], and their sun-kissed; chemical-heavy Californian cousin; Fred Tomaselli's psychedelic collages [fig.12]; and of course the arch-sublimist himself, Barnett Newman, whose ventures in the field had opened up fertile passages for the following generations to explore.

Metamodernism spoke of the 'informed naivety' of Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, and Wes Anderson, whose films seem to suggest the retrieval of an irretrievable innocent past; of Peter Doig's 're-appropriation of culture through nature', the 'adaptation of civilization by the primitive' of Gregory Crewdson and David Lynch; and Kaye Donachie and David Thorpe's fascination with fictitious Romantic sets [fig.13].

Hovering in-between these were other similarly acknowledged occurrences with shared missions: Altermodern, Reconstructivism, Renewalism, the New Sincerity, The New Weird Generation, Freak Folk, and so on. There was Stuckism, which started in 1999 as an opposition to the Saatchi-patronized Young British Artists phenomenon, who released the Remodernism manifesto (subheaded 'towards a new spirituality in art') which inspired Remodernist Film Manifesto.

The latter, published online in 2008, calls for “an understanding of the simple truths and moments in humanity” – appropriating the Japanese concept of 'mono no aware' – where the realization of the impermanence of things (as experienced and revealed through the passing of time) is simultaneously (and contradictorily) cherished and mourned for.

To close this chapter I will briefly touch on filmmakers Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Michael Haneke, and the painter Agnes Martin. These four individuals, in my view, have dedicated their careers in pursuit of the 'unnameable' goal that typifies this chapter.

Of the four, Tarkovsky and Bresson were the most openly religious and committed to Christian values. Tarkovsky said that art “takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual.” He felt that recent art during his time “has taken the wrong turn in abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake.”

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33 T. Vermeulen and R. van der Akker, ibid.
36 Literally "the pathos of things", also translated as "an empathy toward things", or "a sensitivity to ephemera", is a Japanese term used to describe the awareness of impermanence (無常), or the transience of things, and a gentle sadness (or wistfulness) at their passing. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono_no_aware, retrieved 16 November 2011.
37 This was one of the subject discussed in my Honours paper, referred to as a “rapturous collapse”, and in which I see a correlation with Marcel Duchamp's notion of the infrathin (both sits within the same semantic field).
Being a Russian filmmaker in the former Soviet Union with such themes proved to be difficult for Tarkovsky. Of the seven feature films he made (excluding three which he did as a student, and one autobiographic documentary), two were done outside his homeland. Unhindered by the bureaucratic nightmares he endured during the production of his films – *Stalker* and *Solaris* are known examples – Tarkovsky still managed to leave a wealth of cinematic legacy that is highly revered today.

His 'sculpting in time' – as in the *mono no aware* before – involve slow long takes that allow scenes to unfold in real time, often putting the unprepared virgin viewer in an unsettling position of not knowing what to grapple on, or what to make of the situation. For those already familiar, these are the very moments where truths would reveal themselves. Rather than a didactic one-way communication between the spectacle and the spectator, we are encouraged – forced, even – to converse and to negotiate with the overall experience [fig.14].

Robert Bresson is similarly unforgiving, if not even more so than Tarkovsky. Susan Sontag once described him as “the master of the reflective mode.” Admired by both Tarkovsky and Michael Haneke, Bresson's films are characterized by the same demanding pathos of the viewers' patience and endurance. I cite *Au hasard Balthazar* [fig.15], *Mouchette* and *L'Argent* as his most powerful. Not in any of his other films do I find his (anti)heroes' journey from normalcy to sub-zero redemption to be as harrowing as in these ones.

As much as I value Bresson's films, they belong to that category of films that I can only bear watching once or twice, over a long period of time. I find them too traumatic in their – note another parodic oscillation here – cathartic moments. That the sublimities arrive at the viewer in such an indifferent, non-extravagant manner only exaggerates the tragic effect. Bresson's conscious anti-Hollywood ascetism (a quality which Haneke would embrace) is an enduring template that I always exercise in my artworks, albeit involving more compromise and consideration on behalf of the viewer.

Agnes Martin, on the other hand, had a deep affection towards Taoism and Eastern spirituality in general; a quality which is clear in her work. Relocating to New Mexico in avoidance of the New York limelights was no surprise, since her distancing from the social/elite art circles is already well known.

In Martin's subtle, visual reverberations, I was acquainted to the shimmering calm that I wish to evoke in my drawings [fig.16]. A calmness which; in the hands of Michael Haneke; would meet its insidious, menacing other [fig.17].

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Haneke is an odd one among these four; coming from a younger generation and conceptually more diverse (and the only one still living); who keeps exceeding his own standards every time a new film comes out. He admits to owing Bresson and Michelangelo Antonioni for their cold and emotionless signature style, as analogies to modern societal detachment. Unlike Tarkovsky, Bresson and Martin however, Haneke's ethical stance is secular-humanist (US academic Richard Locke called him “a secular grandson of Robert Bresson”).

Once described as a hyper-realist, his depiction of a violent society devoid of moral and spiritual values can be – if not always – confronting and transgressive, leading his detractors to accuse him of promoting and glorifying such acts rather than critiquing them. He does so, in fact, in retaliation to mainstream standards – “as polemical statements against the American barrel down cinema” – and what he sees as a “disempowerment of the spectator.” It is a case of 'excess breeds more excess'. What he does is to take the decisive, entertainment value away – particularly with regards to the thrill of glorified sex and violence – which resulted in a stark contrast to Hollywood dialect. Haneke made them unbearable.

So far I have made the effort to shed light on the multitude of background issues and preconditions where the research now settles. The next chapter will explore the writing aspect of the studio practice, its connection to drawing as a form of mark-making, writing as a notion itself, and the shades within it that are deemed pertinent to my research.

THE HAND THAT WRITES

Human handwriting has a sensibility that allows me to return to it time and again. Used as an artistic device, it carries great potential for a multitude of readings. One kinship underlined by Czech-born philosopher Vilém Flusser is that it is “a gesture related to drawing. A far more rigid drawing than 'free' drawing, but still a gesture which puts shape on a surface.”\(^{42}\) This observation provides yet another testimony, confirming an already fertile trajectory in art that explores the relationship between writing/word/text and image.

My early encounter to writing's usage in an art form was seeing Cy Twombly's works. Here was writing applied, extracted, used and abused, then re-injected, to produce something that sits within the borderline of writing and drawing [figs.18-19]. Twombly's art is an exercise in mark-making that aptly demonstrates the kind of lineage Flusser had identified. “Twombly often deliberately mimics the look of writing – its rhythm and slant, horizontal axis, scale, concision and contrast – while failing to form any legible letters or words,”\(^{43}\) wrote text-based artist Simon Morley, whose book *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* is essential for the shaping of this research. “In this context, the distinction between drawing and writing often breaks down, but a residual linearity and clear spatialization of marks signify the basis of these inscriptions in a primal act of writing.”\(^{44}\)

There is an inevitable, inferential nature in handwriting that would immediately suggest the personal, the diaristic, the autobiographic. Twombly's “demotic, abasement of writing”\(^{45}\) might be read as a way “to vent his frustrations and desires,”\(^{46}\) but as decades of postmodern and poststructural scepticism has taught us, certainly not always. As Morley also suggested, “it is the *possibility* of language that Twombly addresses, rather than its actuality.”\(^{47}\)

Whichever way we look at it, it is through this prismatic vantage of writing that my studio research embarks itself upon. Three main attributes are assigned to writing, following this juncture.

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., p.6.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., p.110.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., p.112.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., p.112.
The first is to see it as synonymous or indicative to text, to word, to language, and to image per se. This follows Derrida's definition of writing as “all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing’”.  

The second, following this logic, is writing as technology. Is it not already? History shows that one writes in order to communicate. A substitute for the spoken word; an ancient form of recording. Writing is a system which suspends speech in a material form. It is a method of transmitting; and preserving; messages, tales, stories, information.

The clay tablets containing Cuneiform – the earliest known writing system dating back to 30th century BC – is said to represent commodities, which became more complex as civilisation advanced. Writing evolves according to the needs and demands of society. From Sumerian script to Gutenberg printing to digitised Twitter, writing – and its past, present, and future derivatives – represents man's capability to initiate, to proceed, to progress.

At the same time however, writing also signify the effects of that same progress. Michael R. Leaman wrote: “Walking Helsinki's streets at night in Shinjuku, Tokyo, a forest of neon signs flash, defying translation, street signs direct speeding vehicles, advertisement screens relay their messages... We live in a world saturated with word and image.” An asphyxiating one, oftentimes.

Writing thus, in true Manichaean conduct, operates as a critique of itself; of its masters, its doctrines, and its excesses. It again corresponds to the dictatorship of reason, this time where language – as a vehicle of reason, mediated by writing – ceases to communicate meaning in its true, beneficial sense in our current globalised and market-driven society. How writing appears in the studio work, in all its contradictory values – readable/unreadable, meaningful/meaningless, and so on – is in reference to the logic of Ralston Saul's sentiment.

The third and last attribute is writing as self-referential to its own heritage within contemporary art. Artists throughout history have extensively experimented with text, and this research – both theory and practice – acknowledges and affirms their relevance and contribution for the shaping of it. Tempting as it is to address and extrapolate every single influence in a 'best of' fandom fashion, lines need to be drawn, and a select number of notable endeavours shall be discussed in the following paragraphs.

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While Cy Twombly sparked the idea, it was Joseph Beuys who showed me the entrance. Beuys's dictum of "art as an ongoing and open-ended spiritual process that could be materialized equally in words, things, images or actions" was – and still is – pivotal to how I approach my own artistic production. His blackboard writings; performed before an audience in the manner of “the protocols of the classroom”, parodying “the scholarly status of the pedant”; were done “in a dynamic and sometimes barely legible script.”

Similar to Twombly albeit rendering his gestural marks in a much more graceful manner, Beuys “sought to challenge the conventional scope of language, upsetting and confusing meanings and usage, and forcing words into new alignments.” The chalk writings are quintessentially drawings; they are aesthetic objects with solid compositional cognisance that belie the improvisational nature of their making [figs.20-21]. My studio work share both Twombly and Beuys's mode of inquiry and disassembly of writing. Drawing has been my primary medium for some time and this recent turn of focus into writing is a propitious and logical step.

A tendency towards an obsessive, compulsive strand of the writing process comes next. The appeal for me is equal both as concept as well as execution. Robert Smithson, On Kawara, Hanne Darboven and Roman Opalka are some of the artists from the 60s and 70s Conceptual period whose art had infused my own. Adolf Wölfli and Russel Crotty are also individuals whose conceptual mindset and artistic outputs I can relate to strongly.

Smithson's A Heap of Language [fig.22] was the first visual precursor to my current aesthetic. Darboven [fig.23] and Opalka [fig.24] arrived a little later. The strong, and at times exhausting, sense of endurance that exudes through their work further strengthens my own artistic vocabulary.

It was only a matter of time that On Kawara returned to the equation. I have always admired his dedication, resilience, and what I perceive as 'idiosyncratic militancy', since before this research. His documentations – of days, of moments, of time, of his time – are remarkable achievements which sit somewhere between brilliant and silly, ones that testify clearly of the ephemerality they seem to be celebrating. Revisiting Kawara now, after a period of absence, serves as a reminder of the kind of stillness – time suspension – which I aspire to achieve in my work [fig.25].

Another figure whose practice amplified mine was Robert Walser. Born in 1878, Walser was a Swiss writer who, following a period of mental illness, began to employ a radical style of minuscule handwriting for his works. With an average letter height of one millimetre, the obsessive pencil inscriptions were initially assumed to be secret codes. Decades of inquisition led to the discovery that Walser employed a diminutive
Old German, a Sütterlin script, for this late body of work. Later to be referred to as 'micrograms', these writings – found on random papers, envelopes and other surfaces – were understood to be poems, prose, and even novels [figs.26-27]. Walter Benjamin wrote:

For the idea that this insignificant content could be important and that this chaotic scatteredness could be a sign of stamina is the last thing that would occur to the casual observer of Walser's writings. They are not easy to grasp... we find ourselves confronted by a seemingly quite unintentional, but attractive, even fascinating, linguistic wilderness. And by a self-indulgence that covers the entire spectrum from gracefulness to bitterness.  

My writing-drawings are similarly ‘difficult’, in that even though they are composed of actual letters, words, and sentences, any ‘traditional’ ways of reading would be futile. The work asks for a different kind of viewing that takes into consideration impressions, asking the viewer to learn to trust the initial impulses s/he felt upon seeing the work for the first time. It does so to encourage the viewer towards an awareness of a proportional way of seeing, one that sees equal value in both rational and emotional judgments.

The process of making the work is informed by a range of influences. Surrealist automatism was a strong currency at the beginning of this research. Extending the Beuysian/shamanistic mode of working, I posit myself as a receiver-transmitter; writing everything and anything that crosses my mind without censor; aiming to acquire an 'objective' and 'truthful' kind of work.

This proved to be far more difficult to perform than it sounds. Automatic writing – both in the Surrealist and in the séance, mystical sense which informed it – have always relied on a complete sacrifice of one's inner control over the process, leaving only the physical (the hand, the motors) to do the work. During the experiments, my mental and psychological refusal was too great. There were too many obstructions, too many disruptive intermittences to the supposed continuous flow of the approach. In the end, my mind's resistance led me to adjust the method to quasi-automatic. Therefore, rather than the full abandonment of conscience and consciousness, a continuous, gravitational negotiation between the conscious and the unconscious is constantly at work during the production process.

The issue of balance is at play here; not in the modernist, holistic-idealistic sense; but again in the pendulumic, oscillating metamodernist sense. It suggests that, it could well be that the balance in question in fact lies in the striving for that balance. That rather than expecting for a balance that is static and solid, a more realistic approach would be to accept it as something which is dynamic and forever in a constant swing. One that never ceases to fluctuate, between any of the available polarities, without ever fully reaching one or the other.

THE VOCABULARY OF DISORDER

In this chapter, some of the aesthetic and visual elements and vocabularies used in the studio practice outside handwriting will be explained. While a fully comprehensive analysis on each aspect would be too numerous for this exegesis, we will now examine three characteristics of the modern condition as embodied within the artwork: noise, information, speed.

Noise

Aldous Huxley said that the twentieth century was the Age of Noise. “Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire—we hold history’s record for all of them.”\(^5^6\) As we enter the second decade of the new century, such reality is far from receding; in fact now is perhaps worse than it was then.

According to Damon Young, “the modern age afford more opportunities for distraction... Most obviously, there is the ubiquity of noise (from the Latin nauseat), which amply demonstrates the strain on our attention. Recent studies suggest that long-term exposure to noise leads to some 200 000 deaths per year.”\(^5^7\) Young mentions a study by Cornell University in New York that shows an alarming result. Children, whose schools are located underneath flight paths, are said to be more likely experiencing linguistic difficulties. Over time they become more adapted to the sound of the jet engine, gradually filtrating the human voice and its subtleties in the process.

And let’s not forget the sound of entertainment. Those blaring “in lifts, malls and train stations, and cafes and bars and wall-sized televisions. In these circumstances, intimate conversation is hampered, along with quiet reflection. If this cacophony doesn't directly fracture our consciousness, it hampers our efforts to determine what will – to clearly and decisively seek what's valuable.”\(^5^8\)

Peer and viewer response indicate that one of the initial impressions upon seeing my work is their resemblance to visual noise [fig.4], the 'snow' found on analog TV or unrecorded VHS tapes.


\(^5^7\) D. Young, op.cit, p.13.

\(^5^8\) Ibid.
Such effect occurs “when no transmission signal is obtained by the antenna receiver.”\textsuperscript{59} What appear instead are flickering, dot-like random patterns of electronic noise, which fell into the antenna’s reception.

This mechanism is re-enacted in the form of my quasi-automatic writing as mentioned earlier. I, the receiver-transmitter, would expose my attention open to thoughts, mental conversations, utterance overheard, dialogues, monologues – words – that travelled through my senses, inscribing them onto the paper surface.

Over the duration of the course, variations to this approach (different nib sizes and pen points, inks with varying degrees of blackness, and so on) were tried in order to determine which, out of those experiments, best articulate the desired content. After all, there was an additional detail which I was after, a particular kind of noise.

The noise takes shape as a musical composition that bookends Austrian electronic musician Christian Fennesz’s breakthrough album, \textit{Endless Summer}. Ten minutes in duration, the said composition is an aural journey in what could have been a bland exercise in ambient avantgardism. Yet it is excellence that is being delivered, and the album is widely regarded as a triumphant landmark in electronic music, notably for its border-crossing scope – avantgarde as it is popular, ‘rock’ as it is ‘techno’, analogue as it is digital, minimalist as it is maximalist, chaotic as it is harmonious – which Fennesz had skillfully formulated to a great success.

I see \textit{Endless Summer} as an important cultural product of our time, primarily for its indexical properties. The title is a direct reference to a Beach Boys compilation album of the same name, as well as to the influential 1966 surf documentary \textit{The Endless Summer}. Gracing the record cover is Tina Frank’s rendering of this unambiguous play on nostalgia – on referencing history – on indicating memory, with images of Super8-quality “placid beach scenes right off an Ocean Pacific t-shirt” that “are obscured by video scanlines, revealing this experience as a third-generation dub of the original media-derived memories”\textsuperscript{60}.

That it was first released in July 2001 heightens this personal conviction. I remember immersing myself fully into the album prior to its release and – like many of my peers at the time – felt that its elegiac nature was almost prophetic to what would happen two months later, on the day that will change lives forever, 11 September 2001.

\textit{Endless Summer} has always played on that sliver of the in-between, of the transitional, of thresholds. Viewing it in light of the above paragraph, \textit{Endless Summer} becomes an involuntary signifier that marks the changing of the world, before and after 9/11.


Listening to the album has never been the same ever since. Simon Reynolds once pointed out that music possesses that strange ability to transport us through time, akin to the Madeleine in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Such is the case whenever I listen to *Endless Summer*, whose sonic adventures of decay, longing, time and regeneration is a clear (albeit reluctant) soundtrack to the world that once was.

It is for this purpose that I incline to use the aforementioned last track’s white noise sensibilities. The brittle, infinitely cascading microgranular grains that seem to envelop all available corners is a perfect analogy for the infiltrative nature of immoderate noise, as much as it does for the next character to be discussed.

**Information**

Today information surrounds us like it never did before. This might sound like an exaggeration, considering that every generation had always endured the same experience, though in different forms. For the ancient Greeks in the time of Plato, even the introduction of writing was seen as threatful. Simple and harmless as we may see it now, for their time the very idea of it conjured assumptions of instability, chaos, disorder. An overload. The scattered and dispersive behaviour of the written text is an indication to this [fig.6]. As was mentioned before, writing in my artwork implies information, for writing is the technology we use to transfer, to pass information – messages – across. But as we should all know too well by now, more information does not necessarily mean more knowledge. In fact it is often the other way around. More, or too much information, often leads to less knowledge, less opportunity to learn and to derive meaning.

Louise Hopkins is an artist whom I discovered to be working on the same trajectory as mine [figs.28-29]. Using painting and drawing, Hopkins's imposition of “her own system for the flow of information” by rearranging the order “into its total annihilation” is clear, “however quietly beautiful her work may sometimes seem.” A description that could have easily been applied to describe my own.

Contemporary thinkers are mindful of the above concerns regarding information overload, as they have been since the days of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Jean Baudrillard, and Manuel Castells. Writer-philosopher Nicholas Nassim Taleb is one recent intellectual who made a point regarding this incompatibility. In his bestselling book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Taleb explicitly wrote that information is an 'impediment to knowledge'.

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In one of the subheadings, written in capitals that says INFORMATION IS BAD FOR KNOWLEDGE, a deceptively simple yet convincing experiment accurately illustrates his point:

Show two groups of people a blurry image of a fire hydrant, blurry enough for them not to recognize what it is. For one group, increase the resolution slowly, in ten steps. For the second, do it faster, in five steps. Stop at a point where both groups have been presented an identical image and ask each of them to identify what they see. The members of the group that saw fewer intermediate steps are likely to recognize the hydrant much faster. Moral? The more information you give someone, the more hypotheses they will formulate along the way, and the worse off they will be. They see more random noise and mistake it for information. 65

He added that “the more detailed one gets of empirical reality, the more one will see the noise (i.e. the anecdote) and mistake it for actual information.”66 The viewing of my artwork mirrors this exact same principle. As already mentioned in chapter three, the harder one struggles to identify the existing letters, words, sentences – in short, attempting to read them – the harder for it to make sense.

I have spoken on how we are easily diverted by things that are sensational. “Listening to the news on the radio every hour is far worse for you than reading a weekly magazine,” Taleb also said, “because the longer interval allows information to be filtered.”67

This issue of the filter is one the interesting points which Nicholas Carr wishes to extrapolate. Whenever we speak about information overload, no doubt the issue of filter will come to surface. Clay Shirky mentioned in 2008 that the problem is not information overload itself, but instead it is “filter failure”.68 Nicholas Carr, on the other hand, has a slightly different opinion. Extending on Shirky's idea, Carr identified that, rather than filter failure, it is actually the other way around – it is filter success.

Technology's ability to filter information allows us to receive information specific to our taste, catered to suit our needs and wants. In reality, this in fact does not reduce the amount of those that interest us, what follows instead is that the quantity increases, intensifying the information flow even further.

“One of the traps we fall into when we talk about information overload,” Carr said, “is that we're usually talking about two very different things... Information overload actually takes two forms … situational overload and ambient overload.”69

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65 Ibid., p.144.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
Situational overload is the needle-in-the-haystack problem, where the challenge is to pinpoint the required information, to extract the needle from the haystack, and to do it as quickly as possible. Filters have always been pretty effective at solving the problem of situational overload. Situational overload is not the problem. When we complain about information overload, what we're usually complaining about is ambient overload. This is an altogether different beast. Ambient overload doesn't involve needles in haystacks. It involves haystack-sized piles of needles. We experience ambient overload when we're surrounded by so much information that is of immediate interest to us that we feel overwhelmed by the neverending pressure of trying to keep up with it all. We keep clicking links, keep hitting the refresh key, keep opening new tabs, keep checking email in-boxes and RSS feeds, keep scanning Amazon and Netflix recommendations - and yet the pile of interesting information never shrinks.

The cause of situational overload is too much noise. The cause of ambient overload is too much signal.  

**Speed**

Throughout the world today, it's self-evident that we are suffering from a painful affliction: the rush to finish up. This odd sense of urgency informs our century in every conceivable domain. We work a great deal more, think much more ... without digesting any of the above or having the time required to do so. Today, nothing is done with time; everything against time. We have reduced ourselves to a delirious succession of film strips.

Speed is a consequence of our insatiable desire for more – more products, more goals, more wants – in, and of, everything. Speed determines acceleration. In a society obsessed with achieving the most in numbers and quantities, acceleration guarantees their increase, thrusting oneself steps closer to success. In speed, the current system that governs our society (i.e. neoliberalism) finds a mutual and trustworthy agent, a forceful ally. In an era where time means money, speed equals power.

Robert Hassan mentions how our relationship with speed is conducted “in ways that have a negative consequence for the individual and society.” Quoting from a section in Stephen Bertman's book *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed*, Hassan wrote:

Bertman conjures up the mental picture of the caged mouse on the spinning wheel, where no matter how fast it runs, it is only ever just keeping up. Humans in the information society... are just like that mouse: running faster, expending more and more energy, devoting more and more time to 'keeping up', but never really getting anywhere.

“We have become prisoners to our own speeds,” said Mirko Zardini. “We face daily the stresses inherent in our ever-faster lifestyles,” he continued, wondering whether “this battle for speed been worth all the bother.”

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70 Ibid.
73 R. Hassan, ibid., p.170.
74 Ibid.
I often wonder if our obsession with speed is ever going to end. Looking back through time, it seems unlikely. Our history is already full of races and competitions, that it is as if our fixation towards haste is almost primordial. That we are, ultimately, impatient beings.

I know for certain that the increase in our life’s rhythm renders me more prone to agitation, particularly when it comes to the obtaining of things. As forms of technology continue to advance, without us realizing it, every other element in our living would increase its pace to synchronize with the much fresher, 'faster and better' standard speed, including ours – how we think, how we behave, how we function, are now set in accordance to it. As I became more accustomed to acquiring things instantly – either via a quick service at the supermarket or a virtual click frenzy on the net – the moment that I was denied these luxuries through various forms of delay, the more they could easily become intolerable to me. Ridiculous, but very much real.

The quote at the start of this section was made by Brazilian writer Joao do Rio, who conveniently captures the kind of sentiment which is shared on a global scale today. He wrote it in 1909.
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THE AUDACITY OF STILLNESS

Stillness is not just a gesture of refusal. Stillness punctuates the flow of all things.76

This research began as a reaction, before it grew into an avenue for me to understand, to find some sense in the increasingly incomprehensible world in which we live. Through my working method, I was able to work inside a self-imposed situation that is antithetical to the mechanisms of our current dominant mode of production. The privileging of hands to machinery, slowness to speed, quietude to noisiness, stillness to mobility – all could easily lead to Luddite accusations. But this is not regression for the sake of regression. As I have indicated in numerous places earlier, if the word ‘regression’ is to be used at all, then this would be – with the idea of ‘oscillation’ in mind – a progressive regression.

The Audacity of Stillness is the title of a series of drawings that forms the studio component of this two-year investigation that is The Future, Today. The ‘stillness’ of the title refers to a number of things – the prescribed circumstance for producing the work, the kind of state where the act of writing takes place, the required momentum demanded from the viewer wishing to understand the work – all these; as well as stillness as being analogous to silence, static, pause.

The title, which follows metamodernism’s positivist outlook even when it describes dichotomies (‘informed naivety’, ‘pragmatic idealism’, ‘moderate fanaticism’), similarly suggests to a ‘loud silence’, which I think is quite accurate in describing the work. The drawings are, after all, silent witnesses. First to my thoughts, ideas, and secrets; as well as to those involving and/or of others, which I had managed to inscribe into the work. In this sense, the drawings can be viewed as idiosyncratic coded parchments, guised as a deceptively archetypal modern/minimal/abstract piece.

This outward passivism is in fact Audacity's main strategy, an operative language in the face of today's loudness. The drawings are content in their present states, they do not feel compelled to compete for the viewer’s attention, because the right viewer will eventually come. Audacity – like its ancestors; the Mondrians, the Brice Mardens, the Agnes Martins and the Rothkos – is a body of work that calls for a slowing down, a deceleration, a halt. And it is not always an easy task.

76 D. Bissell and G. Fuller, 'Stillness unbound', in Stillness in a mobile world, (London: Routledge) 2011, p.3
“They put us in an either/or situation,” Yve-Alain Bois, describing this kind of art, “either you proceed at the speed they require, or you'll see nothing that is specific to the works in question.”  

“Of course you can ignore the injunction,” Bois added, “you are free to proceed as you please.”

Such is the preferred tangent which *Audacity* decides to pursue. Michael Haneke once spoke of his films as being “projection surfaces for the sensibilities of the viewer,”79 suggesting that a significant amount of what they contain are dependent on the viewer’s own judgments. Haneke films – like those by Tarkovsky, Bresson, Antonioni, or Victor Erice and Bela Tarr among others – are core templates for the kind of artistic output that this research aspires to.

*The Future, Today* has been a journey into the maelstrom that is our contemporary world. Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek, said in a 2007 interview:

My only optimism comes from my pessimism. What I am saying is capitalism is generating tensions and catastrophic potentials within its own field. It will not be able to maintain control indefinitely. As a result, we will be forced to act in a utopian way. True utopia is not: “Oh, we're doing well but why don't we dream of doing it even better.” For me, true utopia is born out of being in a totally desperate situation where you simply cannot survive within the existing coordinates and it becomes a matter of survival to invent something new.80

Newness aside, this research similarly departed from the conundrum that Žižek – or Klein, Chomsky, Ralston Saul, Hassan, Hedges, and the rest of the 99% – had outlined. *The Future, Today* does not pretend to have achieved, let alone is able to provide an answer to the conundrum. It has, however, come to a conclusion that; in the context of navigating through the status quo; an approach which translates the metamodernist oscillation has been adequate.

The metamodernist oscillation, unlike postmodern *différance*, clearly differs in its fundamental reasoning. Where postmodernism was a reaction to; and *against*, modernism; metamodernism does not seem to share the same suspicion and negativity. If, and only if, metamodernism is ideologically against anything, then it would have only been towards the *condition* – the chaos/confusion/disorder, etc – rather than to any of the isms. Mark C. Taylor said, “As always when in the midst of extensive and rapid changes, it is difficult to assume a critical perspective from which to assess the significance of what is occurring.”81

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77 Ibid.
The Future, Today takes heed of Taylor’s advice, by employing stillness as a strategy to manoeuvre itself through the situation, and by doing so as a form of art, part of its design was to also encourage the viewer to the awareness and realization of such value. Stillness, silence and pause, are the currency that I, and most of the social thinkers mentioned in this paper, consider to be one of the decisive factors if we wish to maintain a measured approach to living amidst the hyper-acceleration.

We need to remember however, that Audacity manoeuvres within a metamodernist sphere. As much as it desires for stability (shown by its admiration towards modernist thinking) it remains reluctant to commit. It continues in oscillation, navigating itself in between contexts and confluences, evading forms of settlement in its journey to settlement. Could this oscillation then, in fact be that 'stable ground' that the research aspires to?

The proposed ‘stillness’ then, no doubt is one that is inherently dynamic. In practical terms, it is in the awareness of constantly having that pause button ready within reach. The Audacity of Stillness asks the viewer to consider the value of repose, the suspension of time, in the same productive, reflective context of mono no aware. This research, through the exegesis and the studio practice, is simply trying to say, quoting Terrie Sultan, that “paradise or no, the future can be better than the present.”82

82 T. Sultan, op.cit., p.8.
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[fig.1] Early writing experiment, 16 April 2010, 3:49am

[fig.2] Early writing experiment, 16 April 2010, 3:50am
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.3] Caspar David Friedrich, *Das Eismeer*, 1823-1824
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.6] Detail, 16 May 2010, 4:43 pm
[fig.7] David Schnell, Blau, 2011
[fig.8] Edward Burtynsky, *Jubilee Operations #1, Kalgoorlie, WA, 2007*
[fig.9] Florian Maier-Aichen, *Untitled*, 2005

IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.10] Hiroshi Sugimoto, North Atlantic Ocean, Cliffs of Moher, 1989
[fig.16] Agnes Martin, gallery view, 2011
[fig.18] Cy Twombly, *Veil of Orpheus*, 1968
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.20] [fig.21] Joseph Beuys, blackboard drawings, date unknown
[fig.23] Hanne Darboven, *Seven Panels and Index*, 1973
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.24] Roman Opalka, *Cartes de voyage*, 1972
IMAGE OMITTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT REASONS

[fig.25] On Kawara, gallery view, 2010
[fig.26] Robert Walser, handwriting on various sheets of paper, date unknown
[fig.27] Robert Walser, handwriting on the back of an envelope, date unknown
[fig.28] Louise Hopkins, *Untitled (the of the)*, 2002

[fig.29] Louise Hopkins, *Songsheet 3 (ii) you're nobody 'til somebody loves you* (detail), 1997
[fig.30] *The Audacity of Stillness*, gallery view, 2011
APPENDIX

VISUAL DOCUMENTATION OF EXAMINATION EXHIBITION

The Audacity of Stillness
VCA School of Art Postgraduate Gallery, Dodds Street, Southbank
6 – 11 December 2011

6. Installation view: *They drew first blood and Frequency II (the verbal image)* (both 2010-2011)
7. Installation view: *They drew first blood, Frequency II and Of all the times that I wished we were together (À la recherche du temps perdu, for Chris Marker)* (2011)
8. *Of all the times that I wished we were together (À la recherche du temps perdu, for Chris Marker)* (2011), india ink on paper mounted on aluminium, frame
9. *Of all the times*, detail
10. *Of all the times*, detail
11. *They drew first blood (a story on forced demarcation, 1917)* (2010-2011), felt tip marker pen on paper, laser print, adhesive tape, mounted on aluminium
12. *They drew first blood*, detail
13. *Frequency II: the verbal image* (2010-2011), felt tip marker pen on paper, adhesive tape, mounted on aluminium
14. *Frequency II*, detail
15. *Untitled Variation III (Black One)* (2010-2011), india ink on paper, mounted on aluminium
16. *Untitled Variation III*, detail
17. *Untitled Variation II (Anthracite)* (2010-2011), graphite on paper, mounted on aluminium
18. *Untitled Variation I (Blue Horizons)* (2009-2010), biro on paper, mounted on aluminium
[fig.3] Installation view: *New York Diaries X – XVII* (2010-2011)

[fig.5] Installation view: *New York Diaries, Untitled Variations, and They drew first blood (a story on forced demarcation, 1917)* (2010-2011)

[fig.6] Installation view: *They drew first blood and Frequency II (the verbal image)* (both 2010-2011)
[fig. 7] Installation view: They drew first blood, Frequency II, and Of all the times that I wished we were together (À la recherche du temps perdu, for Chris Marker) (2011)
Of all the times that I wished we were together (À la recherche du temps perdu, for Chris Marker) (2011), india ink on paper mounted on aluminium, frame, 165x185cm approx
[fig.9] Of all the times..., detail
[fig.10] Of all the times…, detail
[fig.11] *They drew first blood (a story on forced demarcation, 1917)* (2010-2011), felt tip marker pen on paper, laser print, adhesive tape, mounted on aluminium, 155x77cm approx

[fig.12] *They drew first blood*, detail
[fig.13] *Frequency II: the verbal image* (2010-2011),
felt tip marker pen on paper, adhesive tape, mounted on aluminium, 155x77cm approx

[fig.14] *Frequency II*, detail
[fig.15] *Untitled Variation III (Black One)* (2010-2011),
india ink on paper, mounted on aluminium, 15x25cm approx
[fig.17] *Untitled Variation II (Anthracite)* (2010-2011), graphite on paper, mounted on aluminium, 15x25cm approx
[fig.18] *Untitled Variation I (Blue Horizons)* (2010-2011),
biro on paper, mounted on aluminium, 15x25cm approx
[fig.19] *New York Diaries III* (2010), ink on paper, adhesive tape, frame, 25x15cm approx
[fig.20] New York Diaries III, detail
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