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### Author

Benzaquen, Lauren

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

***The Auratic Interpreter: A Multi-Media Installation***

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in  
DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

By  
**Lauren Benzaquen**

December 2017

The Dissertation of Lauren Benzaquen is  
approved:

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Michael Chemers, Ph.D., chair

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Professor Jennifer A. González

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Professor Dee Hibbert-Jones

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Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2017

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## **DEDICATION**

For Shelagh, Wesley, and Hazel

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**Auratic Interpreter**  
**Lauren Benzaquen**

**Abstract**

The *Auratic Interpreter* is an interactive multi-media video installation. Part divination, part polygraph technology, the *Interpreter* reads the aura of inanimate objects and translates it to a visual record. Viewers can participate by choosing an object from a collection and placing it on a divination device. Visually, the machine responds in two ways: a video representing an extraction of memory from that object, and a scrolling print-out of electrical activity signalling a successful reading. A story develops as different objects give clues through coded imagery, and much like a psychic reading, broad strokes allow for a viewer to make their own connections.

*Aura* is a word laden with meanings, especially arousing the aesthetics of the paranormal experience. Encountering the *Interpreter* is like encountering a psychic booth at a carnival, yet is countered by the look of a mad scientist laboratory. The divination machine is connected to a mechanical chart recorder that continuously prints a measurement of auratic metrics. The technician is myself, the artist, wearing a lab coat and taking notes on the study. Several dispositions are implied: that of alchemical traditions or early technology meant to measure the invisible; the sense of surveillance and paranoia reflecting the return gaze of possessions upon their owners; and a disposition of irrevocable distance between people and things, one that requires a radical mediation in order to experience a pure intimacy with the material world.

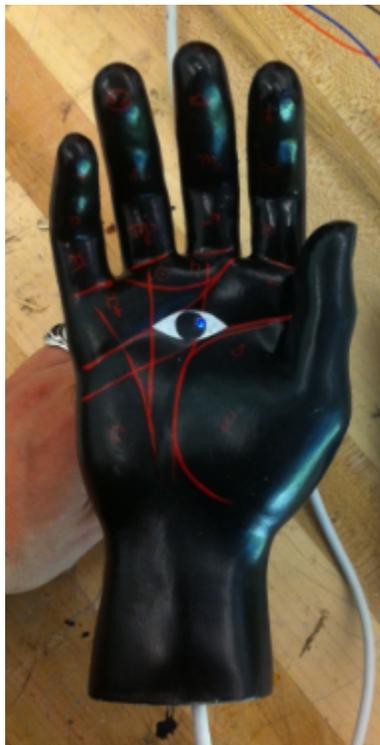
My desire for a holistic interpreter, or to be an objective empath, is also a desire to move beyond ironic detachment, habitual consumerism, scientific

reductionism and religious naivety. It reflects my desire for grounding the being phenomenologically, with my possessions as part of the politics of self. The *Auratic Interpreter* is an attempt at mediating invisible knowledge, however anecdotal or trivial, revealing the multiplicities of possible narrative.

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## Introduction

The *Auratic Interpreter* considers the aura dually from a spiritualist angle and the notion of aura as aesthetic principle. The project reads as a pseudo-scientific device while referencing the literature of Walter Benjamin and the nature of a unique art object. The participatory aspect of the work evokes the tradition of psychic readings by way of an occult figure hand, while the chart recorder's swaying needle recalls the technique of automatic drawing enacted in the seances of the late 19th century. Neither of these devices hide their mechanical and electronic parts; they are hybrid pieces of material and digital technology. The chart recorder is also inspired by the obsolete polygraph machine and the naive belief in the irreproachable capabilities of technology, as much as the naivety of belief in the prophetics of the human as diviner. This project utilizes these beliefs in the infallibility of technology, in tandem with supernatural methods of inquiry, to engage the politics of perception.



The dismembered hand acts as a fortune-telling device, a dime-store gag hand that is painted up like a mysterious occult object, with its electronic innards spilling out from the wrist. It 'reads the aura' of an object placed into its palm. The aura that I have manufactured for each particular object is displayed to observers on a video screen. They are colorful, distorted visions of memories and collages of found footage.

Commonly known from Kirlian photography, the aura is a phenomenon of colored light emanating from a body, usually living. Before Kirlian, the process of electrography was done in France by Hippolyte Baraduc in 1895. He produced photographs of emotions using light sensitive plates and called them *iconography*, or "thought pictures."



Hippolyte Baraduc Photographs His Wife Nadine, 20 Minutes after death, 1907

Whereas Kirlian images of the aura are typically considered hoax photography, electrography is a scientific practice. It is a method of documenting and measuring electrical activity, including the modern techniques of Electrocardiography (EKG) and Electroencephalography (EEG). These techniques of measuring the invisible are heirs of a continuing study of invisible phenomena since

the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> I consider my project to be a creative continuation of that study. I am documenting (and creating) the invisible stories of inanimate things. My intentions are also to put those imaginary stories alongside the very real stories that our possessions could tell us if we investigated the role they play in the greater economic and political paradigm. It is a thought experiment to open the possibilities of new relationships with our possessions by allowing them to speak.

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### **Spiritualism and technology**

The American Spiritualist Movement, begun in the mid-nineteenth century as a loose affiliation of seekers rather than an organized religion, was largely discredited by the end of the century: nevertheless, it remains an influential force on American culture.<sup>2</sup> As a philosophy defined by its disdain for the sharp divide between religion and science, it also was highly intertwined with the concurrent movement for social justice and equal rights. Binaries of gendered labor and political representation were under scrutiny and upheaval, as well as the echelons of religious dogma. Women found new importance within Spiritualism as the center of the seance, though there were no proper churches or designated places of worship, and little in the way of a governing body.<sup>3</sup> Metaphysics was the realm of spiritualist study; practitioners

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<sup>1</sup> Geurts, Guglielmetti, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Albanese, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Braude, 2001

sought new connections with the unknown, using science and new technology to explore the paranormal.<sup>4</sup>

The new technology of the late 19th century might well have been considered as ‘other-wordly’ as much as a seance or psychic reading. The Spiritualists were likely to adapt the new technology of the time for paranormal research and communication, and not simply in a metaphorical way.<sup>5</sup> The use of photography to illuminate spirits, like the tintypes of William Mumler, were popular mementos of the recently passed. The spirit rapping of the Fox Sisters in 1848 became known as the “spiritual telegraph,” shortly following the introduction of Morse’s telegraph, and came to be the name of a popular Spiritualist newspaper. The development of the phonograph in 1877 had such an impact on the public that Edison was dubbed the “Wizard of Menlo Park.” Although the phonograph is not known for its ability to capture the subtle energies of other dimensions, recording is capable of picking up cosmic electromagnetic radiation in the form of audible white noise. The early inventors who worked in communication are rumored to be motivated by a desire for communication with the spirits of the dead, a sure sign of the belief in technology to have a significance outside of everyday utility and efficiency.<sup>6</sup> The desire for the ability to communicate with other dimensions is a desire for revolutionary change, for such communication would alter the self and our perception of daily life, even giving more meaning to one’s existence.

Paul DeMarinis is an artist inspired by these early experiments and their reliance on haptic manipulations. Electricity often used the body itself as a

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<sup>4</sup> McGarry, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Weisberg, 2004

conductor, and as DeMarinis notes, it was “viewed initially as part of the life force...that unifies people.”<sup>7</sup> Scientists like Luigi Galvani, ca. 1780, used body parts to demonstrate the life giving and life taking ability of electricity by animating a dead limb or literally electrocuting a test animal to death.<sup>8</sup> DeMarinis was especially interested in ways that the haptic manipulation of electrified objects revealed how sound could be produced and communicated across distances.

These early sound and communication experiments, like the telegraph and phonograph, leading to the invention of the telephone, influenced the artist Paul DeMarinis’ artworks *Gray Matter*, *Firebirds*, *Rain Dance*, and *The Edison Effect*.<sup>9</sup> In these pieces, the medium of sound has an effect on the transmission and its perception by the viewer. In *Firebirds* for example, a flame is the transmitter of sound modulated by high voltage audio fields. Speeches from Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Franklin Roosevelt, and Adolf Hitler from the years 1935-36, are used to illustrate how the voice can reach past borders and conflicting nations via radio signals. These speeches, ‘voiced’ through a flame, conjures the idea of the potential for voice to either be easily blown out or catch fire and rage out of control.<sup>10</sup>

DeMarinis asks with his work: what were the special conditions surrounding this type of technology, and how did the medium alter or encourage certain politics through its reception? Is it collective, or individualized? Radio is different from telegraph is different from telephone. Does the modern internet have any likeness to the primitive Arpanet? What consumer practices demanded one tech over another? How does the technology resemble the early wonder and accidental happenstance of

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<sup>7</sup> DeMarinis, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Whitaker, 1910

<sup>9</sup> DeMarinis, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

an inventor's mind, and the political turmoil of their era? DeMarinis is as much interested in the personal lives and circumstances of the inventors that inspire his work as he is of the technology. This is evident in the piece as a dialog between himself and the inventor, this modern era and the primitive one that still worked with the senses as a tool for discovery. Witnessing the process of coding and decoding of sound through material like water or fire conjures a sense of mystery of the elemental; yet, it is seen to work and we wonder why some technologies pass into canon, and others become orphans.



Paul DeMarinis, Firebirds, 2004

*The Edison Effect*, also by DeMarinis, hearkens to these questions through its use of new and old technology. In this piece, a laser, typically from a compact disc player, is used in a phonograph machine to read old wax disks from late 19th century. The laser, having no actual physical contact with the wax grooves, can only scan to pick up vibrations, signaling a complete rupture of recorded memory to somatic response, or as DeMarinis says, “the emancipation of memory from touch.”<sup>11</sup> If the

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<sup>11</sup> DeMarinis, 1993

gift of technology is to assist us in relinquishing conscious experience through matter, then it may be well on the way, according to DeMarinis:

The promise of technology enabling us to be conscious masters of our experience, overlords of the material world, is long past. We have more the impression of being swallowed by our own doing... There is no way out, but we are hopefully capable of an occasional lucid moment within our dream where we can savor at the whole process even as we are swept away by it, that being the nature of our experience.<sup>12</sup>

This search for the 'lucid moment' is what compels me to revisit ways in which the so-called 'aura' might be made manifest again in a new way.

I am no stranger to the experience of 'being swept away' by new technology, and my project provides a moment to savor the process as it is in motion. While modern virtual technology seems to ease relations between people and facilitate communication across distances, the *Interpreter* provides a dialog with objects getting left behind, or rather the relationships with objects that don't necessarily have a virtual replication. What is unique between people and their things is what my project examines, through a concept called aura.

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## **Aura**

DeMarinis' judgment seems to echo that of Walter Benjamin and the problem with 'aura.' What kind of experience are we missing in the age of mechanical reproduction? A surface analysis of Benjamin's literature would be that copies are cheap, and that mass proliferation deadens our senses to a unique image. It could

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<sup>12</sup> DeMarinis, 1997

even be taken as a high brow stance, determining a handmade original as the only truly valuable form. The notion of aura, however, is more nuanced and complex.

Aura is not something found in a thing; it is not an intrinsic characteristic of some things and not others. It is an aesthetic transcendence, not to be applied to a category of art, but to describe the perceptive mode of the subject.<sup>13</sup> It is purely relational: the experience of aura requires a subject, and has much more to do with the interaction between that subject and object. It represents a state of exchange with art beyond that of commodity, beyond monetized value. In that sense, it recalls a nostalgia for a primitive state of being with things. We don't know if this primitive state existed or what it was like, but according to Benjamin, it has something to do with nature:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, not matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow on the observer, *until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance* - this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.<sup>14</sup>

There is a specific reference here to the passing of time as an aesthetic appreciation. The grounding of an image in a temporal space gives an aura to that thing, a sense that it has had its own experiences through a connection with a particular place and time. I would argue that mechanical reproductions still bear the mark of their place and time as seen in the type of reproduction it is, as metadata, yet the concept speaks to the nature of perception, which is Benjamin's concern. He saw that the accessibility of fast publications and fast media was shaping contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> Costello, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, 1935

perception, and continued as a form of displacement of the cult value of the object. An object of ritual function in prehistoric times is now seen as a work of art, yet the cult value remains in some transference. Photography for example, retains this value in the early trends of portraiture, where the aura is found in a subject looking back.<sup>15</sup> Significantly for Benjamin, the fascist tendency to use classical forms of art as icons of German heritage illustrated the shift in function of art from ritual to politics. Nazi imagery appropriated auratic images for propaganda, typically classical forms of sculpture, sublime bodies, and traditional aesthetics. This 'secular cult of beauty' found transmission through mass media, and example of mass media appropriating auratic imagery as a simulacrum of cult value.<sup>16</sup>

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### **Return Gaze**

An essential characteristic of aura that we glean from Benjamin's literature is that of the return gaze. This means a type of 'aesthetic transcendence,' where the subject recognizes something essential of the self in the object of perception. A notion of subjectivity in the observed image that conveys a transmission of lived experience, a seer being seen. This is found in the above reference to nature as an example of auratic experience. In observing nature, Benjamin traces 'the range of the mountains' and 'the branch which casts its shadow on the observer.' These are not simply appreciations of the individual forms, but the contingencies of setting. The perception includes one's own unique point of view, as Benjamin describes the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Patt, 2001

passing of light across the scene, and the time it takes for observation. A literal rootedness in nature represents the rootedness of an auratic image in tradition and place.

To extend this notion of aura, it becomes a phenomenon of anthropomorphism. The image that observes in return becomes animate and capable of critique itself. “Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin traces the work of art from its origins as cult object, later to be considered art as secularization of society shapes our perception of imagery. Cult objects have a status of sacredness, literally unapproachability, even as one is near to them. This duality of perception continues with art objects as an ‘aesthetic transcendence,’ a characteristic of auratic imagery. Benjamin calls it “the unique apparition of a distance preserved in the face of proximity.”<sup>18</sup> This is essential to a type of reflexive aesthetic appreciation, where recognition of subjectivity in the observed image reflects the self, even a semblance of autonomy. This explains in part Benjamin’s association of aura to nature, and why certain subject matter might illustrate this concept despite being highly reproducible media like photography and film. It is not only found in certain media of art, but rather in the mode of perception and the encounter with the art.

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, 1935

<sup>18</sup> Costello, 2005

The reflexive nature of the *Interpreter* is that the objects are given a ‘voice.’ Vital signs move the chart recorder as though possessed by a ghost, and faces look back at us through the video screen. The CRT television, especially with its fresnel lens, evoke a sensation of surveillance. We are looking at the hidden interiors of objects, but the naked CRT seems almost eyeball like. We feel looked at in return.

A television embodies Benjamin’s critique of mechanical reproduction: it is used to simulate (and stimulate), as well as encourage rapid digestion and dissemination of ideas. The television as medium encourages advertising more than cultural information; the commodified information lacks foundational tradition in community and history, a critique of mechanical reproduction that Benjamin emphasizes. In the *Auratic Interpreter*, because the television is used to impart the interior of the object, it can therefore include the media of television as part of a modern tradition. My personal perspective and place in time includes commercial media as part of my history and the history of these objects. In order to adequately represent the modern condition, we have to consider the recent technology that is rapidly becoming extinct, e.g., television and radio, as well as the privacy of one-way communication.

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## **Things**

The objects in my collection are taken from mundane sites. However, by entering them into dialog with the *Interpreter*, I imply that there is an aura to be found within. They become potential cult objects. The videos depict various imagery,

mostly in the form of portraiture, having to do with people or process. The reflexivity of aura can be found in these videos as well as in the objects, as being common recognizable things that are very approachable. They provoke questions from the observer: Who did this belong to? Why is it here now and what does it have to do with these other things?

The meanings of my objects shift and are questioned through the apparatus. Asked whether or not an object has a soul for example, would mean to ask what is elemental about that thing. Is there an essence of that thing that makes it more than what is signified, or less than? Does the 'boxiness' of boxes have more to do with categories and organization, or the shape of having four sides? How do we get to a phenomenological understanding of material minus the relation of its social meaning? In "Thing Theory," Bill Brown would suggest that a thing is somewhat of an oxymoron.<sup>19</sup> Things have a stubbornness of materiality even in the midst of theorizing them. They are semantically reducible to objects, yet things resist being understood purely phenomenologically, as well as purely cognitively.

We can look at what objects mean by examining how they produce value through exchange and consumer practices; yet examining this cultural capital, Brown states, does not examine the thing itself, but rather what is produced by the thing. He suggests that a more thing-centered study is found through 'misuse.' What we discover when encountering something in an unexpected way is highly revealing. Our relationship to materiality is disturbed, and more specifically the sense of understanding what that thing is: "By misuse value I mean to name the aspects of an object—sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic—that become legible, audible, palpable when

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, 2001

the object is experienced in whatever time it takes (in whatever time it is) for an object to become another.”<sup>20</sup> Again, it is *time* that allows for experiential learning (or unlearning). The process of transference could be as simple as using a tool incorrectly for example, or finding that a vehicle is also a weapon. According to Brown, “The experience of sensation depends on disorientation, both habit and its disruption.” In this way, one’s experience is closer to the materiality of a thing than one could be through cognition. The defamiliarization that takes place allows a thing to be other than what it is; an instability of meaning that may even provoke perception of magic. Brown asks us to “imagine things.. as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects - their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.”<sup>21</sup>

My project takes that idea somewhat literally by invoking the tradition of auratic and psychic readings. Familiar objects are given a new status as potential cult objects, and through that defamiliarization they gain a magical quality. That process is shown scientifically, documented as ‘proof’ via the chart recorder. The transition from dead to animate object has a record; the simplest form of proof left is to show it on paper. I find that even paper- a receipt of transaction/transference- is itself a cult object, especially in the digital age of record keeping.

Recognizing that objects have a meaning other than those that we have granted it provokes the idea of primitivism, difficult from a Western perspective. To accept that it is not an arbitrary meaning, like that of Saussure’s semiotics, is to respect it of its own accord, to respect it as Other. Issa Samb, in “How to Make

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, 1999

<sup>21</sup> Brown 2001

Objects Talk,” relates our respect to objects as affirming our respect for Otherness.<sup>22</sup> Samb makes the case that attempting to claim that image or object is meaningless, which Samb argues is impossible since things have their own language, is to act fascistically, “because through the object you would be denying the culture of the Other.”

Samb also conflates the source of meaning as that which grants power to a notion of a god, an uncomfortable awareness for our secular society:

Because we know it to be fortuitous that we are unwilling to grant that stone this energy, this word that force without seeing a god, a unique creator in front of us. And even with the death of the god, mechanical or industrial civilizations don’t want to go that far. Because it would mean facing up to a unique creator.<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin has been interpreted as being nostalgic for the experience of God, influencing his work on the aura.<sup>24</sup> It represents a desire for experience that cannot be co-opted, commodified, indoctrinated, or codified. Although it can be said that he mourns the loss of aura, significantly he sanctions the shift toward reproduction because it emancipates the work of art from its “parasitical dependence on ritual,” thereby making room for polysemy.<sup>25</sup>

The *Auratic Interpreter* evokes the quality of the supernatural as a method of inquiry that is neither institutionalized ritual practice, nor institutionalized scientific method. It calls for an experience of awe (or at least curiosity) unfettered by a systematic framework, and steeped within the mundane reality of our own things. I find that castaway items and thrift store objects speak of a network of place and time

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<sup>22</sup> Samb and Majewski 2010

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Patt, 2001

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, 1935

that I am surrounded by: the cycle of consumption, love, identity and discarding, the only place of reincarnation that I can see without psychic ability.

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### **Leakiness**

The *Auratic Interpreter* has an affinity with a curated exhibit by Mark Leckey called “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things.” Leckey has accumulated objects (including a digital collection of things intended for the exhibit) that speak to a particular condition- that of “leakiness.”<sup>26</sup> They inhabit both the virtual and material worlds, and in some way or other cause us to ponder the marginal spaces of bardo, a Tibetan concept signifying the intermediate state between reincarnation. The objects in Leckey’s exhibition are not bound by other affinities like form, function, or historical era, in fact they are all over the spectrum of fetishes. There are images of mythological creatures, like the acephelous man, chimeras, the Cerne Abbas Giant, anatomical mermaid drawings, next to modern hybrid creatures like ‘furries,’ and bodies having robotic prostheses. Uncanny automata and ventriloquists, shamanistic visions, cybernetic feedback loops, Bettelheim’s story about Joey the mechanical boy; these ideas play with the body as medium, or the requirement of medium because one cannot have a direct experience as in the case of the schizophrenic child. Perhaps a paranoid delusion in extreme cases, these ideas are beliefs that the self doesn’t have to be defined by one’s body. A hyper awareness of the influence of collectivity, or the interdependence of bodies in an ecosystem is to

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<sup>26</sup> Leckey, 2013

blur the boundaries of self. Leckey's work is to explore these amorphous states of perception to perhaps ask a larger question: where lay a pure experience? Can one actually ever escape mediation? Behind these 'phantom objects,'<sup>27</sup> *Universal Addressability* employs technological apparatuses to bring them into the Internet age. Green screens and live video feeds add the milieu to the fifth domain of cyberspace- a place where the confusion between reality and theatricality is still rampant.

A display of sculptural pieces and cultural icons that defy categorization, yet in their exhibit together form a new dialog between modern technology, archaic totems, and consumer culture. These decontextualized artifacts are placed in new situations, giving them a sense of surreal autonomy, an inanimate animism.

The more computed our environment becomes, the further back it returns us to our primitive past, boomerangs us right back to an animistic worldview where everything has a spirit, rocks and lions and men. So all the objects in the world become more responsive, things that were once regarded as dumb become addressable, and that universal addressability—a network of things—creates this enchanted landscape.<sup>28</sup>

Leckey talks about approaching art objects without conceptualizing them or using critique. He speaks of an immediacy between person and material that may be a type of animism, or an empathy with those items. Paradoxically, it's the augmentation of the material by technology that animates these items and gives them a new sensuality.<sup>29</sup> The more virtual our encounters with things and experiences, the more Leckey finds that the primitive animism surfaces, especially in the ways our 'smart' devices begin to speak to us, and us to them.

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<sup>27</sup> Breton, et al. 1994

<sup>28</sup> Leckey, 2013

<sup>29</sup> Cornell, 2013



Mark Leckey, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*. Gavin Brown, New York. 2014.

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### **On the practicalities of the performance of evocation**

Because my project primarily uses found objects and found footage, I feel it resonates with parts of Jan Verwoert's essay 'Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art' (2007). I employ appropriation as an aesthetic practice- many of the objects I use were found in thrift stores, disposal areas, or given to me by others for this project. I worked with video from the Internet Archive and Youtube as well. While much of it is dated from the 60's to the 90's, some of it is current such as the text of Youtube comments from an acne fetish video compilation. 'Living with Ghosts' looks at appropriation through the lenses of Benjamin, Jameson and Derrida among others.

According to Verwoert, we can think of appropriation as the crux of postmodern art practice. Pastiche of images and concepts adopted out of context, citing, copying, and modeling after the creations of the past is a common practice

within and without the art world. Building on, yet steering away from the discourse of appropriation of the 70's and 80's, Verwoert redefines it for our time; characterised by "a multitude of competing and overlapping temporalities born from the local conflicts that the unresolved predicaments the modern regimes still produce" (148). Appropriation has the potential to reveal the complexities of the forms of dominance within the body of commodity culture, if examined from multiple perspectives. I agree that "we trust the appropriated object to be able to reveal in and through itself the riddled historical relations and dynamics that today determine what things mean"(149).

My objects of then and now are put in the same box, a milieu of treasure and waste. By sharing a receptacle, their individual meanings are diminished compared to their meaning as a group. To whom do they belong? In what way were they used? Who owns them now and why? One can sense the dated imagery, worn textures and irrelevant kitsch as the ever present death (whether out of date fashion, simply broken, or sensing the death of the previous owners), yet the juxtaposition of old and new reminds us of the persistence of commodity. They share a timeline with each other, and with the viewer, a timeline simultaneously signifying death and infinity, a reincarnation of objects passing through the hands of many.

Verwoert's essay discusses how because the appropriated object breaks with historical continuity, its image becomes 'mute.' Drawing from theorists Douglas Crimp, Fredric Jameson, and Craig Owens, he writes, "It is the idea that the sudden dissolution of historical continuity charges postmodern material with an intense sense of a presence without historical meaning - and that this intensity can be isolated in the object of appropriation as it manifests the breakdown of

signification”(150). If artists speak with this empty language that itself signifies its lack of real meaning, it necessarily becomes a language of desire, representing the void that cannot be fully reconciled.

What then, do these objects have to say, if given a chance to speak? Would they speak of their irrelevance, or would they point beyond themselves to an undocumented history? Do they only represent a desire for exorcism? It is possible, while I work with this project, to develop the videos as allegory, a figurative language that represents through appropriated imagery a mythology of our time. Verwoert works with the literature of Benjamin and Owens to describe how allegory “became the predominant mode of articulating a sense of culture in decay” and as “a signifier in ruins that exposes the ruin of signification”(151). I would have it that the imagery both forms an ambiguous narrative through multiple and non-linear application, and conveys the ghost of our collective consciousness via appropriated media and empty signification.

By appropriation, I do not imply that I now have ownership of the imagery, the objects, or any new meaning I make with them. The project is an imaginary platform for the objects to ‘speak’ and be seen. Admitting my own envy of those empaths who sense the spiritual imprints and relate stories of the dead, I simply wish to present material with the illusion that it speaks its own truth, while necessarily being curated and staged in my art. This is of course, the way of the carnival seer, a present influence in my work. Verwoert, in discussing this (re)possession of appropriated material, quotes Derrida from *Spectres of Marx*:

One must have the ghost’s hide and to do that, one must have it. To have it, one must see it, situate it, identify it. One must possess it without letting oneself be possessed by it, without being possessed of it... But does not a spectre consist, to the extent that

it consists, in forbidding or blurring this distinction? In consisting in this very indiscernibility? Is it not to possess a spectre to be possessed by it, possessed period? To capture it, is that not to be captivated by it?(154).

It is a struggle over determining meaning of a thing which you did not create, and how to do justice for it. How one presents this material without claiming resolution, is how 'to learn to live with ghosts'.<sup>30</sup>

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### **Formal project description**

The *Auratic Interpreter* is an installation that has three main elements: A chart recorder with paper print-out, a mounted prosthetic hand, and a CRT television screen. Overall, it is a versatile work that could easily be located on a table-top or placed on individual plinths. A fourth element is a collection of small items that are meant to be used with the piece; they are in a labeled banker's box.

It is intended to be participatory, and so must be approachable and more importantly touchable. As the artist, I work performatively with the piece to facilitate participation. A viewer can engage the art by choosing an object from the collection and placing it on the hand. They can also touch the paper print-out and examine the markings made on it.

The chart recorder is a hand made mechanical object, sized roughly 6 x 7 x 6 inches. It is structurally made with aluminum, steel, and plastic tubing. There is a moving needle, resembling a polygraph, that holds an ink nib. The pen needle is controlled with a micro-servo which is controlled by an Arduino, which is in turn

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<sup>30</sup> Farr, 2012

controlled by a Pi. The paper feed mechanism on the recorder is powered by a geared down 5v motor, powered individually from the Arduino. The chart recorder sits independently from the hand and the monitor.

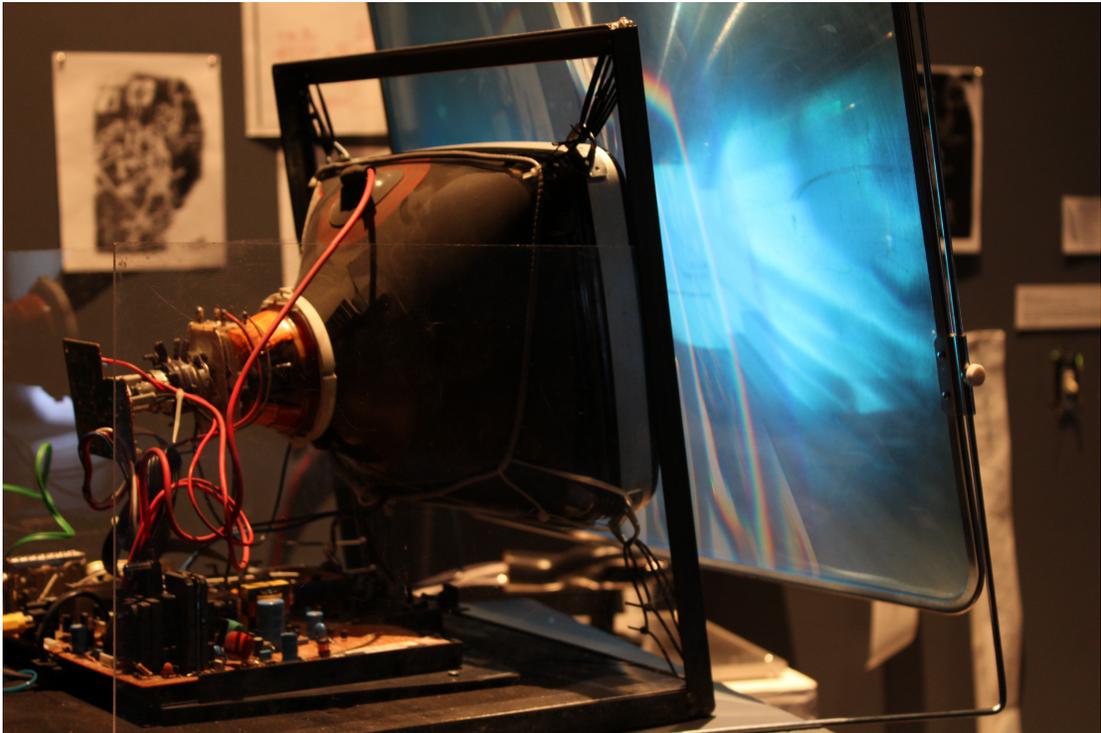
The CRT television is stripped of its plastic case and mounted within a welded frame. There are exposed electronics that are guarded by plexiglass. In front of the screen is a large fresnel lens that distorts the screen, enlarging some areas and blurring others.

The prosthetic hand is a plastic prop painted black with palmistry and zodiac symbols. In the center of the palm is a painted eye. The eye is useful to indicate where an object is to be placed; in fact it has a small blue light emanating from the RFID reader that is placed within the hand. The hand is mounted palm up in a receiving gesture; this way it prompts users to give to it.

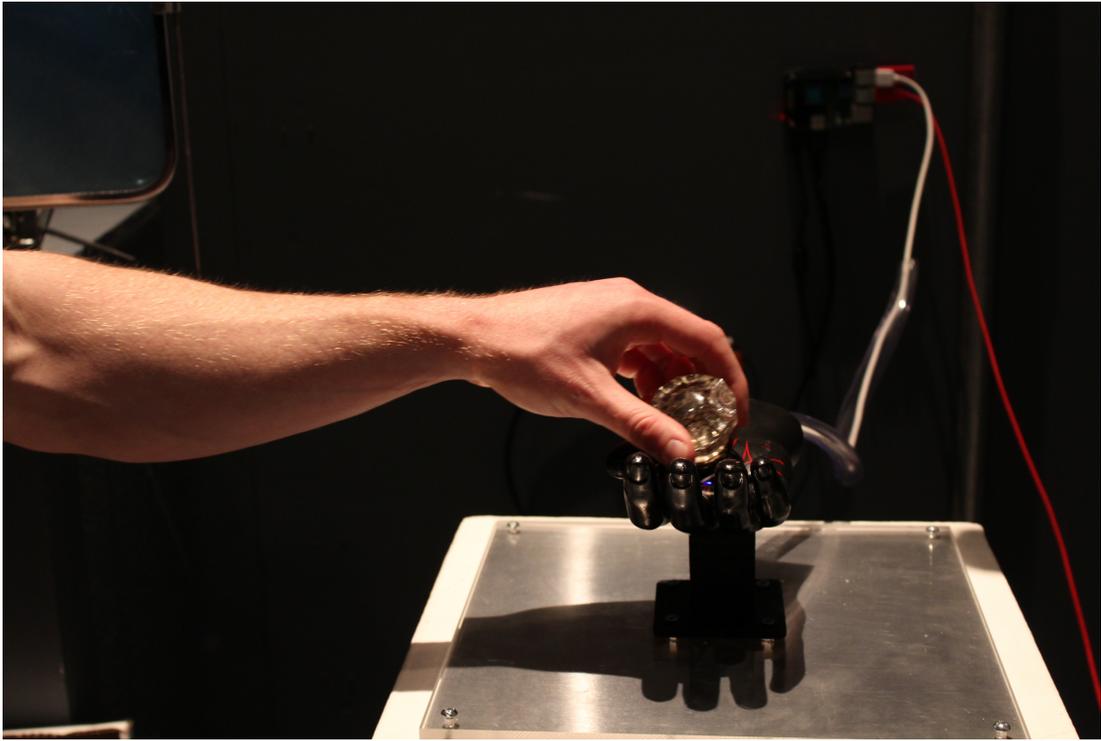
Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID) technology uses radio waves to identify coded tags. Each of my objects has a tag attached to it, and when placed on the prosthetic hand, it is read by the embedded RFID reader. The unique code is programmed to retrieve a particular video to that object. The RFID code also sends a request to the Arduino to activate the needle's movement.

To summarize, the *Auratic Interpreter* code coordinated incoming signals from the RFID reader, output to a listening chart recorder, and video output. The hardware consisted of a Raspberry Pi master, receiving RFID input and producing video output, and Arduino Nano slaves, operating one or more chart recorders. When RFID input was received, RFID was matched to values in a database that corresponded to video files and timing information. A brief transition video element was displayed followed by the corresponding video. Meanwhile, the chart recorder

was started which continued until the video concluded. While video played, the code was still listening for new RFIDs which would interrupt the current video.



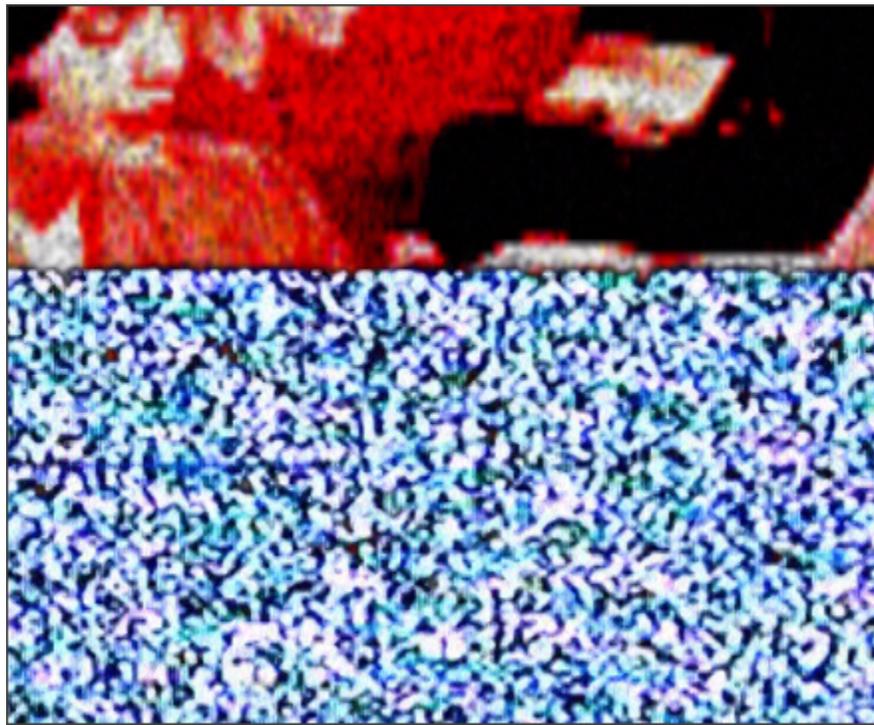
**SL Benz. *Auratic Interpreter*, UltraShift DANM exhibition 2017**



SL Benz. *Auratic Interpreter*, UltraShift DANM exhibition 2017



SL Benz. *Auratic Interpreter*, UltraShift DANM exhibition 2017





SL Benz, *Auratic Interpreter*. Stills, 2017

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## Project Progression

My goals overall for my time in DANM were to integrate new tools that would help me continue my video and animation work in a new form that is not screen based. During this project, I've learned programming skills, electronics, and welding to name a few. The *Auratic Interpreter* combines my love of the occult with kitsch collections, video collage, and kinetic machines: my dream project.

After having a thesis discussion early on with Jennifer Gonzalez, one of my thesis advisors, I researched her suggestion about Radio Frequency Identification, or RFID. I found an Instructable<sup>31</sup> doing exactly what I wanted to do with my project: items tagged with RFID could be used to retrieve memory videos. It was designed for souvenirs that could access web content on Youtube. When I approached my partner Wes Modes (DANM '15) about this idea, he started brainstorming ways that we could build the program to suit my project. We designed it so that there was a constant looping video display showing the title of the project and a prompt for viewers to choose objects. To facilitate rapid prototyping, additions, edits, and finalization, the collection of videos and a JSON database of metadata was served from a USB thumb drive, providing easy access to the video archive during development from my laptop.

While the technological framework was relatively simple, the coding was complex enough that debugging took a significant effort. For example, the communication of the separate subsystems was challenging.

The MFA exhibit was instrumental in helping to refine the project, especially in regards to the mechanical troubleshooting. Having the installation run for several

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.instructables.com/id/RFID-Tagging-a-Souvenir-to-Play-a-YouTube-Video/>

hours at a time revealed new challenges, ranging from a split motor belt to dry ink nibs.

Overall, audience engagement was high and curiosity-laden. One couple took the time to try out all 25 objects, and as they did, a sizable crowd hung around to watch. It seems that sometimes people are too shy or reluctant to spend a lot of time at one exhibit, and enjoy watching others do the clumsy bits. I remember one person spent a good deal of time examining the recorder strips looking for changes based on who last held the object. Most people seemed to enjoy seeing the internal mechanics of the CRT television and the novelty of the fresnel lens, and others commented that they wished the installation was more carnivalesque. I was very tempted to move in that direction, to make it an enveloped space of carny theatrics. I think the performative role of my 'live' research could have been better developed if I chose to work in that direction.

Feedback during critique of the *Interpreter* ranged far and wide. Many people were not thrilled with the look of the final exhibit, and suggestions included going more into the mad-scientist/ conspiracy theorist workshop, or making it more carnivalesque, or more like a Wunderkammer (cabinet of curiosities). I was encouraged to be more interactive as a performer and to take objects from people to put on the reader. On the other hand, there were strong suggestions to make the display as neutral as possible so to emphasise the objects themselves and the ability for the observer to draw their own connections and determine the stories they tell. I attempted to make subtle suggestions toward many possibilities: the installation walls had basement fixtures and grey paint, there were charts, scribbled notes, and diagrams fixed to the walls- all with the monitor and scrolling charts, I felt it

suggested a place of inventor's phobia. I think the exhibit could have gone further into many territories and would still be successful and engaging, but the matter of lacking a strong basis of narrative within the objects is really the primary issue that I will continue to focus on.

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### **In context of my work**

Since beginning the Digital Art and New Media program, I have been clear that my goal was to incorporate technology in my work in such a way that would bring my screen based work into an interactive framework. I believe that goal has been met successfully. My intention with this project was to use programming to develop an interactive form of storytelling, as well as incorporate kinetic sculpture in an installation setting. Some of these points were met, and some need improvement. In terms of the storytelling aspect, I would like to improve the elements that link objects to their videos. Some observers assumed that the videos were randomly applied to the objects, whereas I curated them together. In some ways it may be difficult to escape arbitrary associations of imagery to meaning since I am not building the imagery from scratch based on that object. I use found footage for its own inherent quality of shared experience, and so part of the intrigue is found in the ambiguous nature of that media. Making the narrative legible, yet keeping associations loose enough for one to draw conclusions on their own, is more difficult than I expected.

My past work is mostly traditional forms of animation, demonstrating my preference for physical material and its performance aspect. The *Auratic Interpreter* merges the physical and digital and through the piece, encourages a discussion of that dichotomy. This project also continues thematically the topics my past projects explored. I've creatively explored topics including excessive consumerism, the resistance of hoarding, and using surrealist techniques of automatic writing as a form of divination and mysticism. I've also worked with found footage to play with collage as storytelling. My insistence that possessions can speak is not only that they retain an imprint of past owners, but that they speak about the circumstances of our time. Objects are political; they have origin stories in labor and economic values, cultural exchange, and are constantly reincarnated. If allowed to speak, they tell us about ourselves.

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