

Shapeshift



Rietveld Fine Arts, 2024

Bein van Vilsteren



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Introduction

My thesis, "Shapeshift", begins by considering the earthly and literal reasoning and argumentation evident in the life and work of some specific artists. I include their stance towards their own work and behavior, as they exemplify the most salient forms human behaviour can take. Subsequently, identity, human subjectivity and their consequences - most prominently for the notion of authorship - are posited as multidimensional, until processed through the one-dimensional tunnel that is communication in the general sense. For this form of communication only has space for one word at a time, were it to be for example human language.

The thesis invites the reader to consider the very act of creation and its consequences as solitary but not isolated, rather stemming from a wider range of potentialities. It poses the question: should the eventual result, the work, be seen as the conclusive statement of a decision made? Or would this interpretation push or suffocate any other plausible outcomes into the consequentially made surrounding vacuum that is falsehood?

If we are able to not see the eventual work as conclusive, then a whole new illuminated space will appear. The emptiness around the defined becoming equally tangible and useful as what would be 'truly' observable. The boundary between 'truth' and 'untruth' can be crossed when authenticity is awarded by the creator's experience and not just the audience's eye. This opens another field of play, one reciprocal from artwork to the creator and back.

Mentioning within the real realm of irrelevance, while maintaining the idea(s) what or who one might be, is central to this thesis.

Violence

On Burroughs and Vollmer

To attempt to research violence, I did not have to look far. William S. Burroughs, whose work is close inspiration, quickly came to mind. This time, not his prose and poetry, but rather his visual work. I begin with a description on how I experience this work. What gave me the impetus was this question: 'how so am I interested in blown pieces and dangerous kept best?'

I had seen an interview of Burroughs conducted by Kathy Acker online. My bad habit had made me think he was fooling me, see my name Bein-the-art-student. That both Burroughs and Acker were in for showcasing his modus operandi this time. Adding to the worldly discourse of art, shooting a can of paint, creating new accents to a work by chance, menacing the canvas in the back. However, he also shot his wife.

William S. Burroughs (1914 - 1997) is primarily known as a writer and commonly associated with the Beat Generation. The Beat Generation is a literary subculture movement that emerged in 1950's - 1960's post-World War II America. Others among them included Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. They are known for their rejection of economic materialism, experimentation with psychedelic drugs and particular interest in sexual liberation and exploration. The nature of their dedication to presenting the human condition - with all its nasty bits attached - was almost spiritual.

Joan Vollmer (1923 - 1951) is acknowledged as a primary influence on the Beat Generation. She was born in Ossining, New York, and studied journalism at Columbia University. She would later become Burroughs' wife. Vollmer met Edie Parker in a bar and moved between a series of flats in New York's Upper West Side. During the 1940's they hosted the drunks, the writers, the sex workers, the poets, the all night conversations which would lead to the Beats.

Brenda Knight wrote in *The Women of the Beat Generation*: "Brilliant and well versed in philosophy and literature, Joan was the whetstone against which the main Beat writers - Allan, Jack, and Bill - sharpened their intellect. Widely considered one of the most perceptive people in the group, her strong mind and independent nature helped bulldoze the Beats toward a new sensibility."¹

The William Tell's feat is a legendary marksmanship game in which a man shoots an apple off his child's head. In 1951 on the 6th of September, eighth or ten drinks into the night with a Burroughs unable to recall the event. A misfire pointed towards her after having dropped the gun, a complete unawareness of any ammunition being loaded as it was three months ago since last usage. Stories shift. William S. Burroughs had shot Joan Vollmer in the head. She died at 28. Burroughs was no poser of some kind; he really did like to shoot.

¹ Brenda Knight in *Women Of The Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*, 1996

Set up in a back garden or country yard, a type of canvas is laid against some fence, a carefully constructed and unimportant pedestal with a can of paint on top, enough distance between object-to-be-shot and shooter, and apparently sufficient acknowledgements of safety. Lesser known are Burroughs visual works, his shotgun paintings. But I'm glad these paintings exist. My good friend Adriane Bastiaens once made a beautiful metaphor but I fear here it might will not have quite the impact. So I'll say it more shrewdly: It might be better to have 'this corpse' in your front garden instead of in the back garden, concealed.

The following comes from a stranger to oneself. A plausible reason for my fondness of Burroughs' work would be a multitude of voices within me, impossible to ignore as such-a multitude. But which part of me is really attracted to these paintings? Is it through some kind of shock that a nobler voice speaks up, bringing his work to my attention? Or could it be bad voice, sharing some nasty desire with Burroughs? At least one thing I can observe without committing to either of these theories: his skill in shooting. Such efficiency as displayed requires either talent or continuous practice. The idea of either appeals to me; at least craftsmanship is at play.

Burroughs views these paintings as nothing new compared to his prior work. He had dealt with unpredictable 'montages' before in his literary work, such as in his novel Naked Lunch. Naked Lunch is a collection of loosely connected vignettes, intended to be read in whichever order the reader chooses.

I noticed a certain indifference in Burroughs as he discussed his work with Acker in the exhibition space they were in. They discussed chance, accident, a can of paint blasted discussed all while disfigured canvasses hung on the wall. Someone dead and paintings made.

Burroughs answers Acker's question:

"For you, is there a difference between visual and verbal thinking?"

With:

"Well, I don't think they are inseparable, it's like a film script ... you have actions, and you have words. A writer is seeing a film, at least I do. When I write, and I try to get the film across to the reader. To him - to him or her."²



² Fennella Greenfield, dir. *William Burroughs with Kathy Acker*, 1988

The indifference I perceive in Burroughs as he responds to Acker seems synonymous to his instructions on how to read "Naked Lunch". The invitation to read the book in any chronology preferred may cause me to forget that there is no actual interruption in thought about several facets of Burroughs. A book Naked Lunch picked up by whoever, done in any bookshop wherever, has been now its last bus stop before real neurological intake. An inevitable shotgun blast like the painting, is only inevitable when such separation of bookshop location its tactility has been brought as versus from neurological interior and its textural immediacy, namely that of Burroughs not-aiming directly at you, so and Vollmer too. An exclusion of a violent nature or danger being merely example, in this sense seems impossible to want for Burroughs.

(Right)
William S.
Burroughs,
Wood Spirits,
1987





On Paul Thek

I will now turn my attention to two other artists who were also unable to refrain from the violent. Yet, these artists seemed to experience it as rather darker and harder to see. The first is Paul Thek (1933 - 1988), an American painter, sculptor, and installation artist. His work touches, for example, upon existential notions of time passing, living consistencies, and the danger posed by advancing in technology. Among his diverse creations were enigmatic "meat pieces" and dismembered limbs, cast from his own body and enclosed in Plexiglas encasements. He employed a technique involving wire frameworks overlaid with beeswax, further accentuated by the addition of nylon wires mimicking human hair. His sculptures for example, as seen above, have a dark but ethereal quality. Layers of vibrant paint and resin lent a luminous quality to the wax forms, imbuing them with a haunting allure. Through this macabre yet captivating aesthetic, Thek not only challenged the prevailing norms of minimalism but also invoked the solemnity of museum displays, prompting contemplation on existence as being of fragile nature.

(Left)
Paul Thek,
*Meat Piece
With Warhol
Brillo Box*,
1965

I wish to share an excerpt of an interview between artist Paul Thek and curator, artist and art historian Harald Szeemann, focusing on Thek's use of symbols and myths in his work:

In his book about UFOs, Jung mentions the names of a few artists, and the interpretation of the entire phenomenon that he offers is that the unconscious, of course, is again seeking "entity symbols." In your environments, I get the same impression. As soon as you create entity symbols, you are free of fears and worries again, and when you only paint chaos, you are merely pushing fear aside.³

³ Harald Szeemann in Interview with Paul Thek, Paul Thek: Artist's Artist, 2008

Harald Szeemann compares Thek's work to Jung's notion of "entity symbols". Jung defines symbols as images that for the most part transcend consciousness. They are images carrying deep meaning tied to human psyche and collective unconscious, which hold significance across cultures and time periods.

Both Thek and Burroughs seem to grapple with the theme of the eternal in their work. Burroughs encourages an infinite possibility of new impacts, while Thek utilizes symbols that are, in some sense, timeless. Both artists challenge permanence and immutability through themes of violence and danger. But there is one use of a word in this interview between Paul Thek and Harald Szeemann, which I believe very much separates Paul Thek and Burroughs in perspective to violence: fear.

I interpret Szeemann's observation of Thek's use of symbols, in contrast to "only" painting chaos, as a coping mechanism. In the face of death Thek uses well recognizable images to translate and communicate his fear. Coping, suggesting a pain and a preferred relief, not quite as indifferent or detached as Burroughs's take on such.

I would hypothetically have to replace the word 'frightful' or 'fear' with 'yet another neurological and indifferent flare' from Burroughs to reader.

On Mike Kelley

Another Artist who delves into themes of violence, pain, and a sense of indifferent detachment is Mike Kelley. Or perhaps, it may be more accurate to say that he grapples with these indirectly, due to an inability to confront them, having me write down 'shadowed by', as I will explain further.

Mike Kelley (1954 - 2012) was a conceptual artist. He is seen as "one of the most influential American artists of the past quarter of the century and a pungent commentator on American class, popular culture and youthful rebellion" as art-critic Holland Cotter puts it in *The New York Times*⁴. His work ranges from stuffed-animal sculptures, performances, installations featuring scale models of educational complexes, paintings, drawings, and more. "His work questions the legitimacy of "normative" values and systems of authority, and attacks the sanctity of cultural attitudes toward family, religion, sexuality, art history, and education."⁵

In an interview with Art21, Mike Kelley discusses the social function of art in the context of his performances and installation piece, *Day is Done*. In the video interview, one can sense a hint of hurt in Kelley's demeanor, behind the humor with which he discusses his work.

4 Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*, 2012

5 Art21 on Mike Kelley, website accessed February 2024

Art21: "Do you find this project humorous?"

Kelley: "I think that's the joyfulness of it. But then, it's a black humor; it's a mean humor, so it's a critical joy. You know, it's negative joy. (LAUGHS) But that's art, I think - for me, at least. That's what separates it from the folk art that I'm going to. I think the social function of art is that kind of negative aesthetic. Otherwise, there's no social function for it. You don't need art, then. Television can do the same thing."⁶

Kelley believes that art plays a crucial role in presenting alternatives to societal norms or expectations. In this content I would like to draw on Michel Foucault's theory of hegemony. The hegemonic discourse refers to the dominant ideology or set of beliefs that are widely accepted within a society, often reinforcing existing power structures.

6 Mike Kelly interview conducted by Art21, website accessed February 2024



Mike Kelley,
*Fruit of Thy
Loins*, 1990

An example could be his works showcasing a kind of 'dark side of the toy', in contrast to the normative plush toy made for joy. Kelley often works with cuddly toys, tearing them apart and reconstructing. It is a totally harmless action. However, because he positions himself outside the dominant ideology, his works are often perceived as violent. Body part, albeit plush, have been severed and reattached. This all the while transforms children's toys into psychological and intellectually layered commentaries on American pedagogy. A mutton dressed up as a lamb. Or Mike Kelley, whistleblower, in Mickey Mouse costume.

Some of his work also portrays sexual acts, or the image or resemblance thereof. This renders them 'non-neutral', not because of their sexual nature, but rather due to the fact that any portrayal would suffice. Portrayal itself sifts the objectivity of the work. Consider a Barbie doll, fresh from the factory, carefully packaged and presented. Sitting on a shop shelf, children pester their parents to purchase it. Regardless of how the packaging might be done or be which conceivable rationale, the Barbie's fate is to be taken out of its "factory-setting", its "natural habitat", the "womb"--a non-living material--becoming a real toy, a projection of a friend, a real pseudo-person. Once removed, the child's true imagination takes over. Held sloppily in the hand, it becomes subject to another layer of imaginative packaging: a role-play, an imaginary friend, a matter of life and death--play. Thus, an uncanny transformation of the child's once-neutral toy occurs, never to return to its original state, only to be remembered.

Another violence has happened, yet perhaps not seen through a gun's scope like Burroughs did, but rather looking straight into the barrel, bravely; Mike Kelley is "playing once more".



Mike Kelley, *Estral
Star #3*, 1989

I enrolled in an art academy in a somewhat haphazard manner. My father insisted I would go into an art academy dear to him. Oblivious to much, art included, I entered the Gerrit Rietveld Academie with little idea of what to expect. This allowed me to approach art making and exhibiting from a different perspective, once I embraced the family-made membrane surrounding me as authentic. This has shaped perhaps a more domestic perspective for me to utilize.

I now realise, it is irrelevant for the violence depicted by Kelley or Burroughs to be embraced through a high standard of exhibition. Both Burroughs and Kelley are renowned artists, and their experiences with violence have been conveyed to us through their work. Their creations have been praised, and there is still a strong desire to see or read their work, making it significant.

Such is the spotlight that the works receive. In this next image, one can see how the lights literally illuminate Kelley's works, revealing the essential and recognizable violence to the visitors. The lamp, in my view, serves as the protagonist object for symbolizing the entire discussion on violence itself. How can I, as an art student, speak about violence as if it's something alien to me, when I commit to engaging with such a wonderful and professional art academy every morning? This academy is inherently violent itself, as evidenced by the presence of similar lamps.

(Right) Photo taken at Mike Kelley, exhibition Bourse de Commerce, Paris, 2024



Any student of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, whether they acknowledge it or not, is inevitably connected by a vital umbilical cord, providing the necessary nourishment, nurture and light in order to student-survive. Despite the attempts to conceal this umbilical cord with 'woke' and anti-institutional clothing, it can never be severed would one wish to study here. The same applies to our actual bellybuttons and the supposed moral fabric of humanity.

In my view, and this might be shocking to you, I think someone with "murderous desires" should be welcome to study art as well. However, the moment such desires begin to take shape, albeit often as microaggressions, some sort of juridical oversight should come into effect. Here our feelings of compassion or regret come into play. As René Girard suggests in *All Desire is the Desire for Being*:

La Chute goes higher and deeper. Clamence is very busy proving that he is 'good' and that other people are 'bad', but his systems of classification keeps breaking down. The real question is no longer 'who is innocent, who is guilty?' but 'why do we, all of us, have to keep judging and being judges? It is a more interesting question, the very question of Dostoevsky. In *La Chute*, Camus lifts trial literature back to the great predecessor.

It may be useful to consider no distinction between alive and dead, but rather to view both the victim and the murderer as components of a continuous cycle of deterioration or decay. Relatively speaking, Burroughs's shotgun paintings might be the most peaceful aspect of the overall constellation, that would be the exhibition space teeming with visitors.

Whether expressed through the works of Burroughs, Kathy Acker, Paul Thek, Harald Szeeman, Mike Kelley, or others, violence seems to be easily and immediately recognizable to anyone viewing such works; it might seem very much a part of us already. A recognition of violence might be merely be our reflection mistakenly seen as 'the other' or as something 'affecting us'. Yet, it appears that any attempt to understand such violence necessitates an inevitable self-observation by every viewer, including myself, without any redirection of the gaze required. It rather seems to be somewhere between the film of the eye to more deeper layers within. The bad was already apparent. The diversity lies in the news and its delivery.

On Proximity

Like any room or building, my studio at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie obviously has its defined location and boundaries. I feel quite certain, secure and protected within the space it occupies. However, understanding the boundaries of all studios in location 013 of the academy is more challenging for me. It is the air between ideas in the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, permeating the building and its occupants, where we all navigate. Location and proximity, I believe, are also significant when discussing violence, or 'manners' and human nature if you will.

If I were to adopt a psychologist's or psychoanalyst's perspective, assuming they knew me better than I know myself, it would be remarkable but ultimately inconsequential miracle that I continue to function. An art academy as a whole would be an even grander miracle, offering roughly eighteen hundred times more possibilities of light and darkness. We exist within the proximity of all our deepest, highest, darkest, and lightest thoughts, wishes, and fears, even if we believe we have concealed them deeply within our minds and souls.

If read, the possibility of the existence of violence or kindness and each its initiating forces discussed in person or through written text or theory such like this, might be mistakenly considered 'over there'; 'in theory'.

Slavoj Žižek on the Kinder Surprise Egg:

We are not talking about objective, factual properties of a commodity. We are talking only here about illusive surplus. Kinder Surprise Egg. A quite astonishing commodity. The surprise of the Kinder Surprise Egg is that this excessive object, the cause of your desire, is here materialized in the guise of an object, a plastic toy which fills in the inner void of the chocolate egg. The whole delicate balance is between these two dimensions. What you bought, the chocolate egg, and the surplus made in some Chinese gulag or whatever, the surplus you get for free. I don't think that the chocolate frame is here just to send you on a deeper voyage towards the inner treasure, what Plato calls the agalma, which makes you a wealthy person, which makes the commodity the desirable commodity. I think it's the other way around. We should aim at the higher goal, the goal in the middle of an object, precisely to be able to enjoy the surface. This is what is the anti-metaphysical lesson, which is difficult to accept.⁷

I quote Žižek here because I would like to speak about Superficiality and Authorship. I know he is speaking about commodities, consuming and where real enjoyment might take place, but I would like to completely misunderstand his intention and the paragraph's meaning.

⁷ Sophie Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, 2012

I appropriate his message by turning his point into a metaphor for speaking about something equally plastic as career-choosing and something equally chocolatey - self-consciousness.

In the Netherlands' primary and secondary school system, students are asked to see themselves as belonging to one of three hierarchically different levels of intelligence. If students believe in this categorization, they may then base their career choices on it. This process of career-choosing, can be likened to what Žižek describes as "Surplus Enjoyment", using a Kinder Surprise Egg as a metaphor.

Let me explain Žižek's concept of the Kinder Surprise Egg and relate it to the idea of an 'aspiring artist.' The key word here is its middle name, 'Surprise'. My understanding of Žižek's viewpoint on the commodity, the Kinder Surprise Egg, is that it offers only a superficial enjoyment at first glance. However upon opening it, there's a somewhat absurd truth revealed: the toy inside. Especially for those with a sweet tooth, this revelation might taste bitter of one expected the egg to be filled entirely with chocolate. Even though discovering this void could be seen as an observation of an ontological truth (anti-metaphysical), the desire to grasp the inner absurdity, akin to biting into the chocolate, might be the sought-after commodity.

Similarly, aspiring to be an artist can be likened to biting into the chocolate shell, only to find a lack of tangible evidence beyond an intangible memory of creating art. The Surprise remains a surprise, despite our belief that we know ourselves well after all, we are well rehearsed introducing ourselves with our name and profession.

On Sturtevant

Elaine Frances Horan (1924 - 2014) was a conceptual artist known professionally as Elaine Sturtevant. One of her most recognizable methods was her appropriations of fellow artists' works, earning her the title 'mother of appropriation art'.



Elaine Frances Horan during the opening of the 54th Venice Biennale in Venice, Italy, 04 June 2011

Sturtevant's work comments on the modernist development by reversing established hierarchies. She is regarded as one of the most important figures in the 21st-century art world. Through her work, Sturtevant aims to provoke powerful thought in viewers, exploring underlying structures and the power of art.

I believe Elaine Sturtevant brilliantly raises such questions and statements by imitating the works and methods of others. Ultimately, her work touches on self-awareness and leaves the presumed author cold and alone, like a gust of wind in the studio. Sturtevant's creation of the Warhol Dyptich raises questions about self-identity, both for herself and for Warhol. Sturtevant's Warhol prompts viewers to think Warhol-thoughts. An intriguing ambiguous space is created between the two artists, making this seemingly ineffable space of identity suddenly very tangible in thought.

Sturtevant in conversation with Peter Eeley during an interview conducted in Walker Art Center, 2009



During April 24th and September 27th, 2009, the exhibition "The Quick and the Dead" was on display at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. To kick off the exhibition, Sturtevant was asked for an interview, conducted by Peter Eeley.

In this interview, it is apparent that Sturtevant and the Walker Art Center had prepared a specifically informative and well-prepared interview.

Peter Eeley: "The brutal truth of her work she has said, is that it is not a copy. The push and the shove of the work is the leap of image to concept. And today she will discuss the philosophical base of this radical work and as she described to me, the imposition of our cybernetic world and the zip zap of our digital world and its dangerous power."

Sturtevant: "Very good! ... Very nice, Peter. Thank you."

It is essential to observe how Peter Eeley grants Sturtevant the opportunity to "discuss the philosophical base of the radical work" with the audience, with Sturtevant expressing gratitude and thanking Peter in return. In this interview, Sturtevant, demonstrating brilliance and deep resonance with her practice, offers the audience further elaboration and informative entry points and questions to potentially understand the impact of the work. However, this is accomplished in a specific and delicate matter: With Peter Eeley's agreement, Sturtevant and he 'reenact' a past interview conducted in the year 2000, instead of conducting a new one live, see the screenshot left.

A reproduction has taken place with "displaced difference", in Elaine's words. Of course it is impossible to confirm the occurrence of the past interview from this image. But here lies the essence of her work. It demonstrates the automatic and imminent survival of a thought after the interchangeable and indifferent input of one. Any thoughts the audience has after perceiving and digesting the real interview from 2000 are legitimate, just as legitimate as if the interview were conducted live, underscoring the strength of such thought time-traveling. (Sur)Plus: the interview indeed served contextually as a solid "base" for an introduction to Sturtevant's work, as she herself noted.





To ensure a successful recreation of Warhol's Monroe pieces, Elaine Sturtevant simply asked Warhol for his technique. When queried about his methods, Warhol simply responded, "Ask Elaine."⁸

Once a work has been fully appropriated, who should one approach with questions regarding psychology and ontology? Thek? Sturtevant? Warhol again? Or perhaps an ever-shifting array of individuals? On the surface, activities like silk-screening Warhol's work (see image) may appear superficial, requiring no specific hands or ownership. After all, the machines do the trick.

Machine is Buddhist. A seamless execution, leading to the desired outcome, parallels the tranquility of enlightened thought. Any disruption or hiccup in the process of the machine mirrors the disturbance of a troubling thought or emotion. Warhol and Sturtevant are like two Western monks, executing the intended and the preferred, creating both the same, the one and wise work of art. Any rather more personal method, such as D.I.Y. if you like, would truly introduce residues of personalities of creators.

8 Sturtevant
quoted by
Bill Arning,
"Sturtevant,"
Journal of
Contemporary
Art II, no.
2, 1989, p.44

(Left)
Sturtevant,
Warhol Diptych,
1973, Detail

Shapeshift shapeshift shapeshift

If one values truth more but desires to discard the notion of a fixed self or "I", they might con-temple dismantling the general assumptions propagated by Western thought, including those prevalent in art creation.

In Roland Barthes' The Death of the Author:

*Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing. No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, the disconnection occurs, the voices lose its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.*⁹

In "The Death of the Author," Barthes reflects on specific approaches to interpreting art and literature. Albeit art or writing, Barthes concludes that commonly done, a work is interpreted through its relationship to its author all too much. By doing so, the work or text becomes limited, perceived merely as the creation of author X or Y. Such reductionism narrows down the multidimensional meaning

of the text, attributing it not only to the author's intention but also their persona. Only an abandonment of this interpretative approach (hence the title), would realize the full potential of the reader's engagement. Such engagement is endless, if one would consider a piece of work never to be truly original but rather compiled from, which is something not an Author would do, but rather a Scriptor. Barthes ends his essay eloquently with "... the birth of the Reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

I interpret his essay as leaning towards the non-Author and the spectator. The artist or author fades into the background of his text, leaving behind unobtrusive advice that is successfully transmitted to the spectator once the notion of Authorship is truly forgotten. This implies that a wealth of meaning becomes accessible once again: the art instead of artist seduces; a holy Christian church being in sudden swift for the golden cockerel is corrected by the wind.

The only true reason I can conceive of someone truly being an "I" is their possession of a single pair of eyes. I acknowledge that this perspective leaves the realm of art-making in its materiality, thus leaving the Reader once again isolated. However, I find a shapeshift, gliding smoothly across the chocolate surface, more intriguing than perilous not to compare with Barthes' essay. To consider an Author's intention (albeit prestigious), an Author's persona (albeit humble), and psychology and identity as yet another field of play; akin to the wrapper and the Surprise within a Kinder Surprise Egg.

⁹ Roland Barthes
in *Image Music
Text*, The Death
of the Author,
p. 142

In Barthes' theory, the desire to become an Author is portrayed as a commodity, akin to the layers within a Kinder Surprise Egg. The act of acquisition symbolizes the desire to assume the role of an Author, with this commodity depicted as multi-layered, mirroring the complexity of the egg. The intention that assumes the role of the wrapper (which is interchangeable), the satisfaction derived from being an Author substitutes for the chocolate (also interchangeable but never to be found when considering a non-author's role, such as that of an actual artist), and the assurance of Identity replacing the void-filling toy (interchangeable).

To excuse myself from a true stagnation regarding to sense-making, plus granting myself access to artistic continuation, I plan to reevaluate Barthes' theory by incorporating Blanchot's concept of "the two kinds of deaths." According to Blanchot, this Nietzschean idea advocates for embracing a being contradictory as is, allowed from a "higher synthesis". I adopt this approach as a means to address preparatory needs, acknowledging that labelling the transformation of the wrapper as a falsehood may be essential, were it necessary to call such a shapeshift of a wrapper, a lie, for such a revelation within the Kinder Surprise Egg would embody truth.

I would prefer to initially entertain the idea of origin, only to ultimately dismiss it as merely a possibility, since assuming it as the definitive truth would be misleading. Where can I discover the absolute and ever-determining evidence of my preferences or aversions? Nowhere, and not truly at any point. It is only through the perspective of a retrospective observer, whether Author or Reader, that a sense of authenticity is supposedly found. While engaged in the act of creation, and in agreement with Barthes, I believe that no sense of identity is ever present, no true belonging exists; it is merely fictionalized and asserted as such once a body of work is, say, announced lonely.

To further delve into the concept of self and authorship, I would like to introduce Foucault's notion, which resonates with that of Barthes. In his essay "What is an Author?" Foucault suggests that within the interaction between a reader and a multidimensional work, the author's individual characteristics are submerged "in an anonymity of a murmur". "Who truly spoke? Is it not perhaps he, but someone else? ... What difference does it make who is speaking?"¹⁰

¹⁰ Michel Foucault in *Aesthetic. Method, and epistemology, What is an Author,* p. 222

I failed tremendously at my first attempt to answer such questions. However, it sparked intriguing personal insights for me. In my project, "Harm Lez Seth Keller," I conceptualized a fictional exhibition curated by a fictitious deceased artist. I failed because after reviewing what I had made, pretending to have my hands be dead hands, I was still able to relate to it; I liked it. My preferences were called upon, my taste called into question, my serotonin neurotransmitters activated. I was not dead, and the real possibility for Harm Lez Seth Keller's existence faded on the spot. If it truly were the product of a deceased artist, I should not have been able to discern it initially. If it were truly dead art, I would likely have felt such profound disinterest that I would have naturally moved on to the next best thing happening that day; anything.

Up until now, I have discussed solely on writing from the perspective of an Author, rather than from that of a scriptor—a generous act for the reader where unnoticed deaths have not truly occurred. Only when news of the death reaches others can "sorrow" arise, if I stick to this metaphor. For me to gladly step out of it; a critic who approaches a work without any preconceived notions of the author gains access to a greater freedom of interpretation, or rather, loses a self-inflicting restriction from this greater freedom of interpretation. Roland Barthes explains this as the author losing all claims of truth by identifying with language:

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it. Suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, exhaust it.¹¹

This loss of claims to truth allows for a "distortion" between artist and work, even during creation, granting freedom. Lies and truths, both postmortem, are untraceable and unprovable, void of cold-blood authenticity. Staying within the realm of Authorship now involves a new appropriation from artist to art to viewer and back—an act of willing identification from this multidimensional and infinite source: a belief in one self.

¹¹ Roland Barthes in *Image Music Text*, *The Death of the Author*, p. 145

12 Roland
Barthes in
*Image Music
Text*, The
Death of the
Author, p.
143

Considering the Death of the Author as a self-inflicting and violent death prompts a second look at the characteristics of this in Barthes's words, which I fully agree with, as the "epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology"¹². The artist, tied inherently to their creations, has a linguistic umbilical cord impossible to ignore, but only if approached with sorrow. I therefore interpret Barthes's work, "The Death of the Author," as also commenting on Ego.

Taking Barthes's words literally but contemplating the death of the "I" seriously, does not advocate for a complete annihilation. Rather a liberation sharp enough to escape certainty—a form of endurance. Smiling, while dancing on the volcano. For why should person A's thoughts not be as real or significant as those of imaginative or substitutive person B? How firm is your ground? Why does it matter?

The question arises: why must the Death of the Author be a death? Why should it indicate violence biting through the superficial shell; a new fear initiating survival of "I" or identity? To understand this, it is worth delving into the origin of violence in human nature, introducing René Girard's theory of "mimetic desire".¹³

13 René Girard
*in Violence and
the Sacred, From
Mimetic Desire
to the Monstrous
Double*

René Girard delves into human nature and its origins, exploring the root causes of violence. According to Girard, understanding violence requires examining our shared ability to observe and adopt another person's desires. When we adopt the same goals as others, seeing them as role models, one would imitate not only their actions and ways, but also their very fixation on the desired object. The kind of 'mimetic desire' thus creates rivalry, as the singular and shared desire of both would suffice for pursuing the goal, only to be obstructed by the very own acclaimed role model.

Applying Girard's theory of 'mimetic desire' to the ghost of the Death of the Author, we can view the psyche as yet another field of play, where there is no singular "I". In this framework, where do Girard's ideas like the Model or the Disciple fit in? Would a reassuring statement of intent truthful from the original artist, not function identically as the obstruction by the Model? The moment of the limiting of infinite interpretation by the Reader would become synonym to a violent clash by the Model and Disciple. And is the devil on one shoulder, not suggesting approval of Burroughs's paintings, equally mimetic as the angel on the shoulder, suggesting approval? Are they expected to do so, or would there indeed be a rather disappointing and distasteful bitter toy inside to be anticipated upon, when attempting to understand either one of the two.

Girard's insights prompt us to consider the complexity of our desires and influences. The rivalry within oneself suggests a constant negotiation between competing influences, shaping our perceptions and actions. I consider these influences, perceptions and actions, as Girard mentions, as horizontal and not as in a vertical axis, having such move either 'downwards' inside a void or perhaps 'upwards' into a sky.

In exploring the concept of the ghost while keeping in mind Sturtevant's appropriation pieces, I want to focus on the shape of the Egg—a round, oval, and smooth object that appears consistent from any angle. Unlike a rough surface, the Egg's outer covering is a crucial identifier and the initial gateway to experiencing the product or object fully. Consider Sturtevant's Warhol Diptych as a prime example within the art context: it presents the initial encounter with the supposed 'trick of Warhol-identification.'

The Egg, easily discarded from its shell to reveal its temporality and effortlessly interchangeable design, remains a defining element of what lies within. This wrapper symbolizes human identification, whether through names or the exploration of anti-metaphysical reality: getting acquainted with.

The metaphysical moment of contact with a work of art, and the subsequent approval from the supposed originator—the artist or 'Author' in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author"—exists within the tangible realm as a singular point in time or step taken. This moment mirrors the intended purpose of art: expression. Without this moment, there would either be no work of art—a contemplative artist—or no artist—a freeform work of art. Each interaction is singular due to its metaphysical essence, allowing for only one expression per moment and one work per observation. Here I say nothing new.

In Slavoj Žižek's metaphor of the Kinder Surprise Egg, I suggest that each layer represents a distinct facet of total expression—a different step in the creative process; another wrapper, another toy. While Žižek focuses on unnoticed but effective ideology, I propose a plurality of interchangeable intents and outcomes when creating. The recognition of the defined artwork, the expression of the artist made public, reveals the fragility of a singular point being truly singular.

Creation, and therefore also language used in discussing art, occurs step by step, making each singular step enigmatic in its plurality. This step is enigmatic because conscious comprehension is also stepwise, insufficient for grasping plurality at once. Since each step is to be comprehended stepwise, a fold of multitude within any step remains both as much hidden as promised. Singularity promises multitude for the realm of the tangible is stepwise. The multitude within each singularity remains in fact open for consideration and metaphysical truth.

Considering the plurality within each singularity, the adjacent step is always ready to stand in for the metaphysical moment of contact, albeit in the intangible realm: the unexpressed. Every 'clear' thing becomes enigmatic by itself, turning the term 'enigma' into something useful only for describing 'extra-enigmatic' things. Having a completely different intent of expression, represented by another step or wrapper outside the chocolate egg, is a change in direction within: albeit toy or void—a Surprise. The metaphysical moment of contact occurring stepwise in time obscures the complete view, as each interaction alters either the insides or the outsides.

There are no inherent doubts of condor corresponding to inner senses, as all wrappers would fit equally on this oval object and could glide smoothly over its surface. In the act of creation, the similarity in each touching-point between artist and his or her work, is bound to be excluded and forgotten in the exact moment of correlated thought or speech. Breaking the egg, a violent bite through, eliminates every other possibility of condor, again emphasizing that knowledge is information demanded by the sharp tooth.

My aim is not to judge or engage in a reality high. I am not here to distinguish between the genuine artist and the phony, nor do I concern myself with deserved misery or ecstasy. Life or fiction do not pique my interests. Instead, I question how certain you are that you would truly like the color red, as you would claim or believe. I seek to challenge established certainties and uncertainties in identity, viewing both as fragmented and therefore identical, much like the symmetry found in shredded pieces on the same floor or the endless circling of the smooth chocolate surface of a Kinder Surprise Egg.

An Author's conclusion after a dry quest for Identity must be merely singular, for that is what identity and a sense of self suggest. However, this conclusion is selected from an infinite array of personas, if I were to attempt such characterization. When not an aspiring artist, but an artist, this question of toy and chocolate has not really entered first of all. This makes me to be insouciant of the health of the artist.

Once a particular idea of self is chosen, often transparent and devoid of pain compared to the space an inner toy fills, all other options are neglected. This form of identity is apparent in its retroactive function involved with decision making. Art becomes an extension of the self in a multidimensional sense.

To now return to Žižek's Kinder Surprise Egg, a metaphor for Lacanian "Surplus Enjoyment". I would indeed tie it to an inner ideology, albeit unnoticed, but this I claim to be as just as interchangeable as the Surprise in the Egg. You are what you do, born where you are, whereas 'biting through chocolate' symbolizes the distinction between a lowercase author and Barthes's uppercase Author. The initial calculation of identity is like the agreement to meet when looking in the mirror, defining one's inner toy through outer wrapper or vice versa.



If a work of art is so conceptual that its physical aspects (material, technique, placement, etc.) become merely an appendix of theory, does it not run the risk of being misunderstood by the "righteous fool"? This misunderstanding could lead to the work being "destroyed", as it could easily be appropriated into a completely different theoretical framework by mistakenly or intentionally linking it to another concept, akin to an alien visit and abduction scenario.



Bruce Nauman,
*Pay
Attention,*
1973



With the assumption of my trip to Paris with my sister Saar Kompagnova being primarily for Mike Kelley's works at the Bourse de Commerce exhibition titled American Mythologies, had I left the city back again with the most satisfaction thanks to _____'s work (Lee Lozano's name that is), were I to speak solely about exhibitions and that most fit for the purpose of this thesis.

Starting with her earliest works, I expected dry depictions of sexuality and depersonalization. An image above shows _____'s drawings with visitors. What sounds do faucets make, as if being repaired? This question would come to mind as a curious association stemming from these early works.

The exhibition progressed linearly, reflecting _____'s artistic journey chronologically. The curvature of the exhibition space, being part of the circular architecture of the Bourse de Commerce, added an interesting layer to the experience. The exhibition culminated in a recap of her artistic life, including her decision to withdraw from the art world, epitomized by her final piece, "The Dropout."

_____ (1930 - 1999) was a painter, visual artist, and conceptual artist. Her background in philosophy and natural sciences informed her art, which she pursued after studying at the Art Institute of Chicago and moving to New York. _____ is notable for her withdrawal from the art scene, a theme that resonates in her work, perhaps foreshadowed by earlier pieces hinting at an impending conclusion.

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Bein van Vilsteren

BA Thesis
Fine Arts
Gerrit Rietveld
Academie

Amsterdam, 2024

Thesis Supervisor
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Vilsteren

Proofreading
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