

Antagonistic Realisms: in conversation with Steven Cottingham

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Pyrotechne, 2020, inkjet print, 30 x 53 in. (76 x 135 cm). Installation view, *Signal chains*, The Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art, Kelowna, Canada, 2020

Two summers ago in a New York gallery, I saw a work by Vancouver-based artist **Steven Cottingham** that has stayed with me ever since. Hanging plainly on the wall, *Untitled* (2016) comprised a single denim jacket, sourced from a Bangladeshi garment factory where workers complained of mass hallucinations and ghost attacks until management temporarily ceased operations for an on-site exorcism. To some onlookers, the incident was evidence of the spiritual realm intervening to offer overworked labourers a break from exploitative working conditions. The jacket lingered because it falls within a category of artworks that I tend to gravitate towards: nondescript objects which contain ideas and provocations far larger than themselves. Like undoing a paper crane to examine its creases, Cottingham makes sociopolitical complexities visible before he refolds and presents them to the viewer as tight, refined artworks.

Cottingham, whose art and concurrent writing practice is firmly rooted in theory, holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia. His disdain for capitalism is clear, but rather than yielding to its oppressive conditions, Cottingham believes art can offer emancipatory possibilities by subverting the laws of profit. One way to do so, he suggests, is by applying destructive logic to commodities nor-

mally considered useful. For a 2019 exhibition, Cottingham poured bleach and vinegar (a combination which produces a noxious poisonous gas) onto folded sheets of dyed canvas, thus returning parts of the material to a raw, un-dyed state. By reorienting the lens of value, he suggests that destruction can become desirable in its own right. The “damaged” canvases were indeed beautiful: tie-dyed, stretched, and hung on the wall like paintings.

Halfway through this unusual year, Cottingham opened two back-to-back shows. The first, *Worldwide Cobweb*, was an online exhibition presented by Wil Aballe Art Projects in Vancouver. Unlike most now-ubiquitous online shows—which largely comprise photographs of physical objects in actual gallery spaces—*Worldwide Cobweb*’s artworks and venue were created entirely with open-source rendering software; in short, beyond electronic data, none of it existed in the physical realm. Digital works included further explorations of bleach-and-vinegar dyed canvases, blow-torched receipt paper, and folded LED curtains glowing with representations of heat emitted by undercover cop cars. Alongside the exhibition, Cottingham published [a detailed text on the implications of realism in the technological age](#) which reflected his long-standing interests in semiotics and perception.

This past September, Cottingham’s solo show *Signal chains* at Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art in Kelowna similarly included digitally rendered cop cars, this time bursting into flames in videos displayed on screens in the (this time, real) gallery space. An accompanying video essay pointed out that the videos are merely data organized by electrical signals within a computer, which comprises wires made from refined sand, manufactured by labourers and transported by shipping companies—in effect, reminding viewers that everything belongs to a network of influence. This emphasis on causation seems fitting of Cottingham’s multilayered practice: one uncovered detail always implies another in waiting.

“If art is to distinguish itself from mass media, it needs to be framed in such a way that it disobeys normative ways of seeing, looking and reading.”

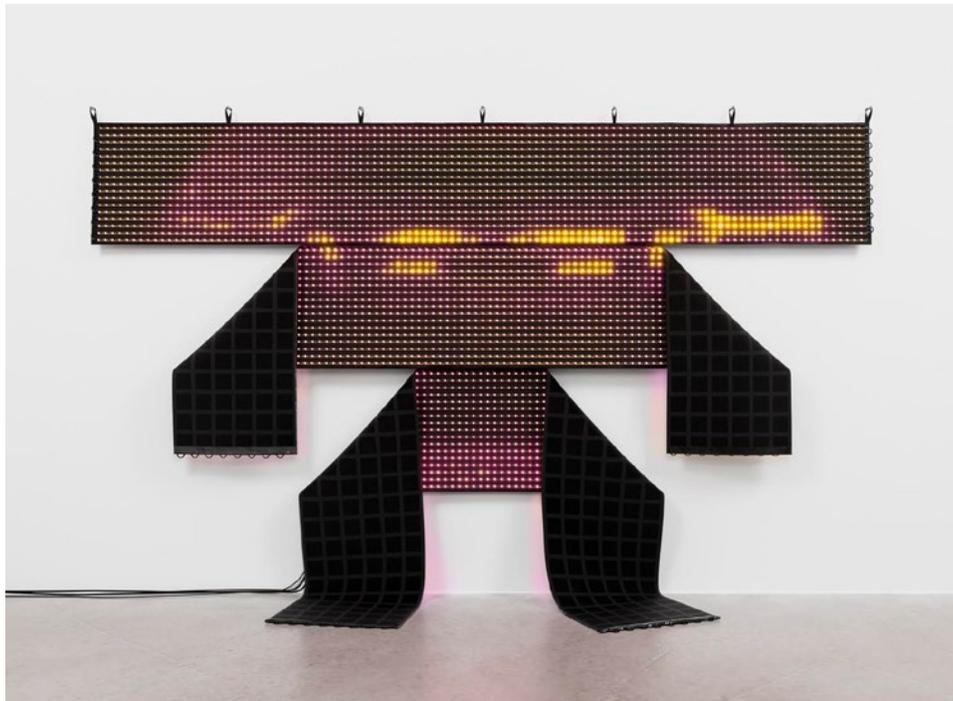
***Worldwide Cobweb* and *Signal chains* shared a few common motifs: police cars and heat. What about those themes interests you?**

Heat is a useful tool for considering sociopolitical circumstances. It illustrates both useful expenditures of energy—like in engines, factories, and weaponry—as well as unproductive byproducts of the former: friction, global warming, and entropy. Metaphorically, heat also represents the policing forces (‘the heat’) that prevent deviation from prescribed values.

I used thermal imagery in both exhibitions to make invisible phenomena visible. In the work *Think-pol thoughtlord* (2020) in *Worldwide Cobweb*, for instance, thermal imagery of “ghost” (or undercover police) cars plays on modified LED curtains. This was a way of reversing the invisibility of and exposing undercover cop cars. But more importantly, I think, it was a way of realizing theatre practitioner and theorist Augusto Boal’s imperative to “kill the cop in your head”. We’re all imbued with a “cop in our heads” through public education, advertisements, institutions and so on. It’s social conditioning. This is reinforced through constant surveillance, meaning that the cop’s presence can be assumed even when it can’t be perceived. Sometimes we identify with the cop; other times we struggle against it.

Boal developed a way of “killing” one’s internalized cop by enabling the audience to claim agency in the play they were watching. In this way, the boundary between audience and actor is subverted and denaturalized—it’s a different kind of “visualization” of invisible phenomena. I explored this technique by folding the LED screens over themselves, further antagonizing the image of ghost cars by making the screen more visible than what it displays.

When we talk about “political art”, we often confuse the aestheticization of politics for the politicization of aesthetics. I see Boal’s method as a way of steering toward the latter to identify the politics that are latent within images and ways of seeing, and expanding our political imagination accordingly.



Ghost car parking lot, 2020, infrared thermograph on LED curtain, media player, electronics, 86 x 96 x 5 in. (218 x 244 x 13 cm). Installation view, *Worldwide Cobweb*, Wil Aballe Art Projects (online), Vancouver, Canada, 2020



Nothing infinite but usury, nothing finite but entropy, 2020, bleach and vinegar on cotton, each 96 x 96 in. (244 x 244 cm). Installation view, *Worldwide Cobweb*, Wil Aballe Art Projects (online), Vancouver, Canada, 2020

Where did the title *Worldwide Cobweb* come from?

The reference to a cobweb was a way to try and express the political ramifications of entropy and waste. Everyone and everything inevitably experiences loss and degradation. This is very much at odds with how capitalist idealism considers people or objects which don't fit the narrow criteria of usefulness and profitability. They are discarded and deemed worthless; they become illegible to the dominant value system. So I wanted to work according to a set of values that allows for the unprofitable to remain legible.

In your essay that accompanied *Worldwide Cobweb*, you asked what freedoms artists have when conceiving a work that might not be fully realized. You've also described photoreal images as propositions which coyly suggest that "this could be real, this could be yours." What does it mean to you to make art objects that are possible, rather than already extant?

In many ways, it feels like the question of "what is possible" has been constrained to "what is feasible", at least when it comes to societal discourse, political action, and even personal ambitions. There is an imperative to "be realistic" when considering the ways in which one might navigate this world. The sum total of possibilities are reduced to a capitalist realism where facts and opinions are conflated, corruption is legalized, and living wages are largely insufficient to pay living expenses. One has to sort through so many idealist fantasies and contradictions to determine what is actually possible. But it is worthwhile to do so, I think, because by accepting our limitations we also delineate the areas in which we can act.

In learning how to make photoreal renderings, I can make propositions that aren't immediately constrained to fantasy. That is, the images *look* real—they're believable because they respect certain laws of light and optical physics. The question then becomes, if not physics, what laws keep them from becoming actual? Market trends, industrial procedures, a lack of resources? Whereas physical laws are inviolable, these other laws may be flexible or imperfectly enforced: new possibilities may yet emerge. It's the distinction between physical laws and societal rules that interests me most.

Is digital rendering a way of avoiding compromises forced by economic pressures? And if so, why, if you can make anything with virtual materials, did you choose “banal” or relatively affordable consumer items like receipt paper, bleach, vinegar and canvas?

That's a good question. Because I'm still relatively new to rendering, my initial products have been more or less in line with my sculptural practice, as opposed to unique expressions of a singular process. I also wanted to see if I could make a believably real art exhibition. So in this sense, yes, it is absolutely a way of making art without typical economic limitations or requirements. The software is open-source and I learned everything by watching YouTube tutorials. The lack of a central or real object has precedents in Conceptual Art and was more recently theorized by post-internet artists. On the other hand, historical realist movements were concerned with depicting that which enables the reality of a given era. French Realist painters, for example, tended to depict workers whose labour ultimately empowered the bourgeoisie. Now, in late capitalist social-distancing society, reality is produced by media technologies.

Nonetheless, consumer items are interesting to me especially as I was recreating them in virtual space instead of purchasing them as physical readymades. By recreating them, I had to really study them, thus upsetting their banal qualities. Something similar happens in exhibiting them, as they become marked as worthy of contemplation and no longer tied to their assumed function. I think these commonplace materials can also operate symbolically—like letters in an alphabet. They might not mean much on their own, but by changing the other materials around them, they form words which form thoughts. For instance, bleach can be used both as a disinfectant or as hair dye, and it may register very differently to someone who works as a cleaner, versus someone who employs cleaners. But in combination with vinegar, it becomes poisonous chlorine gas. The symbolism may be interpreted or disregarded in any number of ways, but I'd at least like for the viewer to entertain a kind of logic outside of their prescribed function.

You've worked with bleach and receipts before, like in *Untitled* (2016), when you collaborated with a linguist to translate shopping receipts into Ancient Sumerian. Do you tend to explore one material's conceptual potential at length? What comes first for you, an artwork's form or the idea?

Ideally, the form and idea are one and the same. Perhaps that's why it's been so important for me to explore representative devices like metaphor, metonymy, and isomorphism to better grasp *how* an

artwork relates to its intended subject. I'm not so interested in literal representations—the question of how media is mediated is more pressing to me. Likewise, I'd say that as fascinating as individual materials can be, my practice tends to be more about the materialistic qualities of symbols. By focusing on the way in which symbolization occurs (i.e. which aspects of a thing are legible and in which contexts), I think the viewer is better equipped to think critically beyond the gallery space. It's also a way of acknowledging the wildly different interpretations that viewers may have—so it's important that the art object prompts one to think about how they interpret it, and less important that they worry about possessing the correct references or allusions.

To answer your question more straightforwardly though, usually the idea comes first. This is especially the case with rendering, when the possible forms or manifestations are basically infinite. Photoreal renderings are looked at in a very specific way, however, typically because a viewer first spends some time trying to figure out what details give it away as a rendering versus a photograph. The question of how images and media are consumed becomes really pressing for me.



Installation view, *Signal chains*, The Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art, Kelowna, Canada, 2020



Thermochromic workflow, 2020, heat-sensitive fabric, led screens, led controllers, media players, flash drives, amplifiers, faux rock speakers, cables, each approximately 44 x 77 in. (112 x 196 cm). Installation view, *Signal chains*, The Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art, Kelowna, Canada, 2020

Your work is deeply rooted in theory and research. How does writing relate to your art practice?

I think it's incredibly important for artists to write and make arguments for their work. The discursive context of an artwork is always in flux, and therefore requires some framing. Anne Boyer has a great line: "As it always has, poetry experiments in fashionable confusions, excels in the popular substitutive fantasies of its time, mistakes self-expression for sovereignty. But in making the world blurry, distressing, and forgettable, poetry now has near limitless competition." Her description of poetry's subsumption is equally applicable to art: images of art frequently appear alongside advertorial images, social media posts, or news reports. If art is to distinguish itself from mass media, it needs to be framed in such a way that it disobeys normative ways of seeing, looking and reading. Alternative ways of looking must be argumentatively established outside the image.

Along with Leigh Tennant, you also co-edit the art theory webzine *QOQQOON*.

Yes, *QOQQOON* started as a way of organizing our own thoughts on the current conditions of art. In particular, we take issue with the fact that most writing by artists is currently produced for the sake of submissions, applications, and proposals. That is, a great deal of writing is directed to gatekeepers as a way of asking permission. These modes of supplication ultimately legitimize the gatekeepers' capacity to respond and determine the course of artistic practice. *QOQQOON* is a DIY response to these conditions, and acts as a platform for artists to make arguments about art amongst peers. We also republish historical and hard-to-find writings by artists to ensure these texts are not limited to

those with academic affiliations.

What are you currently reading?

I've got a few things on the go—I finally tracked down a copy of Rasheed Araeen's *Art Beyond Art*, and I've recently discovered an [open access archive](#) of Howardena Pindell's writings. Outside of art, I'm making my way through Stuart Hall's essays on Gramsci.

Do you work in a studio?

I work from home—this has always been my situation, even pre-covid. The times I've had a separate studio space I inevitably end up moving in permanently. With rendering especially, there is a fair amount of downtime waiting for physics simulations to calculate, or ray-tracing to complete. It's like developing film. I use this time to read, make food, or go for walks.

I'm always curious about how artists consider the role of art in times of crisis. What do you think the purpose—if any—of art is right now?

If we think of art in a societal sense—that is, as synonymous with the art world—then I don't think it has much of a role other than affirming elite interests, exploiting tax loopholes, and decorating condo towers. Art has historically been and remains an aristocratic pastime. But if we think about art outside of its social role, and more as a worldview, symbolic framework or creative impulse, then I think it's of extraordinary importance for individuals and communities.

There are many ways in which we are (and are made to feel) unfree. Creativity is itself an affirmative response to limitations. Because art uses familiar materials and symbols to point to unfamiliar thoughts or possibilities, it plays a crucial role in enriching our experience of otherwise despondent situations. Freeform creativity is an intrinsic mode of expression, just as free association is a therapeutic technique. Despite art world trends, art is more constructive than critical: it affirms new principles through creation. Somewhere between individualistic practice and the overarching art world are lots of small communities where people make and write things to inspire one another and challenge dominant worldviews. Absolute freedom is not the goal—we have many obligations to one another as social beings. But conceptual freedom is a luxury that should be seized by everyone, and speculative thinking must be wielded for purposes other than fear-mongering.

The above conversation was conducted by Elliat Albrecht. Albrecht is a writer and editor based in Canada; she holds a BFA in Critical and Cultural Practices from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and an MA in Literary and Cultural Studies from the University of Hong Kong.

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