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Confronting Contemporary Mythmaking:
On artist’s engagements with popular culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by outlining an understanding of how the culture industry operates in American culture and explores ways to counter the transmission of modern mythmaking through art. As described in Roland Bathes’s *Mythologies*, mythmaking in the contemporary context serves to sever current systems of power and coercion from the historic processes of their creation; to naturalize the current neoliberal order and make it seem like the only way things could ever be. This sort of mythmaking is transmitted through popular culture, and many artists have responded to it through their practices. Herein I describe several different artists’ approaches, including my own.
INTRODUCTION

Organized human life is made possible through the trans-generational transmission of knowledge through culture, "the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for… responding to the social realities around them."¹ Culture includes the hunting, farming, and fishing methods that feed us, as well as the sciences and arts that help us understand each other and ourselves. Its power over us is undeniable, and in fact, necessary.

This makes the fact that there exists a “culture industry” especially fraught. If, as it is asserted², the “culture industry” uses the power of culture to produce uniformity among the populace and compliance to existing power structures, one might conclude that it should be resisted and countered by those outside it engaged in culture production. But it’s clear that what’s called the “culture industry” isn’t exclusively engaged in outright repression of the masses. If one were to ask anyone working within the culture industry to generically describe what they do, the answer would most likely be some variation on the theme of “giving the audience what they want,” and oftentimes, they figure out how to do so. The fact that what’s called “popular culture” is indeed popular is the most obvious proof of this. Moreover, it would seem this mass production of popular art has necessitated the development of an unnamed, unacknowledged science; that of identifying the coordinates of popular desires and developing ways to satiate them. So while this science of the culture industry may be often deployed to reinforce existing societal hierarchies one might hope to help eradicate, it would be foolish to ignore its findings.

Starting from the earliest days of filmmaking, an intricate system of cinematographic and editing techniques was developed by those working within the culture industry; this has come to

²Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1944.
be known as *film language*. Recent neuroscience studies even suggest the brain takes in the flow of traditional film language without much effort, as the human mind is able to segment events discretely and work to "construct continuity out of the discontinuous bits of perception:"³ easily following action across cuts. Clearly, film language is a huge innovation, but this ability to reach past an audience’s analytic defenses and engage with the unconscious can be, and often is, used to persuade and manipulate. One need only take a brief scroll through social media to find evidence of this. Video has become the overwhelmingly dominant medium of advertising.

Yet even when the selling of something isn’t made explicit, there is often a de facto symptomatic persuasion at work beneath the surface of film language. Roland Barthes identified this tendency in the popular culture of his time as “modern myths”⁴, wrapped in the cloak of “realism”. He identifies the purpose of a modern myth is to “transform history into nature”, to depoliticize systems of coercion and control, erasing the historical forces and conflicts that produced the current order of things in order to make it seem like the only way things could be. Barthes goes on to describe how the current system is able to consume attempts to examine and disprove prevailing cultural myths and adopt them as “inoculations.” This calls to mind recent examples of mainstream entertainment products that aim to expose the darker side of capitalism. According to Barthes, the more effective way to counter modern myths is to create countermyths, or what he calls a “second-order myths”. The second-order myth exposes the pretenses of “realism” and thus the myth’s essentially ideological construction. It uncovers the realities myth is designed to conceal, and opens up the audience to the possibilities that lie beyond and after the current system’s reign.

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I. TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND THE ‘SUPERFLAT’

In his Superflat Manifesto, Takashi Murakami describes the confusion that clouds Japan’s adoption of the Western concept of “art.” Strikingly, the Kanji version of the text repeatedly uses 『ART』 instead of a Japanese word. He does however open the manifesto with a definition that seems as good as any:

“It is the moment which, even if we don’t completely understand what we have glimpsed, we are nonetheless touched by it. This is what we have come to call “art.””

Thereafter though, the manifesto traces “art”’s restless place in the Japanese mind, coming to be associated with concepts such as “freedom,” “celebration,” “explosion,” and “entertainment.” In the end, he declares the Western paradigm irrelevant to Japanese culture and can thus place avant-garde painting and sculpture alongside pop culture products like mass-produced plastic figurines, manga, and anime in the same “lineage of eccentrics”; the Superflat.

This philosophical positioning manifests potently in Murakami’s late 1990s and early 2000s work, wherein he appropriates the visual motifs and tropes of Japan’s culture industry toward a radically different affect. A good example of this is his sculpture My Lonesome Cowboy (1998). Though the piece’s title references Warhol, its visual style is unmistakably drawn from anime; specifically, given the subject matter—a cherubic young blond man gleefully ejaculating a lasso-shaped stream of semen—hentai. Yet the oversized eyes, the angular hair, the kawaii facial proportions aren’t meant to arouse or generate moe—at least not in the way they would be if the image were encountered in the context of a culture industry product. Overall, the larger-than-life sculpture is somewhat horrific to encounter: the uncanniness of the three-dimensional rendering of a style usually encountered on a flat screen lends Cowboy a sense of menace and incongruity. A similar effect can be perceived in his Mr. DOB paintings,

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6 Ibid.
7 Andy Warhol, Lonesome Cowboys (1968)
particularly the PO+KU series (1999): the images resemble manga in their layout, yet there's no clear way to “read” the panels – there's no recognizable structure or linearity, and so the eye darts about the image, looking to make sense of discernable shapes and fragments of distorted faces: an unnerving chaos within a form usually defined by sequence and order.

(Fig. 1) Takashi Murakami, *Po + Ku Surrealism Mr. DOB-(Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple, Pink)* (1999)

Since Murakami includes both Warhol and manga in the same ‘Superflat’ cultural lineage, he is free to use the visual language of one to respond to the other, or vice versa. His transmutation of the easily-digestible and recognizable culture-industry-produced imagery into pieces about deformation, degradation, and decay expose the horrors that lie beneath the surface of *kawaii*: the trauma and fallout from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki⁸, and the postwar infantilization of the Japanese people:

“We were taught the meaning of life was meaninglessness… We were forced into a system that does not produce ‘adults’.”⁹

Murakami’s work doesn’t seek to directly destabilize the culture industry’s imagery; instead, it redeployes the power of these highly-refined visual systems. Systems that are designed to distract and conceal are repurposed to instead reveal more unpleasant emotional realities. This irony is central to his work of this period, and fuels its dynamism.

Two of my works, *Jake Roberts* (2020) and *Esfinge Movimiento* (2022) have a relationship to pop culture that parallels that of Murakami’s 1990s-2000s work. Both works

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redeploy the tropes of North American professional wrestling toward exposing realities
entertainment usually offers an escape from.

(Fig. 2) Jonathan Case, Jake Roberts (2020) (still)

One common trope of professional wrestling is the *promo*. A shortening of the phrase “promotional interview,” the promo typically takes the form of a short monologue delivered by a wrestler on the subject of a future match. The promo is when a match is imbued with its emotional stakes, when what might otherwise be viewed as just a fictionalized sporting event is turned into high drama; a soap opera for men. Wrestling fans often rate a performer’s promo skills alongside their athletic prowess; they are equally essential to their enjoyment of the form. In the promo, a wrestler might simply recite a list of insults aimed at their opponent; simple “shit-talk.” Other wrestlers are more surrealist (Ric Flair) or absurdist (Stone Cold Steve Austin), theatrical (The Rock), deliberately boring or obscure (Terry Funk). Jake “The Snake” Roberts was known for particularly eloquent promos, and *Jake Roberts* appropriates one of his more
well-known promo monologues, a fan favorite commonly known as the “Muck of Avarice” promo. In Jake Roberts, this performance is isolated, cut off from its context in the world of professional wrestling. His disembodied head appears within a set of accretion discs; a celestial object, a presence outside of our world. A wrestler video game avatar rolls his head back in smug amusement, but instead of a laugh, he emits a distorted scream that degrades into digital noise. Roberts’s monologue continues as we see an executive ring the bell at the New York Stock Exchange: the context suggests Roberts’s beef is with America’s economic inequalities. His anger rises as video game characters strut around in a black void and scenes of poverty are juxtaposed against Las Vegas opulence. Street scenes from the artist’s hometown of Syracuse are seen, culled from a YouTube account known for its “poverty porn.” The piece ends with overlapping shots of a computer-generated limousine speeding around a racetrack backwards. The impression left is that of impotence: the Roberts character may be enraged by the injustice of the American system, but he is powerless to do anything more than yell about it.

In Jake Roberts, the tropes of professional wrestling that lend it its drama –the beefs, the threats, the self-righteous thirst for revenge– are redeployed toward America’s social ills. But the piece acknowledges its powerlessness: the artist’s rage remains locked inside the kayfabe of art while the rich do donuts on a racetrack.

In another subculture of North American wrestling, the masked luchador is a potent symbol of physical and moral strength and masculinity –an almost mythic figure. Though the masked luchador’s origins can be traced to the United States, it’s most popular in Mexico, where it’s inspired an entire genre of movies. Hundreds of Luchador films were produced in the 1960s and 70s, wherein various luchadors fight vampires, monsters, mad scientists and criminals. The films are wildly cheap and pulpy, but as Philip K Dick once wrote, “symbols of the divine initially show up in the trash stratum.” In these movies, we see the masked

luchadores go about their daily lives, wear three-piece suits, attend business meetings, even go out on dates; there is something sublimely strange about watching this figure outside of his usual context of the wrestling ring. *Esfinge Movimiento* too is an effort to recontextualize the figure of the masked luchador, and to experiment with its symbolic meaning. It places currently-active luchador Esfinge in a kind of bardo, an interzone where he cannot boast intelligibly about his wrestling prowess, where his acrobatics produce anime sound effects, where he is at the mercy of forces beyond his control. He is hurled through worlds at blinding speed as Boguslaw Schaeffer’s avant-garde composition *Scultura* is heard. He then lands back in a wrestling ring, on top of his opponent. *Esfinge Movimiento* resembles a 49-second drug trip that extracts the symbol of the luchador from its usual context and places it within an undefined and indecipherable mythic paradigm.

(Fig. 3) Jonathan Case, *Esfinge Movimiento* (2022) (still)
II. MIKE KELLEY AND “NEGATIVE JOY”

The humor present in Mike Kelley’s work is almost universally recognized, though it was seldom discussed by the artist himself. In his copious writings, Kelley never discusses it, and only does so when asked about it. On the subject of his gesamtkunstwerk Day is Done (2005), Kelley had this to say:

INTERVIEWER: 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... 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.12

When asked outright, Kelley suggests his use of the comedic is symptomatic, rather than intentional or studied:

I’ve always found deconstruction funny because most jokes are based on decontextualization... What bothered me about a lot of conceptual work is that it tried to do this deconstruction in some serious professorial manner. It's unnecessary. You don't need to do that. I like it when things are funny.13

This explains a lot of the humor in Kelley’s work; it also explains why it defies analysis. It's simply there as a result of his process – not so much added as not subtracted.

Another dimension of Kelley’s work that reads as comedic is his fascination with what might be seen as the ‘work that goes wrong,’ or the artist’s pratfall. “I am interested in playing with, and exposing, the conventions of visual language,”14 he notes in describing his willingness to indulge in the occasional self-own. He labels one series of his own paintings as “failed attempts,”15 others as “obviously overdone,”16 “half-assed”17. This can be seen in Incorrect Sexual Models (1987), where the ‘artist’ is clearly not quite able to do what they are trying to do.

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12 “Day is Done,” Art 21, 2005.
13 Mike Kelley with John Welchman at Walker Art Center, June 2, 2005.
with the picture: to model some form of perfect symmetry and equality. It’s an intentional failure, designed to express Kelley’s suspicion of utopian fantasies.¹⁸ Here, Kelley seems to be playing the character of the ‘artist;’ a Tony Clifftonesque performance piece where the performance is unseen: only its product remains. Yet there is a tragic dimension to all of this; his explorations of the dimensions of human ineptitude are not simply funny, they are often profoundly sad.

(Fig. 4) Mike Kelley, *Day is Done* (2003) (still)

There are moments in Kelley’s video piece *Day is Done*, shown both as a multi-channel installation and a single-channel long-form video, that might be mistaken for sketch comedy, and though these moments are very funny, the piece also resonates as a deeply forlorn evocation of

painful memories from which the characters are unable to heal. The videos are extrusions from found yearbook photos that document extracurricular activities involving costumes and ritual. From this innocuous source material, Kelley extrapolates elaborate depictions of trauma, abuse, and mental illness, awash in colorful costumes, bizarre makeup, downright wacky songs, and dance routines. Like Murakami, Kelley uses a culture-industry medium, video—a form that is most often offered as an escape from one’s own bruised headspace in the form of television—to instead amplify, even celebrate trauma.

(Fig. 5) Jonathan Case, Aylewyfe (2020) (still)

My video Aylewyfe (2020) is at first appearance, basically a string of jokes, delivered by an actor in a manner that evokes stand-up comedy. But it is also an attempt to do something novel with the conventions of film language. Aylewyfe is intentionally odd, from the very start: it begins with a mundane and ill-composed shot of trees in a parking lot, accompanied by a clanging noise. The editing is intended to be unusual to the eye accustomed to the rhythms of television: shots linger too long, or not long enough, a new thing appears on screen without
explanation, sound effects bleed into music. All this is meant to create a tension between the protagonist and the work itself. The lone speaker asserts his authority and dominance over the audience and the film, and the film tries to slip away, to become something else. It gets distracted by a concrete planter, an escalator, a window, and the protagonist bangs a tiny hammer on a pole to bring the film’s attention back. By the end, the film escapes, cutting to black while the protagonist bangs away on the pole to no avail. The piece ends.

Making Alyewyfe was a process of noticing and documenting forgotten and neglected artifacts that remain embedded in the built environment, then extruding an imaginative explanation\textsuperscript{19} for them for the actor to confidently assert. The train terminal that was “once considered futuristic,” the monumental public sculpture that has fallen into disrepair, the old factory “that used to make things” that’s been turned into “artist’s studios or something.” The finished piece is also littered with dead space and ambient noise that seem to emphasize the degradation of the urban landscape and the dominance of roads and cars. This underscores the protagonist’s alienation from the world around him, standing alone in an empty parking lot, banging on a pole, stating plainly untrue assertions— it would be painfully sad if he weren’t so unpleasant, and if such people didn’t hold positions of power.

\textsuperscript{19} The script was co-written with Eric Trageser, who also appears in the piece.
III. JOHN SMITH AND “THINKING TIME”

Filmmaker John Smith’s masterpiece *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) has become possibly one of the most beloved avant-garde films of its time; it’s still screened regularly and remakes and homages continue to circulate on YouTube. Yet at the time, Smith’s contemporaries (the Structuralist filmmakers, the prevailing avant-garde movement in the UK at the time) shunned Smith for making a film that was too enjoyable,\(^2^0\) as though mainstream entertainment should have a monopoly on pleasure. Yet *Girl Chewing Gum* does things no mainstream entertainment would contemplate. In it, there are three major shifts in the position of the narrator relative to the world on screen: it begins as the voice of a ‘director,’ commanding the movements of the people, cars and camera (“I want the two girls to come in from the right”), then gradually becomes a narrator revealing facts not apparent about the people walking across the screen (“The dentist continues on his way to the bank”), then a confessor who reveals he’s been lying all along (“I’m shouting into a microphone… about 15 miles from the building you’re looking at”). As Erika Balsom notes, “What might have appeared as an assertion of control becomes legible as a critique of the fantasy of control.”\(^2^1\) The film’s one edit follows: a jarring cut to an empty field and some power lines. Smith calls this “thinking time,”\(^2^2\) a chance to reflect on what you’ve just experienced.

This undermining of the narrator’s authority is central to Smith’s concerns as an artist\(^2^3\): he is both attracted to, and suspicious of, the power of mainstream narrative film. Contrary to the aims of the structuralists –to purge the “spectre of narrative”\(^2^4\)– Smith wants to expose the mechanisms of power manifest in the moving image producer’s position relative to that of the audience. Smith describes his approach like this:


\(^{2^2}\) Ibid.

\(^{2^3}\) Erika Balsom, “(Not) The Voice of God,” Tate in Focus, September 2015.

“I am trying to work backwards and forwards between an involvement in the illusion and making you aware that what you are looking at is a construction."25

(Fig. 6) John Smith, Girl Chewing Gum (1976) (still)

Smith’s acknowledgement of the audience’s attraction to and engagement with illusion, coupled with his critique of the illusion’s power is his signature move, expanded upon in later films Om (1986) and The Black Tower (1987), but unfortunately, few subsequent artists have built on Smith’s innovations, as his work seems situated in an uncomfortable liminal space between video art and comedy; it’s too funny to rest comfortably within the avant-garde, too formally experimental to appear on Saturday Night Live. Yet his work seems just as urgent and relevant today.

My piece CHROMA-KEY (2021), drew upon my own dubious theories about the connection between America’s car-centric culture and social media use to provide a nonsensical parallel to the video essay form. The piece draws some rather unlikely cause-and-effect chains through our history, then narrates a dark future that leads to the most disappointing let-down of a conclusion possible. The video is essentially an effort to push the voiceover/found-footage format into absurd abstractions; to find out how many ridiculous notions can be taken in at face value if asserted confidently by a disembodied voice, and undergirded with visual ‘evidence’. How much is the viewer willing to believe what the voice in their ears is saying while their eyes are assailed with information accompanied by jaunty music and syncopated editing? If the European flavor of the triumphant music at the end isn’t enough of a cue to the audience that they should be skeptical, the music’s dissolution into noise and rapid succession of Google image search results for “chroma-key” should be. Like Girl Chewing Gum, CHROMA-KEY is a
critique of the fantasy of control that current examples of the video essay form generally embody: a skilled editor can create convincing causal connections on the screen that have no basis in reality. The video is fun to watch, but the ability to make something that is fun to watch is a power, and here, that power is intentionally abused.

(Fig. 8) Jonathan Case, *The Metric System* (2021) (still)

*The Metric System* (2021) is also an experiment with the voiceover/found-footage format that begins with clips from instructional videos from the 1970s intended to prepare Americans for the then-(supposedly)soon-to-be-adopted metric system. This footage is a striking artifact: some shots look like they are from an alternate universe to our own: people in 1970s fashions admiring street signage showing kilometer distances and gasoline measured in liters. Indeed, as
the video progresses, it narrates America’s downfall as the metric system slowly destroys people’s minds. “WITHOUT THE FOOT, WITHOUT THE GILL, WITHOUT THE LONG HUNDREDWEIGHT,” text on screen proclaims, “WE ARE LOST.” This hyperbolic extrapolation of the rationale behind the Reagan administration’s blocking of metric system adoption in 1982 exposes its absurdity, and positions it as one of American history’s least crucial junctures. *The Metric System* exposes the dishonesty of the political right’s resistance to change and progress by simply providing an explanation of what they must have been afraid of in 1982. The explanation is inherently ludicrous, but it finds rhyme in the dire predictions that accompanied the legalization of same-sex marriage, or cannabis.
IV. CAULEEN SMITH AND “RADICAL GENEROSITY”

Cauleen Smith’s manifesto “The Association for the Advancement of Cinematic Creative Maladjustment”26 quotes Martin Luther King’s use of the clinical term *maladjusted*:

“There are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize.”27

Smith argues that the ‘maladjusted’ filmmaker (and audience) must liberate the moving image from narrative and illusionism. Though much of its critique is aimed squarely at Hollywood and “The Industry,” “Maladjusted” is mostly about proposing a wholly new mode of engagement with time-based art that is free of commercial (and academic) constraints. The novelty of her proposal is striking: she’s not making an argument for “avant-garde film” or “video art” per se as an alternative to standard mainstream entertainment, she emphasizes the need for something entirely outside of any tradition of moving image-making. Only that, she says, will “excavate [the audience’s] needs”. Smith suggests it is not enough to work “outside the system,” or to provide a critique of some sort, or even to adopt radical form; art must provide an alternative to the “placebo-art” of mainstream culture to an audience that is “maladjusted” to it. For Smith, activism is not in the art, but alongside it: the work is “merely an object, a tool, a dream. Action, resistance, and change are the realm of humans, not objects, consciousness, not sentiment.”

These concerns are echoed in her approach to the production of the work itself. “I have been trying to develop a new way of... making films, that goes against the way you’re trained to make films,” she says28, “You can abuse anybody as long as you get the shot. This is just the culture of film sets. It’s some dick-swinging macho patriarchal bullshit.” She instead argues for the practice of a “radical generosity” and her film *Sojourner* (2018) charts a sort of history of radically generous intentional communities across the United States, produced improvisationally.

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26 Cauleen Smith, *Cauleen Smith: Give it or Leave it*, 2018.
27 Martin Luther King Jr, *I Am Proud to be Maladjusted* speech, 1963.
in collaboration with her cast and crew. The film centers on the Watts Towers, a work of monumental public art created for, and gifted to the community in which it sits. The film asks us to imagine a community built upon such acts of radical generosity, and shows us a vision of it through “speculating and projecting what the future might look like.” Sojourner asks the audience to imagine a future by looking at what the past has proved possible. Or, as she remarks, “It’s possible to build a better world. People do it all the time.”

(Fig. 9) Cauleen Smith, Sojourner (2018) (still)

Smith’s practice seems to suggest a fundamental ethical tenet: if one’s work is meant to encourage imagining the expansion of something like “radical generosity”, this principle should also govern the work’s production. My series of video loops Estonteco Sekureco Episodes 0.00-0.004 (2022) are an invitation to imagine a post-American, post-carceral-state future society, one that is committed to the egalitarianism and horizontal community organization

30 Ibid.
necessitated by the climate crisis. The pieces use science fiction tropes and imagery to offer fragmentary glimpses of this wholesale reorganization of society and clues to how it might operate. The form I chose to instantiate these pieces was animation, a form that is most often produced using an industrial process exploiting cheap, even unpaid labor.31

(Fig. 10) Jonathan Case, *Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.01: Shoreline* (2022) (still)

These pieces however, were produced entirely by the artist and made extensive use of free, open-source animation software Blender. Since Blender is available to everyone with a computer and an internet connection, a robust online community has developed around it. People from all over the world share knowledge in forums and on YouTube on how to master the notoriously complex interface. Blender artists create 3D models of buildings, vehicles, even entire cities and make them available for download at low costs for other artists to use in their projects. This makes every Blender project a virtual collaboration of sorts with every other member of the Blender community, past and present.

V. ANIMATION AND OTHERNESS

Hand-drawn animation is often associated with children’s media, and there are many theories to explain why children are so drawn to it: the bright colors, the imaginative worlds and characters, the “heightened experience.” Research also suggests animation helps children develop their creativity and spatial reasoning not just through wild imagery, but through what’s missing, or wrong; what’s called “cognitive conflict.” In other words, children are able to unconsciously draw contrasts between the world around them and what’s on the screen. This in turn helps them better negotiate the physics of the real world.

Animation stands apart from both photorealistic CGI and photographically-derived video precisely due to its evident unrealness. Just as early modernist painters made no effort to conceal the “flatness” of the picture plane, animation’s positioning outside “the real” is intrinsic to its form. As author Paul Wells describes:

“The ‘otherness’ of animation itself announces a different model of interpretation which is abstracted from material existence and offers up the transparency of ‘ideas’.

The indexical relationship between real-world objects and their representation is severed, and instead mediated through the animator’s cultural conditioning, psychology, drawing and animation skills—this is the tacit agreement of animation; creator and audience both agree it’s not real, but an idea of real. In semiological terms, this meets Barthes’s description of the artist’s responsibility not to “represent reality, but to signify it.”

Thus the ideas that inspired the works in my series of video loops Estonteco Sekureco Episodes 0.00-0.004 meet the audience as ideas, not as truths. Any nature present in them is a depiction of nature. The characters are not people, but renderings of people. Evidence of human activities is purely born of the imaginal. They are seamless loops, without beginning or

33 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting.” From The Collected Essays and Criticism, 1940.
34 Paul Wells, Animation, Genre, and Authorship, 2002.
35 Barthes, 1957.
end. The viewer can walk in on them at any point in their duration – there is no effort to impart ideologies of cause and effect. There are details that suggest the pieces are drawn from a larger world, but if they are, that world is obviously a fiction.

(Fig. 11) Jonathan Case, Estonteco Secureco: Episode 0.04 “Vermillion Line” (2022) (still)

Though the movement in them is spare, there is an effort to remain true to animators’ understanding of the term ‘to animate’ – to bring artwork to life. They represent an earnest effort to create a style that is, if not free of influence, free of ironic reference. Though they do not evince a refined level of craft, it’s clear that effort has been made to allow the viewer to enjoy the pleasures offered by the animated form; the animator’s observations of the way things look and move, interpreted through their psyche, rendered directly through their hand: the way light defines the contours of the human face, the way a cat reacts to her environment, the way that wind flows through hair.
CONCLUSION

If the culture industry functions to naturalize and dehistoricize current systems of economic hierarchy and coercion, then opposing it necessitates developing forms of defamiliarization; to render strange the visual systems of realism, the learned expectations of easy emotional gratification, the myth-like stories of “how we got here”. Through repurposing the culture industry’s tools of myth-making, deconstruction of its tropes and signifiers, or through strict adherence to ethical principle, these works represent ways of not just opposing the dominant narrative, but offering ways to be maladjusted to it.
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APPENDIX
Images of the artist's work


Jonathan Case, *[machine tones and noise]*, 2021.


Jonathan Case, *Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.01: Shoreline*, 2022.

Jonathan Case, *Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.02: Homework*, 2022.

*Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.04: Vermillion Line (detail)*, 2022.

Jonathan Case, *Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.03: Crab Storm*, 2022.

Jonathan Case, *Estonteco Sekureco Episode 0.00: ┃-Pose*, 2022.