



# THE ASSAULT OF ILLUSION

ENRIC PUIG PUNYET

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# The Assault of Illusion

ENRIC PUIG PUNYET





Hidden behind the curtain, holding her breath, she looks out the window. She needs to retain that image: he gets into his luxurious car, drives down the street and turns at the first corner. Alida breathes again. At last, she has the certainty of finding herself alone, for the first time safe from the ever-oppressive presence of her superior. At once, her eyes fix on the door at the back of the room. The forbidden door: that is what she calls it every night when her son reproaches her for her long absences and she, to spare him laments about an undesirable job, to save him a deep sigh over having as a boss the most despicable being in this world, fantasises about the one magical crack, the only thing with any colour in that grey office, the only thing capable of sustaining a certain fascination. That simple door at the back, sturdy, worn, yellowed, unexpectedly took on an enigma the day Alida dared to touch it.

“Don’t you ever think of going near it!,” an authoritarian shout from a mahogany desk, sheltered in a glass cubicle. “You, that door, don’t even look at it.”

Now certain she is alone and yet fearing that the despot might suddenly appear, his shout and his sanction, each of Alida’s steps toward the door reactivates her imagination.

What secret could be inscribed in that absurd veto? What dark mystery could an office so dull conceal, one that reeks of bureaucracy in every corner? Good sense prevails and begins to threaten the space of illusion that, night after night, she has been opening for her son, building each one of the worlds that this closed place might come to contain. But she knows that, whatever the door hides—if it conceals neither treasures nor chimeras, neither monsters nor piled-up corpses, if it holds no path that winds precariously toward a distant mountain, nor an unfathomable darkness that unleashes the most abyssal terror on whoever it devours—no dull functionality, no shelf with boxes, no invoice archive, no furniture storeroom will be able to erase the thousand wonders she will keep opening for her son each night.

The doorknob turns. A narrow gap reveals the fantasy behind the door.

This text could go on, delving ever deeper into the absorbing illusion that is enclosed not only by the door, but also by the very structure of the narrative itself. You would plunge into it through a triple effect that the words would exert on you: first, an effect of identification, which would manage to make you feel more and more in the skin of the one who carries the action; second, an effect of fascination, which would heighten your desire to know more, to keep reading; third, an effect of reality that would whisper between the lines that all of this is happening, has happened, will

happen or, at the very least, could come to happen.

Have you felt how that illusion began to seep through your pores? How each sentence was settling itself, one after another, in your entrails?

The book you hold in your hands starts from this strange and at the same time familiar effect. In it we recognise ourselves because we know, you and I, what we are talking about, because we have felt it countless times coursing through our bodies. And it is from this shared experience that the pages will try to steer you toward the suspicion that everything we call culture has above all one intention: to enchant us.

Trying to understand that illusion—both for the one who produces it and for the one who receives it—places us at a crossroads. Does it encourage you, open up other worlds? Or does it lie to you and deceive you? In any case, the illusion seduces you. And then, after having submerged you in a pseudo-hypnotic state that blurs that fine line separating fiction from reality, when your ghosts begin to dance with those that culture carries with it, it assaults you violently. Your sense of reality is then deeply wounded.

Throughout history, the arts have developed a series of complex techniques so that, without you or me noticing, this illusion deposits itself without respite in our most hidden depths. Metaphor, antithesis, prosopopoeia, hyperbaton and a final cliffhanger have subtly operated in the brief text you have just read with a minimal persuasive power compared with the elaborate techniques of illusion that culture uses every day to seduce and assault

you. Perspective and photography use them, architecture and cinema, literature and your social networks. Each one of these apparatuses, with its own particular histories, has been invented and patented, financed and perfected, applied and exploited for one purpose: that the illusion produce in you, without your noticing it, the three effects named above. Let us repeat them: one, illusion causes you to identify with it; two, illusion fascinates you and alters your desire; and three, illusion manages to have you assimilate it with a certain dose of veracity, with the suspicious consequence that everything you once understood as reality becomes irredeemably profaned.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The three effects analysed in this text stem from the observations made by Laura Mulvey in “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.” The author’s analysis regarding scopophilia, narcissistic identification, as well as the effect of reality that arises from the contradiction between the two, is delimited within mass cinema, especially that produced in Hollywood. *The Assault of Illusion* suggests that these three effects do not operate solely in commercial cinema, but that, to a greater or lesser degree, they can be found more broadly in the different artistic manifestations that, in one way or another, are involved in the creation of illusions—that is, since the beginnings of European modernity, all except those which, being aware of it, have experimented with various forms of distanciation, a practice widespread in part of contemporary art since the onset of the avant-gardes. In this sense, this text assumes what E.T.A. Hoffmann already stated in *The Perfect Machinist* (1814) and Edgar Allan Poe in *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846): that “any artistic practice could be interpreted as an act of seduction, consensual to a greater or lesser degree between artist and spectator.” (Juan Elvira, *Arquitectura fantasma*. Madrid, Ediciones Asimétricas, 2021).

These pages propose a journey in four steps: from the naïve illusion to which art subjects us to the critical emancipation from the mechanisms that produce this illusion, passing through a moment of revelation and another of negation or questioning. The path is accompanied by a brief analysis of some of the technical apparatuses that inject illusion into our bodies, as well as of the modes of economic and political power associated with them. It is essential to understand their interests: who creates, dominates, and controls them, who funds them and why. Numerous notes and quotations accompany the journey, not only to achieve the recurring effect of adding truthfulness and legitimacy to the text—another illusion—but also out of the sincere desire to provide references for anyone wishing to delve deeper into the subjects we will traverse here.

The text, despite being written so that it may be read autonomously, was conceived first and foremost as a proposed reading of the exhibition *The Assault of Illusion*, shown at the Santa Mònica arts centre in Barcelona and at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid between 2026 and 2027. It is the works of the exhibition themselves, and not any wish to follow a chronological or causal scheme, that guide the winding course of these pages.

Finally, this publication gathers several entries on the principal technical apparatuses that have generated various forms of illusion throughout history, and especially from European modernity onwards. These should be read as syntheses of the constant flirtations these inventions

have had with bourgeois power: why they appeared, who financed them, and, above all, what interests they have served up to the present day. The entries arise from the research that Albert Chamorro has developed in parallel to the production of *The Assault of Illusion*, and which may be consulted at the following link: <https://bit.ly/devices-TAOI-pdf>.

# Illusion

The curtain rises.

All art is a field of illusion. Its laws are those of seduction and the manipulation of point of view.

To reinforce this statement, the figures of the curtain and the automaton may prove useful, since they function as concepts that gather together many of the ideas we will begin to traverse from here on.

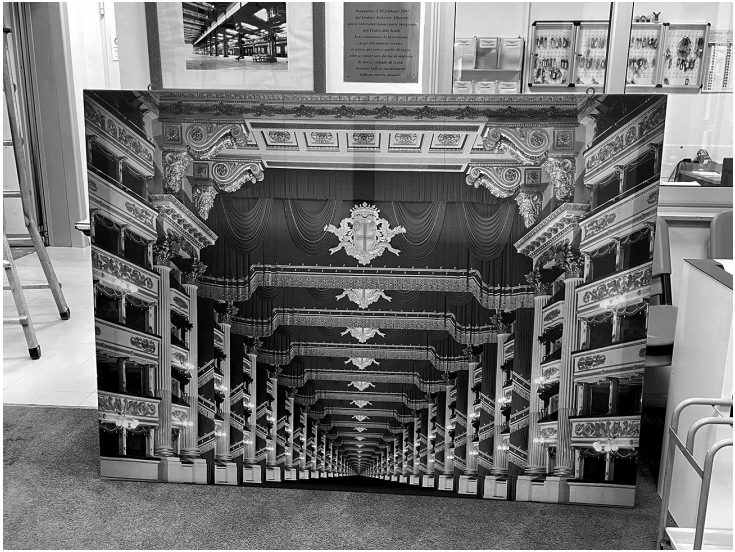
Although their origins go back to classical Greek theatre, where large cloths were used to divide space and conceal actors before their entrance on stage, the current image of the curtain cannot be detached from the model of Italian-style theatre architecture that appeared over the course of the sixteenth century. The defining feature of this construction is the radical separation that the proscenium draws between the stage, where the action takes place, and the stalls, where the audience sits. This invisible fourth wall delineates the space of illusion and, moreover, privileges one point of view over all others. This displacement of the gaze was the necessary condition for the birth of many sophisticated techniques, from voice projection to scenography. The accumulation of these techniques,

developed over time, served to render more seductive and fascinating, more credible and probable, the illusion created on the stage.

Since then, for the curtain to rise means the audience's acceptance of an unwritten contract, a pact in which the performer acts as though the audience were not there, as though the scene and the text and their codes were the only reality in the room. In return, the audience, seated civilly in its comfortable armchairs, allows itself to be affected passively, keeps silent, pays attention, cries, laughs, and applauds.

It is no coincidence that the mechanical automaton has a parallel history to that of the theatrical curtain. Although it too can be traced back to ancient Greece, a period in which hydraulic mechanisms were used to reinforce the alluring effects of mythological statues, temples, and theatrical actions, the origins of the mechanised, automated figure lie in the birth of the mechanistic cosmology that Descartes would soon disseminate at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 “It is upon being impressed by mechanical spectacles that Descartes begins his mechanistic revolution, understanding nature as a machine in motion. In Benjamin as well, it is the attentive observation of scenography that leads him to a reconsideration of the underlying social mechanisms; but, unlike Descartes, he does not place his observation at the service of the development of an iconography of power. Rather, he seeks to understand how this scenography constantly mutates.” George Makari. *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.



Xesca Salvà, *Abans*

Xesca Salvà's installation, a gateway into the fantasy space that *The Assault of Illusion* introduces us to, consists of a theatre curtain that is at once an automaton—or, conversely, a machine that opens onto the world of fantasies. The automaton, like the curtain, carries with it an implicit pact: to allow oneself to be captivated by the illusion, to act as if one did not know that a mechanism is at work. The curtain and the automaton, beyond their history, share that childlike space of suspension that we believe fades as we grow older: the space of pure illusion,

the essential innocence needed to sustain the beliefs that will accompany us throughout life, shaping our world. To allow oneself to be seduced by a curtain that opens, as by the effects of an automatic machine, by its apparent invisible hand, is to surrender to a place where suspicion is suspended, a fantasy world constructed through techniques and pacts of illusion.

The branch of psychoanalysis that deals with the influence of culture and the media<sup>3</sup> has been asking itself this question for years, a question that, because of the ever-increasing impact that mass communication and culture exert on our lives, and because of the multiplication of the time we spend consuming them, becomes more pertinent with each generation: Who truly shapes what we, as we grow up, call reality? Who constructs our desire, how, and why? Who lays the foundations of our subjectivity, that point of anchorage between our desire and reality?

Without a doubt, family relationships in early childhood are decisive in this construction. But perhaps not to the extent that early psychoanalysis wanted us to believe. In Freud's time, of course, there was no Netflix, Instagram, or Peppa Pig. Yet by 2025, it is not uncommon

3 Among the many authors who have developed this line of thought, Jean Laplanche stands out, having applied the theory of seduction to cultural studies, and more recently, Slavoj Žižek. It is, however, feminist and queer thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Laura Mulvey, and Teresa de Lauretis who have most deeply explored the effects that culture and the media exert on subjectivity and desire.

to see baby strollers equipped with flashing, blaring mobile phones. To what extent is a child's early reading of what a mother is, what a father is, or what brothers and sisters are, already predetermined by the thousands of cultural stimuli present in the countless media we are increasingly exposed to from the first months of life? Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth Freeman have developed excellent reflections on this issue in their analyses of family scenes that are unthinkingly reproduced in films and series, but also in every photograph contained in every family album.<sup>4</sup>

This area of thought is addressed by the series *Mama* by Aneta Grzeszykowska, which can be read as a reflection on the role that artistic representation plays in the way we define our subjectivity throughout our lives. In the photographs, a young girl interacts with a human figure as any daughter would with her mother, but as the series progresses, it becomes evident that the figure is in fact a mannequin, a wax sculpture. It is representation—consolidated through its relentless repetition in art and the media—what shapes the presence before which we are constituted.

It is important to emphasize here just how much the early days of photography helped cement the image of

4 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Mama*

the bourgeois family and managed to construct a domestic correlate to the industrial time typical of the 19th century. Photography not only transformed the image of one's own body into a reproducible and transportable object. It also allowed projection to be placed alongside those of other people, thus making relationships visible and solidifying them. Among the images prioritized and tirelessly repeated in photographic studios, with stereotyped poses and props that reinforced them, it is no coincidence that the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family already stood out. Domestic photographs, through simple repeated poses—paradigmatically, the arrangement by age, which placed male futures in the foreground—deposited in the social imagination a genealogy of the linear family, an image of prosperity that marked within the home the equivalent of the technical, political, and economic progress that permeated the developmental world beyond its walls.

It is not family configurations that determine the image. This belief is part of the great illusion to which we are all subjected. Rather, it is the influence of the image that creates and repeats to exhaustion the family structures that a society considers correct and desirable.<sup>5</sup>

5 “We must not see representation as something posterior to reality; on the contrary, we should understand it as that which makes reality possible, shapes it, and separates it from itself. It is representation that enables presence, not the other way around.” Jean-Louis Déotte, *Qu'est-ce qu'un appareil ?* Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 2007.

Again, for these images to gain that power, for them to be capable of altering what we desire, of transforming the image of ourselves through which we make sense of the world and the way we perceive and order reality, they must be grounded in complex technical mechanisms that cement their seductive power. Without a doubt, if we focus on the photographic medium, one of these techniques is captured in the concept of the “snapshot.” It is this technique that has led us to uncritically assume that an image captures or freezes a specific instant of reality.

By pretending that reality produces the image, we forget that the past reality was altered knowingly, in anticipation of a photograph about to be taken. We omit that the past reality was inevitably modified by the advent of a future record, an immortalization of the instant. We overlook that there was an intention—conscious or unconscious—on the part of the person who pressed the shutter, to freeze one moment and not another, just as there was later in the process of selecting or rejecting among perhaps hundreds of photographs taken. It is, of course, the image that retrospectively produces reality, and not the other way around.

The particular technique of the snapshot assumes many others that developed beforehand. It deposits itself as an additional layer that cements and sustains the illusion produced by this technique; that manages to seduce you as it does, to fascinate you, to alter your desire and your reality without your awareness. Tracing back through

# FRAME

The frame is the apparatus that separates the artwork from the real world. Historically, its use in framing art has been linked to religious images. As in medieval altarpieces, the frame establishes a boundary through which the gaze moves toward illusion. With the Renaissance, new artistic patrons prompted the appearance of the so-called *court* frames. As the wealthy gained power, frames became more prominent and turned gilded, with the

same objective they had in earlier religious artworks: to set them apart from ordinary mortals. With the colonial period, sculptors such as Kugler and Deibel created frames using materials expropriated from the “New World” to reflect the conquests of the Bavarian court. The frame always bears the name of the form of power it embodies in each era. Examples include the “Louis XVI frame” of the Baroque period or the “Empire frame” of the Napoleonic era.

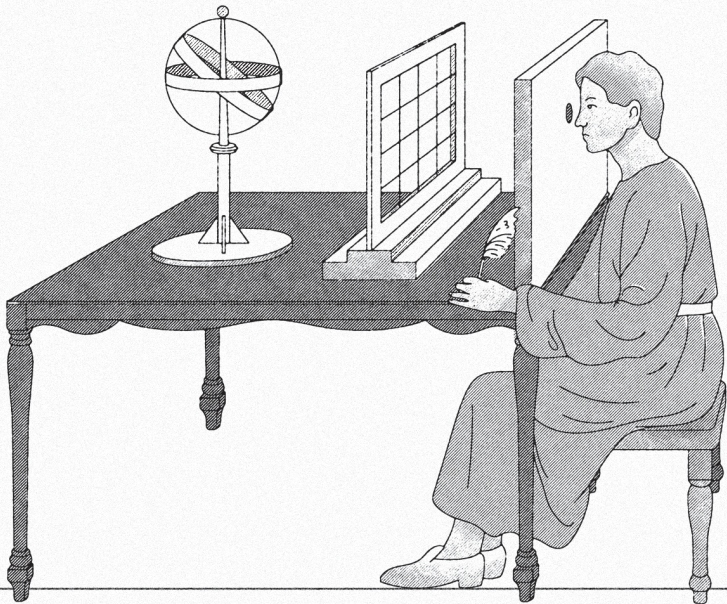


# PERSPECTIVE

The perspectograph is a mechanical apparatus that allows, through the vanishing point and the position of the observer, the drawing of perspective and thus the creation of a hierarchy of vision. With this, the human being becomes the center of the universe and humanism emerges as a doctrine of the modern state. 👁 Medieval art did not follow the laws of perspective but obeyed a symbolic hierarchy. Romanesque art, for example, does not seek to faithfully represent proportions; in-

stead, representation follows a spiritual canon. Artists such as Dürer created the first perspective devices under commission from Maximilian I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. His reign was characterized by strengthening imperial authority and centralizing the administration of his dominions, which is why he is considered a precursor of the modern state. With perspective, the authority of God is transferred to bourgeois power. 🌀

2 / 10



these multiple layers, the genealogy of these accumulated techniques leading to the instant photograph, takes us back in time to the beginnings of the pictorial technique of perspective.

It is to two Italian architects, Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti, that the establishment of the foundations of linear perspective is attributed in the mid-15th century. This system of graphic representation is based on the projection of a three-dimensional object onto a plane, from the position of a vanishing point or viewpoint. The introduction of linear perspective profoundly transformed not only painting but also the way the image would assault the viewer from that moment onward.

This is the transformation that will relentlessly advance toward the technique of the photographic snapshot. It is, in fact, perspective that “invents the temporality of the instant, very different from the infinite continuum of movement.”<sup>6</sup> Until then, pictorial composition and the relationships between the various elements of a painting responded to a symbolic ordering. It resembled, in a certain sense, what we today call a conceptual map, in which we read that the relationship between its components is not determined by simultaneity, but by hierarchies and correspondences. Before perspective, “the eye jumped from one side to the other, picking up symbolic crumbs, guided by taste and imagination. In the new paintings, the

6 Ibid.

eye follows the path of linear perspective along streets, buildings, pavements, whose lines the painter has deliberately introduced for the eye to follow.”<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between the different elements that make up a painting in perspective obeys principles very different from those previously used. These principles, gradually, will manage to completely change the way we look at images. Perspective hints at an instant. It suggests that all its elements share the same place and the same time. From this, we infer that the scene it depicts happened, is happening, will happen, or, at the very least, could have happened.<sup>8</sup> It radically alters the way we link image and reality and, consequently, profoundly transforms what we understand as reality: how we perceive it, how we read and interpret it.

Moreover, perspective entails two additional phenomena that are crucial here: on one hand, the vanishing point—the anchoring place from which the master lines for the composition are drawn—will become the foundation of subjectivity. Just as that image is painted for you, the world acts for you. You are the centre of observation of reality, an idea that will reinforce the “I” and its self-image in a way unprecedented until then.

7 “The perspectival apparatus introduces a space of reception that is quantifiable, homogeneous, and rational, from which the new physics will emerge.” Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*. New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1934.

8 Jean-Louis Déotte, op. cit.

On the other hand, the high technical complexity involved in the perfection of perspective will generate a profound effect of fascination on the viewer. This fascination, from which great ideological systems—from Christianity to Humanism—will benefit, quickly transfers from the pictorial technique itself to the content of the paintings.

It is no less important that this effect of fascination would extend not only to the content of the paintings but also to the very figure of the artist. From then on, the



The work of Miquel Màrtir based on Van der Weyden's  
*The Crucifixion*

artist would be distinguished as someone who does not perform a simple task like everyone else, but who, like a magician, possesses knowledge and skills that the rest of society cannot even approach. It is no coincidence that Alberti himself, the first theorist of perspective, boasts of the “merit of being the first to write about this art, which is the most difficult.”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his life, Miquel Màrtir has devoted himself to faithfully reproducing classical paintings such as Crivelli’s *The Virgin and Child* or Van der Weyden’s *The Crucifixion*. Through this act of reproduction, achieved with a refined command of technique, he casts a gaze upon key moments in the history of perspective, especially in the staging of religious subjects. Perspective is a way of articulating reality, a technique from which a new subjective frame of reference will be constructed, crucial for the sociopolitical project of European modernity. At the same time, the collection of faithful copies of recognizable great paintings raises a second question, one that will recur throughout the exhibition: why does an authentic work of art seem more real to us than a fake? What role does the art system and the cultural construction around an artist’s name play in the way reality is woven?

In his treatise *De pictura*, Alberti argued that “the aim of painting is to provide pleasure, goodwill, and renown

9 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

to the painter.” He stated that “the painter’s work seeks to be pleasing to the masses” and advised that “anyone who wishes their works to be acceptable and pleasing for posterity must first think seriously about what they ought to do, and then perfect it with dedication.” These statements, written in 1435, initiated a divide that would be key throughout history in shaping how we allow ourselves to be seduced and affected by art. The artist is not a mere craftsman. The latter is limited to copying—a defect that Alberti harshly reproaches: regarding previous paintings, to what others have represented before, and to the manner in which they did so, one must strive not to repeat them.

What, then, must the artist do to transcend mere craftsmanship and achieve renown, both now and for posterity? “When we have a story to paint, let us first consider the method and order to follow to create the most beautiful work. From the outset, we must strive to have the aspects clearly defined in our mind, and throughout the process we must know how each element should be executed and where it should be placed. To be completely certain, we will divide our models by means of parallels.”<sup>10</sup>

Alberti makes it clear: the artist’s goal is to achieve a striking effect on the arduous path toward producing beauty.

10 Ibid.

What he calls beauty, now, well into the 21st century, we should strive to understand as a means of attaining—according to the standards and demands of each era—an adequate degree of fascination, of identification with the point of view inherent in the representation, and of correspondence with whatever we happen to call reality at that precise moment. How is this effect achieved? Alberti is transparent here as well, of course: through a perfected control of perspective technique. This is the foundation of everything. Photography has done nothing but latch onto and continue developing the very effects that perspective had already begun to produce.

Let us focus, for example, on a body that has been depicted persistently from the dawn of perspective up to the birth of photography. Let us pay attention to the clouds. Reflecting deeply on them can give us clues about some of the ideas that concern us here, because they condense into a single phenomenon some very powerful guides on how illusion reconstructs perception.

After all, as Deleuze already asked, what does it mean to perceive a cloud? How do we perceive something that never stops changing shape?<sup>11</sup> Isn't it at least suspicious that it seems more natural to you that, when you perform the exercise of imagining a cloud, a defined shape immediately comes to mind rather than something else that today

11 Gilles Deleuze, *Sur Cinéma, vérité et temps : Potences du faux*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1986.

no one is even able to conceive, because “the way something is constantly represented modifies its very nature”?<sup>12</sup>

First of all, we can recognize that in the cloud there is condensed that childlike space we already mentioned in relation to the curtain and the automaton—a place where suspicions are suspended, suspicions that will later accompany us into adulthood. It is perhaps the ineffability of clouds that allowed them, for a long time, to remain safe from the Western obsession with definition and classification. Surprisingly, it was not until well into the 19th century, when the rise of positivism made it inevitable, that clouds were profaned by taxonomy, simultaneously by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and by Luke Howard. This process ultimately culminated in the first edition of the *International Cloud Atlas* in the 20th century.

It is significant that the taxonomic impulses of Aristotelians and naturalists—who classified and ordered every being and phenomenon in nature that caught their attention—overlooked clouds for so long. The reason perhaps lies in the fact that, intuitively, clouds are motion before they are form. This is the childlike intuition that captivates you when you lie in a meadow and admire their constant transformation, their isomorphism, their resistance to any fixation, to any attempt to reduce them to a frozen, identifiable image. Perhaps, in some hidden corner of our mind, no matter how grown-up we

12 Jean-Luc Nancy, *La vérité du mesonge*. Paris, Bayard, 2021.

become, we still want to see clouds escape our control, dissolve before our eyes. This is probably another type of fascination that gets relegated to oblivion in that first school drawing class in which someone forced us to draw a cloud, and also through the thousand representations that, one after another, from the dawn of perspective, insist on the immortalized instant, condemning them to be concrete forms.

It should come as no surprise that the history of cloud classification, in its most developed stage—from the publication of the first Atlas in 1896 to the *International Cloud Atlas* of 1932—was accompanied by a strong investment in meteorological photography.<sup>13</sup> We cannot overlook that no painting of clouds could represent anything other than an exercise in the artist's memory and imagination. Faced with a body that cannot be examined or dissected, whose form literally escapes, photography—thanks to its short exposure times—emerged as a cutting-edge technique capable of immortalizing it and, in doing so, introducing it into a new, domesticated reality.

Berndnaut Smilde's *Nimbus* series presents and anticipates one of the symbolic constraints that will accompany us throughout the exhibition: the cloud, an ethereal element that gives us the impression—taken to the extreme, for example, as a metaphor for digitalization—of being a

13 To explore the topic further, consult the texts collected in Andrés Galeano, *Fondo perdido de nubes*. Barcelona, MAC/RocioSantaCruz, 2021.



Berndnaut Smilde, *Nimbus*

mere form without material support. Accustomed as we are today to digital tricks and montages, we tend to believe that these photographs are digitally manipulated. However, our perception deceives us once again, because here the illusion is constructed using other technical means. The artist physically introduces clouds into spaces through a complex and refined technique, and then immortalizes them with a snapshot.

Likewise, A.A.Murakami's installation *Beyond the Horizon*, which materially introduces clouds into the exhibition space, functions as a disruptor of representational logic. In contrast to everything seen so far on this journey, and

contrary to what we have believed about the techniques for constructing illusion, against the evidence that a cloud in an exhibition can only be a projection or a photomontage, *Beyond the Horizon* reintroduces us to an illusion confronting a body that we are incapable of comprehending technically.

All these operations of domesticating reality—which begin with perspective and perhaps find their most paradigmatic formulation in the immortalization of a cloud’s form at a precise moment—these deliberate and forced uses of representation cannot operate alone. They also require a context, a place that acts as mediation, another technical apparatus that grants these representations enough symbolic value to gradually transform our desire, our point of view, and our perception of reality. They need a site of public exhibition.

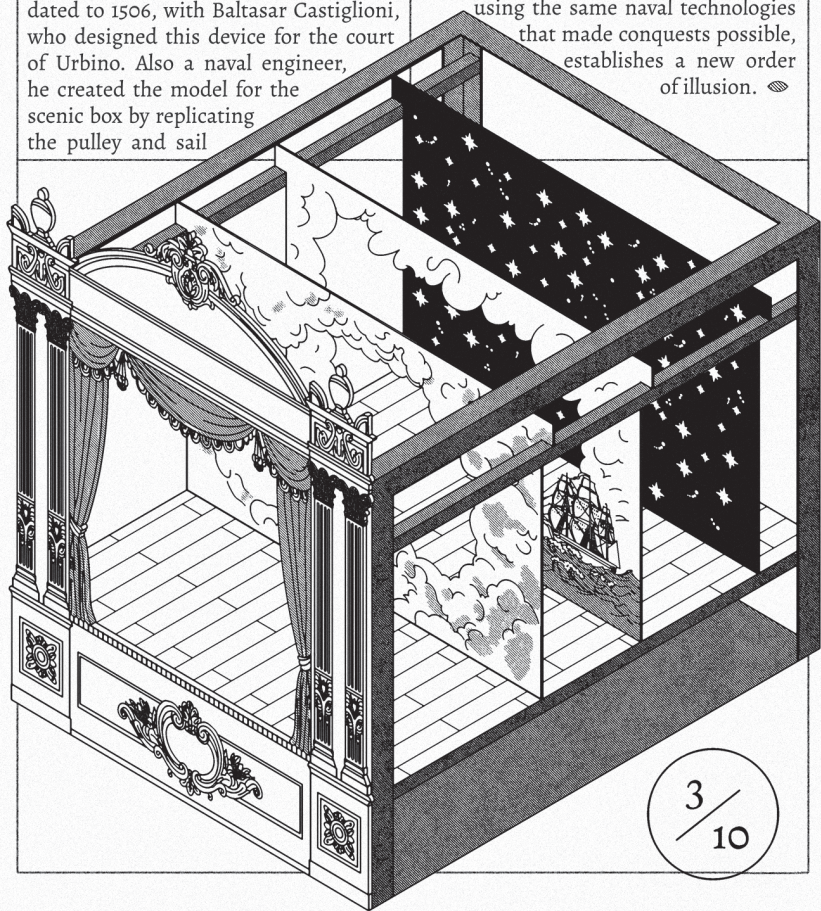
As cathedrals progressively became ruins, museums emerged—grand devices that generate illusion. “The museum opens a new relationship between the subject and the artistic object, which will affirm that it has provoked a disinterested, aesthetic pleasure of pure contemplation. The question of art is possible only through the institution of this special apparatus we call the museum. From it, works are suspended and for the first time can be contemplated for themselves, provided one maintains a distance of three meters.”<sup>14</sup> This exceptional space, this

14 Jean-Louis Déotte, op. cit.

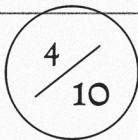
# SCENIC BOX

The scenic box is the apparatus that shapes the model of what we know today as theatre. It is a complex system of stage machinery (curtains, flats, pulleys, and other scenographic mechanisms) placed at the service of representing an illusion. The origin of the scenic box can be dated to 1506, with Baltasar Castiglioni, who designed this device for the court of Urbino. Also a naval engineer, he created the model for the scenic box by replicating the pulley and sail

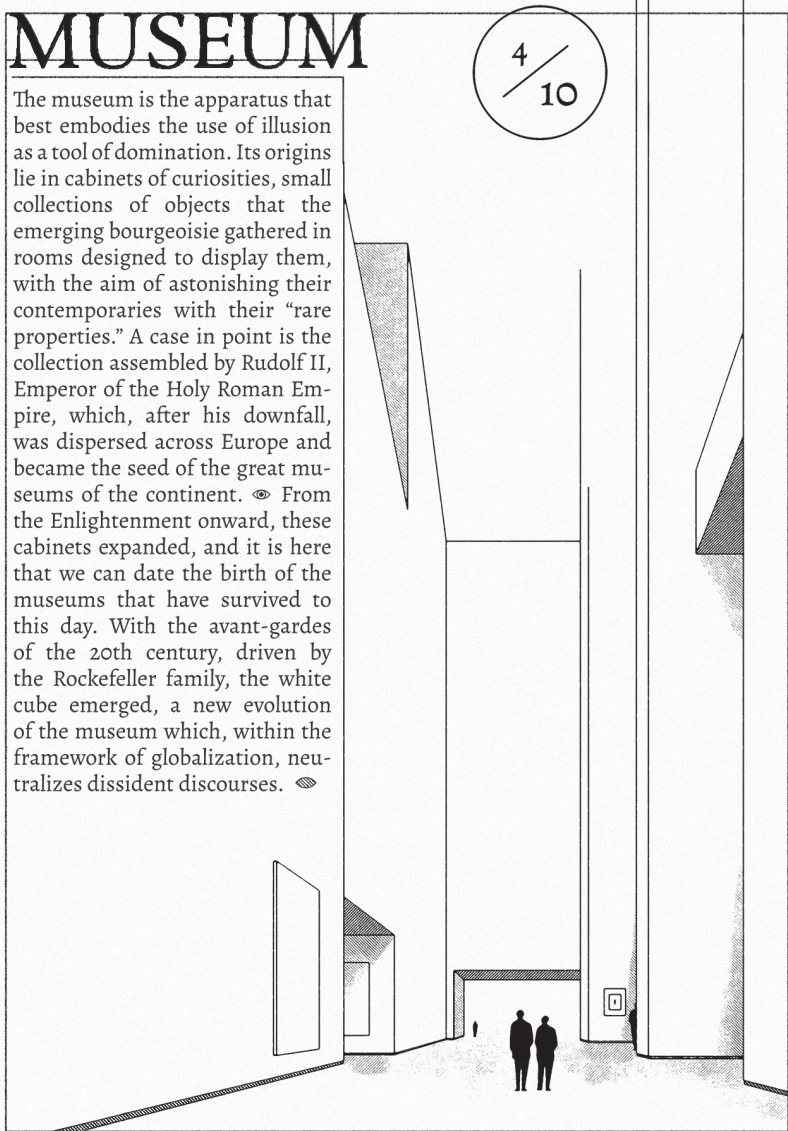
systems of the ships that were colonizing “new worlds.” In the following century, Michelangelo Buonarroti developed new stage machinery for the theatrical spectacle of the wedding of Cosimo II de’ Medici and Maria Magdalena of Austria. Thus, the scenic box is an apparatus that, using the same naval technologies that made conquests possible, establishes a new order of illusion.



# MUSEUM



The museum is the apparatus that best embodies the use of illusion as a tool of domination. Its origins lie in cabinets of curiosities, small collections of objects that the emerging bourgeoisie gathered in rooms designed to display them, with the aim of astonishing their contemporaries with their “rare properties.” A case in point is the collection assembled by Rudolf II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which, after his downfall, was dispersed across Europe and became the seed of the great museums of the continent. ◉ From the Enlightenment onward, these cabinets expanded, and it is here that we can date the birth of the museums that have survived to this day. With the avant-gardes of the 20th century, driven by the Rockefeller family, the white cube emerged, a new evolution of the museum which, within the framework of globalization, neutralizes dissident discourses. ◉



temple of modernity, will be decisive for the illusion proposed by art to take effect.

First, the museum represents a threshold, a cut from what lies outside its walls: there is no noise, no distractions, no strange or undesirable elements that could threaten its mission. Everything there is designed so that you can give your full attention to the artistic object, which represents precisely what is outside that building—what deserves to be recounted. Everything is controlled to produce the illusion. The museum functions, like theatrical representation from the moment the curtain rises, through an implicit pact, an unwritten contract between the audience and the objects that hang on its walls and fill its halls. In a display of apparent neutrality, they will fascinate you, offer you a point of view, and reorder reality. And in return, you will allow yourself to be seduced by their charms, to indulge in illusion, and, gradually, as you become familiar with its codes, you will enter a hypnotic trance that will alter your subjectivity, your desire, and your sense of reality.

Second, the modern museum, throughout its historical evolution—from the late 15th century to its canonical form in the 19th century—functions as a site of identity and of segmentation by class, gender, and race, much as the cabinet of curiosities did before it. It is through the process of liberating collections, abandoning aristocratic salons, and gradually opening them to the general public that the bourgeoisie began to grant this space the fundamental role of creating and consolidating its own identity



*Beyond the Horizon*, by the collective A.A.Murakami

symbols. Here, aesthetics precede ethics, both in purpose and in foundation. Within its walls, surrounded by an atmosphere of prestige and distinction, the museum will present scenes representing life in this and other worlds, distinguishing right from wrong, proper from improper conduct, and illustrating what is beauty, goodness, and reality. The new ruling class will construct an entire ethical and political system from this foundation.

Together, these phenomena will progressively result, as Lewis Mumford already noted in 1934, in the museum

replacing the direct, authentic experience of life, filtering it through the controlled and transformative lens of art. Representation will take the place that lived experience had traditionally occupied.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the museum will function as a great machine, a powerful apparatus inseparable from its own narratives of power.

But the museum, despite fulfilling this evident function, is only an individual and paradigmatic case of how architecture affects and reconfigures reality. Throughout modernity, the city has undergone a series of notable transformations that have produced an involuntary assimilation of its ideology. In the words of Peter Sloterdijk, architecture provokes a submersion—that is, a submissive immersion into an atmosphere designed to affect us psychologically. Gradually, over the centuries in which the imperialist, colonialist, heteropatriarchal, and bourgeois model of European modernity was constructed, cities became filled with palaces and monuments that daily remind us who the heroes and civilizing principles are, and which aesthetic ideals must be assimilated as ethical imperatives.

Architecture does not achieve its effects only in public spaces. Domestic spaces are also flooded with a new configuration that defines the bourgeois interior: a segmented space, divided by doors separating public from private rooms, male from female spaces, noble from service

15 Lewis Mumford, *op. cit.*

areas, work spaces from leisure spaces. From then on, the door acquires a new significance: it is the element that separates the space you are allowed to enter from the one that is forbidden, whose interior you cannot know—just as Alida, in the brief story that opens this book, does not know what is hidden behind the door of the office where she works. The door thus becomes an element that synthesizes our desire to pass through it and, at the same time, by closing, delimits our identity, enclosing us within the space we are permitted to inhabit. The door, of course, redefines our world.

Walking through the corridors of *The Assault of Illusion*, peepholes create the illusion of adjoining spaces—mysterious rooms that are difficult or impossible to access. Manuel Calderón's miniatures hyperrealistically compose rooms with impossible doors and connections that, with ghostly projections upon them, give the impression of a reality that is at once ours and not ours. Observing a model through a peephole activates voyeuristic desire, while the space it displays projects or anticipates itself into our reality as a place we could traverse, even though its change in scale necessarily situates it in another dimension.

Like the model, perspective, instant photography, the museum, and architecture, these are forms of representation that, through technical sophistication, achieve the effect of an illusion that ultimately redefines our place in the world, our desire, and our reality. They concretize

what Jean-Louis Déotte calls the texture of an era. However, their particular effect would not be possible—or would be very different—without the effects of discourse; that is, without a specific connection between words and images.

If we pause to consider it, what does a frozen image of a cloud ultimately mean—what does it tell us exactly? Could it not be a metaphor for melancholy, but also for daydreaming? Could it not be the symbol of a decentralized server, but also the sign that a bomb has exploded? In fact, we reach a decisive point when we speak of the influence that the illusory effect of images exerts on our bodies. It would be a mistake—or, at the very least, a simplification—to think that there is a clear and direct intentionality, except in rare cases, in the relationship between an image, what it signifies for us, and the effect that this relationship between image and word has on our interior.

All of this is brought to our attention by Chico Amaral's scene-paintings, which refer to a distant imaginary of shadows and magic lanterns, animated by a hidden mechanism that we cannot see or understand. His work introduces, for the first time, a textual layer, introducing the word into *The Assault of Illusion*, which otherwise deliberately leaves the image almost always devoid of written support. In these scene-paintings, the effect of attributing meaning is produced by the audience itself, manually operating a small pulley—but doing so from a place removed



Manuel Calderón, *The Illusion of a Floor of One's Own, Assembly #1*

from which they cannot see the effects their manipulation produces. The movement of the painting and the word on which it stops illustrate the randomness between signifier and signified.

This is how the attribution of the word operates within illusion. We must avoid falling into the conspiratorial fantasy of imagining a closed-door meeting where gray-haired businessmen in expensive suits meticulously design, stroke by stroke, the future, anticipating the specific ways in which a system of representation will be read and absorbed. The way effects operate—the way they define the texture of an era—is far more complex than that: often, the person who receives the precise meaning of an

image is unable to point to who loaded it with that meaning; and often the person who holds the power to attribute meaning to images, who controls the mechanism, is unaware of the concrete effects it will ultimately produce in those who receive them—yet this does not dilute their intentionality.

But there is perhaps a notable exception to this principle. Cinema, from its origins with the use of intertitles, but especially with the introduction of sound in the 1920s, is a form of representation that relies precisely on the relationships established between the moving image and the word. It is, therefore, an extremely powerful system for the re-signification of the imagination—something that totalitarian regimes understood throughout the 20th century and that contemporary fascisms continue to apply in the new digital frameworks of moving images.

From its beginnings, cinema has operated according to a pattern that includes dynamics of imitation and the production and reproduction of desire. This pattern has developed in parallel with its technical and narrative evolution because, as Jacqueline Rose insightfully observed some years ago, imaginary identification is particularly implicated in the cinematic apparatus itself.<sup>16</sup> We should

16 “Cinema is the most imaginary of all representational devices because its perceptual presence is more precise and tangible than any other system of representation. While the spectator is being deceived more than in any other artistic form, they are nevertheless aware of this process and, therefore, occupy a position



Chico Amaral, *Endless Scroll*

understand cinema, then, as an immensely powerful apparatus producing an imaginary already loaded with meaning, whose ideology, developed through its technical evolution, has worked to blur the limits of its own fictional nature. In accordance with this, we can read the history of hegemonic cinema as a progressive attempt to establish communicating vessels between the illusion consciously perceived by the spectator on the screen and the life that resumes once they cross the door of the cinema into the street.

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that psychoanalysis might call one of denial.” Jacqueline Rose, “Woman as Symptom,” in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London, Verso, 1986.

Although, of course, there are nuances, tributaries, and entanglements within it, it can be useful to read this historical evolution through a timeline marked by three moments of transformation in the ways of pursuing verisimilitude. First, what we might call mythical realism; second, objective realism, which characterized the golden age of Hollywood; third, subjective realism, in which we are currently immersed. Paying attention to these three moments can provide some clues about the strategies historically followed by cinema to approach its ideological goal of being believable and, thus, achieving more striking effects. Through a better understanding of these strategies, we can attempt a coherent answer to a fundamental question about what we are addressing here: why do cinema, and art in general, seek to establish these communicating vessels between its reality and ours?

Mythical realism defined cinema from its beginnings until the appearance of sound in films. It was a period characterized by great historical feats and also by fantastical ones. The canonical historiography of cinema defines two impulses or modes of representation through which the medium developed technically. One, marked by the Lumière brothers, and in the United States by Edison, can be read in some way as the root of what we today call documentary cinema: an impulse to show what occurs in the world. The other, recognizable in the films of Méliès or Segundo de Chomón, explicitly developed cinematic illusion through the use of an extensive toolkit of resources,

from backgrounds to complex editing techniques, to create worlds far removed from those of the cities where the films were projected.

However, a closer look at the early strategies for disseminating cinema suggests that this binary division does not fully account for what actually occurred. The cinema of the Lumières, like that of Edison and also Méliès, presented itself above all as a technical curiosity that opened a window to other worlds, whether these were as fantastic as the study of Faust or as recognizable as the exit of a factory or the arrival of a train at a station. What made this mechanism so appealing, turning it into the most impressive of illusionist tricks, was its ability to transport the audience. It is worth emphasizing here that, just as a magician does, the cinematograph initially carried out the action of bringing a distant scene inside the screening room, not the other way around. It would not be until much later that the opposite effect would be pursued.

For cinema to succeed in transporting the audience elsewhere, thus reversing the operation, a deep understanding of editing techniques and their potential to accompany narrative was necessary—a technical development highly conditioned by the propagandistic and ideological uses of the medium. With *The Birth of a Nation*, a film constructed from the North American desire to educate a migrant population considered illiterate about the ideological history of the country, passing through the Civil

War and including a fascist apology of white supremacy, D.W. Griffith for the first time put all cinematic resources at the service of a new project of subjectivation. With that film, it is the spectators who are transported into the screen. Here, cinema is already capable of producing all kinds of identifications and phantom projections propelled by the content and supported by a very powerful technical toolbox.

Cinema, however, was still in its exploratory phase of other worlds, whether created or recreated. Let us remember that at that moment it still lacked sound, so fantastic or mythical scenarios provided plots more accessible to a medium with serious narrative deficits. This is the moment that characterizes the first, mythical phase of cinema. Its stories, already capable of projecting the audience inside them, relied on distant, non-realistic settings. A good example is Raoul Walsh's 1924 film *The Thief of Bagdad*. That film employed powerful strategies to fascinate the audience: the public would be introduced, transported, and identify with the exotic romance between the thief and the princess. What in Griffith's film was tinged with racist and nationalist ideology would then begin to develop as a heteropatriarchal ideology.

Of course, these strategies of fascination—whether transporting us to an exotic paradise or a remote time—would not disappear; on the contrary, they remained inscribed in what we today call cinematic genres, which gradually emerged over the years. Fantasy, historical,

adventure, or horror films would continue to explore from different angles the process of opening windows onto very distant worlds, worlds that conquer their audiences through their strangeness, their radical otherness, rather than through familiarity or proximity that might involve processes of internalization and projection into the heart of their stories and characters.

However, from a certain moment—which suspiciously coincides with the beginnings of sound cinema—a leap occurs in the medium’s credibility. Audiences then achieve a certain state of maturity, surpassing a degree of naïveté within the cinema hall. Due to the familiarity they gain with the format, cinema ceases to attract purely by transporting viewers to other worlds and requires, to connect with spectators, an additional dose of realism. From then on, what is reproduced on screen is what appears to be objective reality. From that moment on, as in naturalist theatre, characters begin to resemble any of the people sitting in the audience, with familiar settings that could very well be located a couple of streets away from the screening room.

This second phase created the perfect breeding ground for the golden age of Hollywood, based on the star system and a powerful network of major studios. If stars then began signing expensive contracts with these studios, being signed and exploited over their careers, it was because the studios wove a lucrative narrative continuity between what happened inside and outside the screens,

in order to enhance identification between the characters, the actors and actresses who portrayed them, and the public. Why should a film studio, whose aim should be to create and exploit cultural products, intervene in what happens outside the cinema screens? Why should it endeavour to construct the lives, relationships, and passions of the stars it contracts—a practice that progressively became the norm in Hollywood? The propagandistic tendency that the cinematic medium gradually acquires, whether in totalitarian regimes or in so-called democratic states, as in the United States, is somehow at the root of this tendency. Cinema, as a powerful artifact of illusion creation, mass influence, and control, and with its low degree of ambiguity because it essentially fixes and makes reproducible the connection between image and word, quickly becomes imbued with ideology. And, like so many other technical inventions since the Industrial Revolution, all technical and narrative refinements, built throughout its history to indoctrinate ideologically, are put at the service of capital.

North American capitalism, already swimming in Fordism at that time, was about to make a surprising turn. Highly influenced by the teachings of Edward Bernays, who had based his theories on those of his uncle—his mother's brother, Sigmund Freud—capitalism moved toward the newly acquired idea that every person, regardless of class or gender, contained a potential consumer whose desire demanded to be probed,

reconstructed, and exploited. Consumerism and advertising were being born.

It is clear that films, in this new consumption scenario, became an ideal product. Not only was their material support, the celluloid reel, reproducible, opening the possibility of simultaneous exploitation in many cinema halls. Not only was the ticket price affordable, accessible to people of all social classes. Additionally, consumption did not involve the use or wear of a single unit, allowing the potential for an almost infinite number of consumers, regardless of the material production costs of the copy.

Exploiting this highly profitable business required knowing the consumers, probing their desires. But how could consumerism know the desires of its consumers if they themselves are unaware of them? Contemporary societies have caused “the subject to confront their desire from a position of radical ambiguity. The media relentlessly bombard them with demands to choose this or that, addressing them as the supposed knowing subject of what they truly want.”<sup>17</sup>

Much more accurate than thinking that cinema and other illusion-creating media focused on analysing what their consumers wanted in order to provide it to them, to try to satisfy them, is to assume the following: all these modes of representation, of illusion creation, have been

17 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. London, Verso, 1997.

responsible over time for constructing the desire of their audience. Specifically, the film industry undertook the task of building a vicious circle of fascination, fantasy of satisfaction, and actual dissatisfaction. It caused a new nourishment for desire to germinate, one that would be deeply inscribed in the texture of the era, creating an army of consumers of its films. And what was this focus of desire creation, in a moralistic religious context, later secularized by the image of the comfortably bourgeois men and women of the 19th century? Of course: sexuality. And not just any sexuality, but specifically heteropatriarchal sexuality, the only kind that the male minds directing the film industry were then capable of conceiving.

To achieve the striking effect of cementing heterosexual binarism through the screen, it was necessary for men and women to identify with the cinematic versions of their own gender roles. For this reason, since then, cinema has never ceased to conquer reality through numerous techniques, ranging from colour to three-dimensionality, in order to offer a greater verisimilitude of the characters with whom the audience is supposed to identify.

Is it not, perhaps, the recent documentary turn in commercial cinema—which floods successful films with subtitles like “based on true events,” which fills theatres with biopics—the latest movement of this technical and narrative process of conquering reality? This last phase, into which cinema has been entering for years, explains the success of reality shows and social media as channels

for selling cultural products that present themselves and are polished as real, and responds to reasons very similar to those that drove the transition from mythical to objective realism with the introduction of sound cinema: mastery of the medium, familiarity with it, exhaust a certain degree of naivety in the processes of identification with illusion, a crisis that fosters a further step in the conquest of reality by the media of representation.

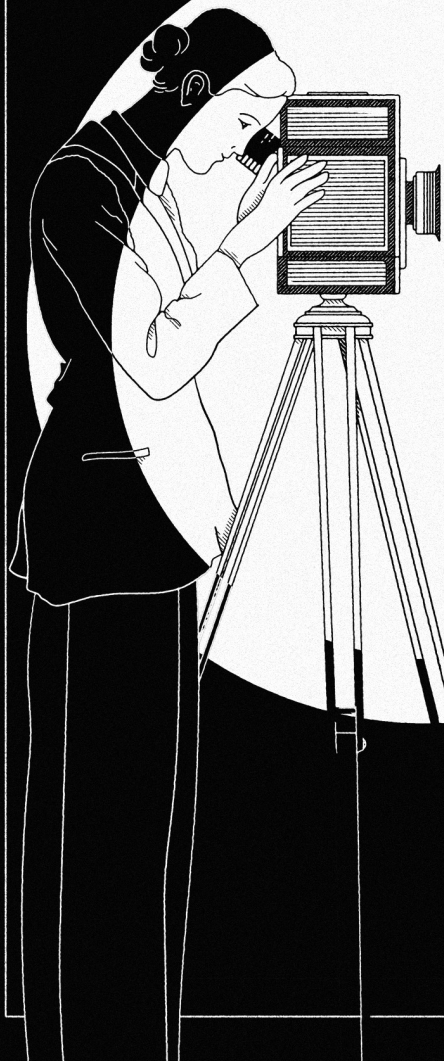
This effect of projection is addressed head-on by the installation of MANS O and Joan Sandoval, which acts in *The Assault of Illusion* as a sort of altered mirror. There, instead of one's own reflection, through a complex system of cameras, the body and movement are reinterpreted and processed as some of the elements that appear in the very pieces of the exhibition. This installation functions as an oracle announcing the way in which we integrate and identify with images, and it will serve as a leitmotif that recurs throughout the exhibition. "The greater the rationalization, the more realistic the film. The magic becomes subterranean, it hides and wraps itself. That is to say, it dissolves. The myth is more or less deep, more or less skilfully brought to the norms of objectivity or enveloped in verisimilitude."<sup>18</sup>



The processes of identification that all art of illusion produces are constantly encouraged by a "that could happen

18 Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*. Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1956.

# CINEMATOGRAPH

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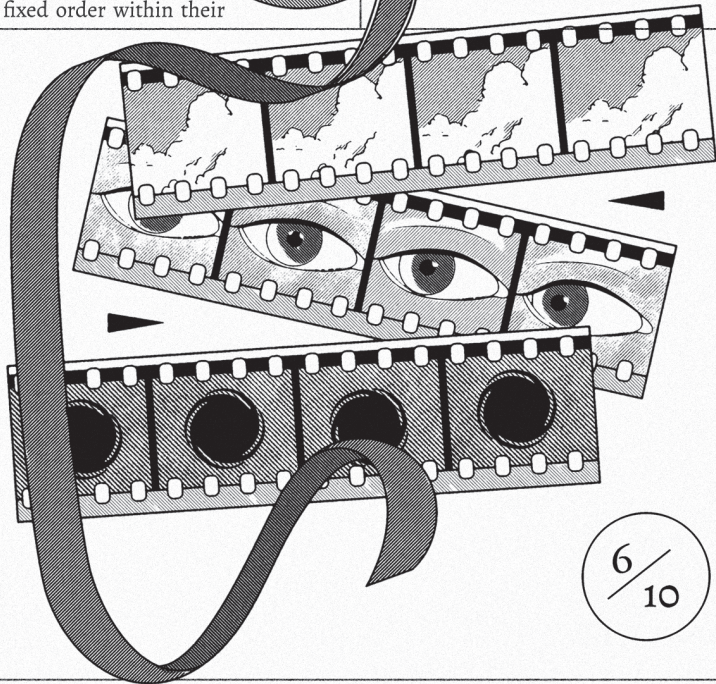
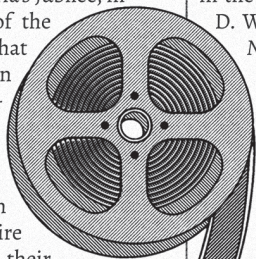
The various technologies that converge in the cinematograph serve a single function: turning the still image into a moving image. Dickson, a young assistant to Thomas Edison, invented the kinetograph in 1888, which in the hands of capitalist entrepreneurship became a mechanism allowing the individual viewing of primitive moving images.  In the 1890s, its first applications served the symbolic perpetuation of the figures of power sustaining the bourgeoisie. Queen Victoria was the first public figure to be filmed, in order to increase her popularity. At the same time, Edison placed the technology at the service of magnate William Randolph Hearst, who used it as a propaganda tool in U.S. elections. Thus, alongside the creation of fictional narratives, the cinematograph reinforced existing power narratives. 

# EDITING

Editing appears as the apparatus that gives narrative meaning to moving images. A form of proto-editing can be found in the 1897 recording of a procession for Queen Victoria's Jubilee, in which distributors of the footage instructed that the images be shown in a specific chronological order. 👁

With editing, then, a continuous narrative is created in which images acquire a fixed order within their

own universe, thereby establishing a hierarchy of contemplation and imposing a single narrative of the event's perception. A clear example is found in the work of the American filmmaker D. W. Griffith, especially *The Birth of a Nation*, in which, through his revolutionary use of editing, he manipulates the visual narrative to associate Black and immigrant populations with chaos, thereby legitimizing social control and reinforcing white bourgeois ideology. 🎞





MANS O and Joan Sandoval, *sm\_algo\_ritmo.ckpt*

to me.” It requires guarantees of authenticity, which is what sustains “the mass adherence of spectators and, conversely, the mass defections when the balance is broken.” Art “imagines for me, imagines in my place and at the same time outside of me, with a more intense and

precise imagination.”<sup>19</sup> For this reason, when it manages to be truthful in the face of the demands of its time, when it successfully assaults you with its illusion, art slips into your dreams each night, transforming you, altering your desire, and redefining what you understand by reality the following morning.

It is no coincidence that the hole or the void is another of the recurring images in the exhibition. Like the cloud, the hole functions as a semiotic aggregator of various planes of meaning that depend on how and from where we construct reality, subjectivity, and desire. Julia Santa Olalla’s paintings, which inhabit the void, play with a formal overlapping of different perceptual planes of what we call reality. They consciously employ the cut implied by a change in modes of representation and the fissure that such a change produces in its reading. The way one moves from one effect of illusion to another, through this overlap, entails a questioning of the anchoring points of the representation of reality.

Gradually, we have been constructing an image that should provoke a certain unease. Throughout its history, art has induced us into a pseudo-hypnotic state in which, caught in its effects of illusion, it corrupts our desire and modifies our perception and understanding of reality. This is just one facet in the history of class struggle and

19 François Ricci, “Le Cinéma entre l’imagination et la réalité,” in *Revue Internationale de Filmologie*, vol. 1, no. 2. Paris, PUF, 1948.



Julia Santa Olalla, *Vidrio*

domination: those who are in a position to create, finance, and sustain new and advanced techniques whose illusion will fascinate and capture us are the ones who will hold the tools to delimit what is real and what is not, to influence what we want and where we situate ourselves.

But the most disturbing question is the following: what if they did not? What if art and culture were not there to tell us who we are, what we want, and under what

principles we organize this chaotic world of perceptions between what is real and what is not? The terrifying news is that then, probably, we would be faced with an unfathomable void which, just like illusion, would fascinate us and trap us in its depths. “Fantasy sustains the subject’s sense of reality: when the phantasmatic frame disintegrates, the subject suffers a loss of reality and begins to see reality as a universe of unreal nightmare, without a firm ontological basis. That universe of nightmare is what remains of reality when reality is left without the support of fantasy.”<sup>20</sup>

*Descent into Limbo* is an installation by Anish Kapoor, first shown in 1992 at Documenta IX in Kassel, and later in 1998 at the Serralves Foundation, upon which the artist himself has drawn to present a new installation conceived and produced for *The Assault of Illusion*. The sense of emptiness evoked by a bottomless hole brings the aesthetic experience close to the idea of the sublime. The installation places us in a limbo between the spatial judgment of what we see and the aesthetic judgment of that apparent void whose limits our imagination cannot grasp. Thus, faced with this optical effect, the imagination, unable to render a judgment, becomes frustrated. The image appears to us as an abyss that provokes an escape of the imagination and, yet, because of its relation to the infinite, fascinates us and holds us captive.

20 Slavoj Žižek, op. cit.



Anish Kapoor, *Void Pavilion*

“Fantasy serves as an intermediary between the formal symbolic structure and what we encounter in reality; that is, it provides a framework according to which reality can function as an object of desire capable of filling the gaps opened by the formal symbolic structure. How do I know that what I most desire is a strawberry cake? That is what fantasy informs me of.”<sup>21</sup> And this fantasy

21 Ibid.

is constructed through a culture that will only succeed in creating illusion, that will only manage to captivate us if it rests upon the most advanced techniques, to which, of course, we have no access. It seems that we cannot escape the crossroads in which, inevitably, “we sacrifice ourselves, act, and take pleasure through the agency of the great Other.”<sup>22</sup>

To avoid being overcome by a feeling of anguish at this newly discovered crossroads, let us make a leap toward the place to which this text should ultimately lead us, a point we will return to later: it is domination itself that opens the possibility of emancipation. The very fact that for so many centuries we have been subjected to a technical evolution over which we could not decide, that we have been subjected to its effects of illusion—which fascinate us, which amplify our desire to consume them—is the dominating effect in the construction of our reality and of ourselves, always beyond our control, and it is precisely this that contains the emancipatory potential of a new scenario in which we could take the reins over the effects that illusion exerts on our lives.

To reach this scenario, however, it is first necessary to undergo an operation of unveiling. It is necessary to lift the veil of illusion, to lay bare its mechanisms and elaborate techniques, and to understand why they have exerted such an effect on our perception for so long. One must go

22 Ibid.

through this process of revelation, and then through a phase of denial or questioning, to aspire to a new state of illusion—one provoked and sustained by a newly reconstructed desire.



## Revelation

Let us return for a moment to the world of clouds. One Saturday afternoon, while the adults are attending to their phones and complaining about life, two little people gaze out the window and play at allowing themselves to be amazed by the shapes that cumulus clouds trace across the sky—always provisional, because they immediately vanish, transforming into other unforeseen sketches, like a visual improvisation without a set script.

The desire of artists such as the Japanese collective A.A.Murakami or the Dutch photographer Berndnaut Smilde to bring clouds into exhibition spaces stems from this childhood fascination with a natural phenomenon that never allows us to capture it, that does not allow us to store it, analyse it, or freeze it, that refuses to be tamed. The introduction of a body like a cloud into a museum, the insertion of any object—natural or artificial—into that space of domestication par excellence, causes it to lose entirely its organic and indeterminate potency. It then becomes inscribed within the artistic-technical realm of classification, cataloguing, and sacralization. It is reduced to an object for contemplation and study. Such artistic



**Fabian Knecht, *Isolation (Parkstück)***

interventions, then, introduce us to a paradox that fascinates us—but they do so in a way opposite to the way clouds fascinate us in the sky.

The postnatural work of Fabian Knecht, which emulates a museification of natural spaces and presents them from that profound paradox, arises from the same fascination. What effect does the separation of a piece of the world from its context produce, by introducing it into a gallery or, similarly but inversely, by constructing four

walls around it? For *The Assault of Illusion*, this German artist has kidnapped thirty square meters of Barcelona's Horta Park, by constructing the architecture of the Santa Mònica Center of Arts around nature itself. The photograph of this installation, introduced into the itinerary of the exhibition, raises crucial questions about the limits or the absence of them between the space we call "free or natural" and the other we call "controlled or artificial," as well as about the processes of domestication that cultural perception always carries with it.

By what mechanism, by what incredible sleight-of-hand do these artists manage to domesticate trees and the atmosphere, introducing them into places where they should never have been? Returning to clouds, the technical mechanism that allows this kind of operation, enormous, complex and costly machines that achieve a very controlled condensation of smoke, conceals within it the accumulation of different inventions that act in it as technical strata. Among many others, three can be enumerated: ethylene glycol, a liquid that, upon changing state, allows the formation of smoke; the heat exchanger, which achieves that this compound can rapidly change temperature and consequently its state; and the air pump, which is in charge of expelling the smoke cloud from the machine.

The heat exchanger is mechanically based on the independent condenser invented by James Watt to improve the performance of the steam engine. It was this mechanism that allowed that machine, a technology already existing

since the 17th century, although its antecedents can be traced back again to ancient Greece, to become a viable and low-cost apparatus for producing energy. That was what largely caused the advent of the first Industrial Revolution and its worst consequences: the greatest impulse of capitalism to date for the growth of surplus value that the new machine made possible, a process of alienation of the new worker that gave rise to the industrial proletariat, and the beginning of an unbridled extractivism of natural resources in which the origin of the environmental situation we suffer today can be found.

Ethylene glycol, for its part, was first synthesized in 1856 by the French chemist Charles-Adolphe Wurtz. However, this compound was not applied until the First World War, at which time someone realized it could be used in the manufacture of explosives as a substitute for glycerol. That change provided greater stability to the bomb, and therefore technical improvements in the battlefield. It was at that moment, in 1917, that semi-commercial production of this product began, the first step towards a later opening in the market that would allow its recreational use.

Finally, the history of the air pump cannot be explained without mentioning the famous experiment of the Magdeburg Hemispheres. In 1654, the already recognized German physicist and jurist Otto von Guericke convened in Regensburg important scientific and political personalities, as well as the curious public, for a scientific experiment that was presented as a circus spectacle: eight horses

on each side pulled strongly on the two parts of a sphere joined simply by the effect of the vacuum inside. The experiment, which demonstrated that the vacuum had more force than the impetus of sixteen horses combined, left all attendees speechless for what at that time could only seem like magic or witchcraft. Even the King Ferdinand III of Habsburg, invited to the spectacle to further lend it authority, realism, and credibility, certified the success of the invention, legitimized it and thus promoted the path of the apparatus towards the many applications that such air and vacuum force could have.

But to this story, which reviews the different technical components that make the machinery necessary to produce the illusion of introducing clouds into a closed space possible, another equally decisive one must be added, without which we would remain only with a partial image. Despite all these technical ingredients being available, which, as we have seen, have origins and hide very diverse intentions, where does the exercise of imagination that suggests assembling them to construct a machine to produce clouds arise from? Where does the desire of the people who will dedicate time, effort, and resources to perfect, articulate, and fit together these three technical elements come from? This is the story that, in contrast to the merely technical, largely answers aesthetic questions. It is the story of desire, fed by the very illusion and fascination that previous phenomena provoke in those who engage in their future development.

This story, in the case of the production and domestication of clouds, is inseparable from that of fireworks, which we applaud today at every national celebration, and has its origin in China, in parallel with the invention of gunpowder and its introduction to Europe between the 13th and 14th centuries.

Undoubtedly, the interest of the West in this compound, which had been in use in the East for centuries, did not respond to aesthetic interests. Gunpowder explodes and allows projectiles to be propelled. Whoever masters it best, whoever better employs their technical knowledge to get the maximum performance, will achieve greater effectiveness in the lucrative business of killing the adversary.

However, despite its development and production being clearly driven by military objectives, gunpowder quickly found other applications. Creating recreational explosives and fireworks was one of them, not so far removed, in reality, from its primary military use: the firework castles that became popular throughout the centuries in Europe, as they had in China, had to do with creating an image of ostentation and victory after a won battle. Is it a coincidence that drones, the war machines par excellence today, have undergone a similar fate and now serve in large cultural manifestations as entertainment of lights and colours? Before these, progressively, national holidays and sporting spectacles appropriated fireworks originating from the battlefield. And although the places changed, the meaning remained: it is the victor who celebrates themselves

through the ability to redraw the firmament, through the power of imprinting in the sky stars larger, brighter, more thunderous, more colourful, and more expensive than the neighbour or adversary.

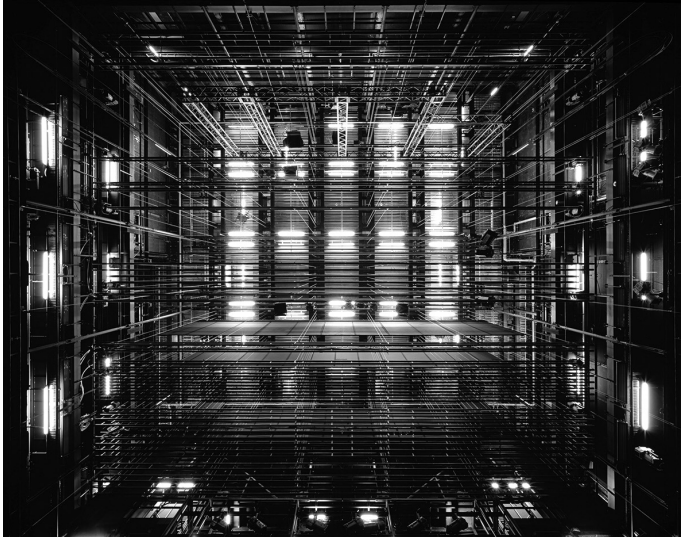
But stars were not the only things that the ancient firework castles drew. The use of gunpowder had become so sophisticated that it could also produce fascinating clouds of coloured smoke, which transferred the battlefield imaginary and corrected it through celebratory dyes. Again, as in the case of producing stars, the opponents engaged in a technical race for the use of pigments and spectacular effects with a very concrete goal: to illusion the spectator, fascinate them, increase their desire to see more, bigger explosions, better and more colourful extensions of smoke that would demonstrate and acclaim the power of the victor.

Due to the toxicity that was later discovered in smoke effects, they ceased to be used as a complementary effect to lights in the sky. It was not a matter of celebrating the victory of the victor with their own death. But the fascination for the cloud remained inscribed in the retina of the public, traceable to the origin of the smoke machine and its use in stage and magic spectacles. In the past, the smoke cloud was produced by burning mineral oils and kerosene, which was also later abandoned for health reasons, giving way to the machine that we know today.

This analysis of a complex technical machinery behind the production of a specific illusion effect could be applied

to many other technical apparatuses that sustain different systems of representation. The perspectival apparatus, the stage box, photography, the cinematograph, cybernetics, artificial intelligence—all of them are complex machines whose ingredients carry intricate and often tragic particular histories within the technical and artistic development of European modernity. In all of them, the impressive illusion effects that they have produced throughout many centuries and continue producing today, so complex that they sneak constantly through every pore of the skin, affect our gaze, modify our body and thought without our full awareness, are possible due to concrete, identifiable, and datable techniques: language, geometric, architectural, and mechanical techniques, photochemical, psychological, montage... Behind every illusion, there is always a complex machine whose gears account for the hundreds of fields of knowledge that technique has been opening throughout the centuries.

The photographic series *The Fourth Wall*, by Klaus Frahm, introduces us into the space from which we will contemplate the technical support of some of the installations in the exhibition. The series takes images of recognizable international theatres from the place that only technicians and actors set foot in, showing us the complex technical mechanisms necessary to provoke in us the illusion that there exists a fourth wall that separates us from the space of representation and illusion: a wall that



Klaus Frahm, *The Fourth Wall*

we know is responsible for the particular way in which our reality, our desire and our subjectivity have been constructed since European modernity.

However, as we have already intuited, technique alone cannot explain the machine in its entirety. It cannot explain its finished assembly, the motives and desires that have caused such a machine to have this and not another configuration because it seeks this and not another effect.

To illustrate this in greater detail, we can try to trace here a simplified scheme of how a process of technical development and deployment usually takes place, from

the first moment of creation of an artifice to a final phase of definitive absorption by its social environment.

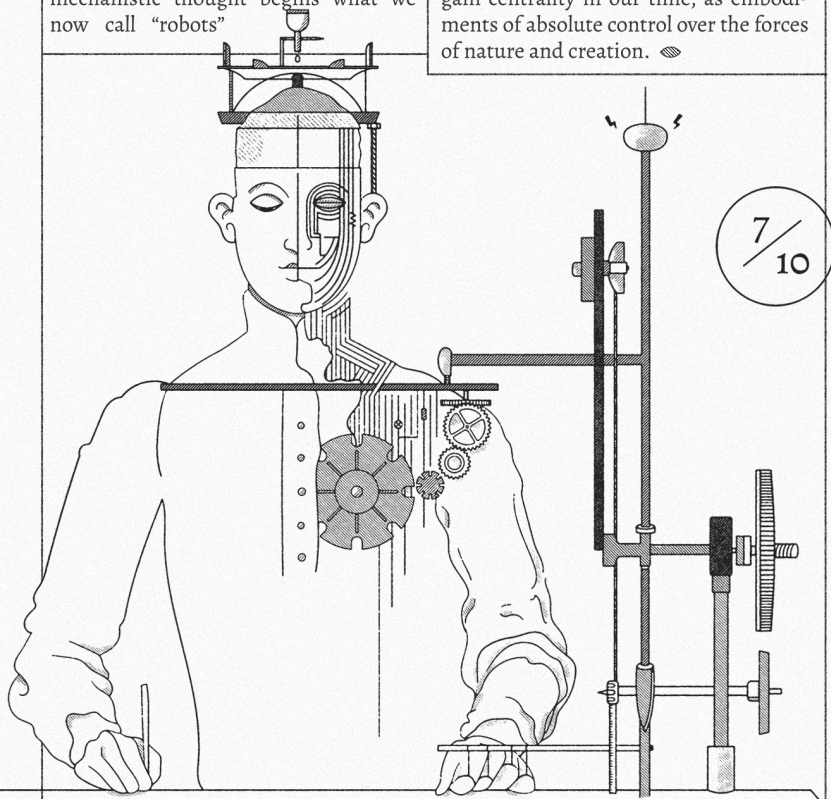
This process begins with an invention. Today we are too accustomed to the frameworks of power, especially economic, being already present in that first moment, since most inventions today are imagined and produced in the research and development departments of large companies, and in university laboratories often funded by those same companies. However, this has not been so, at least not so blatantly, throughout history. We know innumerable episodes in which an invention apparently took place by chance or accident, as in the case of ethylene glycol which, as we have just seen, was synthesized for the first time in 1856 by Charles-Adolphe Wurtz.

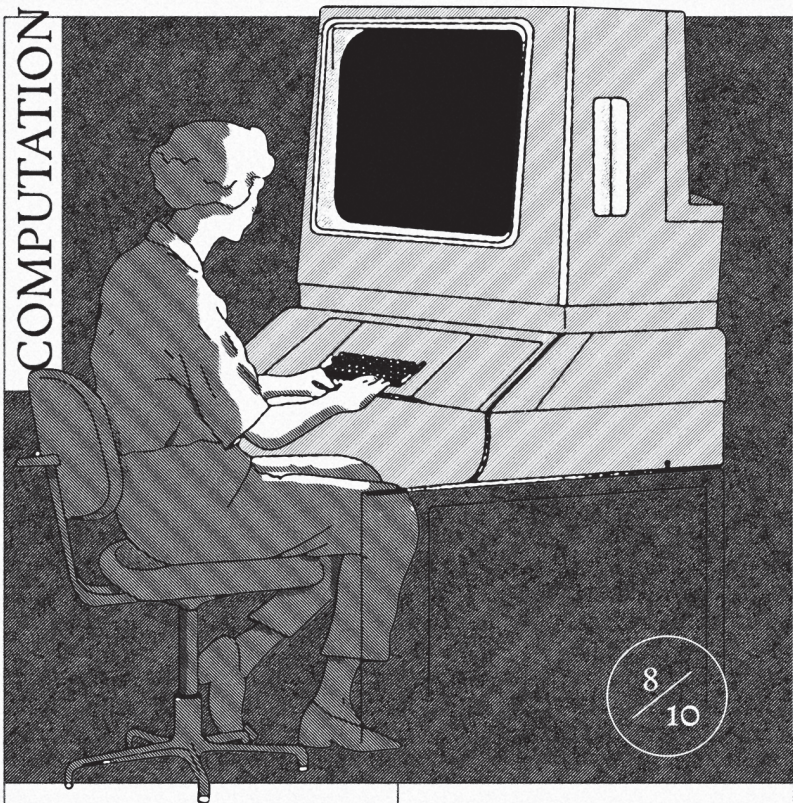
This story of accidental invention or discovery, often used with suspicious romantic shades by the historiography of art and science, must nevertheless be qualified: in the first place, especially as technical developments become more complex, the person who has the capacity to come across that chance is someone who, either by possessing their own resources, or by having enough renown in academic or political spheres to convince another to lend them resources so that they can have accidents, is surrounded by the necessary conditions for these to take place. Of course, one does not synthesize ethylene glycol by chance while enslaved twelve hours a day as a labourer in a factory. At the very least, one must have acquired chemical knowledge and have access to a laboratory.

# AUTOMATON

The automaton, as an apparatus in the service of illusion, has existed since ancient times. Automatic devices are often documented in the power spaces of various cultures: in Greek temples, gigantic statues were moved by steam machines, and in Persian courts royal thrones were adorned with mechanical beasts that intimidated subjects. ◉ With Descartes' mechanistic thought begins what we now call "robots"

or "artificial intelligences." The French thinker shaped his vision while contemplating the mechanical devices in the royal gardens of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where royalty and the burgeoning bourgeoisie of the early 1600s gathered to delight in observing creatures animated by hydraulic forces. From this point onward, these "animated beings" gain centrality in our time, as embodiments of absolute control over the forces of nature and creation. ◉





Digital computation is the capacity to convert any information into a binary reproduction system. Its origins as an apparatus can be traced back to the 18th century with figures such as Leibniz and Johnson, who conceived it as a method of calculation. In the 20th century, however, we find its practical evolution, especially thanks to the role of General Electric, the most important technological company in the world at the time. ◉

To improve its competitiveness, the company created a system for digitizing the insurance policies of millions of users, violating their confidentiality. From there, digital technology expanded into all fields of information management. Particularly by the end of the 20th century, this company gave way to the modern techno-feudal empires of Google, Apple, and Microsoft which, among others, shape our present-day representation of reality. ◉

The second consideration is that technical research is, if not absolutely, at least relatively conditioned by a field of application. Let us say, to simplify, that an investigation is usually an attempt to answer a question that someone has formulated. And the one who formulates the questions, especially those that are most amplified, the ones that are heard everywhere, the ones that manage to deploy an army of people interested in providing an answer, is usually seated on some throne of power.

Let us assume, however, despite our suspicions and reservations, the hypothesis of accidental invention. In the case that something like this may occur, in the case that such an invention is not providing an answer to a specific question and therefore lacks application, it will remain forgotten in a report inside a folder. The report will be abandoned inside a dark drawer in a laboratory or department, and no one will open it until somewhere the right question is formulated and someone realizes that the answer could be found there. Such was the case, again, of ethylene glycol. It was not until a trench war began that accelerated a tactical and technological development, that fostered improvements in artillery to provoke advances in mobility, that someone formulated the following question: how the hell can we make our explosives less unstable than those of the adversary? It was not until this question opened that the ethylene glycol report was rescued from a dark drawer as a possible answer to it. Only then did that chemical compound begin to be

produced semi-commercially by the North American company Union Carbide Corporation.

This phase, which begins in creation and ends in controlled commercialization, is the first in any process of technical development. In it, the product has the characteristics of a high technology.<sup>23</sup> During this stage, the production of that particular technique is not yet fully industrialized nor massproduced, so access to it is rare and costly. It is, of course, “the richest classes that first adopt the new mechanisms.”<sup>24</sup> This causes two repercussions that will be unmistakable throughout this stage: first, those who are going to use that technology at this moment must have resources, so its use will be governed by a class differentiation. Second, since it is a cutting-edge, rare, and little-known technology, it will always be linked to a high degree of illusion on the part of the public, a fascination that in many cases its developers, whether artists or scientists, will take advantage of to increase their recognition within circles of power. It will serve to reinforce, in Alberti’s words, their renown.

23 We must try not to confuse what we today understand as high technology with what it means within the history of technology. “High technology” is a contextual concept that refers to those devices which, in a specific historical and geographical framework, require a great expenditure of resources and, consequently, are not accessible to the general public. Paper, for example, was a high technology for many centuries, even though it is not today.

24 Lewis Mumford, *op. cit.*

In this first phase, we can already glimpse what has always been a fruitful relationship between art and technology: from perspective to theatrical machinery, from the daguerreotype to the cinematograph, from the introduction of sound in movie theatres to the hyperrealism of an image produced by artificial intelligence, its audiences have been fascinated throughout this first stage. They are prey to illusion during the period in which these techniques are costly, cutting-edge, and inaccessible, not because of their content, but because of their simple technical deployment.

It is their condition as a new technical wonder that awakens in the audience the desire to consume them. And this occurs at a moment in which, precisely, only the instances of power have access to it, so they can control, manipulate, and inject into it the meanings they deem appropriate. It is, therefore, due to the fascination that this first stage provokes, as well as the derived effects it has on our desire, that its illusionary effect can be fully deployed, introducing us to a new perception of reality and a new anchor for our subjectivity.

This first phase is also strongly marked by private property for centuries. The Statute of Monopolies of 1624 was an act of the English Parliament that has gone down in history as the first legal expression of patent law. Since then, inventions and technical developments have been imbued with a dimension of property that always entails that the holder of the invention has full

power to make a decision about its subsequent technical development. Should the invention be opened, replicated, disseminated, and commercialized, which will imply introducing it into a Fordist logic that will make the product more accessible and, in passing, generate great profits for its owner? Or, on the contrary, should one choose not to give up its condition as high technology and, among many other repercussions, safeguard it as a rare, scarce, and fascinating good?

Although uncommon, there are numerous technical developments that have leaned and continue to lean toward this latter resolution. To a large extent, because the high resources for their production cannot be reduced, or because they are highly specialized techniques whose broad commercialization is unimaginable. But another example of techniques that opt for this second path are precisely those cultural manifestations that rely on the illusion they produce. In these cases, of course, it is not advisable to give up their effects of fascination, which will remain very powerful if the technique can never be used by those who can only see it from a distance, dazzled by its seductive power.

In fact, the visual construction of the void in works by Anish Kapoor such as *Descent into Limbo* or *Void Pavilion*, created for *The Assault of Illusion*, is made possible thanks to Vantablack, a pigment composed of carbon nanotubes that the artist patented and has never disseminated or commercialized. This makes him the only person legally

authorized to produce that particular visual effect. The very void proposed by these works highlights the technical mechanisms that underpin the aesthetic construction of an illusion, as well as the relationship with the forms of power that make them possible. It is nothing new, because “throughout history, the highest achievements in art have been the possession of the small caste that can master the instruments.”<sup>25</sup>

Outside of these notable exceptions, however, the most common response to this crossroads, which sooner or later faces anyone who has patented a technique, is to opt for its dissemination and commercialization. This response opens the second phase of technical development, in which the invention ceases to be strictly high technology and gradually spreads its use. In this second moment, the commercialization of the technical object causes the illusionary effects it produces to no longer be used exclusively by a dominant class with access to power and resources. In contrast, the familiarity acquired by the new spectator, now converted into a consumer and user of the technical object itself, will progressively erode the sense of fascination it once provoked and, consequently, the capacity of influence it exerted on them.

Now, however, even though it may seem otherwise, even though it might appear to open a new process of horizontalization or even emancipation, since it makes the

25 Ibid.

technical object accessible to the general public, this second phase is no more democratic than the first. At least, it is not in terms of the relationship between, on the one hand, power, and on the other, the consequences that the illusion provoked by that particular technology entails.

For example, we can recognize that Kodak's commercialization of a low-cost camera popularized photography, just as we can recognize that Instagram popularized that technical apparatus called the "exhibition space," since it opened to the world the possibility of publicly displaying a selection of images hung on a wall. But we cannot accept, in either case, that they democratized the repercussions that the illusory effects of their techniques produce in society.

Moreover, the dissemination of image capture and exhibition, respectively, arguably produced an even greater alteration of desire, subjectivity, and perception of reality in the formerly passive spectators, now turned into active cultural agents. Why? Because, as owners protected by patent law, Kodak and Instagram continued to control the technical codes that govern their respective machines: the technical decision of a certain type of framing redefines our relationship with reality; the choice of a fixed focal lens determines the distance between our body and the photographed object; a certain colour balance makes us perceive the world as muted in contrast to its photographic representation. And also, a concrete relationship with the audience, based on constant evaluation of our

exhibited photos, transforms our dynamics of desire; the algorithmic logic places us within a competitive framework and reorganizes the relationship between subjects, the world, and its representation; automatic censorship modifies our construction of gender and our aesthetic and ethical regime.

In both phases, although through different strategies, “the apparatuses uproot, tear out, delocalize, violently displace bodies.”<sup>26</sup> And they do so through what Roland Barthes defined as “hypotiposis,” that is, “forcing things through the eyes of the audience, not in a neutral, observational way, but endowing the representation with all the brilliance of desire.”<sup>27</sup> This illusion, which assaults us in every work of representation, does so through the technical machinery that underpins it. But, as we have just intuited, the analysis of this technical machinery, of its history, leads us to identify a process in which the purely technical is constantly interspersed with operations of an aesthetic nature, like two sides of the same coin.

The installation created by Juan Antonio Cerezuela for the exhibition shows, through a technical mechanism of switching between concealment and revelation, what is hidden behind the cultural scaffolding. When the lights are on, the devices, tripods, and trusses supporting fabrics with invisible messages charged by light are revealed.

26 Jean-Louis Déotte, op. cit.

27 Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

And once the light is completely turned off, various messages emerge in the darkness, revealing political and cultural reflections that Cerezuela collects from situationism. The revelation of the technical apparatuses that uphold the illusion of reality, that sustain desire and the viewpoint from which our subjectivity is positioned, also entails a revelation of the political and economic interests that, both today and throughout the history of culture and representations, have been at their foundation.

As the analyses of the developments of illusion techniques suggest, the attribution of a signifier to an image is not strictly an aesthetic or poetic operation. It is also a rhetorical operation and, at the same time, a technical operation. The split between art, science, and technology, so assimilated since modernity, which defines and segments institutional apparatuses everywhere, is a dubious and imprecise cut that misleads us because it sections tententiously. In every science there is an aesthetic operation just as in every art there is a technical operation.

Any critical understanding of the substrates of the illusion that assails us every day demands that we be bold here. It requires that we be capable of confronting the fact that, despite what universities, museums, and art centres producing exhibitions like *The Assault of Illusion* tirelessly claim, despite the insistence of those who assume the authority to dictate what knowledge is and how it is ordered and segmented, art, science, and technology are categories that must be urgently dismantled.



Juan Antonio Cerezuela, *Make It Feel like an Accident*



## Negation

“My people have worn green glasses for so long that most of them believe they are actually in an Emerald City, a beautiful place where jewels and precious metals abound and all the good things one needs to be happy.” When Dorothy asks him for his reasons, the Wizard of Oz responds with a chilling statement: “How can I avoid being a fraud when all these people force me to do things that everyone knows cannot be done? It was easy to keep them happy, because everyone imagined that I could do it.”<sup>28</sup>

This seems to be our imposed reality today. Perhaps at no other moment in history have we been as aware as we are now of the technical mechanisms hidden behind the curtain, yet we do not want or cannot bring ourselves to give up the illusion.

Structuralism and poststructuralism were able to list the strategies that power weaves between the reconstruction

28 L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Chicago, George M. Hill Company, 1900.

of our desire and the configuration of reality. And that, in turn, gave rise to a fruitful critical theory that led to a new wave of feminisms, queer movements, and sexual dissidence—which analyse and denounce the technical mechanisms behind heteropatriarchal illusion—, decolonialism—which analyses and denounces the technical mechanisms behind imperialist illusion—, ecosocialism—which analyses and denounces the technical mechanisms behind the illusion of extractivist development—, and the new left—which analyses and denounces the technical mechanisms behind capitalist illusion. And even though these critical movements are more widespread than ever, popularized through countless critical media, something still prevents us from taking control toward the emancipation from these techniques of illusion.

Just as we want to continue watching clouds vanish, because there is something irrepressible in that childish space of suspended suspicion, we want to continue living in a made-up reality. That is why, every day, we perform semi-conscious exercises to make filters invisible and return all their strength to illusion. We do not want to acknowledge that we are in a new regime invaded by perpetual performativity and constant control of any narrative to which we are exposed. We begin to cynically resign ourselves to the evidence that “any culture lives inside a dream,”<sup>29</sup> to uncritically consent that we can do nothing

29 Lewis Mumford, *op. cit.*

but let ourselves be carried away by the illusion, that it is inevitable for its charms to be stronger than any claim for our autonomy. Shouldn't we, like Alice after crossing the looking-glass, shout in unison, "I greatly dislike being in a dream that is not my own!"<sup>30</sup>

But in the end, even though today we have more means than ever to shout that loudly, it seems we are not inclined to do so. During the press conference of the jury at the last Cannes Festival, "a journalist had the bad taste to question the political sense of the festival while the massacre in Gaza continued, which caused the podium of the Awakened Great Consciences to be somewhat abruptly stirred. On the stage, they focused their gaze on their feet. Fortunately, the writer Leila Slimani volunteered to stop that timid beginning of suffrage. We must continue defending beauty, poetry, and the will to live, she responded."<sup>31</sup>

That is precisely the core in which we are immersed: the media construction of reality, the supposed truth that invades us daily, we know it is built through complex and opaque technical artifacts. We know, as pragmatism suggested many years ago, that only some of us have the power to get inside the guts of those mechanisms.<sup>32</sup>

30 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. London, Macmillan & Co., 1871.

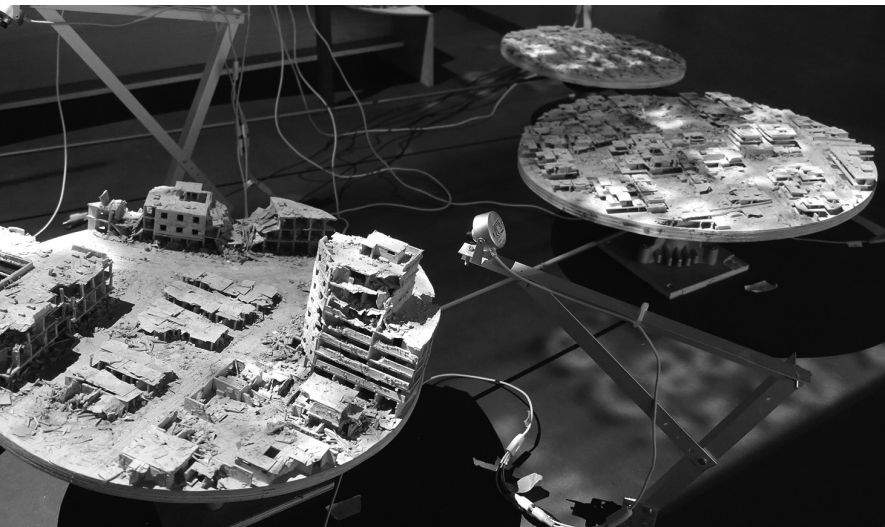
31 Frédéric Lordon. "Un si grand sommeil." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2025.

32 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*. New York, Philosophical Library, 1946.

And yet, despite having this critical awareness within reach, we practice daily a self-distancing that guides us toward an increasingly entrenched cynical position. The cultural construction of beauty and poetry must continue.

It must be repeated: the institutional segmentation of culture in which we are enrolled is perhaps the greatest and most powerful of illusions. We carry a tattooed mark from which we cannot free ourselves: the conviction that the manipulation to which the media subjects us, with the discourses that plague the news and newspapers, is suspended when we open a novel or enter a theatre, when we get hooked on a fiction series or enter a museum, and of course when the Cannes Film Festival begins. There, Slimani's demands prevail—that the production of beauty and poetry continues—because both lie beyond the question of truth. There, that question ceases to make sense, because the only function of beauty and poetry is to provide a luminous, neutral, and contemplative meaning to our existence.

But it is precisely that evasion, so deeply rooted in our culture, in our politics and institutions, in our lives, that is the most opaque of curtains before our eyes. It prevents us from seeing the most fundamental thing: that any system of representation, even those that boast of not having to account for reality, is built upon the technical foundations of all the previous ones, that everywhere “we walk with the feet of others, see with foreign



Alain Josseau, *Automatique WAR*

eyes, recognize with an external memory, live by the works of others.”<sup>33</sup>

In the video installation *Automatique WAR* by Alain Josseau, a large monitor shows a newscast with images of current political events. A presenter constructs the media reality through their discourse. Their words acquire veracity through the captured images projected behind them: aerial shots of cities at war, tracking shots moving through bombed and ruined streets. Everything shown on

33 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXIX, VIII, 19.

the screen is produced in real time: the presenter delivers an artificially constructed discourse, and the images are generated using a set of rotating models that, with a fixed camera focused on them, create the sensation of a moving aerial shot. All these images are sent to an editing room where motorized cameras perform live editing.

Perspective, the snapshot, the cinematograph, and the stage box are the ingredients that any system of world representation will use, whether exhibited in a theatre or a parliament, in a newscast or a cinema hall, because these are the technical substrates that have been deeply ingrained in our culture. Our bodies are forever marked by the effects of illusion that, in the name of beauty and poetry, every representation of the world has tattooed onto our skin. Our bodies are already profoundly modified by the training provided through the recurrent exercise, again and again, before the constant repetition of the same techniques and illusions.<sup>34</sup>

The history of art, building upon and perfecting elaborate techniques of representation, has been responsible for welding those green glasses in front of our eyes that Roland Barthes called “reference illusion”: what the narrative is signifying is not this or that story, but the very category of the real itself.<sup>35</sup>

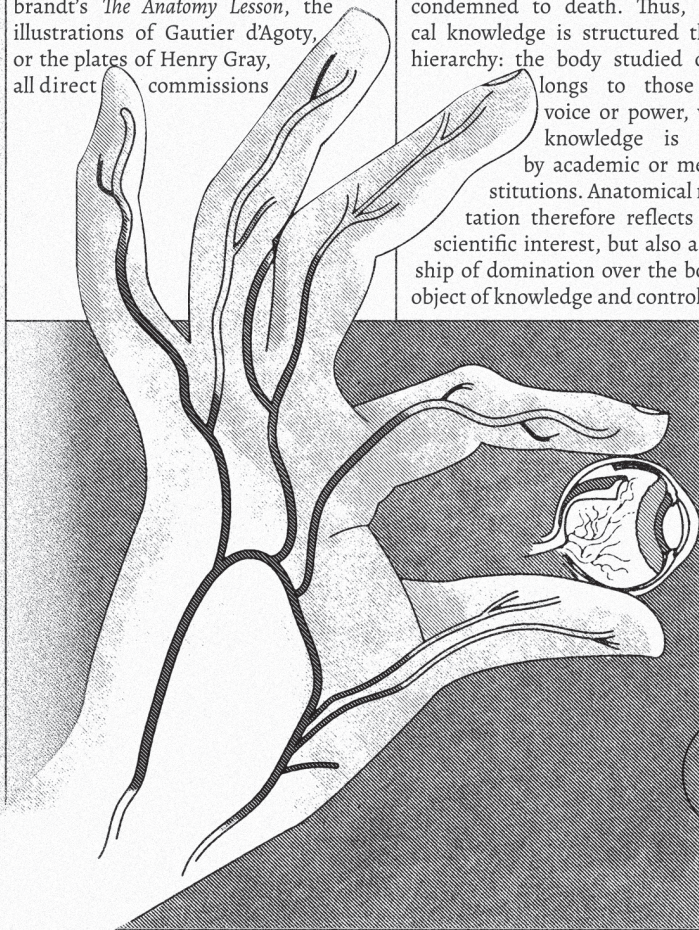
34 Jill H. Casid, *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment Subject*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

35 “An effect of reality is produced, forming the basis of that unconfessed verisimilitude that shapes the aesthetics of all the most common works of modernity.” Roland Barthes, op. cit.

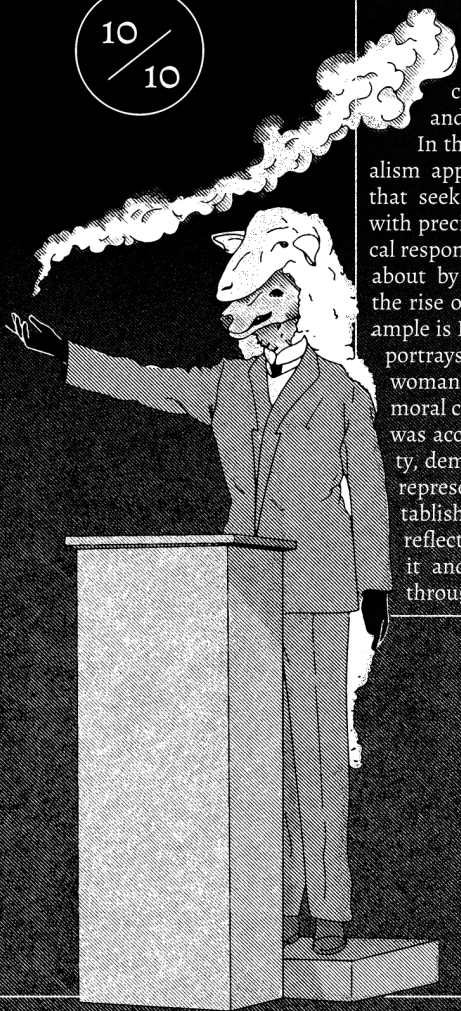
# ANATOMY

During modernity, the anatomical representation of the body became a key apparatus for the development of medicine, but also for the exercise of power over the human body. Examples include Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, the illustrations of Gautier d'Agoty, or the plates of Henry Gray, all direct

from medical societies formed by the bourgeoisie of the time. Although a great scientific advance, it must be remembered that many of the bodies used came from marginalized people or those condemned to death. Thus, anatomical knowledge is structured through a hierarchy: the body studied often belongs to those without voice or power, while the knowledge is exercised by academic or medical institutions. Anatomical representation therefore reflects not only scientific interest, but also a relationship of domination over the body as an object of knowledge and control.



# LITERARY RHETORIC



Rhetoric, since antiquity, has been a fundamental tool for exercising and maintaining power. Mastering the art of discourse allows one to influence public opinion, construct convincing narratives, and legitimize authority. ☉

In the contemporary era, literary realism appears as a rhetorical apparatus that seeks to represent everyday reality with precision and detail, often as a critical response to the social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie. ☉ A clear example is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which portrays the existential frustration of a woman trapped within the social and moral constraints of her time. The work was accused of violating public morality, demonstrating how power reacts to representations that question the established order. Thus, realism not only reflects reality but also interrogates it and exposes who controls it and through which discourse. ☉

“In Gothic cathedrals, their architectural technique was aimed at unconscious perceptual manipulation. The faithful no longer participated in the ritual, but rather submitted to its enchantment.”<sup>36</sup> The faithful, upon crossing its doors and being dazzled by the majesty of its columns rising toward the sky, by the presence of God glimpsed through a high stained glass window, became prisoners of the illusion that this space opened onto another reality that need not answer to the world beyond its walls. That world could neither intrude upon nor influence the spiritual transformations that anyone might have the satisfaction of experiencing within the sacred space. And it was precisely this illusion that prevented anyone from realizing that the world outside the cathedral walls—the lives, relationships, and the images people construct of themselves, their desires—was deeply marked by those spiritual transformations imparted by Gothic architecture.

As we discovered earlier, as the secularization of European modernity progresses, this function of the cathedral is gradually transferred to the museum, which “manages to mask its forms of exploitation under the veil of the universal.”<sup>37</sup> The museum plunders the cultural forms of a

36 Andrea Colamedici (Jianwei Xun), *Hypnocracy: Trump, Musk & The New Architecture of Reality*. Toronto, Sutherland House, 2025.

37 Françoise Vergès, *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum*. London, Pluto Press, 2024.

territory and, once established as a temple in that very place, presents them in relation to other forms of representation on the grounds of a supposed shared aesthetic or poetic potential. Through this operation, the object is forever re-signified, along with our gaze toward it and toward its original place.

This operation of aestheticizing technique, through which it activates all its effects of illusion, actually has a parallel history to that of European modernity. It is throughout its deployment that its colonial, extractivist, heteropatriarchal, and bourgeois ideology has settled within us. And it has not done so through an explicit form of power before which we had to kneel, but precisely as the effect of an enchantment that, of course, is not neutral. Let us not forget: “the fantastic world is always subject to the law that produces it.”<sup>38</sup>

The video installation *Sleight of Hand* by Ilê Sartuzi brings to the surface a critical question about the colonial substrate of the collections that materially sustain these narratives. In it, the artist himself enters the British Museum to steal an ancient coin through an elaborate sleight of hand. The video is accompanied by the theft complaint letters that the museum sent to the artist, as well as by the responses the artist himself wrote, and it reflects on the legitimacy of private property

38 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, Autumn 1975, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 618.



Ilê Sartuzi, *Sleight of Hand*

that underpins the heritage and collections of national museums.

Perhaps the greatest novelty we must confront today is that these places have intensified, become omnipresent and permanent, as metaphorically shown in the photographs of Víctor Enrich, in which a museum like the Guggenheim in New York is strangely inserted into Rafael Uribe Uribe, a suburb of Bogotá, architecturally parasitizing other urban contexts. It is no longer necessary to actively travel to the temple, the theatre, or the museum to be at the mercy of the beauty and poetry that whisper to

us, with illusion, that they have nothing to do with reality. Today, these places replicate themselves in our homes and follow us in our pockets. Today, power is more than ever everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Foucault already informed us of this long ago when he wrote that “everywhere there is power, power is exercised. No one, speaking properly, holds it, and yet it is exercised in a certain direction, with some on one side and others on the other. We do not know exactly who has it, but we know who does not.”<sup>39</sup>

But, as if that were not enough—if the multiplication and omnipresence of these spaces of apparent and illusory suspension of reality, which paradoxically have the greatest impact on our reconfiguration of it, were not sufficient—another remarkable phenomenon also explains why today we are collectively throwing in the towel, cynically allowing ourselves to be assaulted by illusion. It is not only that this illusion is now everywhere. Moreover, its technical mechanisms, whose birth and development we have already seen are laden with certain intentions and specific applications, gradually become blurred, transforming into a grammar of our culture through its media. Over time, “what begins as a trick ceases to be one, stabilizes, and becomes a convention.”<sup>40</sup> In all forms of representation throughout their development—in literature,

39 Michel Foucault & Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation.” In *Language, CounterMemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1977.

40 Juan Elvira, op cit.



Víctor Enrich, *R.U.U.E. 5 - Las Lomas*

painting, architecture, and cinema throughout history—what begins as an effect, named and identified as such, becomes neutralized within the medium and by the audience. It then transforms into a common rule of the language that both use to understand each other.

Today, the spaces that generate illusion are everywhere, but moreover, their technical substrates have become so common that they have merged as ingredients and rules of a single, unified grammar. For this reason, even though in recent years we are more informed than ever about the mechanisms and their origins, about their effects and functioning, and even though we could produce an exhaustive catalogue of illusion techniques and their elaborate methods of assault, something prevents us from identifying them. Their perfect camouflage within a language we already use so familiarly to navigate the world makes it truly complex to pinpoint the exact moments when illusion assaults us, the precise marks it inscribes on our skin.

To be fair to our actions, despite the cynicism in which we gradually install ourselves day after day, which carries a certain sense of surrender and resignation, we must recognize that it originates in part from the great difficulty today of identifying the camouflaged artillery that stands before our bodies, just a few steps away but confused within the landscape. Perhaps we are capable of looking around and realizing that we are on a battlefield, in a situation of permanent conflict where our subjectivity and desire, our autonomy, and our mental health are at stake. But the enemy is already so ubiquitous that identifying it becomes almost impossible. It is in our homes and in our families, it is in our streets and in our prostheses. It is in our language. It flows freely through our bloodstream.



Leandro Erlich, *Changing Rooms*

The installation *Changing Rooms* by Leandro Erlich takes us through a small door into a changing room that reveals itself to us as a complex labyrinth of mirrors that do not reflect what they should and imprison us in a sense of strangeness. The installation introduces the fragmentation of the contemporary subject: our reality, our desire and our subjectivity have been genealogically built on an illusion, and this illusion requires specific techniques constructed

by those who had the resources to do so. Our identity's configuration is inherently subject to power biases. Realising this necessarily entails a strong fragmentation of the subjectivity that defines the world we inhabit, in which we are reluctant to leave the space of illusion and seek the comfort of deception.

# Emancipation

Illusion has historically been treated as the reverse of truth, as a deception, a lie. And yet, as we have intuited throughout these pages, the way we have constructed the world seems to respond more to the effects of illusion than to whatever truth could offer us. This has always been the unconfessed secret of culture.

We know that, in our lives, in our decision-making, the illusory terrain of fantasy and desire takes up more space than the truth provided by our attention and judgment. If it were otherwise, we would not choose partners who attract us even knowing they unbalance us, instead of others who offer care and stability; we would not compulsively consume objects and brands that we know are unnecessary or even ethically questionable; we would not risk our health to fit unattainable aesthetic ideals; we would not vote for politicians based on charisma even knowing that their agendas harm us; we would not accept jobs that exhaust us in exchange for symbolic prestige; we would not spend hours on social media presenting a distorted version of our lives that produces more anxiety than contact; we would not cling to irrational beliefs or rituals.

It is for all these reasons that illusion, when viewed closely, should not be conceived so cheerfully as the opposite of truth. On the contrary, it is perhaps another kind of truth, culturally shaped and often against ourselves. Understanding how that illusion is constructed is today a fundamental and urgent matter, not only for reasons of aesthetics but also of politics.

Historically, the left has operated pursuing the truth, seeking data, rational arguments, and precise denunciations, and has faced enormous difficulties inhabiting the terrain of illusion and desire. Its attachment to analytical rigor has caused, in many cases, the illusion of the dominant culture, as well as the repercussions it has on the social construction of reality and desire, to remain in the hands of a reactionary right. The latter has indeed understood, for many years and still today—as is evident in the constant performativity of contemporary fascisms—that power is not conquered through truth but through the creation of effective illusions, mobilizing affect, and seductive scenographies. While the emancipation narratives of much of the left have been grey, ascetic, and guilt-inducing, they have been outdone by the colourful, simple, and exciting promises of reactionary illusion.

It is not a question of abandoning the truth, but of understanding that it is useless without illusion. This is why it has become essential today to deepen our comprehension of its modes of production.

Artistic institutions have acted for centuries as spaces where the demand for the true is suspended, where it is accepted that what happens there need not answer to facts but to experience. And yet, it is precisely this suspension that has allowed their images and narratives to penetrate more deeply into our guts. Their greatest illusion has been to make us believe that nothing is at stake there—but it is when the curtain rises, when we enter the museum, when we navigate the stories of a social network, that everything is at stake.

From all this, we can draw the conclusion toward which these pages have been guiding us. Let us repeat it: illusion is not the opposite of truth, but the means through which truth becomes desirable. Considering this, even though we live in a world obsessed with truth, post-truth, and its limits, we should convince ourselves of the following: it is not a question of eradicating illusion, nor of returning to some supposed essential truth—whatever that may have been. What matters is understanding the logics of illusion, its technical entrails, and intervening actively in its modes of production. It is about disputing who has the right and the means to produce the illusions that have governed the world until now and, whether we like it or not, will continue to do so.

Desire, even when expressed through individual bodies, is constructed within collective environments and contexts; it is built through the illusion to which society subjects us through culture and our means of representation. For



**Núria Güell, *Fantasy. An Application of Discourse*.  
Image of the meeting in which the artist proposed  
to the director of Santa Mònica to apply,  
in a literal way, the ideology of the art center  
he directs as an artistic action**

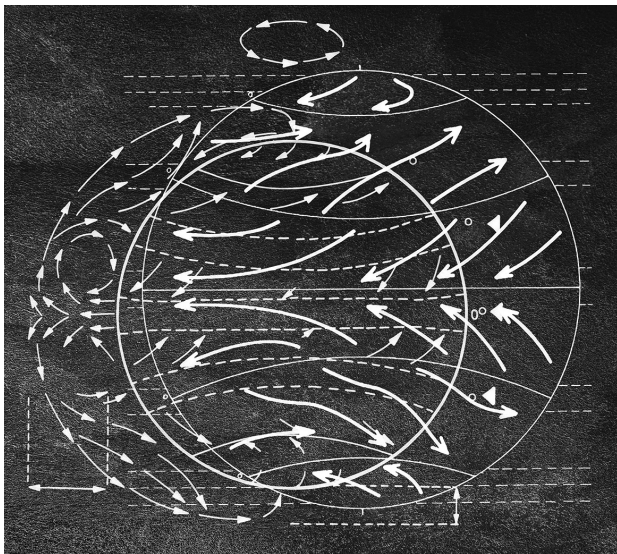
this reason, we must imagine emancipation in relation to the ways in which we read our culture. As long as we continue relating to cultural production as something merely offered to us, rather than something we actively compose with our attention, our desire, and our interpretations, we will remain at the mercy of the power structures that have prevailed until now. Democratizing illusion does not simply mean improving access to means of representation and diversifying them. Above all, it requires updating our role as spectators. It requires rethinking what it means to have agency, what our power of interpretation is, and our

right to suspect, reinterpret, and remake every illusion that has subjugated us.

*Fantasy. An Application of Discourse*, the artistic intervention Núria Güell has imagined and produced for *The Assault of Illusion*, takes place within the institutional framework of Santa Mònica during the period in which this exhibition occupies its spaces. It questions precisely the dynamics of desire that inhabit the institution itself. To what extent is an art centre also subject to the illusions it produces and spreads? To what degree has its own reality been assaulted by the fantasy contained within its own discourses? Through various artistic and legal actions, the artist investigates the desires of the institution and its inhabitants to provoke a critical distance from them.

Of course, there can be no emancipation of desire without prior aesthetic and technical pedagogy. Society must understand how cultural forms are constructed, how their tricks, grammars, and rhetorical techniques operate. We need to know how to read the mechanisms that capture attention, produce affect, and generate recognition. This dimension has historically been monopolized by dominant classes, who have controlled not only the material means to produce illusion but also the technical knowledge to shape it. They have made us feel, they have made us desire, through precise procedures that, while we ignored them, subjugated us.

In *Canto XVIII: fabricación de armas*, also produced for the exhibition, Antonio Gagliano and Verónica Lahitte



**Antonio Gagliano and Verónica Lahitte,**  
*Canto XVIII: fabricación de armas*

show us, through technical diagrams that emulate the blueprints used for patenting inventions, the historical correspondence between techniques of cultural production and techniques of war production. How and why did the centres of power finance many of the techniques that served artistic creation? Not only, as the exhibition argues, because there was a veiled, underground, or even invisible intention—even to the power structures themselves—in intervening in the configuration of reality, desire, and subjectivity. But also for a much more direct

correspondence: the very techniques that underpin culture have served to develop the great business of war.

Let us not forget that, despite everything, this longstanding subordination is what opens up the space for autonomy. It is only by inhabiting the illusion constructed by others over time that we have been able to learn its codes and understand the grammars of illusion. The good news is, in Foucault's words, that "where there is power, there is resistance."<sup>41</sup> Emancipation can only be achieved from this position: we must not reject illusion but rather reclaim its architecture. We must not destroy technique but decide upon it. High technology, by its very nature, due to the resources its production demands, will always remain beyond our reach—but that should not be an obstacle, because technique allows for detours: it permits abandoning the fetishization of sophistication, of the latest invention, of the newest device, and reclaiming a situated, accessible, collective technology that is low-cost and politically potent. Illusion also inhabits manual assembly, photocopies, poorly recorded sound, salvaged archives, and old projectors. We must strive to produce an illusion that does not rely on technical dazzle, but on its capacity to introduce deliberation and the distribution of agency throughout its production process.

Since illusion is inscribed in our bodies and forms part of our grammar, any operation that seeks to reconfigure it,

41 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London, Penguin Books, 1990.

that attempts to intervene in its mechanisms, will require the audacity to confront and dissect our own desires. “To self-decipher in distrust of oneself and the world: this, and only this, will grant us access to true life.”<sup>42</sup> This is the cultural revolution we must provoke: not only one that changes content, but one that modifies the way we stand before it, using the techniques we have at hand and with the conviction that no machine is innocent, that all of them began their journey on the side of power, yet each contains within its own configuration the potential to be sabotaged.

In a world that increasingly reveals that any solid ground on which to settle reality is crumbling, that all our surroundings have been constructed by the effect of a powerful illusion, we must not expect any redemption. We must not long for a definitive truth to come to our rescue, beyond the truth that there is no truth to cling to. Emancipation involves opening a deliberative, open, imperfect path in which we collectively experiment with desiring differently. If, for centuries, power has been exercised not only through laws or weapons, but by shaping what we want, where we situate ourselves, and what we call reality, then the true political struggle is not only for the distribution of wealth, but for the distribution of illusion. To emancipate ourselves means ceasing to consume others’ illusions and beginning to create our own—with

42 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

our words, our gestures, our machines, our mistakes. It is necessary to organize in order to provoke new illusions that re-enchant the world, breaking spells from within.

Illusion should not be eliminated, but returned to the common field, where we can decide together what deserves to be dreamed and how we dream it, where we can decide together what we call reality, where we can decide together what our symbolic place in the world is. Technique, art, aesthetics, illusion: everything these pages have presented as spectacle or manipulation can once again become a territory of encounter. We must not protect ourselves from illusion, but reclaim it, because it is our shared vital force. Because, after many centuries of subjugation to its effects, we have understood that illusion is not only what deceives us. It is also what mobilizes us.



# Artwork

(in the order proposed by the exhibition route)

**MANS O and Joan Sandoval**

*sm\_algo\_ritmo.ckpt*

Video installation, 2026

**Xesca Salvà**

*Abans*

Automated sound installation, 2026

**Aneta Grzeszykowska**

*Mama*

Photographic series, 2018

**Miquel Màrtir**

*Copy of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna col Bambino, 1480*

Oil on canvas, 1999

*Copy of Rogier van der Weyden, De Kruisafneming, circa 1435*

Oil on canvas, 2004

*Copy of Jan van Eyck, The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434*

Oil on canvas, 2009

*Copy of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Estate, 1573*

Oil on canvas, 2005

*Copy of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Autunno, 1573*

Oil on canvas, 2007

**Berndnaut Smilde***Nimbus Atlas*

Video, 2016

*Nimbus Diocleziano Aula V, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome*

Photograph, 2018

*Nimbus MdbK, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig*

Photograph, 2021

*Nimbus Kunstmuseum Hal, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague*

Photograph, 2021

*Nimbus MAXXI, Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome*

Photograph, 2018

*Nimbus Kunstmuseum Erezaal, Kunstmuseum Den Haag,**The Hague*

Photograph, 2021

**Manuel Calderón***The Illusion of a Floor of One's Own. Assemblies 1, 2 and 3*

Models, 2025

*The Illusion of a Floor of One's Own. Floor 2*

Platform, 2025

**Chico Amaral***Endless Scroll*

Collages with mechanisms, 2026

**Julia Santa Olalla***Fuente Cesar*

Oil on canvas, 2026

*Jarana era un huerto*

Oil on canvas, 2026

*Vidrio*

Oil on canvas, 2025

*Bola*

Oil on canvas, 2026

*Sin título*

Oil on canvas, 2026

**Anish Kapoor***Void Pavilion*

Sculpture installation, 2026

**A.A.Murakami***Beyond the Horizon*

Installation, 2024

**Juan Antonio Cerezuela***Make It Feel like an Accident*

Installation, 2026

**Lucrecia Dalt***An Ego that Floats*

Sound installation, 2026

**Fabian Knecht***Isolation (Parkstück)*

Installation and Photograph, 2026

**Klaus Frahm***The Fourth Wall (Berliner Ensemble, Staatstheater Stuttgart,  
Neue Flora Hamburg)*

Photographic series, 2011-2015

*The Fourth Wall (Thalia Cage, Schauspiel Hannover Cage)*

Photographic series, 2013-2016

**Víctor Enrich***R.U.U.E. 5 - Las Lomas*

Render, 2015

*The Fantastic Fourbes (Ortega, Zuckerberg, Gates, Buffett)*

Oil on canvas, 2018

*CMYKRGBW*

Sculpture, 2026

**Alain Josseau***Automatique WAR*

Multimedia installation, 2018-2026

**Ilê Sartuzi***Sleight of Hand*

Video, coin and documentation, 2023-2025

**Leandro Erlich***Changing Rooms*

Installation, 2008-2026

**Antonio Gagliano and Verónica Lahitte***Canto XVIII: fabricación de armas*Oil-based markers with flexible varnish on PVC linoleum,  
printed with UVI inks, 2026**Albert Chamorro***Cabinet of Devices*

Concept and scenographic design, 2026

**Núria Güell***Fantasy. An Application of Discourse*

Action with documentation, 2026

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This book starts based on a suspicion: that the intention of what we call culture is, above all, illusion. Throughout history, the arts have been perfecting increasingly subtle techniques so that this illusion be relentlessly embedded in our depths. These pages propose a journey from the naïve illusion to which art subjects us to the critical emancipation implied by understanding the mechanisms that produce it. Interspersed along the way is a brief analysis of some of the technical devices that inject fantasy into our bodies, as well as the modes of economic and political power that are associated with them.

Although designed to be read independently, this text was originally conceived to accompany the exhibition *The Assault of Illusion*, held at the Santa Mònica in Barcelona and the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid between 2026 and 2027.



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