

A Differed Life; Masochism In Search Of Meaning

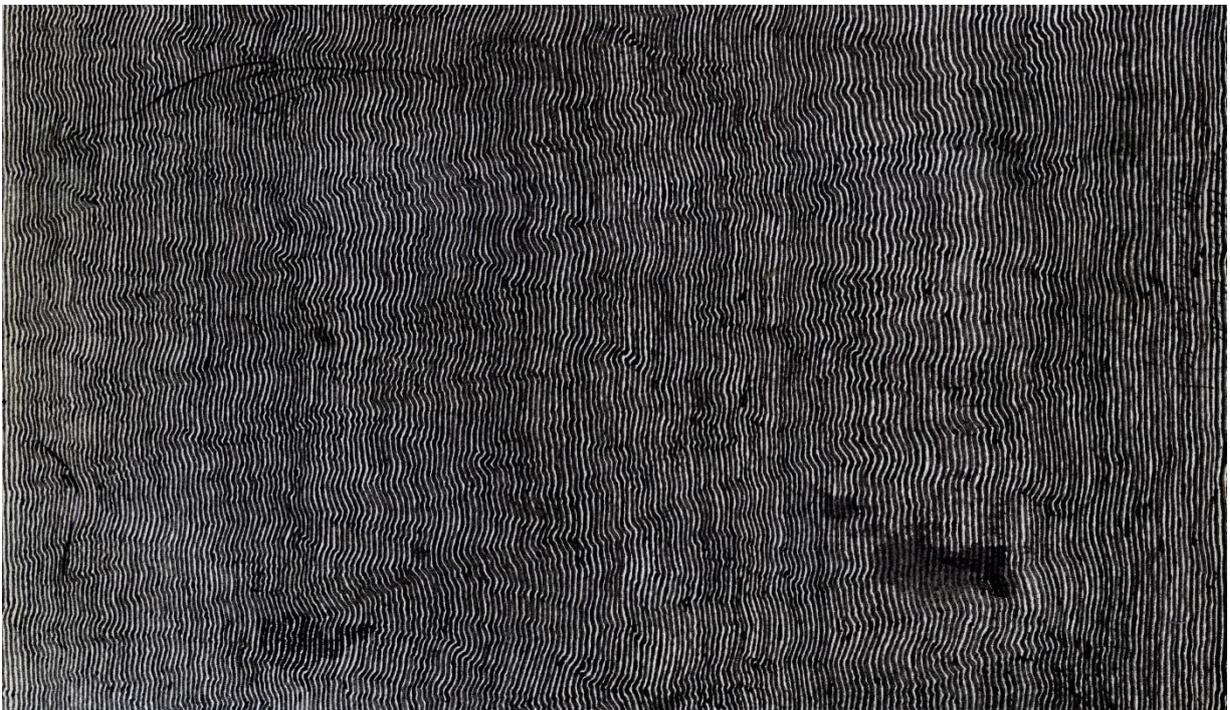
*'The obsessive pursuit of impressive but empty accomplishments gives cause for psychological concern.'*¹

And concerned we must be. It is no trivial task to focus one's attention, to pour two years of one's life into a single physical object. Such an act is antithetical to us in an age of mass production and commodity fetishism. Vacuum-sealed plastic artefacts silently fly along automated conveyor belts at speeds fast enough to quiet a troubled mind. Immediacy is the prerequisite. The means of production are far too efficient now to subdue one's anticipation, even for a moment. The hunger needs to be satiated, its time is forever now. The art world, with its shallow loyalties, was an early adopter of these mechanisms of hyperproduction. Exploit or be exploited was Warhol's mantra. Alas, this androgynous technocrat, bug-eyed and burnt out, was only a pale forbear of the menacing technological age we inhabit now. How many hours do we sit drenched in the electric blue light of our phones and tablets, these interfaces are most of what we know. Some say they are but manipulations. The black-faced minors of the attention economy, dragging up from the depths another second, minute, hour of our time; of such insignificant value but en masse the only resource left worth exploiting.

So, what does it mean at this juncture in our collective history to unshackle oneself from these modern maladies, to go into some cramped rented studio space and sit at a desk, working arduously for months on end making an object that only a handful of people will see, an investment of time for which there is no obvious remuneration or reward? In one word, it's masochism. It remains to be seen if there is any meaning to be found there.

¹ Andrew Anthony – James Cracknell's Boat Race; The Guardian, 14.04.2019

This series of works, the earliest incarnations produced in 2006, emerged from social anxiety, triggered by a naive enthusiasm for psychoactive substances. The stress of habitual consumption combined with the violent psychological upheavals so common amongst young adults of this age, led to a bout of panic attacks. This branch of his practise functioned as a form of physical exercise that enabled him to extract himself from this world of teeth and spiders. Some small point of shelter, safe harbour in the storm. Art as escapism for a disaffected mind is commonplace, and it would be safe to assume its genesis wasn't to be found here in this series of works. Most likely an adaptive coping mechanism deployed by a shy child early on in life. In days past balanced high-achieving individuals were seldomly drawn to the atelier. More commonly it was the affected and the awkward. These slouched and tormented souls, prospectors on the subterranean boulevard of the mind, long abandoned by local crowds and tourists alike, an outhouse, a backwater, dark and damp. To be an artist was an affliction. The only place these socially displaced persons could find some small measure of solace. Well, that used to be the case - that archetype has become passé. These days, good posture, clean clothes and eye-contact will get you a long way.



Something to Spoil, 2006

The early permutations of these works are drenched in anxiety. There is a notable shift, however, one that nicely traces the arch of a young adult finding their feet and pulling themselves up by the bootstraps from this quagmire of psychic torment. The works become more controlled. The hand steadies, tracing lines so fine they are almost indistinguishable as such. The surface of the paper transforms into an undulating hallucination. The straight line across the page morphs into a funnel; a psychedelic mandala of time, compressed with such immense force it becomes something wholly new. Furthermore, an additional medium is introduced to this series. Assemblages constructed of glass and miniature Z's cut from magazines. Some so small they cannot be measured with a conventional ruler. Thousands of these are meticulously excised with surgical scalpels, then coloured by hand to hide the almost invisible white edge of the exposed paper. They are then pressed between layers of glass. One on top of the next. Until these flat planes of delineated space become a fractured dimensional object.

And to what do we owe this transmutation? Are the drawings some deterministic algorithm, the first mark made defining the last? ...Perhaps. Are the Z assemblages signifiers for hypnagogia, the transitional state from wakefulness to sleep, a submersive wellspring of creative energy, the unconscious? ...Probably. Does the title *Rehabilitation Exercises For Online Chess Addiction* reference and counter Marcel Duchamp's 1923 renunciation of art? "*I am still a victim of chess,*"² ...Presumably. But this is only what is being overtly referenced. What is most obvious and consequential is that this practise is no longer the swan-song of the disaffected – it has become a devotional act.

Hegel's *thesis, antithesis, synthesis* is now a whirring wheel, faster than light, imbedded a thousand times over in a microchip smaller than a fingernail. In this state of flux, knowledge is no longer accessible to us. There is no ground. No foundation. Just violent progress, so rapid it drains the colour from our skin. Perception itself is an intricate illusion. We are the embodied. We are the deceived. It is no surprise that in this feverish nightmare we crave certainty, grasping desperately for something tangible. The one thing in this world that is most real is suffering. When you encounter it there is no room for doubt. And herein lies the purpose of ritual sacrifice,

² Marcel Duchamp; Time Magazine, 10th of March 1952

the devotional act. Say you are some new age guru seeking glassy-eyed devotees... An effective way to institute devotion in your followers is to have them make a sacrifice in the name of the faith. Once we suffer for a fiction, the stakes have been raised. We must rationalize: Why would we relinquish something precious; be that a goat, our time, our fortunes or a loved one? And there can be only one answer. The gods are real. And the more we sacrifice, the greater the gods become. A most potent form of biohacking, this cognitive bias has been exploited ad nauseam over the millennia.

Asceticism, from the Greek – *áskesis*, "exercise" or "training" is an existence characterized by abstinence from pleasures, often for the purpose of pursuing spiritual goals. Ascetics typically withdraw from the world adopting a frugal lifestyle while concentrating on their practice. A turn towards the inner life, dramatic introspection, disregarding social norms, all in the pursuit of some perceived higher power.

However, the gods have been vanquished, churches open their doors to nothing but a cold breeze, wood spirits lay lifeless in tepid ponds. In the age of reason, our collective psyche has been immunized against any sense of mystery. What now is worthy of adopting such a self-effacing posture? The mythical entity here is art. To make it real, all one has to do is to give more than anyone else could reasonably give. Hunched at a desk for hours cutting these invisible z's, hands cramping, back aching, yet wading further in unfettered. In the unconscious hope that this will be the transformative act. That this is the last push. A final line or cut will be the one to materialize the enigma. Legitimization of a myth through ritualistic labour – such is the mysterious alchemy of sacrifice. A grand delusion that has fuelled us for aeons.

“This realization engulfs & erases all duality, dichotomy, & dialectic. It carries with itself, like an electric charge, an intense & wordless sense of value: it ‘divinizes’ the self.”³

Did the golden lion, chest out and proud, appear before him on the etched marble steps of Antithinon, or did he fall victim to his wounds? It is impossible for us to say. All that is left is a crude sketch of the ship that would take him there. But to be sure, conscious or otherwise, here lays the intent.

³ Hakim Bay - T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone; Autonomedia, 1991

We are all made of little fictions. An uncountable number of tales, guide rails for the ego, a scaffolding around which we construct the image of ourselves. These stories can be instructive; useful fables designed to promote adaptive aspects of our nature while subduing antisocial or nihilistic tendencies. As we grow they must evolve and adapt for them to remain favourable. If they don't some may become redundant baggage while others could fester into a wholly negative force in our lives; cherished myths that once served us can transform into tyrants. Possessed by these antiquated veterans of the mind they become so deeply embedded in our self-image that further sacrifice in their name becomes preferable to the trauma that would be incurred if one were to attempt an extraction of them. As is so commonly the case, here art is just such a tyrant.

I by no means posit this interpretation as the only valid reading. Within this work there are any number of elucidating avenues of inquiry. However, this report is a narrowly focused analysis designed as a corrective intervention. Its principle objective is to isolate and define the motivating factors in an artistic practise so they can be addressed and treated within a broader therapy program.

Sincerely,



DR. M.C Matheus

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