WELCOME TO THE VOID

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2019
This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the contents of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

(signed)

Bernadette Aronson Basch
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Welcome to the void.

The sublime, or rather the lust we humans have for sublime experience, is a desire merely to be raised up. To ascend beyond the badlands of signification, through which we are obliged to toil through daily. It follows therefore, that the sublime in the context of contemporary art can only exist apart from pictorial representation. It is both the antidote and antithesis of signification.

As the rate at which we consume and produce imagery quickens, we see a diminishment of the faculties of any one image to remain potent. Not even the Icon; the mirror of society's hopes and dreams, can hold the attention of the overburdened minds of the internet age. Icons live through memory and die in neglect. When cultural memory is outsourced to cloud storage, what will fill the void in the Icons wake?

It is my contention; that the death of the Icon-image has been integral to the opening up of a new mode of interaction between art and transcendent or sublime experience. The departure of the Icon has illuminated the rituals and physical spaces that mediate both the sublime and the Icon from new perspectives. For as the Icon has shown itself to be susceptible to the influence of technology, changing its form, and eventually losing the boundaries that once contained it, the coded responses of worship have endured. I will show through the course of this project that these coded behaviours are akin to those of the experience of the Kantian sublime.

One way to operate in this climate of hyper image ingestion is to subvert the structure of the Icon as a symbol worthy of veneration. Another is to admonish the Icon/Idol framework of eristic representation completely.

Each iteration of Welcome to the void adapts to its particular space and context. The first iteration was exhibited at Vivid 2018, in collaboration with Gwen Taulalai and Liam Bray, to whom all credit for the technical implementation and programming of the Vivid installation is due.
The Icon, once removed from its altar, leaves an imageless void; a spectre remnant that draws everything around it to converge on an object that has become so eroded it has disappeared. *Welcome to the Void*, is to the Icon as the empty frame is to painting. The similarities between the prescribed behaviours of the museum and those of the church are perhaps not so surprising as the etiquette of seeing art was born from the protocols of religious worship. An empty frame on a gallery wall conveys the thought 'there is nothing here,' but by its associative power confirms whatever is placed there duly becomes art, prompting the question: Is it the artwork/Icon that holds power? Or is it the frame? Both the physical places and cultural rituals that facilitate the attribution of authority.

At its inception, the research for this project was rooted in the exploration of cyber selfhood - specifically, to what degree technology is changing the relationship between humans and their images, and culminated in a sculptural installation that speaks to codes of sacred architecture, ritual, and sublime experience. The path this project charts between these seemingly distant themes is varied, yet can be observed through the lens of a single idea:

The long-serving paradigm of images as mediators in the relationship between human, and spiritual experience, is no longer tenable. In the vacuum created by the Icons inescapable state of constant flux, there is a void. It is within that void that, art which concerns itself with the engagement of the Icon - as my practice does - must situate itself.
Perfection is always punished;  
The punishment for perfection is reproduction.

- Jean Baudrillard
Introduction

The online persona is undoubtedly a central issue within the changing face of modern human interaction. In the digital age legacy has become phenomena, and the development and maintenance of a portfolio of online profiles is becoming increasingly intrinsic in the process of identity actualization, or, selfhood.

Our mirror, the objects we use to evaluate our own images, are no longer just a single reflective surface. They have become splintered, constructed from carefully considered fragments, cut from our lives, and assembled in the most flattering way possible.

It can be said that in order to be a part of the societal norm, to remain engaged in the broader community, one must adhere to some form of virtual interaction. This form of identity construction - by symptom of the social media interface through which it operates - ensures that projected identities become contrived and fractured reflections of the self.

Icons - images that contain significance or meaning beyond their aesthetic surface - function as a mirror of the cultures and societies that create them. All cultures have Icons, and by consequence of their inception, all Icons must therefore be considered as semiotic vessels: Images that harbour collectively understood cultural knowledge, at once both reflecting, and dictating, the moral codes and values of the society from which they emerge.

As the rate at which our social communities transition to cyber communities accelerates, what reflections will our Icons portray? How in a world of thunderous image ingestion can anything coherent take hold in the mind? What becomes of the offline architectural spaces and rituals that for centuries supported and solidified the interactions between humans and the divine?

This project addresses the above questions to create a dialogue concerning how artists - the traditional administrators of the Icon - may adapt to a climate that has rendered the image inept.
Throughout this project, I have distilled the aforementioned ideas through my own artistic practice. I will speak to four works; A Two Part Man, Icono(clan)ism, Art is a Weapon, and Welcome to the Void. Each piece addresses a root component of my overall argument, thus acting as signposts to mark key concepts throughout this text.

Mirror is the central medium of my practice. The technique of setting the duplicitous surface of mirror to the task of subverting the traditional reading of signs and icons remains a constant throughout the project. First explored in chapter one’s; A Two Part Man, then returned to under newly evolved frames of reference, in tandem with the development of this project.

A Two Part Man investigates identity and selfhood in the changing cultural landscape that grows in the tech-saturated state of the present day. It is a discussion on the implications of technology in the evolution of the way humans interact, or perhaps more aptly put, interface. Ultimately asking the question: Is the maintenance of an online identity merely an extension of the real world self? Or is the online identity now driving the way we experience the world?

A Two Part Man is grounded conceptually in the remixing of two semiotically charged motifs; the double and the mask. I situate the double motif as analogous to the dual online/offline modes of identity construction. To show how these two themes are interrelated I will explore Otto Rand’s study on dual identity, and Sigmund Freud’s writing on narcissism and the uncanny.

The research for A Two Part Man uncovered two modes of concern that remain relevant throughout this project; the transmission of signs, and the influence of technology on that transmission. I begin with the basis of semiotics, namely the work of Charles Peirce and his British contemporary Ferdinand Saussure. Peirce’s work is of particular importance as his development of semiotic analysis positioned imagery, as of primary concern, as opposed to linguistics. Additionally, I utilize the distinctions made by Peirce of sign, symbol, and index, to clarify the way I understand and engage with signs in my artistic practice.
**Icono(clan)ism** takes a closer look at the historical usage of Icons as tools onto which the administration of moral codes can be affixed and centred, addressing the idea that an Icon is drained of its potency through overexposure; the relentless appropriation of its sign. The eagle motif, arguably one of the most prolifically used signs in history, appears in **Icono(clan)ism** as a stratified broken form. Each layer of the dissociated sign is encased in a mirrored tomb. The nature of the mirror dictates the work is enveloped by is space, its sign reduced to the fractured reflection of its surroundings, possessing nothing of itself.

Through the chronological investigation into each iterative form the Icon has undertaken, an evolutionary trajectory begins to take shape. The desensitisation of imagery that started with industrialised printing, was brought full throttle via the coupling of the internet to the smartphone. To further extend the examination of the historical passage of signs and Icons, I utilise Debray’s ‘three eras of Mediology’ to give a linear framework to my analysis.

I focus these ideas within the scope of contemporary art through analysis of the work of David LaChapelle and Hank Willis Thomas. The attribution of status in the realm of religion and art is explored through the work of Jeff Koons and elaborated upon through; **Art is a Weapon**.

This project concludes with the presentation of my final artistic work; **Welcome to the Void**. **Welcome to the Void** is representative of a last parle between my practice and the Icon. Its conclusive statement:

When the Icon is rendered imageless art - that seeks to genuinely engage with the Icon paradigm; must represent this state by itself becoming imageless.

Much of my writing concerning **Welcome to the Void**, is occupied with the concept of sublime experience, specifically focusing on the similarities between the behaviours commonly associated with encounters of sublime
experience\textsuperscript{1} and rituals of religious worship. The interrelation between Icons and the sublime exists via a prescribed way of looking intrinsic to both; a sacred gaze.

The Sublime is the precipice between terror and delight, the known and unknown, freedom and security. While the uncanny steeps in anxiety, shackled to the mind, the sublime engulfs the physical and mental alike. The sublime is evasive of both easy representation and straightforward explanation; more often defined by what it is not than what it is. The writer Philip Shaw describes the sublime as such:

\begin{quote}
In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of the conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits; this may well explain its association with the transcendent, conceived by the theologian John Milbank ‘as the absolute unknowable void, upon whose brink we finite beings must dizzily hover’.\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

Immanuel Kant proposed two frames of reference within which we may locate sublime experience: The Mathematical sublime and the Dynamic. The Mathematical sublime is the sublime of grand depths and vast expanses. Beyond nature it may be elicited through feats of labour, evidenced, for example in the incomprehensible detail of Iran’s mirrored mosque: Shāh Chérāgh, or Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. Such feats of skill intend to evade the eye’s limits of perspective. The moment when the mind’s faculties of reason come to terms with its own inadequacy is the bedrock of the Mathematical sublime. In the words of Kant, the Mathematical sublime is:

\begin{quote}
A momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
The psychic power of the Mathematical sublime explains its almost unilateral adoption in the administrative spaces of religion and government. The Dynamic sublime - in contrast - speaks to a sense of stupefaction in the throws of the supreme power of nature. Kant's examples include overhanging cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes and hurricanes. The Dynamic sublime is a sense of numinosity; inextricably interlaced with the fear of death.

To extrapolate a theory of contemporary sublime that may withstand the rigorous intellectualisation of the postmodern vanguard, the work of James Turrell and Mark Rothko will be observed. The writer Phillip Shaw has been immensely useful in the task of comparing the sublime of Modernism with that of Postmodernism. This is a necessary step, as an artist engaging with the very old topic of the sublime, in a very non-contemporary way.

Kant’s concept of the Mathematical and Dynamic sublime will be explored further in chapter three, aiding in the reading of Welcome to the Void. The work of Emily Brady has been of particular help in easing the translation of Kant's notoriously complex ideas.

Each artistic work created in dialogue with this project tackles the central questions underpinning my practice from different perspectives: What form will our Icons, our mirrors, take when image production has become an almost ubiquitous occupation? Moreover, what becomes of our art, our culture, when the rituals of our ancestors have been rerouted to the worship of ourselves? These questions will be addressed in the following chapters to provoke a dialogue on the role art will play in the cultural rituals of our future cloud-augmented communities.

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CHAPTER 1 - A Two-Part Man

In the 21 century legacy has become a phenomenon. The documenting of our lives has become for many, not just a tool of remembrance; but rather, a vital part of a consciously designed mask made to market the self to the world. I say mask because it is not a part of us; it is a prosthetic that must be constructed, evaluated, re-varnished and then validated by others.

The mainstream adoption of the Internet in the 1990s forever changed the way in which we transmit and broadcast information. Following this, the rise of Social Media in the early 2000s was equally impactful. Accordingly, how we relate to each other has been redefined – along with the way in which we construct our identity or identities.

The Internet is one of the most impactful inventions in the history of humankind – The marked effect this technology has instigated in the realms of human interaction and identity projection are cataclysmic, and still largely unknown.

Social media platforms; the medium through which huge swathes of the global population now conduct the majority of their identity projecting behaviours; displays of style, expression of ideas, debate, and the many other of the things that used to take place in the street, now take place to an equal or greater extent online. The migration of social communication and identity construction to the online platform has created an environment where individual tastes, views, subcultures, and style – the things we use to locate ourselves in the world, now build upon, and reflect each other, on a global rather than local scale. It is a mirror ball turned inwards, and its effect is homogenising.

Devoid of the isolation required for new epochs in culture to properly take root and cultivate, instead, what we are witnessing is an ever-quickening cycle of appropriation. Adaptations of stylistic expressions of the past are now remixed, peppered with irony and regurgitated.
Yet, they remain devoid of the history, context, ideas, and manifestos, in essence, the culture, these expressions of style were once rooted in. Identity once begot style. Now style is its own primary operant.

Working with these ideas as theoretical kindling, from the outset of this project, mirror occupies a crucial component to my artistic canon, as a medium that’s surface is continually in flux - eternally dependent on its surroundings to dictate its form. These attributes situate mirror as a material uniquely qualified to represent the unsolidified state of identity in the online arena.

The pilot fire that would open up my practice and in time, become the basis for this entire mode of research, was lit under the unremarkable scenario of watching a friend Photoshop two versions of a snapshot together. He was doing this to create the ideal image to post to his profile on Facebook. It was then that I realized how fractured our online reflections had become, and indeed a fracturing of the cool mirror medium would be essential in the implementation of its materiality as a chalice of the metaphors I wished to interlace to my studio work.

And so, just as humanity all over the world was partaking in the ritual of carefully arranging the online versions of their present selves, I began to fragment and arrange mirrored surfaces of the Icons that represented and influenced their collective past.

The first work to engage with these ideas would be; A Two-part Man.

In brief, A Two Part Man, acts as a metaphor for identity construction via the social media interface. The work consists of two identical masks, one mirrored, the other coated in matte-black gravel-like substance. Each mask stands at 1.5m high, respectively. The twin masks, representative of the dichotomy of parallel on/offline modes of identity construction, are to be exhibited facing each other on opposite walls, with enough room for the viewer to stand between them.
I constructed the framework of each mask from bent plywood, the massive scale of the works significant for three reasons;

1. The work should be representative of the level of the influence the social media behemoth occupies in contemporary social culture.

2. By symptom of the comparative nature that is intrinsic to the core structural function of social media interfaces, the work should be emblematic of the exaggerated tense the representation of our lives in response takes on.

3. There should be no possibility of the masks being regarded as something that can be worn.

The mirrored mask typifies the online identities people create for themselves in the cybersphere. It’s tessellated planes an intimation of the image-centric profiles fabricated from the imagery of our lives, each fragment contributing to a polished self-reflection. Every image that is uploaded, having been carefully chosen edited and then published, joining the steady stream of like imagery continuously flooding the online space. The mirrors of the mask like the mirror of Facebook reflects the viewer, the chimera of a real yet fragmented self.

The second mask stands in stark contrast to its bright reflective double. It represents the viewer’s shadow, the inescapable mark of our flesh and bone selves. It serves as a reminder of the cardinal truth that no matter how important the online identity becomes, we still reside in the offline world. We must breathe, work, eat and sleep, our shadows eternally attached. A mirror must remain eternally dependent on its surroundings - Gravel, in contrast, manifests a deeply textured surface, rooted to the real and incapable of reflection.
The Double motif or; ‘Der Doppelgänger’, is prolific throughout modern western literature, yet its roots are thought to be mythic. The representative of a vast array of binary pairs; good/evil; soul/body; man/alter ego: The Double is commonly utilised as a device to symbolise narcissism, transformation, inner desires, bad luck and the spread of anxiety. Manifested in various forms: shadow, mirror image, and twin. The Double is an emblem of the uncanny.5

These themes and their corresponding relationship with The Double are explored in detail by Otto Rank in his book, The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study (1914). Otto, chiefly concerned with the pervasive use of The Double motif throughout modern literature, provides a sound basis from which its history as literary allegory can be traced.

The Double – A psychoanalytic study, was primarily concerned with examining the occurrence of the Double motif in ethnomological, literary and mythical terms. Throughout several Ranks works including The Double, he proclaims that the human need for self-perpetuation, the desire to immortalise oneself, is directly responsible for the development of civilisation and its spiritual values.

A Two Part Man partakes in the ebb and flow of the now almost pedestrian rehashing of the double motif as an artistic device in contemporary literature and art. Otto Rank was the first to reference The Double in psychoanalysis and is quoted by Freud at length in his essay; The Uncanny (1919), a text that has been often employed in cinema and literature from its publication in 1919 right up until today. Claire Rosenfeld explains Freud's concept of the uncanny in a journal article published in 1963:

The 'uncanny' is that form of terror that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar, but has become terrifying because it corresponds to something repressed that has returned.

Freud's uncanny is relevant to my practice in that the online profile tends towards unrealistically 'good' representation. In situating the experience of interacting via social media as one tinged with anxiety, we may view the online profile as the uncanny double. A mirror version of identity that feeds of anxiety. There is something inherently uncomfortable in our cyber doubles, something missing; the realness that comes with flaws.

The second motif explored through this work is that of the mask, explicitly chosen as a pre-digested cultural Icon. The gladiator mask was a deliberate choice, as I wanted to work with a semiotic vehicle already tuned through years of literary analysis and artistic representation.

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During the research process for; *A Two Part Man*, a survey into the use of Icons as cultural messengers; *myth makers*, lead to a further interrogation into the role of images as vessels of cultural codes: Containers that may be used to transmit information across time and geographical space. These themes were to become the primary focus of the remainder of this project. Shifting the focus of my practice from identity in the cyber sphere to the role of the Icon in a cyber augmented world as both an embodiment of communal identity and mediator of the divine.

It is clear, in examining the codes of social media; a mode of interaction that is transmitted through imagery; the study of semiotics is undoubtedly to become a star player. It would, of course, be prudent to here mention the often-perceived forefather of semiotic linguistics; Ferdinand de Saussure. I will touch on Saussure’s ideas briefly as they are relevant to the theoretical grounding of this project. However, as the focus of my paper is far more concerned with images, rather than words, the alternate primogenitor of semiotics; Charles Peirce is for this project especially relevant.

Saussure’s principles of linguistic structuralism are particularly useful in the process of breaking down and attempting to understand visual and linguistic codes. In his text *Media and Semiotics*, Jonathan Bignell uses Chess as an example to make clear some of Saussure’s ideas:

> Each linguistic sign has a place in the whole system of language (in Saussure’s original French *langue*), and an example of actual speech or writing (in French, *parole*) uses some particular elements from that system. This distinction is the same as that between, for instance, the system of rules and conventions called chess, and the particular moves made in an actual game of chess. Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the langue of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be parole, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves allowed in the langue of chess.10

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As this project is more or less built on addressing the operation of visual signs in the language of media, Saussure’s system of *langue* and *parole*, is an effective first step in the process of unveiling the mechanics of signs and codes. It is a system without which, no artistic engagement with signs, whether through appropriation, subversion or basic incorporation can take place.

In the development Peirce’s semiotic doctrine images rather than linguistics took precedence. One of Peirce’s main tenants was the distinction between the terms *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. As it pertains to my practice in narrowing the scope of imagery around which my work is occupied, I will here summarise Peirce’s three distinctions respectively.

For Peirce, the Icon was defined by its resemblance to that which it signifies. The Icons of the Byzantium were realistic depictions of how artists of the period imagined them to be. Another example being the save Icon in computing; it is a simplified picture of a floppy disc; the technology used to save and store files at the time computers were first introduced to the consumer market.

An Index, in comparison, has a concrete and often causal relationship to its signified. Smoke is an Index of fire - in that, it does not look like fire but alerts the viewer to the presence of fire by proxy. An Index is a sign caused by the thing that it signifies.  \(^{11}\)

Finally the Symbol - Peirce found, any sign that has an arbitrary relationship with the thing it represents should be characterised as a symbolic sign. As there is a pictorial or causal relationship between the symbol and it’s signified, the connection between them must be culturally learned. \(^{12}\)

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Codes can be thought of as the system through which signs are divided into groups, for a sign to successfully operate - to be deciphered, it must rely on its audience’s understanding of its membership to certain codes.

This knowledge of codes is what enables the transitions of meaning for any given sign. It is a transmission that moves through the medium of culture. Iconic images, due to their historic membership to a system (langue) that has already bestowed it with a coded meaning, it follows, can be more easily appropriated, mimicked or congealed to fit alternate meanings, than an image that has not yet been encoded. Yet, however abstracted the new meaning becomes, it must always remain tethered to the langue. This is due to the culturally implanted knowledge of that signs membership to a specific code, a truth that has become foundational to my practice and the Icons that become vehicles of my work.

The langue of images becomes increasingly important in the social media sphere. As our communication becomes exponentially more dependent upon imagery, the usage and translation of cultural codes becomes vital and complex. The following chapter moves to examine the role and involvement of Icons as model images and objects of divine communion, calling into question the position and form Iconic imagery will take on in what is likely to be a heavily cyber-augmented state of future social interaction.
Chapter 2 - Icono(clan)ism

Art has always been tasked with the representation of the Iconic. It is the definition of Iconic that has changed throughout history and now seems to be in constant flux.

Before individual identities were constructed in a contrived manner then expressed to others through a visual language of storytelling, religious organisations and ruling heads of state had long employed these same pictorial tactics. Through the purposeful construction and dissemination of images to which the codes of religion, community, and national identity were attached, governing bodies were able to emotionally influence - and therefore wield control over - the masses.

Following the industrial revolution, the stronghold of image was to be ruptured, forever changing the understanding of what an Icon can and in fact should be. Continual technological advancement, especially in the realm of media, disrupted the long-standing system of control over imagery. The invention of the printing press, and later film and television, meant the power over imagery no longer remained solely in the hands of the governing factions. Rather, it was to be grasped by the booming hand of business and commerce - its henchmen the Ad Men of Madison Avenue.

Fuelled by a growing middle class, a demographic captivated by the idea of the American dream - a concept rooted squarely in the domain of capitalism and materialism - the concepts of aesthetics, image and style took on new importance. The products and fantasies of which were marketed to the hungry public through the proliferation of images, the most powerful of these being that of the Celebrity.

Naturally, with such a cataclysmic shift in the function and use of images, the Icon - society’s mirror - drastically changed in turn. The Icons of Modernism were no longer strictly religious; images of flesh and bone living people were now too, becoming Iconic.
In addition to religious Icons, other symbols of power, for example the eagle, have also undergone a history of repeated appropriation across centuries and continents. Debray believes this is because the memory of the sign, in this case, the eagle, as a symbol of power, is retained through cultural ritual as a sort of genetic memory. For Debray, our entire mode of seeing is preprogrammed to understand this symbol as it was understood by prior generations.

Debray’s theory explains the repeated use of the same symbols to represent analogous concepts among widely differing religions, locations, and cultures. Debray describes this theory elegantly in *The Three Ages of Looking*:

Because we have the same brain and carcass as Neanderthal people, they understand us better than we understand them. They still live and breathe in us even if their intellect escapes us. The framed photo of the president of the republic in the bureaucrat's office plays an analogous role to the medallion of Isis in the hypostyle of the temple at Edfu, a role that is much more than descriptive or decorative. Isis is there, as the president is there, in person. They look upon and oversee all that is done in their presence.\(^\text{13}\)

It is this process of transmission that informs the images I incorporate as the structural basis for my artistic practice. I seek to utilize images where the use of their form is so ubiquitous it cannot be denied. They are overt, porous signs, fully laden with signification, the result of which leaves their surface already primed for appropriation.

My practice enters into the dialogue of vacant signs with the artistic work *Icono(clan)ism*. The title for the piece is a play on the word Iconoclast; the vehement belief in the destruction of symbols and Icons; which has its etymological roots in the Greek Eikonoklastes: Eikon meaning likeness and klan meaning to break.

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**Icono(clan)ism** takes the image of the eagle and splits it into linear sections, the sign is segmented, its layers become remnant artifacts of the worn, eroded sign, bored and apathetic to its relentless appropriation. The eagles surface is locked in mirror, its sign obliged to operate on behalf of countless agendas, yet its encoded message of power remains steadfast, sturdied through decades of semiotic reinforcement. My practice embraces such signs because their message is so undeniably clear. The underlying semiotic framework, when exposed via mirror, gets lost in the world around it. Its edges dissolve, the mind loses track of its meaning, the viewer sees the sign but it's mirrored surface circumvents direct translation.

To clarify the terms through which I will trace the evolutionary path of the Icon; this chapter utilises as its structural basis; Regis Debray’s concept of Mediology. The framework of Debray’s Mediology is an essential tool through which the correlation between technology and the Icon - the theme of which this chapter is primarily occupied - can be more coherently understood. Moreover, the work of Debray and his predecessors, namely Walter Benjamin, can be viewed as the progenitors for my analysis of the transmission of codes: Enabled by, and in correlation to, technological advancement.

Debray’s Mediology takes the study of the Imagery one step beyond the classical discourse of structuralism and semiotics. Its primary concern is not with logistics; the mere technological underpinnings of image-based communication, but rather, the physical spaces, cultural rituals, and social structures that operate to facilitate this transition.

Debray developed Mediology as a union of the study of technology and cultural ritual. In his essay, *The Three Ages of Looking* Debray defines the term Mediology in his own words:

> I take the term mediology to designate the study not of different forms of media per se but of the mediations through which an idea or visual representation [une imagerie] becomes a material force.

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Debray believes that in order to develop true insight into the cultural function of signs, both disciplines must be tackled in unison: a paradigm that in his opinion is sorely lacking in the analytical structure formatted by his contemporaries in the fields of media studies and semiotics. For Debray, belief is a core tenet in the discourse and dissemination of signs: A complex cultural phenomenon that is central for the processes of transmission.\(^{16}\)

Debray contends the Image/Icon has undergone a progression of its form. He mapped this trajectory in three eras. It is a system of categorization that offers a useful framework through which the observations of this chapter can be further built upon, clarifying the historical iterations through which the Icon has traversed.

Era one: The Idol operates as a representative of God/gods itself. Its aesthetic form matters only as an index of the divine. The Idol is an image/object mediator through which spiritual transcendence is achieved. The Moai figures carved from the rock on the Chilean Polynesian island of Rapu Nui (Easter Island) between the years 1250 and 1500, are exemplary of era one.\(^{17}\)

In era one, the idol is not of aesthetic but rather of religious interest, with directly political stakes. It is a matter of belief.\(^{18}\)

Era two: The Icon becomes a representation of the divine rather than a vessel of it. Aesthetic representation and artistic skill here become important: The power afforded by the control over such imagery is wholly recognized and systematically utilized by the ruling elite. The Icons of the Byzantine period are representative of era two.

In era two, art conquers its autonomy vis-a-vis religion while remaining subordinate to political power, since its legitimacy turns on questions of taste.\(^{19}\)


Era three: Through technological advancement, the image is co-opted by business. Its coded semiotic power both democratized and diluted. In era three we see the rise of the celebrity image and its explosive use for commercial gain. The celebrity becomes Icon in era three.

In era three, the economic sphere determines both value and distribution; it is now a matter of buying power.\(^{20}\)

Debray criticised social theorists such as Levi Strauss and Marshall McLuhan for not giving nearly enough credence to the role belief and ritual play in the creation, instruction, and transmission of signs. In Debray’s words:

There must be more to cultural processes than the transformation of tools because tools do not in themselves produce allegiance and do not generate affectivity.\(^{21}\)

In brief, Debray saw McLuhan’s brand of technological monism as a failure to consider that which promotes affect - the causing of emotion or feeling when analyzing the mechanics of signs - as a failure to perceive that which is responsible for the propulsion and transmission of visual codes within and across cultures.\(^{22}\)

In Debray’s words “a reduction of our hopes and dreams to the story of our tools.” Debray writes:

Technology, then, is only one aspect of the process of mediation: it forms its material supports (as printing press, archive, video). These supports, however, cannot become effective without a human, social dimension – without institutions, groups, schools and their attendant hierarchies, their rules of belonging and ways of doing.\(^{23}\)


Debray's Mediology is wholly relevant in the aim of this project to analyze the evolutionary course of the Icon, and delve deeper into the role of the Icon in the media milieu of the present day. For only when gazing at the Icon's historical evolution through the Mediological lens can we see a complete portrait of the semiotic DNA of images. A DNA that is cultivated and bound through cultural rituals, physical locations, beliefs and religious practices – The private life of signs.

The artists David LaChappelle and Hank Willis Thomas though stylistically unalike, both produce work that distils and subverts the sign dense language of advertising; a language that is primarily concerned with the instruction of the masses through the manipulation of coded responses to imagery. Each of the artists plays on the pre-conditioned ways of seeing, that is evoked when confronted with advertising imagery. Although both artists are photographers who produce work concerned with the visual dialogue of media, the techniques through which they achieve this are polar opposite.

Their works are relevant to my practice as exemplary of a cabal of artists who critique, subvert or exploit coded ritual responses to the sign dense language of media, a practice that is directly responsible for laying the foundations of the field of discourse on which this project is built.

On one side, David La Chapelle's work revels in the act of over signification. He builds his imagery up with highly stylised, visually obese subject matter, exposing the signs within the image for what they are - an exchange between emotions and commerce. The effect of this causes the image to become so bloated with signification that it is rendered absurd.
Figure 4, David LaChapelle, Breakfast of Champions, 2001.

Figure 5, David LaChapelle, Death by Hamburger, 2001
This technique allows the viewer to be relieved of the mental filtering process automatically engaged as a result of the constant barrage of advertising imagery that permeates modern everyday life. LaChapelle invites the viewer to join in on the image conspiracy, by forcing the signs within his work to subvert their coded meaning. In effect, LaChapelle’s work creates a climate where the viewer can experience a melee of signification owed to the fact that the mind, once relieved of the burden of filtering can adopt a more open stance towards the image.

Conversely, Willis strips his images back to achieve a similar result. His Collection: UnBranded Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008, is a series of images that appropriate magazine advertisements marketed towards an African American audience or feature black subjects.

Thomas digitally removes the text and logos. No other part of the image is altered. He does this in the hope of encouraging viewers to look harder, and think more deeply about how advertising reinforces generalisations surrounding race, gender, and cultural identities.

When the image is stripped of the visual signals that lubricate its translation, the image is no longer automatically understood. The intended message of the advertisement – one typically delivered in the imperative tense – becomes lost. The oddity of the image engages the viewer. The mind, so used to the continuous decoding of imagery, lingers, trying to piece together its orders.
Figure 6, Hank Willis Thomas, Smokin' Joe Ain't J'Mama. 1978/2006
While these artists appropriate, adapt and subvert the language of media through a process of over accentuation, or conversely omission, my work seeks to expose the semiotic framework by the emptying of the Iconic vessel of meaning altogether. By the erasure of its surface through encasing the Icon in mirror, it is divested of its symbolic power. The mirrored Icon at once takes in everything of its audience while offering nothing of its own.

Figure 7, Icono(clan)ism

So what does it mean when the power of imagery becomes further democratized through technological advancements such as the internet and social media?

The dramatic rise in the popularity of the cinema sparked a process of transformation in which the fake characters in films - like the religious Icons preceding them - began to reflect, inspire and instruct the identities and social behaviours of the audience. In essence, living people began to encroach upon the cultural role once occupied by the static, Iconic image. This was further exacerbated in the late 2000s by the marriage of the Internet to the
Screen. The smartphone opened a direct door to the private lives of everyday people, streamlining the administration of advertising imagery into the personal and social lives of the masses.

If the analogue camera blew the ways in which humans perceived of themselves within the world wide open; it was social media, armed with the digital camera; that set fire to the ashes.

For the first time in history, the power to create and easily disseminate imagery on a mass scale, has been truly democratized. Due to the increased availability of technology that enables image production at a relatively cheap cost, such as phones with inbuilt cameras, coupled with the invention and rapid expansion of the social media sphere, everyone on the planet with access to an internet connection can play a role in the image/Icon arena.

Surely if Debray were conceiving of his Mediological eras presently, the post social media epoch occurring today would warrant a fourth: One that sees the Icon fully descended and submerged in the image milieu, transfixed in a state of eternal flux, where in amongst the daily onslaught of imagery no one image can shine through. The fourth era would mark the beginning of a process of the blurring of the lines regarding what an Iconic image is, and what it had historically been.

The very intense study of Icons, namely how they are repeatedly filled and drained of their meaning, leaving behind a wasteland comprised of the dried out husks of signification, led me to the realisation that, for me, transcendence may be better facilitated via art devoid of imagery; Imageless icons: To be released from the burden of endless sign interpretation, a sublime experience of semiotic freedom. I found my attention drawn to I worked the sense sublime of Abstract Expressionism and land art, a sublime tied in with the codes of ritual and pilgrimage. A physiological rather than psychological experience veering closer to the dialogue of the Romantic sublime; though without any of the pictorial realism characteristic of the period. Investigations into how this idea could be explored in a less literal way formed the basis of the future direction of my research and major artistic work of this project.
Chapter 3 – Welcome to the Void

As the proliferation of images has increased through the years of Postmodernism, seeping into every crevice of personal and private life alike, the desire for the sublime in art is experiencing renewed interest. The efforts of the artists and theorists of Postmodernism to do away with the sublime of Romanticism has in a sense only served to increase the psychic potency of the Romantic sublime. The over-consumption of imagery has left the modern appetite turned off by pictorial representation. Interest in the sublime endures just because it is so resistant to infiltration. I will return to the writing of Phillip Shaw once more to detail the contrast between the Romantic and Postmodern sublime:

If the aim of Romanticism is somehow to incorporate the 'sense sublime', Postmodernism, by way of contrast, seeks to retain a sense of the sublime as, 'something' that can never be 'interfused' through the use of metaphors, symbols, or verbal connectives. Since, as we have seen, such an approach might well
usher in Romanticised notions of reverence and awe through the back door, as it were, other versions of Postmodernism endeavor to do away with the sublime together.24

Before tackling the task that is in large part the primary concern of this chapter; that of positioning the sublime experience as the final manifestation of the Icon, I will address the somewhat behemoth topic of defining the sublime, as it relates to my practice, its due diligence. It is a necessary step in narrowing the scope of how I am engaging with the concept.

The word sublime is derived from the Latin sublimis, a combination of sub (up to) and limen (lintel, literally the top piece of a door).25 In daily usage, the term is often attributed to objects, or experiences, that are extremely good. One might use the word heavenly interchangeably. However, in the field of aesthetics, the concept of the sublime incorporates a set of strict characteristics.

The particular faction of scholars I will be focusing upon to locate the arguments of this chapter stem from the Kantian strain of analysis. Emily Brady’s The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature,26 has been particularly useful in clarifying the notoriously complicated writing of Immanuel Kant, specifically his analysis on the sublime as laid forth in his Critique of Pure Reason (1781).27

Developed over centuries, the origins of sublime discourse are often attributed to the first-century text: Peri Hupsous which translates to “On Sublimity” authored by the Greek critic Dionysius Longin.28 Longinus’s text was primarily concerned with elevated language. However, the ideas put forth were adapted over centuries to explore the phenomenological experience of numinosity elicited when confronted by the awe of nature’s majesty. Brady sets out a paradigm case for the sublime as such:

25 Shaw, Philip. The Sublime London :: Routledge, 2006. Pg.1
28 Shaw, Philip. The Sublime London :: Routledge, 2006. Pg.4
My argument is straightforward. Paradigm cases of the sublime involve qualities related to overwhelming vastness or power coupled with a strong emotional reaction of excitement and delight tinged with anxiety.29

She argues while art, architecture, moral conduct and mathematical ideas can also be considered as sublime, nature must be held up as the paradigm. Thus confronting the terrifying awe of nature can only be made pleasurable when experienced from a position of relative safety, Brady writes:

However, ‘at certain distances, and with certain modifications’, when we are not immediately affected by pain and danger but merely have some idea of them, we experience a kind of delight mixed with terror.30

From the period when sublime rhetoric was at its peak - namely the late 17th-century writing of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant - came a period of intense artistic interest in sublime subject matter. Broadly recognised as belonging to the Romantic style, the artists of the time favoured realistic depictions of the type of landscapes associated with the classical Kantian sublime.

However, few works of the Romantic period held up to the dressing down the sublime received at the birth of Modernism, fewer still the Contemporary. Rejecting the Romantic tendency to indulge in stereotypes of the sublime, the painter James Abbot Mcneil Whistler in his infamous ‘10 o'clock’ lecture vehemently admonished the Romantic style. Phillip Shaw summarizes the reasoning behind the disdain Whistler conveyed well:

The spread of a vulgarised vocabulary of sublimity had, in Whistler’s view, led to a decline in artistic judgement. For critics trained in this vocabulary, a mountain is ‘synonymous with height – a lake, with

depth – the ocean, with vastness – the sun, with glory. So that a picture with a mountain, a lake, and an ocean – however poor in paint – is inevitably “lofty,” “vast,” “infinite,” and "glorious" – on paper.\textsuperscript{31}

While the artist of the period of Romanticism created works that were, in essence, a realistic representation of the sublime in nature, the artists of Modernism; working after Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882 declared the sublime to be out of date,\textsuperscript{32} produced works with a distinctly modern take on the sublime.\textsuperscript{33}

In recent times it has become almost habitual for writers to reference Barnett Newman’s late 1940’s painting; Onement I, as the starting point of the modern sublime. Perhaps as it offers such a sumptuous mental image of the artist painting a decisive zip down the centre of a canvas, and thus ceremoniously drawing a line in the sand; calling an end to the old guard and ushering in the new. A moment captured succinctly in the words of Robert Hughes’s 1971 article for Time magazine entitled: Pursuit of the Sublime:

One of the hidden forks in American art history was reached on Jan. 29, 1948, when a painter named Barnett Newman painted a thin, rough orange stripe down the exact center of a small dark red canvas, and left it alone.\textsuperscript{34}

Light and dark and that incendiary line that separates the two. It is the precipice between opposing forces that conjure the sublime, and this goes to the heart of many artists working in the vernacular.


\textsuperscript{34} Hughes, Robert. “Pursuit of the Sublime.(Art).” Time 98, no. 16 (October 18, 1971).
On the subject of art and the sublime, Mark Rothko and James Turrell are two of the most commonly referenced artists outside of the Romantic tradition. Although the respective practices of Rothko and Turrell were born from different periods, and mediums, their work does share a formal similarity; it is a mastery of colour and light which echoes across the horizontal plane. A complete eradication of graphic representation is distinctive of the work of the two artists, sidestepping both the chaotic haze common to Abstract Expressionism and the cynicism of Postmodernism.

I compare the work of these two artists as a setting of the stage for a new mode of engagement between art and the sublime, one that speaks in abstracted, yet familiar terms to that of Romanticism.
Light is fundamentally essential to the work of Turrell and offers many clues to the underpinnings of his aesthetic. It is, in essence, the substratum on which his practice and its evocation of the sublime is built. Notably, Longinus cites as one of the highest examples of the sublime chapter 1, verse 3 of the book of Genesis:\(^{35}\)

\[ ‘God said … Let there be light’.\(^{36}\)\]

The physical feeling James Turrell wishes to evoke is in a sense tapping into the essence of the terminally indefinable core of the sublime. Similar to Kant's \textit{a priori} and Debray's concept of cultural DNA, James Turrell produces work intended to engage the senses - the Dionysiac aspects of human nature.

Turrell maintains the physiological and philosophical makeup of human beings as holding a core component to the reception of his use of light and architectural space, Turrell states:

\[
\text{In working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought, to make the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile. It has a quality seemingly intangible, yet it is physically felt.}^{37}\]

Nietzsche's writing on the \textit{Apollonian} and \textit{Dionysian} duality in human beings,\(^{38}\) expressly relating to art and the sublime, was hugely influential to many of the artists of Abstract Expressionism, no one more so than Mark Rothko. This goes some way to explaining Rothko's consumption with evoking the Dionysian through his work and may explain the transcendent experience that many feel make Rothko's paintings so unique. Jeffery Weiss comments on this idea in his book; \textit{Mark Rothko}, 1998:

\(^{35}\) Shaw, Philip. \textit{The Sublime} London :: Routledge, 2006. Pg.19

\(^{36}\) Holy Bible, 2013.


\(^{38}\) The opposing drives of the Dionysian and Apollonian are central themes within Nietzsche’s first major work, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}. Named after the Greek gods; Apollo, God of light, indicative of the traits of reason, order, control and individuality; and Dionysus, God of Wine; "centred in extravagant sexual licentiousness where the most savage natural instincts were unleashed". Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Smith, Douglas. The Birth of Tragedy Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. p.147
Rothko famously insisted that his work was an attempt to express ‘basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom’. Something of Nietzsche’s interest in the Apollonian veiling of terror, in the ability of art to render terror bearable, seems implicit in this statement.\textsuperscript{39}

The interplay between the core Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of humankind brings us back once more to the ideas of chapter one concerning the double. This is related to the sublime in that there is an evident split between the theorists and artists who engage the sublime on the Appolian level. Take for example the intellectualised sublime prevalent in the art of Damien Hirst; and those who believe true sublimity can only be experienced through the Dionysian.

The work of Turrell and Rothko speaks to the Dionysian sense sublime, rather than the ideas, tricks, and definitions of the Apollonian intellectual sublime. Rothko’s involvement with the sublime is speculated upon by Barbara Novak and Brian O’Doherty in their essay; Rothko’s Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void:

Rothko’s perceptual strategies sought to usher the spectator into the penumbra of a powerful idea. That idea would, according to his intention, initiate an experience that drew on spiritually sanctioned habits of contemplation...

...The chapel paintings (1964-1967) are a testament to Rothko’s faith in the power of art - “imageless” art - to meet, create, and transform an audience one by one- to place each person in contact with a tragic idea made urgent by the contemplation of death.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{40} Novak, Barbara, O’Doherty Brian, “Rothko’s Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void” In Mark Rothko, Weiss, Jeffrey S., and Gage, John. New Haven :: Yale University Press, 1998. p.78.
Our knowledge of how one should act when partaking in the ritual of viewing art is a set of codes. These codes have their roots in religion as almost all art and public architecture does. This link between art and religion goes a long way to explaining the revenant, quiet contemplation that typifies the art museum experience. This behaviour is a way of seeing: *A Sacred Gaze.*

An image is nothing but pigment on paper until it is bestowed the power the gaze affords it, thereby transforming it into a semiotic conduit. A comprehensive understanding of the gaze is relevant to this project as demonstrative of how our histories; both culturally nurtured and historically shaped, can through ritual and in the Kantian logic of *a priori,* manifest a set physical and emotional responses when confronted with certain ‘known’ visual stimuli.

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Expanding upon Lacan’s use of the term Gaze - A way of looking that includes not only the image but the surroundings of the viewer that make up the complete visual field - the writer David Morgan in his book; The Sacred Gaze, takes the concept of gaze theory and applies it to the act of looking in a religious context.

A sacred gaze is a state of mind, a ritual performed in the presence of imagery that is understood to be religious. This type of gaze shares a common vernacular with that of art and the sublime. As a construct, it is important to my work because religious Icons – the first famous Images – set a precedent for a type of engagement with imagery where the image is invested with a spiritual significance and becomes a mediator through which worship and communion with the divine take place.

Human beings have an innate desire to possess, gaze upon and indeed often worship imagery. There is something about imagery especially shared or Iconic imagery that helps to facilitate the human desires for communion, pleasure, transcendence and even relaxation. Morgan, in reference to the power of Icons and the human propensity to surround themselves with imagery writes:
The power inherent in imagery may help us understand the allure of art and history museums and the use of icons and statuary in churches and museums. It may provide a clue to the comfort of television, that glowing electronic hearth whose sounds and flashing images readily become a soothing presence in the home. In every case, viewers experience an absorption in an image. They cultivate a variety of visual practices that engage them in this absorption.42

The gaze becomes an interesting lens through which practices of image mediated worship can be observed. This enables the localisation of behaviours or emotional responses that are in sync with experiences of the sublime in nature. This idea may offer a path forward in the search for a replacement to fill the cultural role left vacant after the exodus of the Icon.

There is an apparent similarity between the protocols of the Art Museum and those of the Church. This correlation is perhaps not so surprising considering both institutions house imagery and objects people come to stand before, contemplate, and if the objects are really persuasive, transcend through.

Access to the divine requires, in all its formats, a willingness to set aside the shell of identity: A negation of the self. The protocols of religion and art are intentionally designed to facilitate this process. The relinquishing of identity is eased via self-generated ritual: A sacred gaze.

Through the sacred gaze, all objects may become vehicles of transcendence. The concept of attributive status via association is evident in the work of Jeff Koons. Koons deals in the subversion of coded ways of seeing. He does this by bestowing every day, discarded images to Iconic status through their reinterpretation in the gallery space. The idea that art may possess capabilities to bring about the ascension of the banal is summarized nicely by Shaw:

For those writing after Longinus, in the discourse of the sublime, language works insidiously to transgress the boundaries between things, allowing properties to be transferred from one subject to another, so that anything, even a dunghill, may be raised to the point of magnificence.43

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43 Shaw, Philip. The Sublime London :: Routledge, 2006. p. 43
Koons's subversion of the traditional codes of art is another step in the long-running Duchampian tradition of the ReadyMade. Koon's actively invests his images with coded cues taken from the contexts of high art and religious institutions, further enmeshing his objects with attributive significance. One may view this as an attempt to alert the audience to the eroded status of the Icon, asserting even the most banal of objects can be elevated to the status of Iconic, given the correct coded surroundings and ritual.

A work of mine that draws parallels to Koons is the unintentionally destroyed; **Art is a Weapon.** The work aims to take the concept of a digital expression and make it out to be more important than it is.

**Art is a Weapon,** was constructed in the Italian town of Carrara, made famous as the source of the marble for Michelangelo’s David. The choice to construct, **Art is a Weapon,** from the weighty, traditional material was purposefully done as an intentional play on the ephemeral, nonexistent status of the emoji. Implanting it into the analogue world, I laboriously dremeled the digital Icon into existence with neither skill nor grace, catapulting a fleeting cyber expression into a world that’s ambivalent to its material existence. In the words of Robert Hughes:

> A sign is a command – and it isn’t any better for being hand-made.\(^4\)

The physical and philosophical weight of marble validates the sculpture, its long history as a material of value lending its significant capital to the quick digital expression. The concept of a marble Icon shares ancestry with other kitsch tragedies that self-validate through the expense of their materials and fabrication. For example; Damien Hirst's **For the Love of God,** 2007. A platinum cast of an 18th-century human skull encrusted with 8,601 flawless diamonds or Jeff Koons's Gilded porcelain sculpture; **Michael Jackson and Bubbles,** 1988. Yet, the wink signals a conspiracy perhaps, a shared knowledge of its own phoniness.

The irony of the story of this work is that there is no longer any proof of its existence.

In a macabre twist of fate, it was confiscated at the airport as I was departing Italy. Evidently, the weight of the emoji constituted a threat to airline security. Confiscated before boarding, I can only speculate on its current location; perhaps in a landfill, or someone’s home, but likely in the back of some airport storage facility, trapped in the purgatory of dangerous objects.

The culmination of this research arrives via the final artistic work I will present: Welcome to the Void.

**Welcome to the Void**, an invitation to take a break from the digital murk that encourages us to leave traces of ourselves everywhere. The work aims to provide a space for a stolen moment of image liberation; a modern day micro retreat from the pressurised can of visual overload - that we call daily life.

In a society resigned to constantly being filmed, the mental freedom of knowing this isn't the case aids in the contemplation of any artwork. For this reason, I ask that devices not be used within the space. By unburdening the viewer of the habitual impulse to document, attention may be refocused to the ritual of seeing art.

**Welcome to the Void**, when you get to the hard kernel of the work, is a sculptural interface, situated in the dialogue between ritual and place. **Welcome to the Void**, is comprised of a series of hardwood railway sleepers, each measuring 2400x20x50. Adaptable in number, the wooden lengths are positioned upright, framing the installation space with an implied boundary. The inside plane of each sleeper is coated in an intricately detailed, hand-cut mirrored mosaic. Light is addressed and diffused within the space on a continually evolving basis. As the viewer moves through the work, the reflected light shifts, its surface continually in fluctuation.

Taking its cues from religious altars and statuary, **Welcome to the Void**, employs a repeating array of sleepers to train the eyes of the viewer across a central point. Each railway sleeper imitates and then elaborates on the preceding; a parametric echo chamber, captured in the complex geometry of the mirror work. This technique serves in a similar capacity to the stone pillars of Greek Parthenon or the Great Hypostyle Hall of Egypt's temple of Karnak. The codes of sacred architecture interlock with the work, aiding in the facilitation of its delivery.
We fetishize objects, words and rituals in the context of art and religion by anointing them with the balm of transcendence. In the context of the Art Museum and the Cathedral, every column, brick and pane of glass is designed with the singular intention of elevating and validating the objects placed within its walls.

An Icon is at its heart a gateway, or interface, through which access to the metaphysical is granted. Therefore Icons are one option from a catalogue of physical interfaces that can be used to mediate connection to transcendence, the sublime in nature is another. **Welcome to the Void**, is a representation of the frames that have always been the true mediators of transcendence. The death of the Icon has merely allowed us to see them.

Figure 13, Bernadette Aronson Bach, *Welcome to the Void*, 2019
Conclusion

As the yoke of digital identity is tightened, the momentary negation of self becomes ever more elusive, and in turn, like all rare commodities, its value is amplified. If we view the transcendent as a sacred transaction in the economy of signs, the rules of economics require an offering of one thing in exchange for the receiving of another.

In the transaction of spiritual transcendence what you give is yourself, and what you get is momentary liberation from the burden of identity - a slippage of the self.

The schema that transcendence relies upon the negation of identity is an intriguing lens to consider the body of work presented throughout this project. For each new manifestation of the Icon demands a new set of terms and expectations of ritual. In the sacred economy what you give is always yourself, what you get, however, is open to negotiation.

The particular structures that surround each evolutionary version of the Icon, determines the way identity is seceded: One cognitively addresses the Icons of the Byzantium differently to those of the Celebrity.

The rituals of the Byzantium Icon deliver a negation of self through devotional prayer. The viewer looks to the face of the Icon, and in doing so gives himself or herself over to the divine. The viewer becomes in that moment at one with the Icon, the divine becomes the central occupant of the mind.

In contrast, the celebrity image diluted the Icon, severing the ties between image and transcendence. One does not mentally transcend through the celebrity Icon, rather they transform. Celebrity Icons facilitate liberation from identity via fantasy. In contemplation of the celebrity Icon, identity is not relinquished in full; rather it is augmented with the mental vision of an ideal self. The inevitable failure of this promise results in the burden of the self-amplifying – this works well for those in the business of advertising but leaves a void in the traditional role of the Icon.
The sublime in nature is the most effective mediator of transcendence; it evokes a sense of rapture that is already known to us, a primal impulse. The sublime in nature it needs no ritual because it taps into something that precedes identity, the source code of the self. It returns the mind to a pre-existing state, the self before it’s wrapped in the shell of identity.

Outside of religion and nature, art is left to the task of creating a pathway to the sublime. The imageless void has left a doorway open to the oblivion of the sublime. Art must now look to ritual and architecture - the *frame* of the Icon, in order to evoke contemplation.

Throughout this project, I have addressed the transitory function of icons and symbols. Working backwards; *Welcome to the Void*, addressed the spaces and rituals that act as support systems for the icon. *Welcome to the Void*, was preceded by *Art is a Weapon*; christened by airport security, the digital emoticon teased out the interplay between the real and unreal, the on and offline. *Art is a Weapon* is the solidification of a flickering screen Icon, purposed only to distil human emotion to ones and zeros. Working to a similar vein, *Icono(clan)ism*, split the eagle as the camera split our relationship to images, the work is an autopsy of a desiccated sign, the well-worn symbol of the eagle segmented like markings on the ruler of time. This brings us back to the beginning of the project; *A Two Part Man*, at its heart, a questioning of what effects the digitalisation of selfhood are having on individual people, and society as a whole.

The importance of this issue is clear, as we are moving into an age where identity actualisation is becoming intertwined into every facet of life; the stakes are higher than ever. The successful projection of the *right* codes of identity is now having an impact on the professional and political spheres in addition to the social.

With the perspective of viewing all four works of this project in completion, the interplay between *Welcome to the Void*, and *A Two Part Man* reveals itself to be the most compelling. For *Welcome to the Void* in a sense functions as the antidote to the symptoms of *A Two Part Man*. 
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Holy Bible, 2013.


