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Worsening: Uncertainty is Unknowing as Liberation: Forsaken Ecologies

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Abstract

Places of abandonment—alleyways, vacant houses, derelict properties—are my sites of reckoning and liberation. These forgotten places, like that of the strip of wooded dumping ground from my childhood, are the platform for rethinking and reimagining the world. Free from purpose, laws, rules, and constraints, they are the sites where new mythologies and cosmologies are conjured and ghosts are summoned.

Forlorn by capitalism, these rust belt settings and we who inhabit them have gained nothing from the centuries of industrialization and colonized norms. In the uncertainty of this destitution and the hell of this contemporary existence, I listen to ghosts or specters as my work reimagines these landscapes as shifting, generative sites of potential. To find new ways, new futures, mass of security lights at the top of a steel post with a concrete footer becomes the stage light for new rituals/dramas. The ecosystem of an abandoned Berlin olympic swimming pool, built during Nazi-era, relives its distraught history alongside new derelict interventions. Trail cam footage of a coyote wandering the wooded interstice to a vacant strip mall offers metaphors of re-inhabiting and reinvention.

Worsening: *Uncertainty* is Unknowing as Liberation: Forsaken Ecologies

by

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B.F.A, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2013

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

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Nobody wants to be here, but nobody wants to leave -Cormac McCarthy, The Road

There's a clearing at the bottom of a valley in the woods behind my parents' house outside Pittsburgh. I remember five black garbage bags, tires and other detritus, sharpened sticks and the beginnings of a fort. Three of the bags contained liquor bottles, which we broke against the rocks; the other two were full of waterlogged slipcovers from VHS pornography. The cardboard would peel and tear into fragments of erotica. This dumping ground was a place for secrets and escape—a place where structure and rule could be remade.

The landscape is bleak here. Growing up, I roamed the streets with my friends telling and retelling its stories and of the ghosts that inhabited them. Both of my childhood homes are haunted by suicides. The first was a veteran who lost his family in PTSD-fueled alcoholism. During my parents' childhood, they couldn't hang clothes outside because of air pollution and the tradition carries on. When I was a child, the specter of this man would wander behind the walls of clothes while I showered in the basement. I still live with him and other ghosts of the machine of industry, of capital. The second man, after taking his terminally ill wife's life, walked into the back yard and shot himself in the head. Their voices, like many from my family, spoke with the accents passed down by immigrants that were consumed by blast furnaces, buried in mines. They still haunt me, caught in transition between worlds. As the promise that lured them

from across the globe recedes, their accents grow thicker, their voices stronger, their presence more potent.

Beginning in the 1970's and still unraveling, devolving, what remained after the major industries had left Pittsburgh and the northern rust belt, was the ghost of the *promise* of freedom. My father says the only things that thrive in these neighborhoods are churches and bars, false promises of freedom, and he's still there.

The neighborhoods outside of Pittsburgh's renewed and gentrified downtown is a hinterland, a fringe of vacant homes and warehouses between farmland and city. Trees and brush grow in the vacant parking lots left in industries' wake. The promises of the American dream have failed the people and this place. What once gave meaning and purpose to their lives: job, country, and religion, has now forsaken them. There are no jobs, the country is run by politicians who cater to base fears for votes, and worse, God doesn't seem to care, evident in that the diocese of Pittsburgh was central to Catholic sexual abuse crisis. Describing the setting, Andy Warhol's biographer, the journalist H. L. Mencken writes:

here was a scene so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of man to a macabre and depressing joke. Here was wealth beyond computation, almost beyond imagination - and here were human habitations so abominable that they would have disgraced a race of alley cats. I am not speaking of mere filth. One expects steel

towns to be dirty. What I allude to is the unbroken and agonizing ugliness, the sheer revolting monstrosity, of every house in sight. -Bockris, 2009:19

The very state of these hinterlands become transfixed in their liminality, caught between the pride of the past and the forgotten promises of their future. They are autonomous in this sense, the rules are made and broken by those stalking these grounds. A small overgrown pathway between housing and an abandoned trainyard has histories of teenagers and those who wander using this area from escape to dwellings. Those who come here to escape the pressures of normalcy can conjure their own identities and worlds. The pressures of normalcy collapse here in transgression. Taboo actions, drinking, unprotected sex, drug abuse, fist fights, are all forms of a liminal state.

My work emerges from these states. A sense of liberation takes control during these acts. Those occupying and performing in these spaces are disrupting the banality of the world. Here they can imagine a different world without the hammering of what it means to be in a *productive* society. Out of these environments myths, narratives and cultures are formed, from ghost stories like the Greenman to the counter cultures of punk rock and industrial noise, these outcast settings transfigure profane experiences to the realm of the sacred.

Building A House on Fire was performed in the witching hour between midnight and 3 a.m. while the church slept. I poured three containers of salt into a circle. I stripped naked and put on a pair of old jeans worn through with holes. I poured six Yuenglings over myself while wearing a werewolf mask. It's a cheap PA beer from the first "blue collar" company to get behind Trump campaign. The plastic werewolf mask moves between youthful Halloween, Skinwalkers and dark arcana, and the erotic concealment of a criminal's face outside the window of a victims house on an A&E special. I fit five of the empty bottles on my fingers, clicking them together into a mic connected to a loop pedal to generate backdrop of throbbing noise similar to the drone of the industrial-scape. I then reentered the circle to take the mask off and place the bottles down in there appropriate place. I then began to generate a painting of sorts, by hanging police shooting targets and roofing paper in layers, covering areas with asphalt. I viewed this as ritual of healing and transition; it employed the profane to reach the sacred, Culturally referent objects culled from witchcraft, scenes from the cult classic movie *The Warriors*, are woven together as the scene played out. The materials take on a new meaning as they interact and blend together in the space; their past identities are blurred and bonded to new ones forming a new narrative and myth.

A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. -Mark Fisher, 2016

I went back to visit my parents where a pack of coyotes moved into the woods behind their house. The same space I first witnessed pornography, had my first sexual encounter, a world of fire free of all rule was now being occupied by the mythological archetype of the trickster. This pack of coyotes had been pushed from across the highway, an area where the woods had been turned into suburban tracts.

Summers, our family would go to a trailer park as a stand in for a home. As my father took me fishing and eventually hunting, I was taught to enjoy “nature,” to sit and contemplate. He still sets up game cams to watch deer, bear, and anything else that comes through when he is not present. In an estranged collaboration, I had him set up two trail cams in the backwoods behind their house where a new wildness was taking hold. What it captured was the coyotes in the “spot,” my spot amongst the broken bottles and VHS pornography. It also captured nothing, where the camera would fire due to humidity change, fog rolling in, or the windblown tree limbs triggering the motion sensors. This spot, like so many others, is caught between progressive society and the undefinable outside. An undefined border or margin. Wildness is right beyond our perception, it’s of everything, we recognize something like a bear, dog, or even the woods; we see its patterns, the ecology and its ecosystem, but there is still something right behind its form we can’t grasp, something unknown and unpredictable. These spots and the things that inhabit them are directly in touch with that wildness, they’re right behind the veil of it.

I took the images I thought best captured the wildness or at least pointed toward it and enlarged them and wheat pasted them on plywood. Plywood has many meanings: it's a base for flooring in houses when they're being built; it boards up openings in abandonment and is found in the dumping grounds around places affected by boom and bust cycles. The plywood bears the images of these wild things in new places of play, it is the backdrop for them and their space as something between the profane and sacred. I want to provoke the (im)possibilities of places left to industrial waste, to dwell in the unknown, the wildness, in strange landscapes of twisted, rotted steel and their occupants' tangled meanings.

We agreed this city was like a morgue

You said we should liven things up around here

This is red when we paint the walls with fire pools of cream

This is my mouth with sharp silver teeth and our implausible dream

These are the blues when sung to you by blue lips the likes you've never seen

Will the smoke leave us time?

Or has someone extinguished your fire?

Maybe you'd rather be left behind?

This is how it felt when there is no product in the store

This is how we enter when there are no handles on the door

This is sleep when they remove the warmth from our little house

This is how you glow burning there as quiet as a mouse

-Alexis S.F. Marshall, Fiery, 2006

The ground my mind first came to in order to play and explore are the spaces left vacant and silent, to discover that in so much emptiness something emerges. That there is a freedom in the horror of wildness. Or better yet, a space closer to the void, like reaching deep under the roots of a tree in a creek clawing at the critters out of site, knowing you cannot see it but something is there.

I put waders on and climbed into an abandoned pool in Berlin, built for training during the 1936 Summer Olympics. It was now something beyond itself, its skeleton still there but fragmented and restructured. The derelicts drank and did graffiti out at the pool but they've since fled and their tags have since weathered. Vegetation formed in the pool but it flooded with the rainy season. Google Maps shows it dry with trees sprouting and with fresh graffiti. Now its murky waters were home to strange swimming creatures and all of the ghosts. Down in that water the sounds of the nearby street cut off. I saw my breath there below the surface, and the world around me slipped away as the pools beyond-ness swallowed me.

I would come back here often, before the sunset and stay late into the night, capturing the strangeness of the pool. I would drink beer, light fires, use Halloween masks and other debris to

make sculptures with. I would map sections with yellow construction spray paint, showing paths traveled by broken bottles or the cracked ground of the adjacent smaller pool that was completely dried up. I collected things here and brought them back to the studio. Once the neighboring studio's dog, Toni, decided to come along with me. I had my eye on a piece of rotted corrugated steel. Together we explored and gathered the material as a collaboration. We took back the steel, and I dipped lambskin in liquid asphalt to soak a little. I slammed it on the steel like a giant sopping brush and let it sit for days. The asphalt ran down on the ground around the steel like creeks. I took the asphalt-stained lambskin back to the pool to replace the steel.

These works exist as videos, sound clips, and photos. They all show the post-performance of the art. It has a ghostly quality in the sense that it only exist as photos and fragments of mythologies. Only Toni and I experienced the full narrative and the artwork exists like the skeleton of the pool. Fragmented and living as disjointed *thing*.

The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in the flesh and blood.

- Derrida, 2002

When I reflect on traversing “the back of beyond,” it exists as specter, images and affects, frozen moments resounding in traces that stand in the landscape of my mind. They are present in their absence. When the trail camera catches nothing as if the emptiness is so vast and large that a presence forms out of that nothing. This is the specter of forgotten promises of industry, bodies and beings lingering in traces of graffiti, trash, mythologies, narratives passed down. This is a wildness that knows what it is, but not its own depth. Something is right under the surface; we know it as unknown, as foreign and forever alien. They are the things haunted by the past and future possibilities of the past left undead in a life living on through the fragmented stories passed on.

Two cops, arms drawn, came up on me and my highschool sweetheart “Roman hands and Russian fingers” on a blanket in small field of highgrass overlooking a valley adjacent to a cookie cutter culdesac in its beginnings. They told us of a boys body found bound and raped here a few years back. Neither of them had anything to do with the investigation and it was only word of mouth that they check up on this space now and again. An Internet search gave us no further evidence of such cruel events, yet we know these stories and treat them as the thing between fact and fiction telling something beyond its horror. This is a fragmentation in thought, myth, and narrative. Somewhere in there something is real and known but without origin like the specter.

I see a section of fencing with ivy intertwined in it, trees bow in the breeze above, but its function has shifted; the partition and the emptied lot behind it no longer have purpose. These places are now set in wait. The portion of fencing reminded me of moments from my youth of mischievous deeds done in back alleys at night, when a motion detector light would kick on, its light blinding, pushing our faces from it creating new shadows spilling onto the pavement. This sudden exposure would send us scattering in the joy of deviant acts we were attempting to commit. I set a fence post in a cast cement block, with five motion detector lights crammed at the top of the pole. I set the lights to their brightest setting. The sensors I set to the closest proximity with the timer set on the shortest bursts. The light expels the viewer as they walk around its circumference. By the time you walk completely around the pole the lights turn off leaving a constant section of darkness at its edge. This light post is a flash on a camera. It floods the surroundings with light. As your eyes adjust another light kicks on exposing more of the area around it. This makes the perimeter a thing that is constantly redefining itself. The surroundings opening up as they become exposed in facets.

In its first iteration, I placed these lights behind a garage as part of a performance. My car was parked in the driveway with the trunk side facing away from the back of the garage. I put on a headlamp, I opened the trunk, took out a cot, backpack, sleeping bag and twelve pack of Yuengling. I closed the trunk, walked behind the garage where the light kicked on and exposed me out of the night for a moment. I set up the cot up against the back of the garage next to a

ladder lying against the wall on the ground, I laid out the sleeping bag and emptied out my backpack. Two sheepskin rugs, two trail cams, two blank VHS tapes, two coyote pelts sewn into masks, three roadside flares. I fastened the trail cams on the nearest trees facing the camp. I went back to the car to gather two VHS camcorders and extension cords. On my last trip to the car, I brought back three bottles of Jagermeister.

Throughout this expedition of setting up cameras, drinking, climbing the roof, wearing the masks, striking the flares, filming others around filming me, setting up the VHS camcorders in different locations, I paused. The motion detectors would quit and all would go back to the light-polluted penumbra. Something would move, triggering an exposure. The pauses created rhythm showing something beyond our understanding and what is being shown. It's a rest, a tacet, a moment when the emptiness of all becomes so expansive it develops gravitational pull. The drainage ditch of post-industrial being that weighs on us unknowingly. Some pauses grew into cinematic moments. I sat in the car on the passenger side wearing the coyote mask with all the doors open, the emergency flashers going off with a road flare set off out front as Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" blared from the speakers.

This whole ecosystem of characters, the man in the coyote mask on the roof, in the passenger seat, the person drinking, sleeping, driving, playing old country hits to the person capturing images of something out of the viewers direct sight all exist as fragmented beings

together. They make up the spectral ecology, all existing as one but never together; this is the collapse of the past, present and future together to be seen at various times and timelines. The camera's light shining, the trail camera photos, which are not available but are being captured while the motion detector light going off, all produce moments of the characters being played. These all expose a moment before it falls back to darkness. The trail cameras and VHS camcorders hold the idea of the image being captured but it becomes abstracted in the viewer's mind because they are unable to view these images. The pauses point the viewers attention to important moments. The image functions for me just like an object or memory, a thing. A still image taken with a lense captures something directly, but like a memory or history, we know it to not be true. It holds a truth to it and it never lies to us, but we know that there is something more on the image's periphery. Memory decays and people have different understandings of the same experiences. The same happens with an object as people have different sets of knowing. The image, still or moving, exposes an understanding of something outside itself the same way objects do, of uncertain origins and lost meanings.

During this performance the objective was constant tension in what the characters would do next. With the lights clicking on and off, flares going off and being thrown, the whole performance was built on uncertainty in where or when would something more violent might happen. It had all the makings of a person in perpetual distress ready to break, it stayed within the potential of the unknown.

What stage of night is it? And somebody comes to warn us that this is the night that does not end.

What stage of night is this? Is this perhaps the point in which we realise that the night is not ending. -Franco Berardi Bifo, 2013

The night became permanent, the sky's blackened with industrial smog, car headlights were needed all day and that *night* has never left. The smog from the stacks that used to be the backdrop have settled into the fabric of the landscape. With the American Dream gone, this world and its people are left groping for meaning, lost in the night. In the forsaken landscape a new ecology emerges from the charred remains of "progress," something uncertain takes hold in this ever-present night.

At the autumnal equinox the Earth's axis points away from the sun, night gets longer, and a final harvest takes place as animals shift into hibernation. Humanity marks this yearly transition as a time of death and its remembrance: memento mori. Halloween has become a time of overconsumption and mass-production. Our wanting to separate the person from nature and establish dominance over death and all things uncontrolled goes against the very thing this night once stood for.

Devil's Night, the night before Halloween, was born out of necessity in impoverished neighborhoods of Detroit in response to the boom and bust Capitalism. The night of mischief where people egged, graffitied but most importantly set fire to the mass amount of abandoned housing. This is rebellious message is seen as obscene by the rest of the United States, but to locals a sense of healing was released in the rage. Ash was often used to heal wounds in traditional medicine and was donned as masks in the early end of the harvest celebrations. A scorched earth to fertilize and heal the land and its people left behind.

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred. -Walter Benjamin, 1931

Destruction as a form of creation is celebrated throughout history. It clears the way for new content, and ideologies. I manipulate and distort to better understand. The destructive character is always at a crossroads. Destruction can level the playing field to rethink what is there and make room for something beyond. Yve- Alain Bois writes in *Formless A User's Guide* says "*To practice sacrifice and dismemberment requires some kind of organization...camouflages (are) a carefully premeditated strategy.*" To realize that the Destructive Character has no need for others to fully understand them but to actually camouflage their doings through destruction, is a way of

decentralizing understanding, to acknowledge the unknowable. A new form of nihilism takes hold, not rooted in trite pessimistic attitudes, but rooted in furthering uncertainty. I used the footage of Detroit's Devil's Night in 1995 of houses burning to play on a loop as part of an installation done on the Devil's Night. I found a dead cat on my walk to the studio that day. I gathered the cat and other discarded materials from anarchist campsites, the abandoned pool and other places I had been working. I cleared out a hallway, an area of permanent transition, a place between places, as the platform for the installation. Using the dead cat as material in a work of art is put into a state of unrest, like the physical structure. The materials are reevaluated by combining them a dead cat reanimated with a video loop of Devil's Night fires. These fragmented spaces hold themselves up with their original skeleton but the bone has been fragmented and reassembled. A state of permanent transition takes form where the players, objects, myths, narratives and histories shift around to point at something more than what they are, to point to their known-unknown settling into something wild.

Devil's Night is celebrated in similar ways across the globe. As a kid we celebrated Devil's Night in Pittsburgh. Plenty of other cities and cultures have a night of debauchery but none uniquely use the name of Devil's Night, a night of transgression. Digressive acts are ways to find liberation from the mundane drone. Using dead cats as art, burning houses down, drinking on rooftops, and wearing a coyote pelt for a mask while lighting off flares as resistance to the banal.

The activity of bare laboring corresponds entirely to bare life. Merely working and merely living define and condition each other. - Byung-Chul Han, 2015

Something remains in the ruins of these places left abandoned. These places are alive in their forsaken ecologies and ghost stories.

Have you ever thought what a ghost of our times would look like, Miss Millick? Just picture it. A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the jerky tension of the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the sullen resentment of the striker, the callous viciousness of the strikebreaker, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns? Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semi transparent masks ? - Fritz Leiber, Jr., 1941

These mythologies, the peoples, places, fuel my work. These forsaken people heal themselves through acts of rebellion. All the false promises and fraudulent histories leave a need to reimagine and rethink the world as we know it. To find liberation in uncertainty is to un-know, to reimagine the downtrodden landscape as a place free from the restraints of mass overproduction. To revel in the filth and the ghosts, carrying forward new ideas of how abandoned homes and vacant warehouses can be spliced together for new ideologies and mythologies.

I ask if it's possible to liberate oneself through alienation. To stay within contradiction and distortion. Asphalt is the blood of the earth, the pitch directs my attention to the infinite, a place far reaching out of the anthropocentric to a cosmic pessimism. In cosmic pessimism we can find an empathy for knowing the universe doesn't care, and in this contradiction, find liberation. Going against the grain of fraudulent histories to stay alien and complex in the unknown and uncertain. The constant consumption of material goods as a way of life has not quenched our existential problems. We must generate our own meaning in cosmic pessimism. Meaning sits swarming in the unknown, the places that are dark and foreboding. Together in this hell we can find solace.

There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable. -Franz Kafka, 1918

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Vita

Jeremy Tarr was born in 1989 to a blue collar family and raised in the working class neighborhoods of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. His undergraduate education is in printmaking and sculpture. He will be receiving his MFA in Studio Art at Syracuse University Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse, NY in spring 2019. In 2017 he received an Artist-in-Residency Fellowship where he lived in Berlin, Germany and had a studio at the Axel Haubrok Fahrbereitschaft collection. Drawing on the decay within post industrial settings his work deals with the abandoned and vacant spaces and the new myths and narratives that arise in their place. He works in performance, video, sculpture, drawing, painting, photography.