

TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE INVESTED OBJECT

THESIS

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of**

MASTER OF SCIENCE (Integrated Digital Media)

at the

**NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
TANDON SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING**

by

Sarah Groff Hennigh-Palermo

January 2017

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Approved:

Advisor Signature

Date

Department Chair Signature

Date

University ID: **N#####**

Net ID:

Vita

Sarah Groff Hennigh-Palermo was born in California. She has a BA in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University. She has worked variously in publishing, advertising, and technology, mostly as a designer.

Art-wise, she endeavors to create works that move away from an information-instrumental view of data and into an aesthetic exploration of experience. By moving away from strict data representation, she hopes to provide an optional take on the kinds of relationships we can have with information in a computer-organized world — one that is less about perfection and completionism and more about augmenting our humanity. Her works have appeared in shows at Westbeth and Flux Factory, as well as in people's homes through the Electric Objects digital frame.

This project has grown from seeds planted at the School for Poetic Computation and nurtured at the Recurse Center. Over the past year, both the BuzzFeed Open Lab and the MAGNET Fab Lab have provided space and tools for its development.

Acknowledgements

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Without Arlene Ducao I would have never known how awesome desktop fabrication is; without the MAGNET Fab Lab, I would not have had access to the machines I fell for. Without Kate Sicchio, I would still be mumbling about how there must be a better methodology than just running user tests and no closer to knowing what it was. Thank you also to Amanda Hickman for her generosity in making space at the BuzzFeed Open Lab's work bench for me and to Elizabeth Mcenaney for thoughtful feedback and enthusiasm.

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Finally, thank you to my parents, Helen Palermo and Tom Cannon, and my husband Westley Hennigh-Palermo. You have made me the weirdo I am today.

*to Westley Hennigh-Palermo,
without whose patience and belief
I would have given up a hundred times*

ABSTRACT

Towards a Theory of the Invested Object

by

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Advisor: Arlene Ducao

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Our current conception of information — as a set of contextless, dispassionate truths that can be transported across distance and medium and shuffled indiscriminately without change — is the product of nineteenth-century concepts of mathematical perfectibility and twentieth-century cybernetic concepts of command and control. It is also the source of beliefs about machines and technical teleology that facilitate anti-human developments, such as the continued production of surveillance devices in the name of progress. One way to denaturalize and counteract it is to create prototypes of what we want to see in the world and thereby shift the cultural imagination. *Oublié/trouvé* is one such attempt, using the stereoscopic memory concepts Roger Shattuck locates in *A la recherche du temps perdu* as inspiration for a hardware/software system. Using standard sensors and the basic form of data visualization but nonstandard content — amorphous, incomplete, layered memory — the system embodies a counter-theory of information. The project's effectiveness is evaluated according to phenomenological methodologies, in particular active reflection from a number of perspectives: designer, developer, manufacturer, and participant.