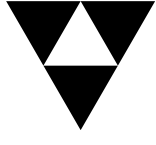


THE BACKET



84



THE RACKET

Hey.

I usually start these editorial missives with some sort of depressing realization from the last week of living on Earth in the year 2023. I do this for a handful of reasons (public processing of my emotions, you say?) but mainly because, well, it's easy. The world is full of darkness and finding a subject in all the murk takes little to no thought. Throw a rock in any direction these days, you'll hit something horrible.

Sometimes though, just sometimes, you find a piece of writing, or in this case, a series of photographs that doesn't wallow in the misery. You find an item or a thought process that seems to actively push back against the idea that everything has become serious to the point that the importance of levity and joy is only acknowledged as a tool of capitalism.

You find something like the work of Selby Sohn. You find something like "Always Smiling" the photograph of a pile of pink, plastic, "smile" masks that adorns the cover of the issue you're currently reading. Like all of Sohn's work it beautifully rides the thin line of art and silliness. It is a comment on the pompous self-seriousness of art that we've all become so inured to while also just being a simple, hilarious thing to look at, to engage with if you're lucky. It asks the viewer to both think about the idea of smiles we wear as masks at all times, but also, to just enjoy the idea of putting on a bright, pink rubber mask with a smile carved out of the front and marvel at how good the silliness of it feels.

Sohn's work always strikes this balance for me. I implore you to find images or videos of one of Sohn's "Long Arms" experiences. The title of the piece says it all: the artist brings a barrel of very long arms and people wear them while interacting. Look at the smiles plastered on the audience's faces as they try to engage in normal activity with these lengthy prosthetics. It's wonderful. It is, like "Always Smiling", a vessel for bigger ideas—a physical representation of distance in the waning days of a pandemic—but couched in a form that bakes in primal joy at just doing something wacky. A way to point a (very long) arm in the direction of serious thought while still allowing people a rare moment of, gulp, fun.

This isn't me being reductive. This is me staring in awe at how easy Shelby Sohn makes meshing smart and silly. This is me marveling at Sohn's ability to do what I find so difficult: showcasing the dark and

THE RACKET

the light in the same piece. Giving a viewer something to chew on and something delightful in equal measure. Expressing honest reflection about the state of the world and earnest enjoyment of that world in a single breath.

It is, as I imagine Sohn always intends, something to chew on. A dichotomy we could all do better to strive for in our own lives.

'Till next time.

- N

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police brutality, racism and violence
perpetuated towards BIPOC
communities in all forms.

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THE RACKET : QUARANTINE JOURNAL, Vol. 5, NO. 84

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Always Smiling / 2023

Website: <http://selbysohn.com/>
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I didn't want to believe it at first. It's too enormous.



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We aren't in this for the money.

But there are costs in doing what we do.

Any help with those costs (and with the costs of future endeavors) would be greatly appreciated.

If not, we get it and we still appreciate you.

THANK YOU TO THESE FOLKS

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84

snake soup

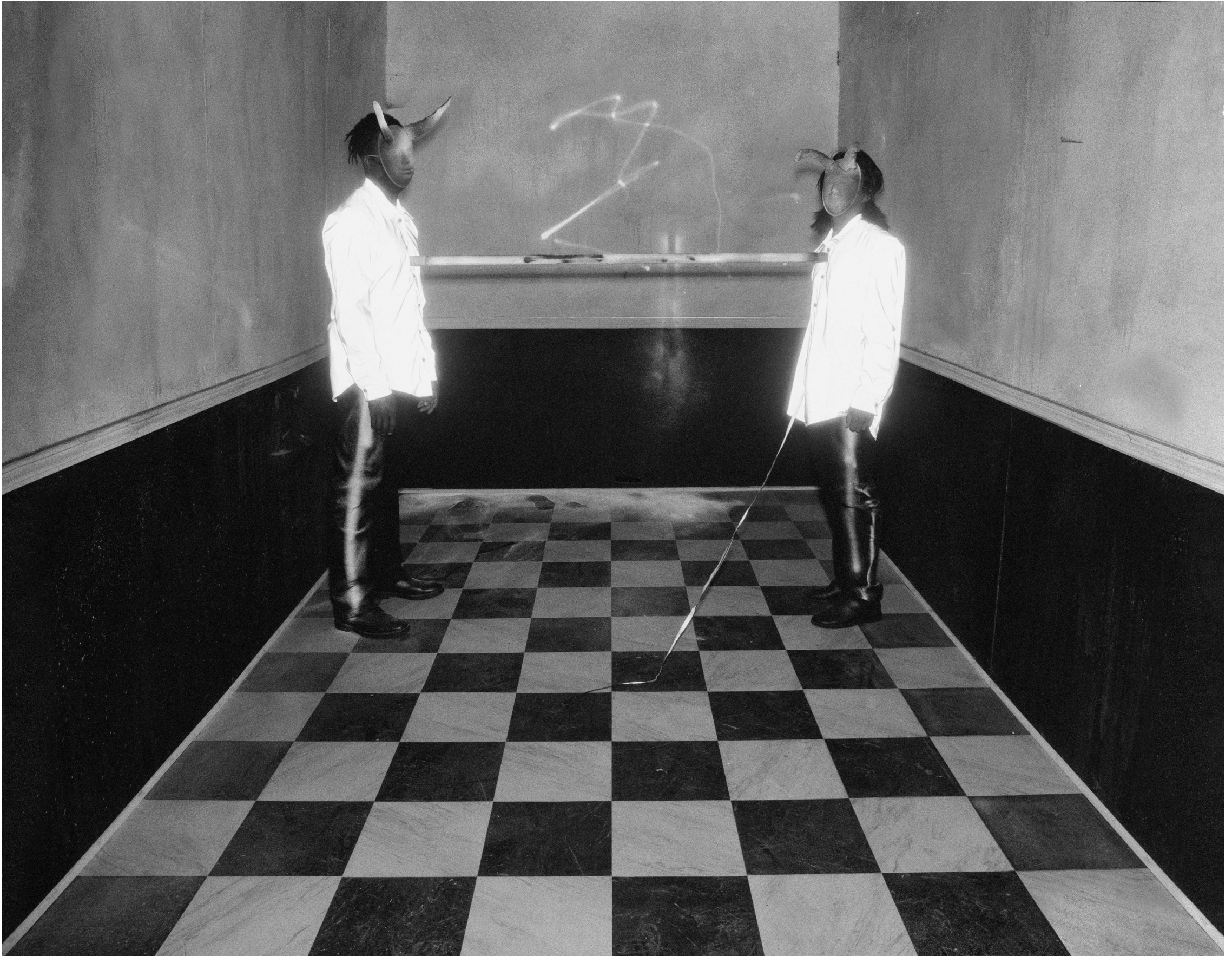
KATHLEEN HELLEN

anecdotal delicacy
for purposes here bollox
for purposes here
phooey

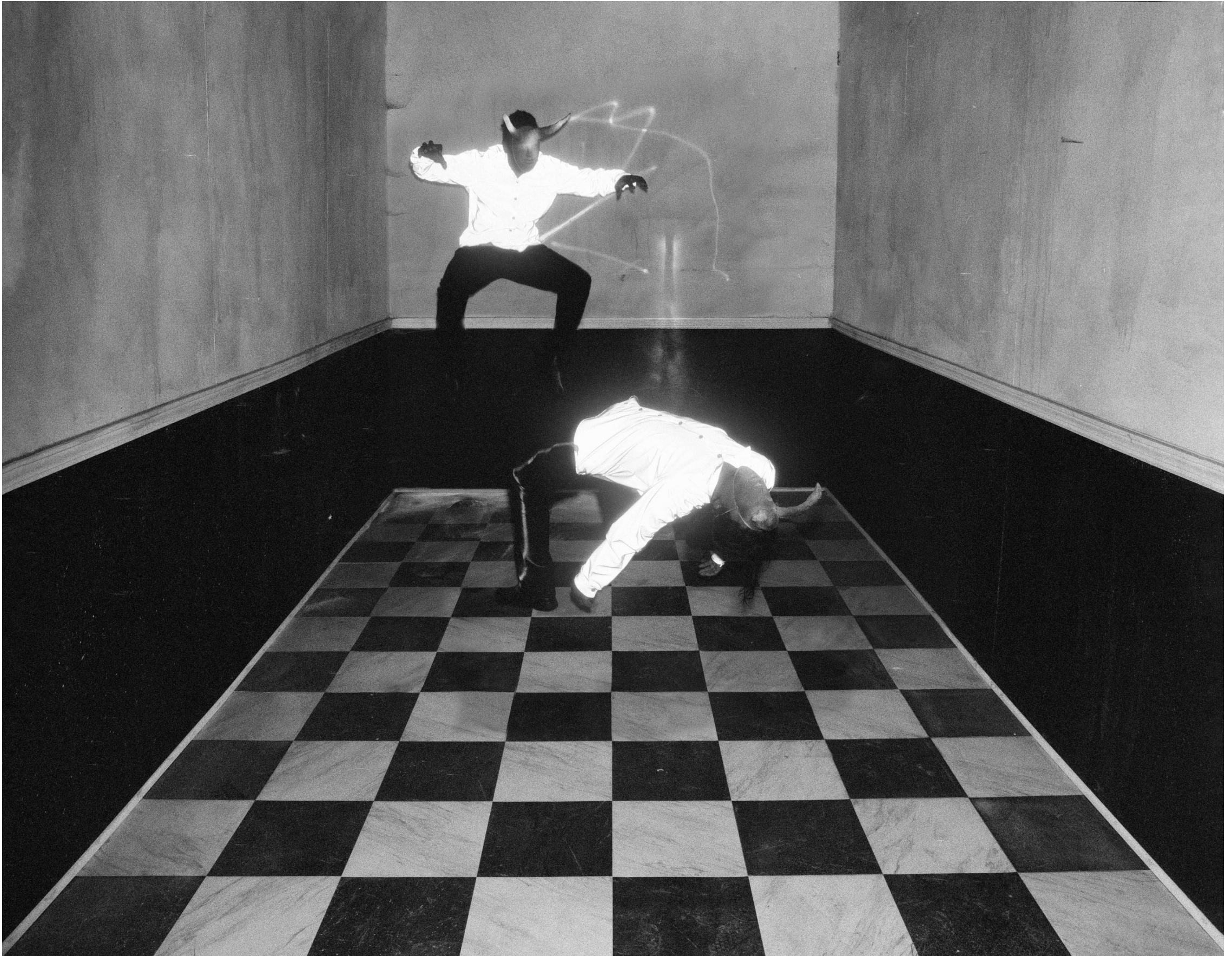
to say the least: hasty
scraps humans peer review
for lurid

speculation fed
coincidence, suspicious and unlikely
data

hypothesizing: hedgehogs,
birds marmots
corresponding origin



DEVIL 7
RODRIGO VALENZUELA
2022



DEVIL 3
RODRIGO VALENZUELA
2022



DEVIL 1
RODRIGO VALENZUELA
2022

Magician, Madwoman

KATE WYLIE

I wrote the same poem thirty times.
Easter baskets, closing caskets, yellow umbrellas

turned inside-out by darkening weather.
Rain in Pittsburgh. Happy Thanksgiving.

One poem calls this sensation magic, the other calls it science.
You want them to face one another, have the discussion.

You want my poems to speak
but I was born without a mouth.

This is genetic. It's a fault.
Tomorrow I'll repent. Tomorrow I'll be better.

The grandfather clock reads 10:07 again.
Someone hangs from the penthouse window, shouting

he loves you, sister. This I promise.
Please, God, no more martyrs.

Please keep that man from falling.
Magician, madwoman, love potion, flowermouth.

The people around us count out the year in trimesters
while we've been penny-pinching and planning funerals.

One sniff of whiskey, one touch of death.
Mouthful of ash. Fistful of coffee grounds.

Watch as I disappear behind the curtain only to return
with an armful of snowshoe hares,

how I fold myself in quarters, then quarters again
to climb inside your overstocked heart.

Watch how helpful I can be. How delicate. How ladylike.
Watch as I shrink down and down and down for you.

Take on your reflection as my own.
Two loose sequins in a torn pocket.

I make you the moonlight. Turn you into my twin.
Tomorrow, I'll beg you to split me down to the rind,

overripe orange, big brave girl, feather-light steel, and thyme.
Tomorrow we'll watch flies drop into a cup

and talk about how brave the dead can be.
I wrote the same poem thirty-one times.

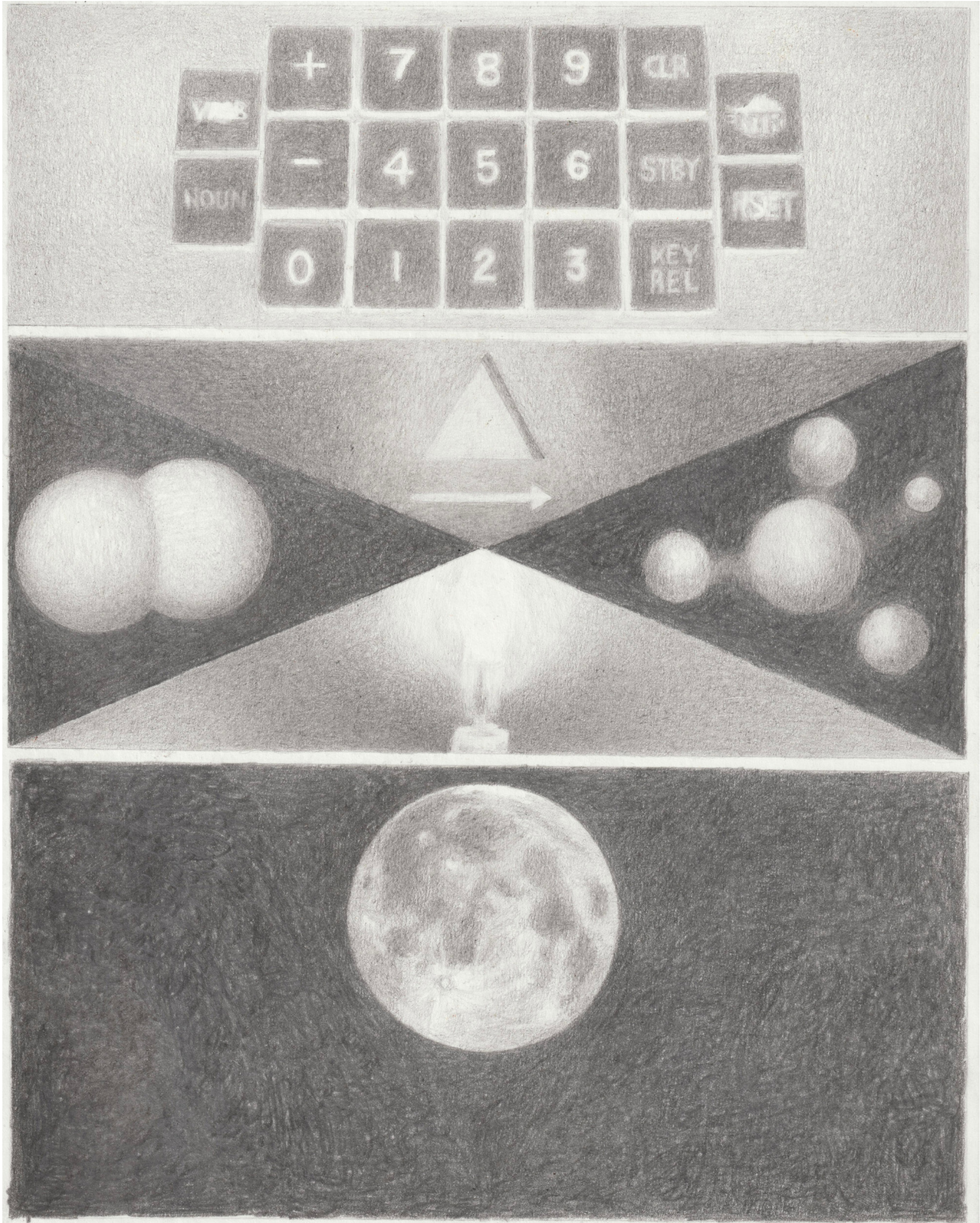
The seer to her blind man. Strawberries and sunshine.
Seventy-seven degrees in November. Love should be

the least of my worries. I shouldn't worry
about love. I shouldn't even remember the word, given the world.

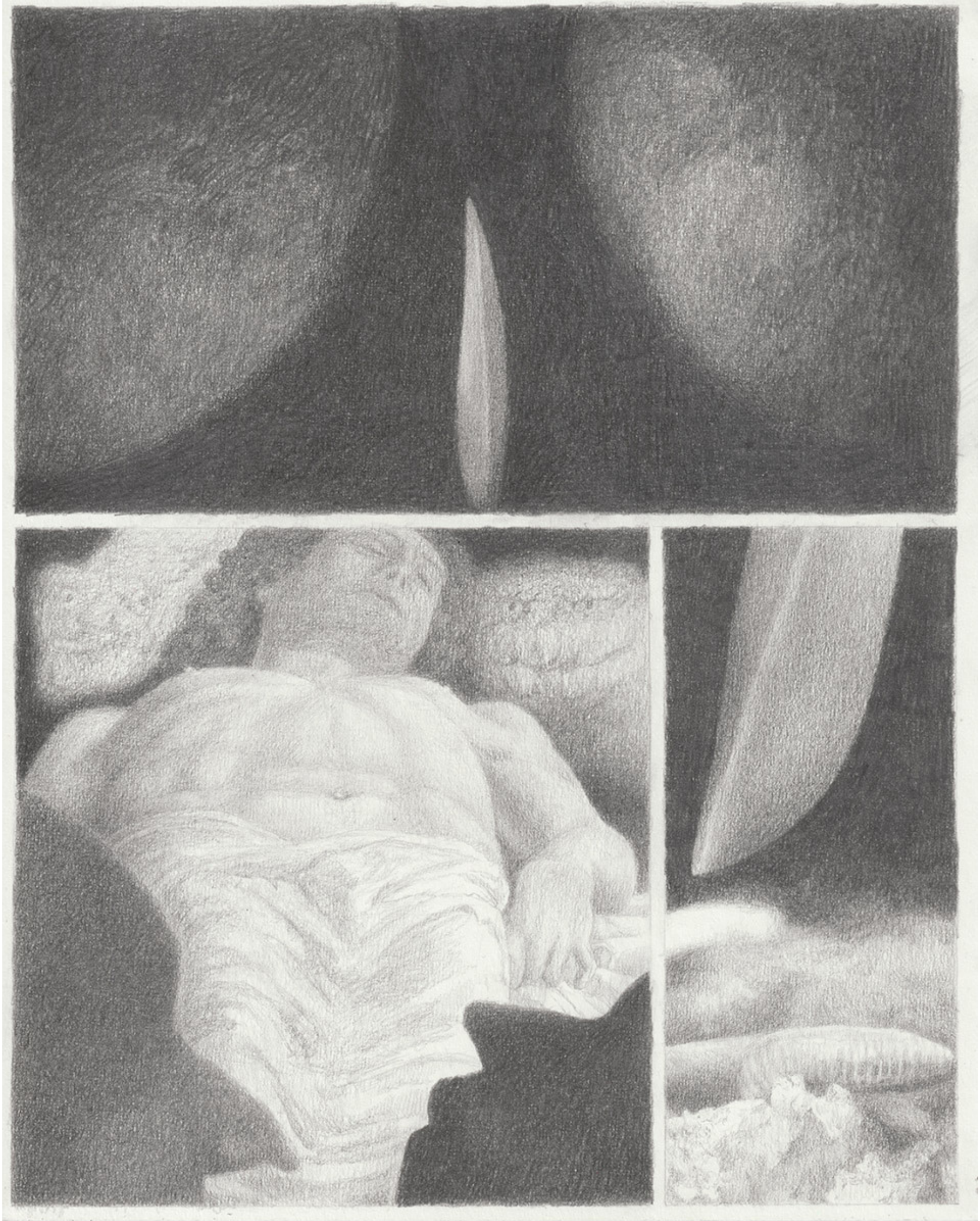
Ghosts rising from gold-spun evenings, bundles of roses,
two million minds gone rotten and this

synesthetic explanation: another blueberry. Another raspberry. Chalk fading
from the sidewalk. I won't even say the word. I can't pronounce it anymore.

Tomorrow I'll go back to the church of my childhood
and listen while those enormous echoes chime.



UNTITLED
MO VLEESHOUWERS
2023



REOCCURING CHILDHOOD DREAM
MO VLEESHOUWERS
2023

The Algorithm Kids

EDMUND ZAGORIN

the algorithm kids find that models are to truth as the hedonic treadmill is to happiness

*The living leave their lodgings (cherubs of statistics
with clear faces looking ahead – nobody in particular)...*

*Nothing causes them pain any more,
neither madness nor loved ones' dying, nor hunger,
nor the brevity of what seemed measureless.*

Arkadii Dragomoschenko

Xenia, (Sun & Moon, 1994) p. 64 trans. Lyn Hejinian & Elena Balashova

morning again. see the algorithm kids: faces awhirr at their sturdy machines.

the algorithm kids apply a new coefficient, check the data, blink, check the data, blink,
check the query, blink, gnaw, blink, run the script again. fuck. what broke this time?

back to the drawing board & the also the drawing board on which all drawing boards are
drawn (including this one). midnight again. the algorithm kids yawn, eyes scarlet, blink.
midnight, then morning again, morning & the flow of bobbing heads down market street

the algorithm kids whiff coffee fumes, vape synthetic marijuana, sneeze at the off-gassing
of the building's photogenic vinyl furniture. edison lightbulbs, granite countertops,
polished concrete. the algorithm kids fade out to an open-mouthed drool, doze on the
shuttle, wake to watch the landscape melt into columns and rows, columns and rows,
tables and tables of tables, one-to-many, many-to-many, confessions of a set of unrelated
entities, no arrows, no relationships, no relationships, no relationships.

can we build a thing that will figure out what is wrong with all the other things we
built? if they build it, will we come, will anyone? who does "they" mean? who doesn't it?

tiny sparrow chirps. chase a spiral helix of dust motes through the glimmering gray
air. a crisp leaf falls from the fog tree. japanese television specials, slow music.

synthetic waves, synthetic beats. cerulean pixels from old video games.

whisper of a voice, gentle. shiver; ASMR, neckbristles, oddly satisfying. *this is your
mother calling...* morning again. (morningagain-morningagain).

here's a true statement about the state of machine learning research today: we do not have a complete or even coherent theory about why some models perform better than other models on a given dataset. in short there is no general theory of model performance. all we can do is run controlled experiments to collect evidence and then interpret the role of our own bias in distorting the conclusions we draw from our observations. this situation makes us feel like we're trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle with mutating puzzle pieces, pieces who are sub-dividing, making love, fading and re-appearing from an unknowable aperture. a conveyor belt of instructions fed into a nested series of black boxes, white boxes, gray boxes. speed counts, like any business.

take pizza. anyone can make a pizza. only certain operators can make and deliver a hot pizza with the correct toppings in under an hour at scale to an unknowable and perpetually changing number of customers. that's why complex social problems are being solved by "how"-people, people with limited curiosity about "why" they should be solved. in a roundabout way, this is also why, in the long term, there will be fewer pizzerias serving more people more different pizza toppings in shorter timeframes.

the algorithm kids wear loose black tshirts and tight black eyebrows. long hairless arms melt into keyboards like hungry snakes swallowing holographic roadkill. pink pythons, golden pythons, soft and smooth, moisturized with brand name dermal lubricant. midnight again, but this midnight is friday. the algorithm kids spill out onto the lonesome sodium glow of mission street. potbellied chicano hawkers wield long bi-pronged forks to spear and flip hot dogs, bacon, onions and peppers on their portable griddles. groups of houndstooth-blazered salesmen stand in little groups, eating morsels from the palms of their hands and smoking cigarettes. blue feelings. are some people simply born knowing the one true secret of happiness or can it be learned?

iceblue feelings. faraway feelings. blueblueblue.

the algorithm kids find that models are to truth as the hedonic treadmill is to happiness.

meaning that reaching for truth using a model makes the deepest truth get pushed away.

there is a cousin of the law of reversed efforts that rears its head in machine learning research. the law of reversed efforts is an aphoristic law, a folk law, a folk theory that finds blank space in the mind of an algorithm kid who remains curious about the triggers of motivation, productivity, "flow states" and deep work. proposed by émile coué and aldous huxley and elaborated by alan watts and other thinkers of the

contemporary mindfulness canon, the law of reversed effort states: “the harder we try with the conscious will to do something, the less we shall succeed.” the algorithm kids nod, blink, nod to each other.

in machine learning, repeating sequential tests on same dataset may increase the likelihood of false positives, meaning that a given dataset’s experimental viability will appear to decay as more tests using the same model are performed over time.

to the algorithm kids, this dynamic of repetition and decay feels like waking from a dream where the residue of forgotten epiphany is an irrecoverable loss, a letter written to a far-off lover that has now been edited so many times that it can never be sent.

to the algorithm kids, the models are to truth as the hedonic treadmill is to happiness: the more truth you find, the more models you need. the world moves too fast for any symbolic representation to remain high-fidelity without continuous input, validation and improvement. what models are to truth, the hedonic treadmill is to happiness: the more you reach for it, grasp it, pull it, rev it, jam it, the more it isn’t there.

shaking fingertips like tiny condiment packets, nozzles of noisy, spicy numb blood.

drip.

the big earth-shattering answer?

the algorithm kids wake up slowly today, knowing that the future is theirs (or at least their shareholders), all theirs to signalboost or obscure, a future to reveal by concealing the complexity of its diffuse and violent past, a future to model by effacing the nature of its origin.



SWIM NIGERIA
MODUPEOLA FADUGBA
2021



MORNING SWIM
MODUPEOLA FADUGBA
2020



STADIUM DREAMER 5
MODUPEOLA FADUGBA
2020

bookends

FAIRNESS PECK

the pages fill
my space
like chain smokers
and their cigarettes
from end to end

ink smudging drapery
during stiff breezes
the kind of wind
that shrieks like Disney
Cartoon noisemakers, with less pastel

there's something of a comfort
the flapping pages
making a flip-book
out of words that lost
meaning, long ago
except the drawing they've made
out of the room
of flowers blooming, childlike
and a bookend, of two walls

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