

NOTHING IS NOTHING

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides critical background and insight into the practical and theoretical context of my artistic practice, by focusing on the concept of *nothing*. In contemporary contexts *nothing* is seen as a void of being, doing or even existing – but paradoxically *nothing* also contains the values and choices defined as negative by dominant ideological forces. Embracing the power and subversive potential of this paradox, however, transforms *nothing* into a progressive political position. My research spans several relevant histories and modes of practice, including the theoretical work of Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Raoul Vanigem and the Situationist International, as well as DIY, conceptual art, punk and zine culture. This investigation is connected to a creative methodology featuring a focus on text, listing, the absurd, and the momentary. It seeks to develop an understanding of the subversive potential of the everyday in an artistic practice which challenges dominant modes of production for gallery exhibition. To achieve this, this paper explores the possibilities of subjective meaning in the concept of *nothing*.

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CHAPTER 1 – NOTHING

“What do we do when we do nothing, what do we hear when we hear nothing, what happens when nothing happens?” - Paul Virilio, 2001

This paper is about *nothing*¹, and what *nothing* means, in the context of an artistic practice and theoretical research informed by the concept of Simulation, the Spectacle, and notions of the everyday. It is about using the linguistic complexities of the term *nothing*, and its philosophical history, to shift meanings and create new connections between a multitude of ideas. It is about how to use these possibilities to establish the idea of *nothing* as a political position that generates critical discourse around modern consumer culture². The problematic binary nature of meaning and value that this way of being presents can be disrupted by using the inherent absurdity, uncertainty, and contradiction of *nothing*.

The concept of *nothing* and the personal artistic practice that is currently inspired by it is a work in progress. In my own practice, these ideas are constantly developing, changing and shifting. This thesis represents one potential exploration into *nothing*, and the web of connections in theory and artistic practice that came out of that exploration. I will continue to build upon and deepen these ideas in future work.

In the above statement, Paul Virilio is describing a concept that he and Georges Perec, in their journal *Cause Commune*, named the infra-ordinary. He describes this term as referencing things which are “the opposite of extraordinary, yet which are not ordinary either” (Virilio 109). This notion gives readers an interpretation of *nothing* that is inescapably contradictory; *nothing* requires an absence of action or being. Perec and Virilio were

¹ In order to distinguish between nothing as a descriptive word in my paper – ie “there was nothing left” and nothing as a conceptual term, I will italicize the word *nothing* when it is referenced in a conceptual manner.

² This paper discusses some big terms and ideas that are, when taken at face value, generalizations of systems of values and ideals. I would like to establish here that these generalities are in some way necessary, and also in many ways part of the point of the paper. To provide some limits for the purpose of this discussion is important though. I will describe modern consumer culture and similar ideas in terms of the concept of Simulation, considering consumption and production in the age of the internet (really the 1990s to present day) in the context of *nothing* that is relevant to pop culture from the same era. The paper is about subjectivity and experience. The idea of *Nothing* is the opposite of generality, in fact, it represents a specificity to moment and experience and understanding that is almost completely unique to each person who considers it. This is part of the reason that it is very difficult to describe *nothing* concisely when used in this way. Because it is virtually impossible to describe each way that *nothing* could be interpreted, it too becomes a generality in this work. This possibility to be completely general and yet so specific only serves to add to the paradoxical nature of the word *nothing*.

challenging readers to make something from this emptiness. The paradoxical nature of the idea of *nothing*, and the potential for experiencing what happens when nothing is happening, is an important foundation for my use of the term *nothing* throughout this thesis. Virilio's definition of the term infra-ordinary itself also seems to be a paradox, occupying a grey area of meaning, with layers of impossibility and uncertainty. This flexibility in meaning is important in my work, underpinning a text-oriented, print-based practice that relies on the subjective nature of interpretation and understanding in language to challenge dominant ideologies in modern consumer based culture.

My interest in this area has centred around the word *nothing* as a concept to explore both in theoretical research and studio practice. I collect references, writing, images, objects and ideas that generate an archive of thought, pulling out threads from all these sources to create connections and build up a foundation that supports my interpretation of *nothing*.

Nothing is a word that implies a range of concepts and definitions in different contexts. There are many, many ways to interpret *nothing* and this paper focuses on Western thinking, but it is important to acknowledge that many cultures have, throughout history, considered *nothing* in terms of philosophy and science. Buddhist concepts of nothing come to mind, as well as the Middle Eastern influence on the west introducing ideas such as zero. The back and forth of philosophical exchange between European and Middle Eastern cultures for many years also significantly influenced the way ancient Greeks, for instance, approached the concept of nothingness. Perhaps in part because of this diverse history, *nothing* is an intriguing term with inherent possibilities for absurdity and uncertainty in meaning. In my studio work, I prefer the idea of *nothing* to be as open as possible but for research purposes it is necessary to set certain limitations for the parameters of each particular project.

Chapter 2 will describe in detail my methodology and studio practice. This will lead into a discussion of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and its role as an ideological concept and way of life that both inspired my research and investigations and serves as a framework for creative output. It focuses on the importance of the everyday, and it sets out a system of values that in many

respects reflects on an undermining of dominant systems of mass media and production. DIY ties together some of the key ideas of *nothing* presented in this work by serving as the starting point for research into the subversive nature of the everyday in artistic practice described in Chapter 4. This establishes an important connection to noticing, primarily the 'noticing nothing' of the Situationist International and subsequent artists influenced by the group. Chapters 6 through 8 will bring together this understanding of *nothing* with the concept of Simulation, and elaborate on the notions of absence and paradox, and their role in developing *nothing* as a political position.

The paper will conclude by describing the letterpress print project that comprises the main artistic output from this web of theoretical research and investigation. It will tie together aspects of DIY, the everyday, and relevant subversive historical movements and artistic practices to generate an understanding of the political potential of *nothing* that is applicable in contemporary culture.

CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY

“Use everything.” - Allen Ruppersburg, 1985

In 1985 Allen Ruppersburg, an American conceptual artist active since the early 1960s, wrote the above statement in a piece called *50 Helpful Hints on the Art of the Everyday*. In this poetic account of the art of the everyday, Ruppersburg describes the importance of noticing the moments of day to day life, the unique opportunities for creativity, and the experiences that come from this observation. The idea of using everything, in particular the objects and imagery of the everyday, highlights an important aspect of my studio work and my methodology. This in turn links my overall practice to a history of post-modern and

conceptual art practices that question the nature and definitions of art. Like Ruppensburg, and many other conceptual and Avant-garde artists, text is an important aspect of my work. Text provides opportunities to challenge the parameters of art, and opens a multitude of avenues relevant to the exploration of meaning and value, and in the context of my own work, the contradictory and absurd nature of *nothing*.



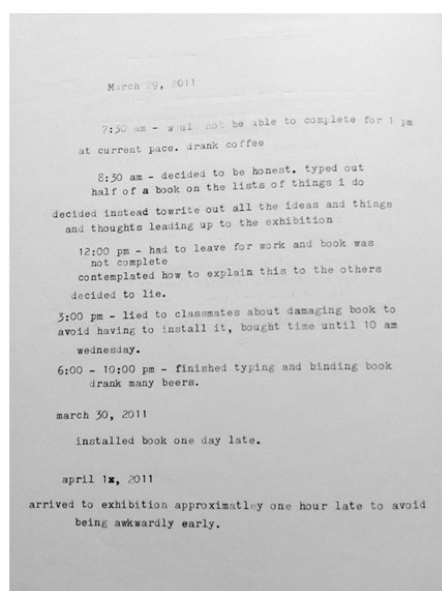
Fig. 1 – Cheryl Carpenter. *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE*. (Side view) Letterpress text. 2012.

I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) is a text based piece that illustrates this position. This piece is inspired by the works of other artists who use text, contradiction and the idea of nothingness to critically consider the boundaries and definitions of art. Take, for example, Stefan Brueggemann's 2004 piece *Nothing*. This work features the word 'nothing' spelled out of glowing neon letters. This work at once comments on the nature of art in the gallery space in contemporary contexts, and also refers back to a history of conceptual art practice. A clear connection to this history is perhaps Joseph Kosuth's neon and text works dealing with 'art as idea' from the 1960s, and John Baldessari's *I Will Not Make Any*

More Boring Art (1971). In this work, Baldessari writes the phrase “I will not make any more boring art” over and over again in a notebook, and also has assistants write the phrase on the walls of the gallery. His use of repetitive, self reflexive text in this piece was an important consideration in the development of *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) particularly in terms of the effectiveness of the simplicity and humour in Baldessari's statement to draw the viewer into many levels of complex and often contradictory interpretations of the work. It also reflects a critical paradoxical commentary on the art world in which it participates. Predating this, there is Yves Klein's *Le Vide* from 1958, a piece in which Klein simply presented an empty gallery space as the show itself. This work, through its apparent emptiness, disrupted the boundaries of the definition of art that traditional considerations create. All of these examples, through their considerations of text, meaning, the gallery space, and most importantly the concept of *nothing*, inform my own practice in many ways, coming to a point in works such as *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11).

The statement, written in 7 inch tall black letterpress letters on cartridge paper, came out of a body of text intended for a book project, and printed in large letters as an experiment. In keeping with much of my practice, accidents and experiments often become the finished work. *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) represents on the surface a somewhat ironic, momentary and personal statement of frustration and dissatisfaction. However, it also presents the viewer with much deeper and more complex issues. In a gallery setting, the work begins to challenge the nature of art. It is absurd and contradictory, sending a paradoxical message to the viewer; the work is shown in a gallery, which implies it is art – but it is stating that it doesn't want to be art, that the text was intended as a message and is essentially *nothing*, in that it is not attempting to be art, but rather trying to be not-art (and failing, perhaps). At the same time it describes the notion of *nothing* as something as explored in this paper, with many contradictory meanings and possibilities, something that works subversively in the gallery space.

This disruption of traditional notions and definitions of art also builds a connection to Ruppensburg's use of text and the everyday. His statement "Use everything" (Ruppensburg 55) encapsulates my approach to idea development and art making. Everything in the world is a source of information and material resources. In turn, all of these sources can be, and are, art. Methodology and method are inextricably entwined in my practice. Ruppensburg's notion of use is a theoretical approach to research as much as it is a method for creating work. For example, the project *An Explanation* (2011, Fig. 2) shown in the *Big Clever Gorgeous* exhibition at Emily Carr University (2011).



An Explanation, cover (right) and excerpt, 2011
 11" x 8.5"
 hand bound book, typewritten text
 installed in *Big Clever Gorgeous*
 exhibition,
 Emily Carr Concourse Gallery, 2011

fig. 2 - Cheryl Carpenter. *An Explanation*, 2011. Hand-bound book. 8.5" x 11".

This book was hand bound and typed. It described the process of generating ideas, which became the finished product of a piece for the show. The work documented lists of ideas, failed projects, random activities, thoughts, and things observed by the artist that were inspirational – and turned this background information and research into the book itself. The

methodology in essence became the art work.

In my practice no things are excluded from being a potential source of ideas, inspiration or material until the moment a particular work crystallizes and, in that same moment, is completed. It is very difficult to narrow down or encapsulate a practice and related methodology of this nature. This approach to creating work is all about potential, multiplicity, and the absurdity and complexity of signs, symbols, and meaning-making. In this way, nothing has fixed meaning, nothing is in a set category to be easily defined. Rather, information, ideas, objects and images are ready to be interpreted, moved around, re-used and recreated into the many different possibilities of subjective understanding both from the position of the artist, and of the viewer.

Perhaps this explains the emphasis on listing in my current practice. As Umberto Eco in his book *The Infinity of Lists* states “The list becomes a way of reshuffling the world... to accumulate properties in order to bring out new relationships between distant things, and in any case, to cast doubt on those accepted by common sense.” (Eco 327) Eco is a semiotician. As such, his concern is with meaning in language, the signs and symbols that create systems of communication, and what this can tell us about how society operates. Eco is invested in a post-structuralist approach to semiotics, which explores the subjective nature of meaning and understanding in language. He states “to be able to talk about [a large idea or concept], to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties” (Eco 15). So the list is a way to try to communicate seemingly impossible things, to demonstrate new connections between many ideas that may give people insight into a particular understanding of a subject, or even to do the opposite; to make it more obscure, less fixed in meaning.

Lists are both a way to generate research and the manifestation of that research. In my studio projects, text, specifically in list form, is a reoccurring theme. Lists are an opportunity to take many disparate objects or ideas that reference the everyday and bring them together to give them new significance in a multitude of ways. An example of this is the book project *i went on a trip* (2011, Fig. 3).

This book featured lists of things, places, and people encountered on a trip throughout the United States. These images seem to describe small and mundane moments of the journey, insignificant observations and snapshots of everyday objects of consumption. However, as the only way to experience the trip, they ask the viewer to consider the everyday items of consumption in a different way, to try to build a narrative out of fragments of moments, and to value (or question the value) of these objects as representing memory and experience.

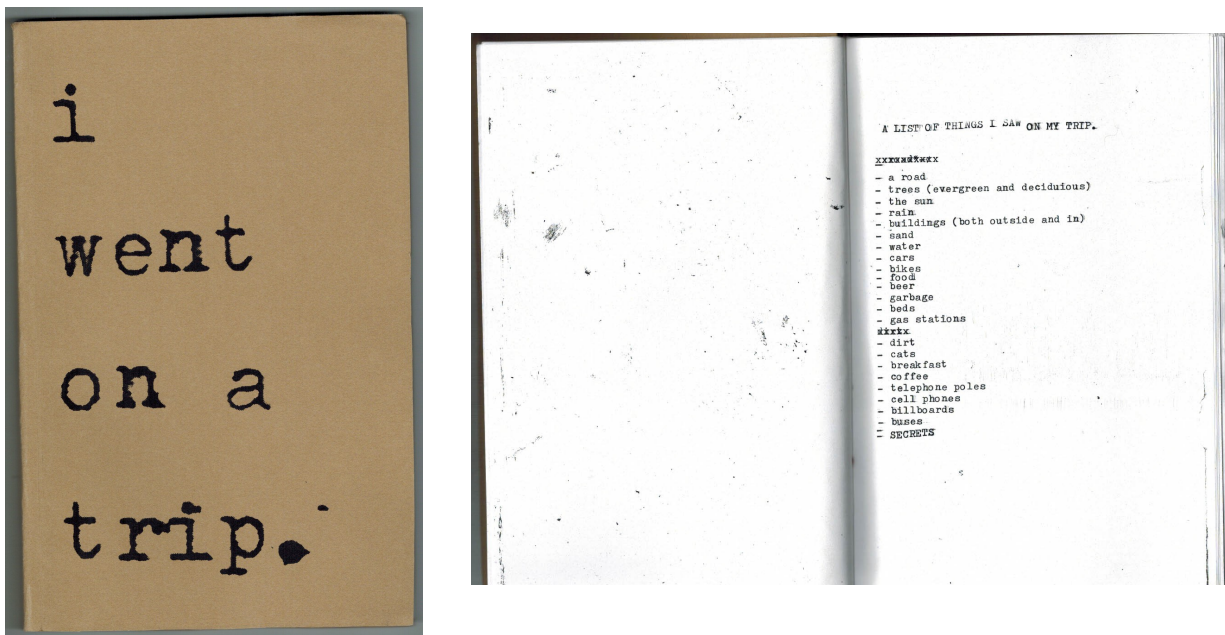


Fig. 3 - Cheryl Carpenter. *i went on a trip*, 2011. Hand-bound book. 4.25" x 8.5". Cover and inside detail.

As Raoul Vanigem states in the introduction to his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, "I fully expect this experience to be lost – and rediscovered – in a general alteration of consciousness" (Vanigem 17), acknowledging the many views and memories each person brings to reading his book. In the same way, everyone bring different associations, however subtle or varied, to *i went on a trip* (2011, Fig. 3) and is left to imagine what the story behind the book really is. Each time the journey is read it is experienced in a different way as a combination of the artist's chosen images and the personal background of the reader. This lends itself to a practice focused on destabilizing and questioning meaning and value in

consumer culture. It embraces the subjective as a subversive position within that discourse.

As Eco states, the list represents the power of subjectivity in defining and creating meaning (Eco 18), and the impossibility of clearly communicating the same idea through representation; every person understands in a unique and irreplicable way - we can only make these lists of things and thoughts to try to encapsulate the infinite possibilities of being as a way to communicate our experiences of the world.

Experience is another key aspect in my methodology. I'm constantly changing plans to incorporate new ideas, jumping through different projects in spurts of activity with a seemingly limited attention span. What is really at work in this is a desire to experience the moment for what it is; to make art that reflects new and often fleeting inspiration without setting specific boundaries on this creativity. I find I am drawn to print and text, stemming from my background and technical skill in the area, but I am open to using any of the materials around me that are relevant to a project. The result is fragmentary and often contradictory body of work that attempts to reflect a sort of light bulb moment of inspiration, when thinking and reading and listening and doing collide. I'm not afraid to follow the tangents and randomness of my thoughts in strange directions. One of the goals of my work as an artist is to communicate new ideas or different ways of seeing the world of the everyday, that acknowledge the uncertain nature of communication and understanding, and embrace the variety of possible experience.

My approach to research is to collect inspirational materials, and then make connections between these things, drawing out similarities, differences, and everything in between. Some of the earliest inspirations for this research into the everyday and, as a result, *nothing*, were drawn from: a fascination with the imagery and slogans of advertising, the exploration of mass media and consumption in science fiction novels and pseudo-philosophical texts³, and the political and aesthetic considerations of zine literature. Then, through journals, books, online sources, library visits, discussion with friends and colleagues,

³ For example the book of the Subgenius, which will be addressed further in Chapter 3.

etc., these notions were connected to scholarly thought and artistic contexts. With all of these references in mind, the space in between representation and meaning in images from pop culture and the everyday is explored in order to confuse and complicate this relationship. The aim is to create new interpretations for these references that destabilizes their role as supporting structures of mass media and mass consumption by removing them from commonly accepted contexts, or places where they would not be noticed⁴ in a significant way.

CHAPTER 3 – DIY

“Decide for yourself how you are going to get screwed. Some ways are fun.” - J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, 1979

In addition to the methodology described in the previous chapter, the theoretical research interests presented in this work stem from a personal connection to the Do-It-Yourself movement (DIY), both in terms of ideology and methodology. The *Book of the Subgenius*, written under the alias J.R. “Bob” Dobbs⁵ (2012, Fig. 4) exemplifies in many ways the ethos and sensibilities of DIY as focused on in this paper. The *Book of the Subgenius* takes on the position of a pseudo-philosophical religion; an absurd parody of consumer culture and dominant ideologies in the United States at the time it was written⁶. As the figurehead of the movement, Bob reveals often 'prophetic' insights on the nature of consumption, UFO conspiracy, and the concept of Slack⁷ amongst many other things.

⁴ Noticing is an important aspect of this thesis. In Chapter 4 and 5 noticing is explained in greater detail and its relevance to nothing, the everyday, and my own practice.

⁵ “Bob” is the ironic figurehead of the movement of the Subgenius, based out of advertising imagery with a 'used-car salesman' style personality.

⁶ According to the book itself, it was first written in 1953 (Dobbs, 3) and initially circulated as pamphlets in 1979 with several more contributors (Dobbs, 3). Iterations of the work are still currently published, and the Subgenius now has a prominent internet presence.

⁷ To “Bob” “*Nothing* is infinitely more real than other realities” (Dobbs, 67) and Slack is a way to achieve this through “absolutely “free” time, devoid of all stress, to do whatever you damn well please for “eternity” without Drawbacks, Apologies, Side-effects, Spoilage, without Remorse.” (Dobbs, 64).



Fig. 4 – Cheryl Carpenter. J.R. “Bob” Dobbs. Drawing, 2012.⁸

The message of the book, veiled in an over-the-top reverence for purchasing small appliances and religious ceremony, is subversive and anti-capitalist. It encourages readers and followers above all to think about what choices they make in life and how these choices reflect values imposed upon society by forces of consumer culture, mass media and government (Dobbs 67, 68). When in the introductory quote Dobbs tells readers to “decide for [themselves] how [they] want to get screwed...” (Dobbs 20) he is acknowledging the fact that like many subcultures which seek to undermine dominant ideological systems, they are inevitably working within (and against, or around) that established structure. Like DIY, one of the goals of the Subgenius is to critically reflect on the capitalist system they operate in by consciously choosing to live and think differently. This demonstrates that even though these choices represent a challenge to the values of mainstream society, alternative ways of being and thinking are not just functional, but often more satisfying or constructive. As Dobbs said “...some ways are fun.” (Dobbs 20)⁹.

To further contextualize my research on the topic of *nothing* and its connection to works such as the Subgenius, it is important to begin with a brief overview of DIY culture and ideology. This is a way of life embraced by many people in varying manners and degrees. For myself as an artist it informs the way I generate resources and create work, and personally,

⁸ Images of work that is not the artists' own in this thesis are re-drawn to avoid copyright issues.

⁹ There is also a connection here to DIY in terms of copyright and distribution with this book, which was originally handmade and distributed in very small circles, mostly through word of mouth and friends making copies for friends. However, in current versions, The Book of the Subgenius is copyrighted by the movement.

DIY reflects my own values and life choices and is therefore an integral part of any research I do in an academic context that is relevant to my own practice – a practice that is based on the personal, the subjective, and also the political¹⁰.

DIY stands for “Do-It-Yourself” and as a subculture is difficult to pin down because of the variety of participation. It originated in many Western contexts as a reaction to mass production and in some senses nostalgia for lost skills or value in things done with investment in the process of doing (Poletti 32). It emphasizes the value of the everyday, the unprofessional, and the handmade in artistic production (Poletti 32). In terms of creative output, DIY can reflect many things. Those that make their own furniture, grow their own vegetables, publish their own books, make jam, soaps, or decorative crafts can all be under the umbrella of DIY activities, and for a multitude of personal reasons. Some people choose DIY because of their inability to afford other means of getting things. Others choose it out of the need to reuse and recycle, by say, fixing their own clothes or bikes – both for cost reasons and perhaps moral or environmental ones. In other cases DIY may represent a love of craftsmanship or the unique regardless of cost; such as those interested in refurbishing antiques or building specialty furniture from locally sourced driftwood, for example. DIY in all these cases can also be as complex as building your own house from the ground up, or as simple as learning to crochet a toque¹¹.

The aspect of DIY that focuses on need is of particular interest in the discussion of nothing. People turn to DIY as a solution for a lack of monetary resources. In these cases, DIY could be making or mending clothes, learning home repair, brewing beer, growing food, etc., as cheaply and as independently as possible. This creates a sense of community as like minded people get together and build relationships around being resourceful and learning new skills. It also reflects a political statement shared in many ways by these communities; to choose DIY over the mass-produced is to choose to value recycling and re-use over the

¹⁰ The political in this sense is also personal – the personal ideological choices and even moral decisions or judgements that one makes that determine a political position in life, even if it is not so cut and dry as “right” or “left” – and how these politics affect the way one interacts with the world.

¹¹ All relative simplicity, of course!

potential status of brand name objects, for instance. To patch your own clothes instead of throwing them away, or to salvage things from the trash are all also potentially negative choices in terms of mainstream society and capitalist values¹². DIY choices, when they come to represent an ideology in themselves and a rejection of culture based on mass production and consumption create a tension between the functionality of these decisions in one person's life and the demands of modern consumer culture to fit in and most importantly, buy things.

It's not surprising, in this way, that DIY and punk subculture often overlap (or are one and the same) and it is from here that my personal involvement in this way of being originates. DIY in punk reflects a need and a political choice to, for example – put out your own music on tapes or records as cheaply as possible. This demonstrates the desire to know all the skills that that process requires, and to have control over your own artistic production from beginning to end. Perhaps most significantly it also represents a political and personal refusal to participate in certain aspects of consumer society, whether that be record labels, production factories, music recording studios, etc. - and these choices of course vary person to person. This attitude extends into many aspects of punk subculture beyond music. For instance, the DIY publishing of zines and art in book form that has its roots in the activities of the Beats, Fluxus, Dada and the Situationist International art movements (Poletti 31) is extremely important in punk, as a way of circulating, changing, and defining the punk movement through a multitude of voices and definitions (Poletti 33), while avoiding the potential disruption of this movement of ideas from mainstream culture, where they could be lost or totally altered by the forces of mass production.

The important thing is that in this way DIY reflects an ideological choice shared by many people to reject the consumption based values of modern capitalist society, and to use those choices as a visual representation of that rejection. DIY is a way to subvert the demands of society to make money, have a career (in the traditional sense) and live life in a societally

¹² Values and ideology in terms of western, patriarchal, theoretically democratic capitalist societies of the 20th and 21st centuries.

proscribed way. DIY questions ways of being and challenges the values set out by mass media, advertising and the systems that produce these signifiers.

DIY is a framework and a background from which to begin an exploration of the concept of *nothing*. *Nothing* is a key idea in DIY and in the development of a critical position in response to modern society in the age of simulation and the hyperreal¹³. It could be said that nothing represents both an abstraction of the concepts of DIY ideology, and at the same time, a condensed and focused way to talk about how to use this sensibility – to transfer it in a knowledgeable and purposeful way to an artistic praxis that seeks to subvert dominant ideologies and value systems. This is the potential of the paradox and the uncertainty of nothing, that it can be seemingly contradictory things all at once.

CHAPTER 4 – THE EVERYDAY

“Everything starts from subjectivity.” - Raoul Vanigem, 1967

An important aspect of DIY to acknowledge is the everyday. Of course, the everyday as a subject goes beyond just DIY, having been considered in artistic and theoretical contexts for many years. One place this interest can be seen originating in a modern sense is with Duchamp's *Fountain* ((1917)2012, Fig. 5), which brought an everyday object into the gallery to challenge conventions and assumptions about art and, by extension, the society that values these conventions.

¹³ Baudrillard describes the hyperreal as the reduplication through another medium of the real – taken to the extreme that now, the reduplication is what is being recreated, so that there is no more real but only copies of copies (Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 146, 148)

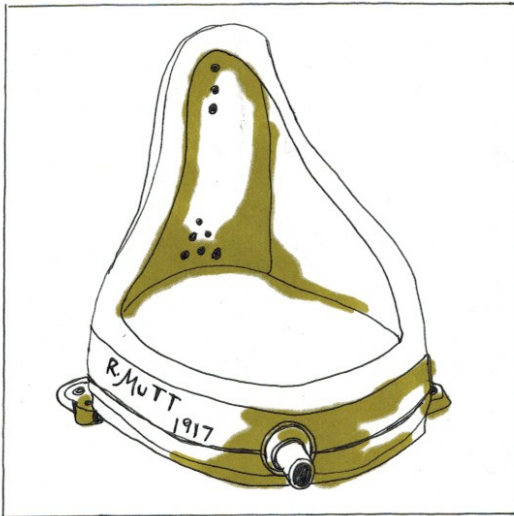


Fig. 5 – Cheryl Carpenter. *Duchamp's Fountain (1917)*. Drawing. 2012.

However, DIY as a movement with strong artistic connections and implications makes use of the everyday as a practical and political tool. This is related in many ways to the ideas of the Situationist International and subsequent groups and artists; for example, Fluxus, many underground movements with text based practices such as the previously mentioned Subgenius or the Principia Discordia¹⁴, and conceptual artists practicing up to present day. As a subculture that values the banal, the handmade, and the everyday over the mass produced, DIY represents aspects of *nothing* that are important in this body of work, as a statement about a way of being and doing that challenges conventions of consumer culture and mass media.

The quotation that begins this chapter is from *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, first published in 1967. Raoul Vanigem set out in this book the nature of the everyday as a revolutionary tool, through art and life. He describes in this work the importance of subjectivity in understanding the potential of the everyday. He emphasizes the importance of spontaneity in creativity as the power of realizing the subjective; in other words, the value of individuality (Vanigem 194). This argument is related to Herbert Marcuse's development of the idea of radical, or revolutionary subjectivity. Marcuse saw that “existing society is

¹⁴ Similar in nature to the Subgenius, it is a parodical account of a cult like religion which values chaos, humour, a good time, and the idea of balance. It was written initially sometime in the 1950s or 60s (the book itself is vague about its origins, stating that it came from visions experienced in the late 1950s (Younger, 7) but was not distributed until 1965 (Younger, 75). It continues to be published and circulated today, with alterations and additions.

organized precisely to prevent ... a reconstruction of subjectivity" (Kellner online source). Like Marcuse, Vanigem was interested in how this subjectivity represented such a challenge to the conventions of consumer culture and mass media. For Vanigem, subjectivity was represented in the value of everyday life, and in the willingness to notice or even embrace the everyday to attempt to circumvent the societal dominance of the Bourgeois (Vanigem 18, 25-6).

"Everything starts with subjectivity" (Vanigem 18) because this is the key in establishing a radical position that undermines structures of capitalism at work in Vanigem's time, and in current contexts, albeit in different ways¹⁵.

Vanigem was an important part of the Situationist International, a group of thinkers, writers and artists active mainly from the late 1950s until the early 1970s. The Situationists were based primarily in Paris, but also had connections to sections of the group in Germany and Scandinavia (Ford 81) as well as artists in the rest of Europe and the UK (Ford 84-86). Along with *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was fundamental literature for the Situationist movement, written by one of its leaders, Guy Debord.

The Spectacle, according to Debord, is the goal and the outcome of dominant modes of production (Debord 13); a collection of images in media, advertising and consumer culture that demand a way of being which supports the ideology of the "ruling order" (Debord 19) and values images over real experience (Debord 12).

Debord specifically saw art as a problematic product, an image of consumer objects that made them even more consumable (Ford 103). The Situationists then had to establish a critical position that allowed art to function against this problem, which demonstrated "the abolition and the realization of art [as] inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art." (Debord 136). What is important about this quotation is the establishment of the contradictory and uncertain nature of art that is to be critically effective in (and against)

¹⁵ Different in terms of time period, first of all, but also in terms of relevance of Marxist thinking. They are also different because of the different locations and levels of consumption. Consumption in Paris in the 1960s was much different than consumption in North America in the 2010s, and this is an important distinction, but radical subjectivity is still a very relevant subject that can be applied to contemporary contexts.

consumer culture, art that is not art but still is art; or to move beyond what is currently considered art in a sense. This is important in building the connection between art, the everyday, and the philosophy of nothing – which are all aspects of *nothing* in the political sense.

For the Situationists art, as a part of life, was inextricably connected to the everyday and the everyday, as life, was by nature political (Johnstone 8; Marcus 17). This produces an inherent connection to the political potential of art, and thus the need to include the everyday in this work.

CHAPTER 5 – NOTHING

“Time passes. Drink your beer. Wait.” - Georges Perec, 1974

In Georges Perec's *The Street*, an essay from his book *Species of Spaces and Other Places* (1974), he describes the act of noticing the everyday, and the powerful ideas that can come from taking the time to do nothing, or to try to find nothing in the city space. In reality, Perec would say that there is no such thing as nothing in the city (Virilio 109) but only things that one would not normally notice, things considered nothing. It is an important distinction to note that nothing is not in fact a total void of being or existing, but rather a collection of experiences, objects and events that are simply not valued in terms of their potential contribution to art or to society. Perec suggests drinking beer and waiting (Perec 107), to see what happens, what can be observed while one is engaged in this activity. The result for Perec is the poetic account of the streets of Paris in that particular moment, but this idea can be applied to many artists at many times.

Dérive was also a way of experiencing the city, a way of noticing in a similar vein to

what Perec describes, but which predates *The Street* and contains the revolutionary motivations of the Situationist International. Dérive, according to Guy Debord, is a way to move about and view the city space without the usual reasons for doing so, in order to see these actions in a different way (Debord in Ford 34); Greil Marcus in his essay *The Long Walk of the Situationist International* elaborates that Dérive was "an attempt to fashion a new version of daily life—a new version of how people organized their wishes, pains, fears, hopes, ambitions, limits, social relationships, and identities, a process that ordinarily took place without consciousness." (Marcus 5)

The revolutionary importance of the everyday in the Situationist movement has already been discussed, and this insight into this artistic act, or "politics-as-art" (Marcus 17) of the group serves to highlight just how noticing the everyday ties into this subversive practice.

Noticing the *nothing* of the everyday is important in establishing it as a political position that is inspired by the work of the Situationist International, but as a concept that exists in a different time and frame of reference. In the context of Simulation, the polarizing revolutionary actions of groups such as the Situationists are problematic. Clearly, although the Situationists presented a way of thinking and being that was full of potential, the movement did contain flaws that led to its ultimate disappearance, notably after the May 1968 riots in Paris¹⁶ (Ford 129-30; Virilio 108) The concept of *nothing* presented in this paper aims to take from the experimental and radical thinking of movements such as the Situationist International. This emphasis on action then used art as a vehicle for social change, focusing on criticizing systems of consumer culture. However, *nothing* presents a potential way to adopt these attitudes without attempting to be a revolutionary force in the classical sense of the Situationists. Chapter 7 will explain the nature of critique in Simulation that this paper seeks to address. Baudrillard's theory is the lens for interpretation of

¹⁶ Not right after, but that event marked an important moment for the Situationists and in many ways represented a failure of their ideals when the riots didn't end up the way they anticipated, and the movement began to decline. (Vanigem 10, Ford 130, 135)

contemporary consumer based culture as discussed throughout this work. Debord's ideas and that of the Situationists are an important historical precedent to acknowledge, and it is by building upon this framework that I hope to clarify the use of *nothing* in a political and critical role. However, it is not my desire to directly repeat the motivations or situations of the Situationist movement, but to use the sensibility of the nature of the everyday that they represented and apply this to the concept *nothing*.

Perec's work moves away from the overt revolutionary nature of the everyday of the Situationists to a more subtle, but just as powerful, noticing of *nothing*. Politics-as-art is still very much as part of his ideas. Georges Perec was responding to the aftermath of the events of May 1968 in Paris (Virilio 108) and the notion that the leftist vision of the time had in some ways imploded (Virilio 108), but he was still committed to the value of the everyday.



Fig. 6. Cheryl Carpenter. *I Want To Believe*, 2011. Excerpt from *Bummer*. Letterpress and photocopy collage. 4.24" x8.5".

The noticing of Perec and of *Dérive* is also an influential aspect of the project *Bummer*

(2010-11), a zine created to ironically explore the meaning of life through the mundane experiences of the day-to-day. Several pages of *Bummer* (2010-11) are of particular interest in this paper, as they are inspiration for the format and content of the exhibition book project. *I Want To Believe* (2011, Fig. 6) takes the form of a list of reality t.v. shows, below the phrase I WANT TO BELIEVE, which is a reference to the popular t.v. show the X-Files, airing in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This work plays with the idea of reality, using a quote from a fictional television series to question the nature of reality t.v. itself. *I Want to Believe* (2011, Fig. 6) suggests these shows are in fact about nothing, about fake lives and lack of real experience that references the hyperreal. The work itself is about *nothing*, the nothingness of reality in these shows. Its also about how to play with language – the idea that reality t.v. is not real at all, that most of it is staged but people totally accept this works conceptually in many ways. It operates similarly to nothing in this sense, that the word can actually stand in for its own opposite, it can paradoxically be reality but the very opposite of reality at the same time. Even the phrase 'reality TV' changes the meaning of reality, but leaves the suggestion of the original in its place; reality based on fakes of reality. This is ideal for framing a discussion of noticing. It questions how people notice the world around them when faced with the saturation of reality TV. How do people address the problematic definition of the real? Do they question or embrace the contradiction at work here? In many ways, it also embraces the absurdity of this situation. Reality TV can demonstrate the extent that fake experience has been adopted as real in consumer culture. People want to consume constructed reality even more than they want to consume products. This is made more clear through the fact that the list of reality TV shows in this project is only the top 25 (from 2010) out of a list of hundreds, compiled from several different web sites (many sites had different variations of the 'top 25' list). This work is drawing attention to Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, an important aspect of Simulation. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 169).

CHAPTER 6 – NOTHING AND SIMULATION

“The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing marks the decisive turning point.” - Jean Baudrillard, 1981

Simulation and Simulacra by Jean Baudrillard (1994) is a significant part of the framework for the interpretation of modern consumer based society represented in this paper. The work of Jean Baudrillard in terms of the theory of Simulation spans many years, books and lectures. The summary of this work presented in this paper by necessity focuses on the relevant aspects of Simulation in connection to *nothing*. Specifically, the idea of void in Simulation is an important tie between the theory of Baudrillard, and this artistic practice.

The quote from Baudrillard which begins this chapter is a description of the distinction of Simulation in society from previous ways of being, where the real was much more connected to daily life. He refers to nothing in the sense of the hyperreal, a “generation of models of the real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 169). *Nothing* in this void of the real plays an important part in the almost apocalyptic vision of Simulation, as an inevitable result of fakes built upon fakes, the void that is an end to real experience (Baudrillard, *Agony* 63, 70, 87).

Nothing as absence, and as a paradox both philosophically and linguistically is based upon a larger history of nothing and nothingness in Western thinking¹⁷, and in Western art contexts as well. Much like the problem of encapsulating a vast and varied movement like DIY in only a few pages, *nothing* – as a word, a concept, even a way of being, is a huge term and impossible to describe in one paper. The following discussion then will serve as my way of limiting the interpretations of *nothing* and focusing it on the specific interests of this paper to establish nothing as a political position. Even though, in many ways, this body of work is in opposition to trying to set limitations, it is necessary to establish these parameters in order to

¹⁷ Chapter 1 acknowledges the many possibilities of the term *nothing* briefly, and it is impossible in the constraints of this paper to properly describe all of these even in the context of Western, European interpretations. It is important to note that I am aware of this and have chosen to focus specifically on the aspects of *nothing* most relevant to the purpose of this thesis.

form a coherent discussion in this particular moment. As was noted in the introduction, this web of research presents many opportunities to be investigated in different ways, and this thesis represents one of those possibilities - but certainly not the only one.

CHAPTER 6.1 - NOTHING AS ABSENCE¹⁸

From the DIY perspective, the idea of *nothing* is drawn out of absence, out of void or lack. To explain; in a sense DIY is to make something from nothing (or to make do with nothing) and in this manner re-using things rather than creating new ones. It is taking a lack of something and turning it into an advantage, or using things considered nothing by society (for instance garbage, something that society would prefer to make non-existent) and making them functional. Nothing in this way also comes from lack as in need, the lack of possessions, owning nothing, and the need to do without. So in DIY *nothing* can be seen from both a positive and a negative place, as absence and as uncertainty.

There is also an ideological connection to absence in this notion – the political position of having nothing and embracing it as a positive experience or way of being, when traditional values in consumer based societies would suggest otherwise. It is a way to subvert through devaluing the ideology of capitalism while still having to exist within than system. Valuing experience is an important distinction, one that supports a critique of simulation and capitalist systems as set out by Jean Baudrillard in many of his works. Baudrillard sees the world, in terms of Western, capitalist society, as moving towards an inevitable void. This void is of meaning and reality, due to the forces of Simulation. The real ceases to be significant as simulation takes hold. For example, Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* describes the fact that a fake bank robbery would be taken just as seriously as a real robbery, and would potentially have the exact same consequences (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 180). For Baudrillard, nothing is absence and void in terms of reality, and the fact that society no longer even looks

¹⁸ Absence (absent) is defined by the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary as [missing](#), and not existing or [lacking](#), and its relationship to nothing here is in that definition of non-existence. The historical context of absence goes back a long way in Western thinking, to the ancient Greeks such as Aristotle and Plotinus and his theories of non-being (Cunningham 4).

for real experience because it is based on production and consumption of the signs and simulacra of simulation.

This viewpoint has an important historical precedent in the concepts of Nihilism and Existentialism. French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), in his book *Being and Nothingness*, describes the consideration of nothing as absence, or void, in philosophical thought. He details the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who questioned the possibility of experience, and the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who discussed abstraction as that which cannot exist without form (Sartre 3) as concepts around nothingness that led to his own ideas about existentialism. Existentialism ponders the non-existence (or existence) of God, and how this absence affects the way people think and live. For Sartre, nothingness questions the meaning of existence, and the value and meaning of experience (Sartre 15). In a way, because everything question posed about existence could be answered in the negative, with nothing, the possibility arises that consciousness (or being-in-itself) is non-being, or nothingness (Sartre 78).

Nihilism, interpreted mainly through the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), was influential on many ideas of Existentialism. According to Conor Cunningham, Nihilism describes “the logic of nothing as something”(5). Baudrillard also describes Nihilism, and its connection to the death of God in *Simulation and Simulacra* (Baudrillard 104). Nihilism, much simplified here for the constraints of this paper, can be interpreted as a void or a lack of objective meaning and value in the world (Cunningham 100) which can lead to a sense of great despair or negativity in the world. Philosophers such as Baudrillard see this lack of meaning and value as symptomatic of the modern world (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 104-5), a world obsessed with disappearance and simulation of the real (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 105).

Baudrillard states he is in fact a nihilist (*Simulation* 105) and his interest in the void of meaning, the absence of the real, is a key part of his development of the concept of simulation. This idea is closely connected through *nothing* to the negation expressed by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*. The spectacle is the mass dissemination of images as

illusion and distraction (Debord 12) that turns reality on its head (Debord 14). Debord describes the spectacle as “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production... it is the very heart of society's real unreality.” (13)

For Debord, the real exists, and the images of mass media are an illusion that covers over this reality to the benefit of the powers of the Bourgeois as cultural producers; in other words, the spectacle is the illusion that the Bourgeois way of life and the power structures within that are the right and best way to be (Debord 15). This concept of 'real unreality' is re-interpreted by Baudrillard. He sees that in modern society media, simulation and hyperreality have replaced reality wholesale with the images and products of consumption, and continue to build upon this (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 169). They become the reality, rather than the cover up. Production is now for its own sake, more than just a support structure for the agenda of a particular social class. Reality is unreality – it is nothing, based in simulation rather than experience.

Debord offers a way to combat the spectacle that through investigating the possibilities of nothing. He states “For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people setting a practical force in motion...the practical movement of negation in society.” (Debord 143). This can also be applied to a critical approach to simulation, a potential solution to the problematic of critique set up by Baudrillard. This problematic describes that in opposition to hegemonic powers of production, any criticism is simply absorbed and regurgitated by forces of media, or advertising, or production, and used to the advantage of these forces (Baudrillard, *Agony* 60).

How is this relevant to an artistic practice closely tied to DIY ethics? The history of this negation connects directly to the Situationist International, a movement that Debord was involved in. The Situationists were known for their revolutionary approach to art, including their participation in the Paris riots of 1968 with graffiti works and writing projects. Debord describes art as “a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence.” (Debord 135) and the Situationists as a movement that has found a place of criticality through negation and

contradiction – art as both abolition and realization of art itself (Debord 136).

According to Baudrillard in the *Conspiracy of Art*, art fails to be critical in this way in the world of simulation. Post-modern art represents the null of modern consumer lifestyle, embracing nothing and meaninglessness (Baudrillard 27) as a way to reflect upon or critique mass consumption. However, in line with the problematic of critique, art simply becomes, or is complicit with, simulation itself by self-reflexively taking on these traits (Baudrillard 71), in a failed attempt at irony. Baudrillard criticizes the Pompidou Centre in Paris as a signifier of this kind of modern culture of simulation (Horrocks and Jevtic 72). However, in 2009, they put on an interesting show entitled *Voids – A Retrospective* that chronicles some of the most influential empty spaces and literally, art works about nothing in art since Yves Klein's empty gallery in 1958 (Pompidou Online Source). The space is empty, and as the exhibition catalogue states this “emptiness also represents a form of radicalness” (Pompidou Online Source) and in terms of Baudrillard's critique of art, this position of nothing is interesting, considering nothing and its interpretation as absence and void in simulation. Can an empty space be simulation? What is it replicating, and is it possible to create a fake of nothing? Baudrillard himself states that from nothing sometimes something of substance can be formed (Baudrillard, Pataphysics Online Source).

CHAPTER 6.2 – NOTHING AS PARADOX

Baudrillard seems to contradict himself – taking on *nothing* as a void, an inevitable end of simulation, a lack of meaning and value, but at the same time seeing that substance can come from nothing. He is using the paradoxical and contradictory nature of *nothing* to his advantage. *Nothing* as a paradox is an important part of the historical context of the concept and a fundamental part of exploring the potential power of *nothing* as a political position. *Nothing*, which is actually something (Kaplan 14) has been investigated as a linguistic trap, a play on words and a riddle since ancient Greek times, even before the use of nothing as a mathematical zero (Kaplan 14). Jacques Derrida, the French scholar and philosopher (1930-

2004) in his book *On Grammatology* also uses the paradoxical and contradictory nature of nothing to suggest “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida 158). He is suggesting that language cannot have an outside, there is nothing outside of language, but nothing is outside language. Derrida is explaining that language is an attempt to communicate in the hope that significations actually bear significance (Cunningham 155) but in reality language and communication are subjective, and therefore it is impossible to understand completely what words and actions truly mean for everyone. This connection between language, the impossibility (and yet paradoxically the multitude of possibilities) for communication through acknowledging the significance of subjectivity, and the concept of *nothing* begins to establish the contradictory nature of working with *nothing* in art and in writing, that refers back to the nothing of the everyday, and the powerful revolutionary nature of the everyday and the subjective as established in previous chapters of this paper.

Nothing is really a paradox by definition. The Merriam Webster dictionary¹⁹ defines nothing as:

something that does not exist : the absence of all magnitude or quantity; *also* : zero : nothingness, nonexistence : not any thing : no thing : of no account : worthless : someone or something of no or slight value or size.

This definition in itself suggests that *nothing* is both something, and not anything, or non-existent. Something implies a thing, as does being of no account or no value – but nothingness would require the absence of things, a total void to be truly nothing. *Nothing* in this way creates a sense of uncertainty, contradiction and absurdity that is important for criticality in simulation and consumer culture, where replicas are the norm. *Nothing*, in its uncertainty, is very difficult, if not impossible to replicate and control. To the Subgenius, who developed the idea of Slack as a way to achieve a state of *nothing* that promotes individuality

¹⁹ From the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary - <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nothing>

and personal happiness over mindless participation in consumer culture, “TRUE SLACK IS SOMETHING FOR NOTHING²⁰” (Dobbs 64) Through embracing the contradiction and absurdity of the concept of Slack, the Subgenius movement is taking on the idea of 'doing nothing' as a potentially powerful critical position, one that cannot be easily absorbed or controlled by forces of consumer culture, because in their terms, Slack negates the “positive thinking propaganda” (Dobbs 67) of capitalist systems.

This uncertainty, and potential for multiplicity in interpretation, means that no one meaning for concepts such as Slack can be pinned down, as it is based on a subjective understanding of *nothing* and how to achieve this. Many of the ideas of the Subgenius were inspired by *The Principia Discordia* (1970, Fig. 7), written under the fake name Malaclypse the Younger. The *Principia* embraces the idea of *nothing* as a void (a void of meaning, of seriousness, of value) with a pataphysical²¹ sensibility of absurdity and play in language to make new connections and develop new ideas about the world, and to critically approach dominant ideologies of consumption in Western society. The *Principia* values confusion and contradiction as the answer for the problems of contemporary society (Younger 3) Perhaps even more than the *Book of Subgenius*, this work, in content and style, reflects a DIY sensibility. The books were hand made originally, and distributed through repeated photocopying by fans of the work, essentially exactly like a zine would be. In fact, the *Principia* rejects conventional methods of publishing and ownership, stating on the last page of the original version (and again in every addition to the book) “all rights reversed. Reprint what you like.” (Younger 75). This allows for a multiplicity of positions and ideas to generate discussion and critical thinking in terms of modern consumer culture and the structure of society, appropriately in line with the Discordian values of chaos, confusion and not taking oneself too seriously (Younger 74).

²⁰ The quote is capitalized this way in the original text.

²¹ Pataphysics is defined by Christian Bök as “an approach to critiquing the metaphysical strategies of systems of production and consumption, through contradiction, uncertainty, absurdity and the anomaly.” (Bök, 11)

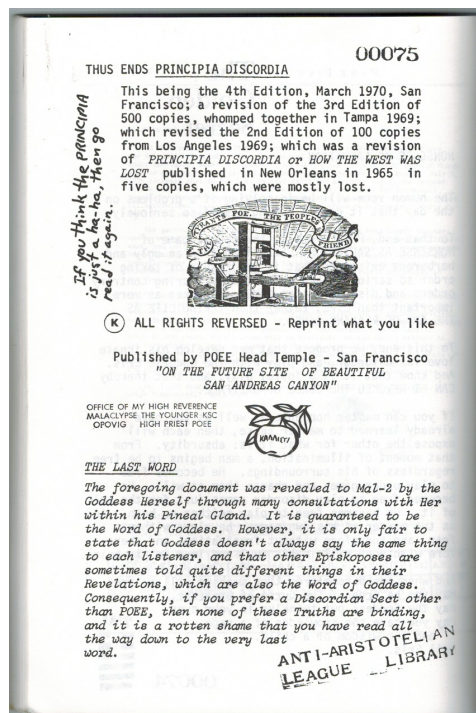


Fig. 7. Malaclypse the Younger. Page 75 of the *Principia Discordia*. 1970.4.25" x 8.5". no permission required.

This joke philosophy encourages readers and followers to not actually follow the belief system if they don't want to (Younger 75), and often suggests contradictory behaviour and ideas. For instance, the book describes the five commandments a follower must adhere to, however, the last commandment is "a Discordian is prohibited of believing what he reads." (Younger 4), pushing the reader into a paradoxical trap²².

Paradox is an important part of the linguistic play in my current artistic practice. / *DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) exemplifies this interest in paradox. The installation questions the nature of art and offers the viewer a contradiction – can this statement still be art, when it is asking not to be? If the statement suggests I (the artist) don't want to be an artist anymore, yet it is on the wall in a gallery space, how does that function and what does it mean?

Another piece that demonstrates this is *Nothing Collage* (2011, Fig. 8), a collage

²² if you do believe the commandments, and follow them, you are in a way breaking them. Still, if you don't follow them, you are still somehow following them, because that is what the commandments require you to do. Then, is that actually following the commandments, or breaking them?

containing letterpress words and photocopied images. In this work, the word nothing is placed as a prominent part of the collage. The word becomes an object, in some ways, because it is placed upon the background as an image of a word, of letters-as-picture. This aspect of the collage references Joseph Kosuth, an artist whose work is influential in my practice. Kosuth's work *Nothing* from 1968 was a typed out and enlarged dictionary definition of the word nothing displayed in the gallery. Kosuth's practice prominently features text as a way to explore conceptually what makes art art, asking the viewer to observe and consider text as image and concept. His use of the word nothing in this case was inspirational in my development of *Nothing Collage* (2011, Fig. 8), as the word itself adds a layer of paradoxical meaning to Kosuth's work that not only questions the piece itself as art, but also begins to consider the nature of the concept of *nothing*, and how this confronts the gallery space.

My collage builds upon Kosuth's notions of *nothing* in order to incorporate the political potential of *nothing* as described in this paper. In this work, the word nothing can suggest a placeholder for nothingness, or alternatively a marker indicating that something else will be placed there. This is one way that the artist is exploring using *nothing-as-something*, and attempting to play with the potential paradox in interpretation of this word. *Nothing* could be seen as suggesting value in conjunction with the other text and images on the page, or it could be simply representing the fact that there is nothing in this particular part of the collage. The meaning is uncertain, and the deeper a viewer tries to go in understanding it, the more potential options develop, often totally absurd, or in opposition to other meanings for the piece.

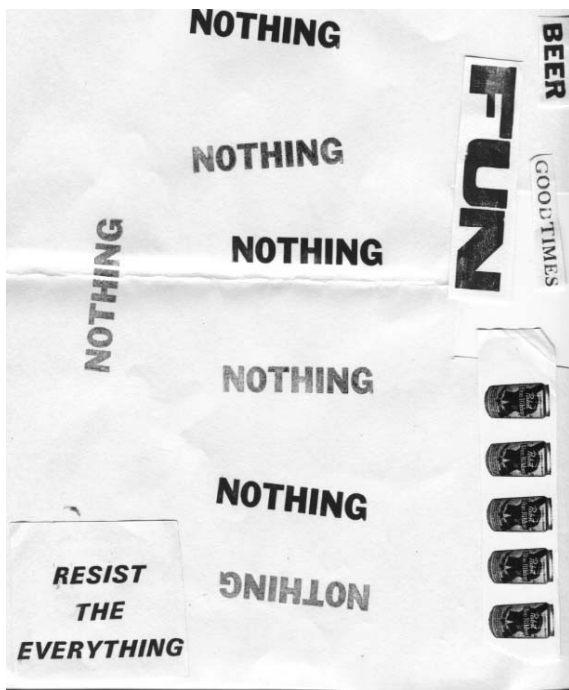


Fig. 8. Cheryl Carpenter. *Nothing Collage* (2011), collage, letterpress text and photocopied images. 8.5" x 11"

CHAPTER 6.3 – CONNECTING ABSENCE AND PARADOX

Nothing as an absence appears as a paradox in pop culture, bringing the two above interpretations together in a fascinating way. Turns of phrase such as 'doing nothing with your life', 'having nothing to say', or even 'whispering sweet nothings' are all commonly heard statements. For the most part, these phrases have a negative connotation²³. For example, the person 'doing nothing' with themselves is by implication lazy, or even unsuccessful in life. What is really being said is that by doing nothing they are not conforming with certain standards and values of society that determine success (values such as acquiring wealth or possessions, or having a good job, for instance). This in essence makes them nothing. This is another aspect to the paradox of *nothing*, that 'doing nothing' does not in fact represent a complete void or lack of existence – rather it is full of signifiers for actions and choices and values that do not fall in line with the right choices as generally mandated by mainstream

²³ There are obviously positive ways to interpret or use the word nothing. You could say "I have nothing to do today" and have that statement received in a positive light – but it still suggests that the things that are actually being done, the mundane, everyday activities of say, a day off from work, are nothing – are a void or absence of real things to do in the manner discussed in the paper.

society. People then choose to label these choices as non-existent, as a void of existence, but in reality nothing has become something, a lot of things; as it represents and contains all the negative choices one could make in regards to life style and goals.

This has a history in the cultural value of work and work ethic in the United States, and in Western post-industrial society in general. Particularly, in the United States, anger towards slackers comes most obviously from the political right in the form of negative reaction to the welfare state and the classification of those who use the welfare system as lazy, or in some way abusing or taking advantage of the hard work of others (Lutz 9). Less clear, but still apparent in reaction to the 'slacker culture' of the late 1980s and 1990s is the stereotype of the 'slacker' in mainstream movies, such as *Clerks* (1994), where the slacker is depicted as a hapless, lazy, often destructive person, who is 'doing nothing' with their life and not really caring about it (Lutz 8). These characters are rarely depicted as satisfied or happy with their choice to do nothing.

In order to be satisfied, someone 'doing nothing' would have to change their life to fit a value of work ethic that has been an important part of western culture since the industrial revolution, the idea that work, in terms of a job or career, is a personal responsibility, or even beyond that, a moral imperative (Lutz 9). Those choosing not to value work in this way²⁴ are labeled as 'doing nothing' - as lazy, or as taking advantage of the system and all those who work hard in the traditional sense. The value of hard work has become a moral obligation in contemporary consumer society, and when value becomes morals, to Baudrillard, this is

²⁴ Even if they do work - this discussion is not about being unemployed and the values of that position (although that is an option), but rather about the value one places on work over other aspects of life. This moral imperative that Tom Lutz describes places work and career as the utmost value in society, an understanding of morals as values that is also reflected in the writing of Jean Baudrillard (*Conspiracy*, 31). To work hard for a living, to earn your own keep, to be a productive member of society - all these ideas present the polar opposite to doing or being nothing, even though it is entirely possible that one person could fill this productive role and another could be doing nothing and still work the same job. There is value placed in Western culture for instance on the blue collar worker, the factory man or woman. But it could also be said that many people in these positions work because they have to, not because they feel morally obliged to do so for the sake of society. Also, a person can still work hard and value doing nothing - these things are not mutually exclusive. In terms of DIY this could be understood as working hard towards making things yourself at home, or making things that are not for profit, but for the benefit of oneself or community. For instance, a common occurrence in DIY subculture is brewing beer and cider at home, not to sell but to enjoy the process of making and drinking the product. It is true that it would be easier to simply go out and buy beer, but people making it themselves enjoy working hard, despite the fact that this is work for 'nothing' - there is no pay or moral need to do this job to participate in society, and in fact it almost discourages participation in society because it discourages purchasing and encourages experience.

symptomatic of simulation (Baudrillard, Conspiracy 31).

Simulation hides the fact that it is actually nothing, a void of the real and of meaning which modern capitalist culture has built itself upon, even as it creates an idea of nothing that holds all the negative values of society. An example of this is Disneyland. According to Baudrillard, Disneyland is a world of fakes built to convince people that it is the simulation, and the world outside the theme park is real, when in fact it is not, and the entire world is simulation of the same kind (Baudrillard, Simulation 178). Disneyland is the ultimate nothing, a void meant to fake the existence of the real by being impossible and unreal.

Nothing as absence and as paradox then becomes an action in many ways. Understood through Simulation, *nothing* is contradictorily both the foundation for the morals and values of society, and also the embodiment of all the negative aspects of society and the choices people make. In other words, in order to avoid considering living in the hyperreal (essentially a society built upon a void of real experience), nothing is assigned as the opposite, or negative, way of being. This way if you are not 'doing nothing', you must be doing something (which in turn suggests the real). However, if one chooses to embrace the contradiction of 'doing nothing' as negative and positive at the same time; negative in the eyes of society, but positive in terms of openness to subjectivity and to alternative ways of being and thinking about the world, then *nothing* becomes a powerful position.

CHAPTER 7 - CRITIQUE

"The curse of critical discourse is to reconcile itself secretly with those it criticizes by denouncing them." - Jean Baudrillard, 2010

Critique as opposition in the system of Simulation is, as Lotringer summarizes, "the conspiracy of art prove[s] that critique has become a mirage of critique, a counter-discourse immanent to consumption... no different from commercial complicity." (Lotringer in Baudrillard 11) This idea was taken from *The Consumer Society*, a book written by Jean

Baudrillard in 1970. It appears again, appropriately, in the introduction to *The Conspiracy of Art*, also by Baudrillard, in 1996 (and republished in 2005), demonstrating the continuing application of this notion in his work and its relevance to contemporary art contexts. The *Conspiracy of Art* represented in many ways a rejection of art (Lotringer in Baudrillard 15) that caused an uproar amongst art practitioners (Lotringer in Baudrillard 9). However despite being an intensely critical look at the world of art and its implications as void in Simulation, *The Conspiracy of Art* establishes some useful ideas in terms of critique in contemporary consumer culture that in many ways, generated the critical position that *nothing* explores in this paper.

The conspiracy that Baudrillard refers to is that art, while seeming to be a way to critically describe Simulation, is actually the height of Simulation itself. This specifically references contemporary art. Baudrillard writes about Pop Art in particular, describing artists such as Andy Warhol as demonstrating in his work that he was *nothing* (Baudrillard, Conspiracy 44). Warhol “introduces nothingness into the heart of the image” (Baudrillard, Conspiracy 28); a paradox in art and modernity (Baudrillard, Conspiracy 44) in that he seems to be representing something with what is in fact nothing. Art in this way takes on the objects of the everyday and attempts to appear to critically reflect on what these items represent. However, it is actually null, a void of reality which represents nothing, because what it is depicting is the hyperreal.

This problematic of critique in Simulation goes beyond the void of art, though. As the introductory quotation states, “The curse of critical discourse is to reconcile itself secretly with those it criticizes by denouncing them”²⁵ (Baudrillard, Agony 39). The criticism of the left, or of any one or group that tries to directly oppose the system gets absorbed (Baudrillard, Agony 59) while still attempting to assume the role of critique. What this means is that mass media, advertising and government adapt or adopt critique and use it to their own ends – rendering it

²⁵ Baudrillard also states here in brackets that he is “well aware that what [he] is saying belongs to this discourse” (Agony, 39) which is an important acknowledgement in terms of the difficult nature of the statement – Baudrillard knows that his own intense and scathing critique of the system he is a part of is by nature a part of that system, and therefore in some way complicit with it. None the less, he still feels that it is important to write these ideas and publish them.

useless. One way *nothing* seeks to avoid this problem is by refusing to denounce. Instead, it removes itself from the acknowledgement of the system so oppositionally by placing value in many, and often contradictory, ways of being rather than comparing itself to the system it is criticizing. My studio practice reflects this desire to explore alternative ways of experiencing the world, often through humour and absurdity. It embraces uncertainty in meaning-making by playing with the potential contradiction and multiplicity in language, symbols and signs represented in mass media, advertising and pop culture, through appropriation and alteration of these images.

The separation between the ideals of the Situationists, for example, and contemporary conditions has come up in previous chapters of this paper and will be addressed further here. If one considers contemporary society in terms of Simulation, then as a part of western consumer culture we all participate in a hegemonic structure of power based on production of simulacra that exists for its own sake, for power (Baudrillard, *Agony* 42). As Baudrillard says, “we are all a part of the hegemony” (*Agony* 70) – and this is a different sort of response than critique that is of the historical dominated versus the dominant which is a much clearer distinction (Baudrillard, *Agony* 70). In the case of the Situationists, (but also many other movements) for instance, the response to dominant powers is class struggle, revolt and revolution in the historical sense (Baudrillard, *Agony* 70), however, according to Baudrillard this can no longer be successful under modern hegemony, where the response represents “fascination and total ambivalence” (*Agony* 70).

Baudrillard states that “Critical thought, or any attempt to attack the system from the inside is in a complete aporia.” (*Agony* 60), and further than this, he implies in his writing that the state of things in terms of Simulation is inevitable and inescapable, as everything becomes the void of the hyperreal, to the end that there “is nothing left to analyze in the hopes of subverting it.” (*Agony* 41). However, the interpretation of *nothing* in this paper seeks to find a way around this very serious problem. I agree it is the case, in many ways, that critical negativity gets absorbed by the system and turned into parody or support (*Agony* 48).

Through exploring subjectivity, absurdity, and multiplicity in meaning and value this problematic situation can be addressed. In fact paradox – using the paradoxical nature of reality to the extreme of its logical ends - escapes the binary nature of critical thought as described by Baudrillard, because it represents many and often contradictory positions that avoid easy definition, and therefore avoid being situated in the system they are attempting to critique.

CHAPTER 8 – NOTHING

“Ne travaillez jamais” - Guy Debord, 1953

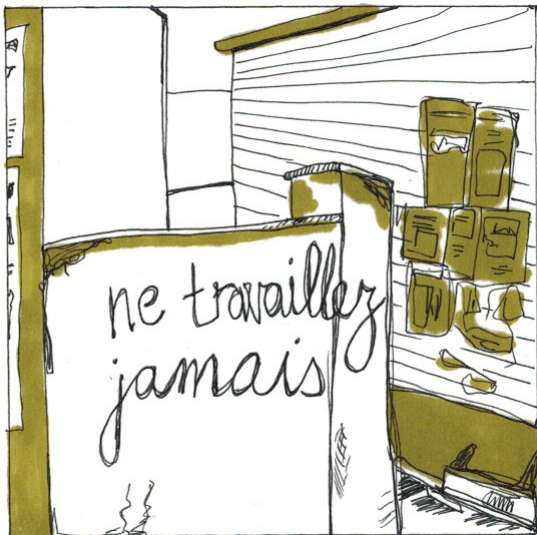


fig. 9 - Cheryl Carpenter. *Ne Travaillez Jamais Graffiti by Guy Debord*. Drawing. 2012.

The potential of *nothing* as both absence and paradox to counter this problem in critique, to use the notion of *nothing* established in the art of the everyday, is working from (but not exactly the same as) the Situationist International's ideas about negation and nothing. The ideas of *Dérive* – and beyond this, *Détournement*, are significant. *Détournement* is a way of using the objects of the everyday, including images of advertising and media, and transforming them to new ends in an artistic context (Ford 36). *Détournement* regards

plagiarism and appropriation as necessary, a way to replace ideas and cultural values (Ford 27). This notion, then, takes the noticing of *Dérive* and of other artistic practices, and uses these observations in a political way.

In this way the book project *All for Nothing* (2012, working title. Fig. 10) uses the sensibilities of *Détournement*, through the act of noticing and appropriating the objects of the everyday to establish a subversive artistic practice based in the concept of *nothing*. The book includes slogans and statements created by the artist²⁶, references to advertising and consumer culture, and writing that establishes the idea of *nothing* as a political position through contradiction, absurdity, and the act of 'doing nothing'. The page of *All for Nothing* (2012, working title. Fig. 10) illustrated in this thesis paper is a rough draft, but the general ideas of the work are there. The book incorporates a vintage zine aesthetic, with typewritten text, letterpress headings and hand cut lino stamps, and it will be hand bound by the artist. However, the subjects it addresses, such as copyright law, social media and the internet, as well as the objects and images of contemporary consumer culture are all very current. The format of the book itself reflects an often contradictory refusal to participate in the modes of production it references, and at the same time being the very opposite of 'doing nothing' – as hand made work clearly represents a labour intensive undertaking.

²⁶ The statement pictured in Fig. 1 and 11 “I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE” was one created while working on this book.

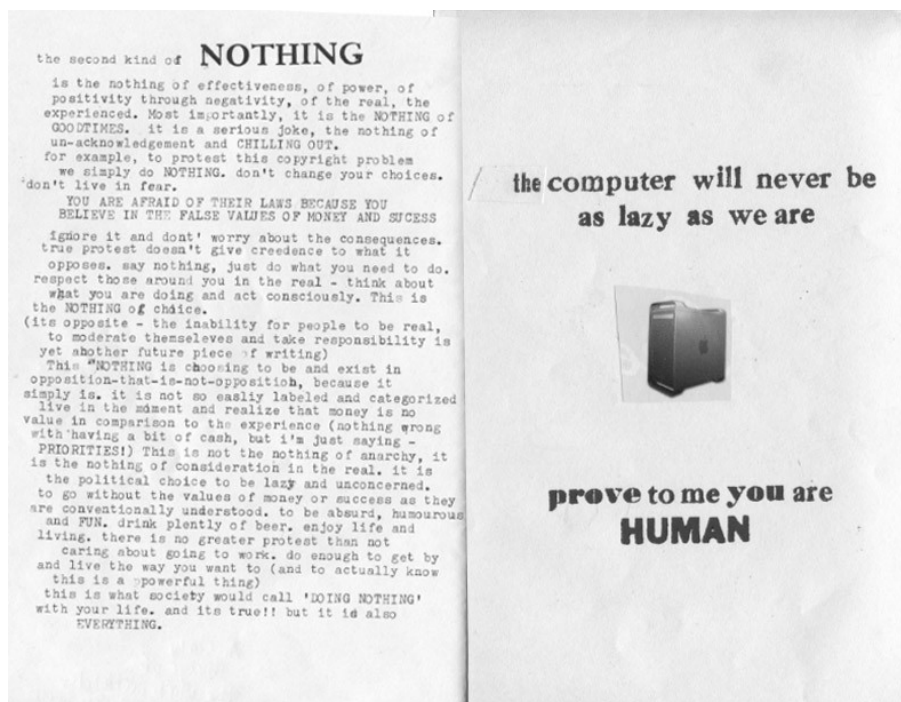


fig. 10 - Cheryl Carpenter. *All for Nothing*. book project - Work in progress. Samples of rough copies. 2012.

It works in a similar fashion to the piece *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) taking on the idea of 'doing nothing' or 'being nothing' to create an ironic, absurd statement about what makes art art. Specifically, *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11), shown in the graduation exhibition from Emily Carr University (May 2012), is a piece that reflects an exploration into the possibilities of *nothing* as a political position. The work uses large black letterpress text to spell out the phrase "I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE" in a somewhat haphazard, imbalanced way. There is the potential appearance of a lack of consideration for proper hanging heights, alignment and framing. The materials themselves are fragile and non-archival, cartridge paper hung with tape that will not last long or stay in place. This functions as a contradiction, materially as well as conceptually, asking the viewer to question the intentions of the artist (or not-artist) in creating this statement, and how or if this text operates as an art work. Inevitably, it draws attention to the nature of the gallery space and its ability to transform what might otherwise be a simple, perhaps ironic statement of frustration into a work of art.

In some ways then this piece can be seen as using the gallery space as a foil. The statement and the space are both activated by the relationship between the content of the work and its place in the gallery. Outside of the gallery *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE* (2012, Figs. 1 and 11) would be a less effective statement in terms of the paradox and the absence of *nothing*. In this context, it is not ambiguous that the piece is art – rather, the work uses the gallery to create a paradoxical space that can lead the viewer into numerous and often contradictory interpretations. Essentially, and ironically, it can't say what the artist wants it to say without making it art.



Fig. 11 – Cheryl Carpenter. *I DONT WANT TO BE AN ARTIST ANYMORE*. Letterpress text. 2012.

The uncertainty of the statement and the seeming negation of the artist herself also illustrates my interest in the paradoxical nature of 'doing nothing' and how *nothing* can signify both absence and also presence at the same time, and its connection to value and meaning in consumer culture. Like much of the body of work that precedes this piece, this work uses *nothing* in a context that is defined by the idea of Simulation, and interpreted in several ways; as a paradox in language, and absence in representation. This comes together in the idea of *nothing* in the everyday, in pop culture, and how that operates in an artistic practice.

Nothing as a political position can be described as a response to the negative

connotations of 'doing nothing'. It is a way to use the sensibilities of a somewhat pataphysical approach to meaning and confusion in interpretation, but also the loaded values and ideologies that go along with the idea of nothing, and take this absence/presence and use it advantageously. *Nothing* can be so many things at once, but also can embody a set of commonly accepted negative values in consumer culture, that aren't really negative things – they can be negatives taken on as positives, valuing fun, for instance, over financial success. As different values for the same idea, it is in a way a logical black hole. A good example is the quote from Guy Debord that opens this chapter – “never work” (the english translation of “ne travaillez jamais” – see Fig. 9) – of course, that was not the case. Debord and the Situationists actually worked very hard, and were very active politically and artistically, writing, creating, speaking and more, despite managing to live a lifestyle on the margins of accepted society (Ford 27, 29,30)²⁷ Debord was being in some ways ironic, but he was really making a statement about what one values as work, or what one is taught to value as work in terms of society. For him this was within the context of the Society of the Spectacle, so it was what people were taught to value by the imagery of the Bourgeois.

However, this same notion can be applied to contemporary situations. In simulation this works in a very similar way, except rather than the Bourgeois in a class struggle sense, it is much larger and in some ways more subtle than that, it is systems of production themselves that are creating the value of work (Baudrillard, *Agony* 43-4, 62-3) – and work in very specific ways that lead to financial gains that will allow people to participate in the consumer culture these systems of production generate. People come to see these values as moral imperatives, in that you are morally or ethically obligated to participate in a system of work that will then define your worth in a tidy sort of way (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 31). This is an acceptable definition of success in terms of consumer culture.

When one decides to value different ways of being, it is a challenge not just to the

²⁷ Ford describes this as enjoying a lot of drinking, hanging out in cafes and discussing life, as well as holding very odd jobs, for example Situationist Michele Bernstein, who was, amongst other things, a horse race forecaster and horoscope writer (Ford, 30).

system of production and consumption but also to the morals and values of people who participate in it and believe in it. The system then responds by negating these alternative choices; rendering them nothing by categorizing them as 'doing nothing' for instance. However if it is accepted that 'doing nothing' is not actually a negative way of being, but positive, it is possible to subvert this criticism. Embedded in the idea of *nothing* is the notion of the everyday and the potential in noticing nothing; the revolutionary power of embracing the everyday with a new set of values, experiencing the moments and objects of life in totally new ways, and using this as a place to think critically about the world of consumer culture. Because *nothing* is a paradox, it can avoid falling into the trap of critique that was discussed earlier in the paper.

This is not a certainty, nor is it the only way to understand *nothing*, and I acknowledge this from the perspective of both an artist and in terms of scholarly research. It is part of the complex nature of exploring concepts that are difficult to clearly define or articulate. *Nothing* in this particular manifestation of the term, can possibly avoid being absorbed or reinterpreted by mass media in that it cannot be pinned down to a binary meaning, this or that. *Nothing* in this way is instead a linguistic and logical loop, something impossible and contradictory, and this is what makes it so fascinating and so potentially subversive.

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