

9 Sum Sorcery

An exhibition of video and sculpture

by

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A thesis exhibition
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

263 Phillip St., April 13 - 29
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

9 Sum Sorcery is a multimedia exhibition comprised of video and sculpture. Nine screens depict 'The Player' performing with an assortment of augmented found materials within the framework of a board game. The Player continually re-organizes the components of the game-space (a social, political, psychological, and spiritual body) in an attempt to come to terms with their place in it. In addition to appearing in the videos, the game's components are present physically in the gallery, enclosed in a vitrine. Each video offers a first-person perspective of The Player in various states of communion with the game system. This system complicates itself through The Player's desire to simultaneously project narrative onto, and remove narrative from, the components of the game. *9 Sum Sorcery* encourages engagement in a spiritual ordeal, where the potential for transformative power can become an ossifying psychosis in the absence of The Player's and the visitors' capacity to de-code and re-code meaning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express deep gratitude for the guidance and support of the entire Fine Arts faculty at the University of Waterloo. Every conversation, every studio visit (no matter the length) influenced the work and the course it took. Thank you to my mentors at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design: Justin Novak, Diyan Achjadi, Beth Howe, Alex Phillips, and LuChan for encouraging me to go forward. Thank you to my graduate committee, Bruce Taylor and Cora Cluett, for coaxing out my best and challenging me to push my practice into new zones. Thank you to Ivan Jurakic and Barbara Hobot at UWAG for their insights and assistance. Thank you to Terry O'Neil for his camera magics. Thank you to Richard Sewell for his unique attention, wisdom, and understanding. Thank you to Adam Glover and Sharon Dahmer for...everything.

Thank you to my parents, Betty and Larry, and brother Andrew for their inexhaustible love and support.

Thank you to the Keith and Winifred Shantz Fund for the Arts for making the last two years of study and travel possible. Thank you to the artists and individuals I had the opportunity to meet, work with, and learn from over the course of my research trip: Vimal Sharma, Iain Ball (E N E R G Y : P A N G E A | Rare Earth Sculpture Project), Owen Hackery (INPBTD, ++ EBNKMNT), and especially Olga Koroleva (The Upper Hand, Cat's Cradle).

Thank you to all of my MFA peers for their encouragement and friendship. A special thank you to Jess Lincoln, Timothy Walker, and Denise St Marie...I am so grateful to have landed in this thing with you three...a more supportive, caring, and wonderful group of humans I could not have imagined. Special thanks to Tara Cooper for her endless efforts, attention, focus, clarity, understanding, patience, and kindness over the past two years. Thank you for making this thing so seriously-fun Tara! And a very special thank you to Mr. David Blatherwick for initiating me into this whole MFA rite.

DEDICATION

9 Sum Sorcery, the experience(s) and process(es) contained within it and the document that supports it, is dedicated to my dear friends and family and to the forests, beaches, and beings (both seen and unseen) of the Pacific Northwest. Your support and love keeps me on the path.

For Olya, who I would walk with along all tides high or low, follow into all ponds crisp or temperate, and journey with across all the sky and sea...

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(fig. 23-27) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

(alea)

"Somehow even if it is still our foolish hands that spreads the cards, gathers the yarrows, rolls the bones, it is still by chance, thanks to chance, that we then produce, that we then give birth to fantastic, extravagant luxurious meaning, excessive, ridiculous, joyous sense and significance...we are not alone in the universe of meaning. We are there by chance..."ⁱ

- Joshua Ramey on Friedrich Nietzsche

(mimicry)

"Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another."ⁱⁱ

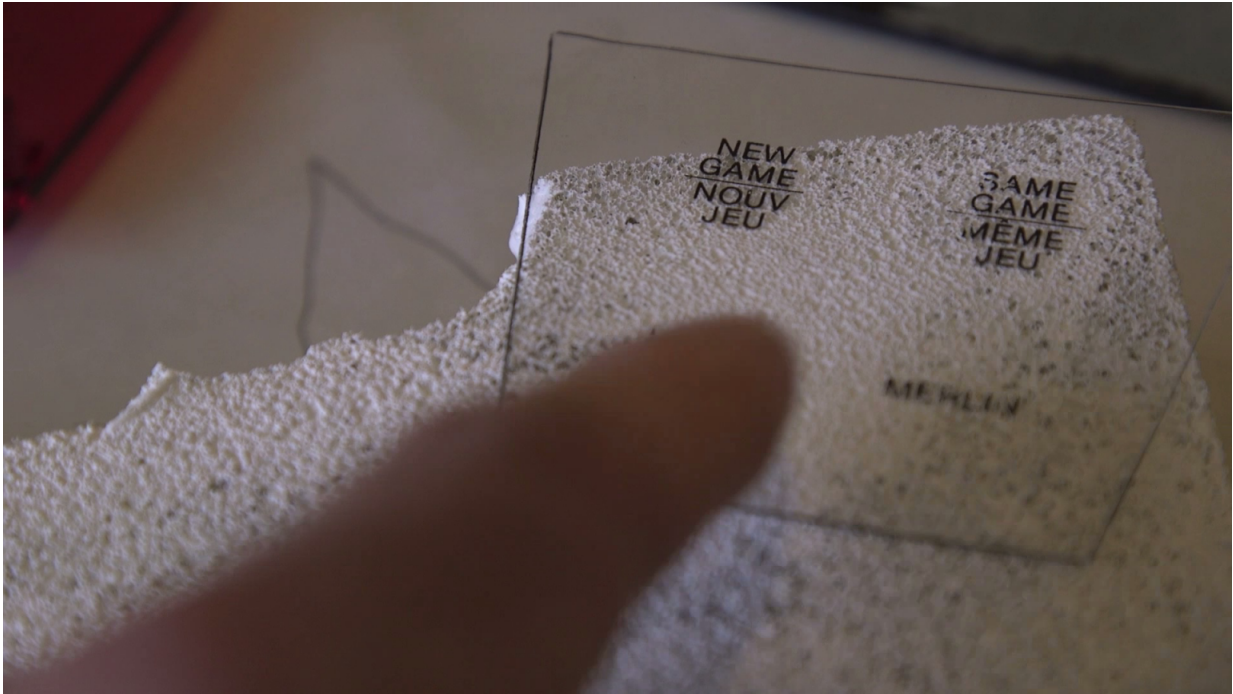
- Roger Caillois

(ilinx)

"Ilinx involve games that are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness."ⁱⁱⁱ

- Roger Caillois

MANIFESTO



(fig. 1) A figure loads a piece of transparent film onto a block of painted foam. The film is pushed forward. "New Game" comes into focus as the figure struggles to unstick himself from the translucent surface. Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

9 Sum Sorcery is a free-form game system; a single-player occultural study; a ritualized re-negotiation of post-consumer packaging and retail detritus (cardboard backing, foam packing, clamshell casing, box inserts, rubber bands, tagging barbs...).

9 Sum Sorcery is a platform on which The Player pursues the old alchemical goals, across, beneath, and within the deconstructed space of vintage board games (*Chaos* and *Merlin*). These archaic modes of entertainment are seized by the imagination in an exasperated attempt at the regeneration and renewal of self and world through intuitive play.

9 Sum Sorcery places The Player within the signature disorder of capitalism as a way to explore the positive potentials of the schizophrenic state. From this position, The Player teeters between healer and patient; magus and madman. Oscillating between pathological meaning-making and enlightened pattern recognition, The Player struggles to re-organize the signs and symbols of consumer culture into a (dys)functional personal cosmology.

A NOTE ON PLAY-STYLE

Sociologist Roger Caillois breaks games into four main types: games of chance (of *alea*, in Greek), games of imitation or make-believe (*mimicry*), games of vertigo (*ilinx*, meaning whirlpool), and games of competitive skill (*agon*).^{iv} Having no interest in competition or skill, *9 Sum Sorcery* ignores *agon*, focusing solely on chance, vertigo, and imitation. The act of make-believe (or role-playing) is especially important to mention here (at the game's outset) as it allows the artist/writer to discuss elements of the game experience from within the game itself. The Player is a role that must be taken on in order to access *9 Sum Sorcery's* mysterious sequence of play.



(fig. 2) *Rituals of imitation often involve masks and the inducement of vertigo through ecstatic movement to allow for more-than-human forces to make themselves present.*

Larval Mask, photograph.

(fig. 3) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still, 2017

9 Sum Sorcery creates an excitable paranoia in The Player—a paranoia that stems from a premonition that the game could be played across (and within) any surface, that *anything* has the potential to become a game component. The writing itself (the very text you are reading) is held under this same suspicion; thus identities may intertwine, voices may intermingle, and boundaries that appear stable may dissolve.

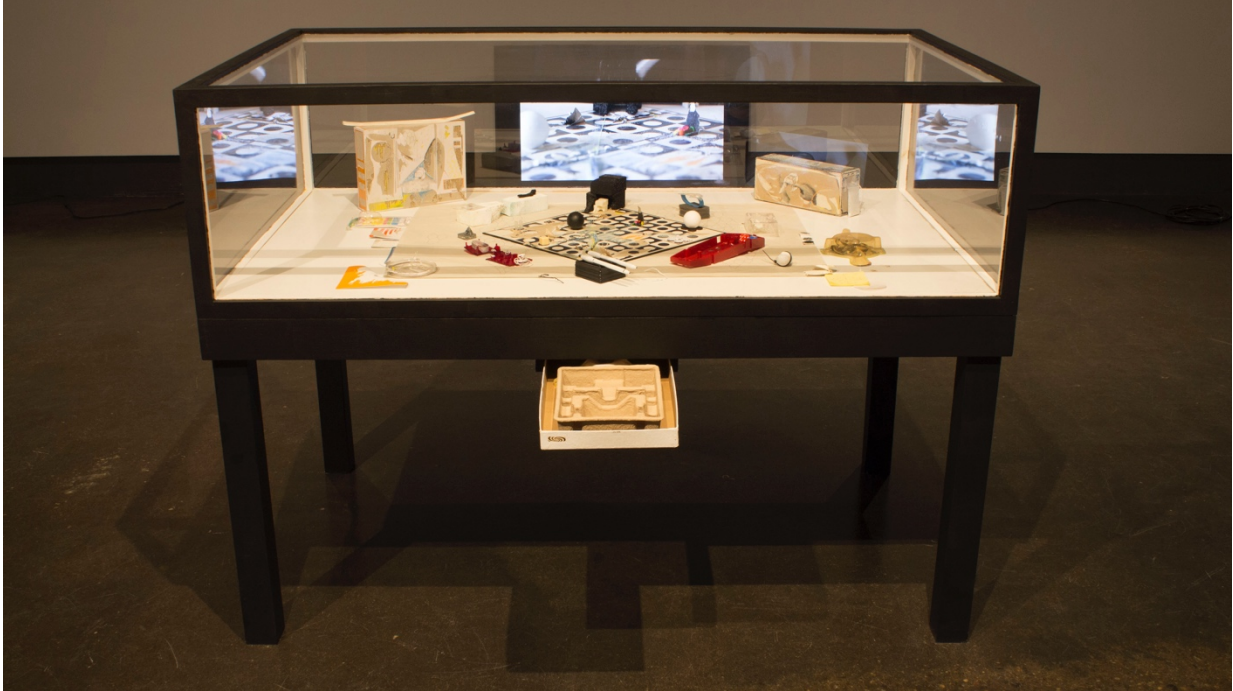
THE EXHIBITION (a 9 *Sum Sorcery*)

"Does describing a game always mean: giving a description through which someone can learn it?"^v
-Ludwig Wittgenstein

Stepping into the gallery, one is met with a chaotic orchestration of moving image and sound orbiting an arrangement of objects enclosed in a vitrine. Nine flat screen monitors operate as a single stage where The Player interacts with a multitude of materials on a disrupted gaming surface. The videos are shot primarily from a first-person perspective, focusing on a set of hands (or in some cases tools that could be an extension of hands). This angle encourages role-play, inviting visitors to interact with the materials as The Player.

The media devices, electrical cords, and mobile outlets used to power the videos have all been left exposed, running the circumference of the gallery floor. The placement of hardware looks intentional, obsessively arranged. Is this arrangement some kind of symbolic gesture operating beyond the supply of power? How does this deliberate placement of hardware relate to the on-screen activity? Do the lines of cord offer a key as to how one should move from screen to screen?

At the centre of the gallery is a large vitrine, housing something resembling a game board and an assortment of objects that appear to be game components. The components placement within the vitrine looks prepared, as though they all have specific roles to play in relation to one another. If this is a game, how is it played, and how can these game components be put to use?



(fig. 4) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery* (game components within vitrine), installation view. 2017

The nine screens (all about an inch above the gallery floor, leaning against the walls) orbiting the vitrine mirror the objects contained within it—from cardboard backing to foam packing, from clamshell casing to box inserts, from rubber bands to tagging barbs, from ping pong balls to ball point pens, from failed 3D prints to wax crayon discs, from Velcro pads to disassembled electronics, from six-sided die to four-sided die, from ties that twist to ties that zap—post-consumer products and retail detritus taken up by The Player as part of a larger abstract system.

What do the objects mean? How are they meant to be interfaced with? If this is a game, what are the rules? How do you play? How can a sequence of play be established if the game actions are occurring simultaneously, and how do the game actions on one side of the gallery affect those on the other?

As one moves from screen to screen they have the opportunity to construct threads of meaning that are neither linear nor irreversible.^{vi} Steps can be retraced and the gallery's space can be cut across. One's personal path determines how they come to interpret the game actions of *9 Sum Sorcery*. These interpretations are not fixed, they can be undone and re-mapped.

Visitors are encouraged to consider the events depicted in the videos as a puzzle that can be fit together in an infinite number of ways. They are encouraged to step into the perspective of The Player, to become the events themselves, to "extend their implications to unusual or unforeseeable conclusions", and to "carry lines of sense farther than they are intended to reach".^{vii} Visitors are encouraged to think of the gallery space as a social, political, psychological, and spiritual body that can be re-imagined, re-organized and re-configured.

This system of play relies on chance and role-play to create meaning. *Alea* (chance) and *mimicry* (role-play) are combined as a way to push The Player and the visitors towards *ilinx*, the ecstatic state. This vertigo is both whirlpool and spiral. It throws all who are present in the game-space off kilter, pulling them towards the centre, the centre where multiple voices come together to create meaning and at which the potential for catharsis lies.



(fig. 5) *Parker Brothers* logo. The spiral; the *ilinx* game type.

The title, *9 Sum Sorcery*, is a word puzzle, a kind of game unto itself—a game that can be played anywhere, anytime, and by anyone. As a title it attempts to gather all the themes, theories, truths, triumphs, tragedies, traumas, trajectories, trails, tracks, transgressions, treatments, theophanies, twists, turns, totalities, improbabilities, ifs, if-nots,imps, initiations, instances, inconsolabilities, inconsistencies, intergalacticities, immobilities, immolations, embarkments, embankments, encounters, entertainments, eye-soars, entropies, enlightenments, and ejections into a single phrase. In this way it aspires to what mythographer Mircea Eliade referred to as multivalence, "a successful symbolical system which can express, simultaneously, a number of different, seemingly unrelated meanings."^{viii}

With *9 Sum Sorcery*, 9 different screens = 9 different units of meaning that can be shuffled and dealt into an infinite number of hands. A sum is the result of an addition, an attempt to add it all up. A way to connect an x and a y and have them expressed meaningfully as a z . *Sum* is also included in the word summon. The second half of summon is *mon*, a variant form of mono, or one. Thus the title references one who sums; one who adds it all up as well as one who summons. With sorcery, the sorcerer is one who summons. He or she is a magic user—one who calls on unseen forces to be an ally in the practice of divination and games of chance. The term *9 Sum Sorcery* comes from philosopher Reza Negastrani's theory-fiction, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. In *9 Sum Sorcery*, The Player works to lose himself (to become anonymous) so that the game's materials can have a voice.

ALCHEMY



(fig. 6) Black and white circles are contained within black and white squares. The board is torn up and cut into. Surfaces are lifted and scraped away. Gouges and marks re-shape the topography of the game platform. The infrastructure of the board itself, its guts, now lie on the surface. Within the video there is a sudden sound, like air rushing around the wings of a great bird, like a vacuum attempting to take in more than it can handle. Scales of black and white paper come crashing down, followed by a set of hands slowly sifting through the wreckage of *prima materia*.

Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

The complex process of alchemy can be understood as the transformation of the cheap into the precious^{ix}, most dramatically that of base metal into gold. This alchemic pursuit (known as 'The Great Work') is said to both culminate in, and be achieved by, the Philosopher's Stone—the creation of which is symbolized by a circle contained within a square.

Historically, the goals of the alchemists were intentionally shrouded in layers of allegorical and metaphorical language. In his book *Art and Alchemy: The Mystery of Transformation*, Lawrence M. Principe asks, "what were the alchemists really doing? What were they trying to say (or not say)?" (27). Were the alchemists truly motivated by the transformation of material substances? Or was the language of material transformation being used as an allegory for a more internal process?^x

During the second half of the 19th century, within the context of occultism, "alchemy was radically reinterpreted as a spiritual, not a material, endeavour. The occultists claimed that the alchemists, while they may have seemed to be trying to perfect nature and make gold, were actually involved in processes of self-transformation" (31). Thus the answer (the very heart of the alchemical inquiry) resides somewhere *in-between*, in dissolving the boundary between the physical and the psychic. As such the practice of alchemy involves both a material *and* spiritual investigation, where equal weight is given to both seen and unseen worlds. It is about the transformation of the materials being worked on *and* of the practitioners themselves, as though the state of one will come to affect that of the other. It is also suggested that through this practice (through the manipulation of matter) the alchemist holds the potential not only to transform him or herself, but to affect *the world at large*.^{xi}

In *9 Sum Sorcery*, The Player is wrapped up in this very wager. He is both propelled and arrested by the knowledge that the actions he performs, and the materials he interfaces with, could have ramifications that stretch beyond the confines of the game itself. The board game *becomes* the alchemical workbench where The Player (with the heart and hands of someone forced to defuse a ticking time bomb) puts himself under the impression that he can "renew the world and self through theurgic ritual."^{xii}

This intense introspection, these "creative travails of spiritual ordeal"^{xiii}, come with the risk that the entire enterprise could simply slip into psychosis, that it could become "relegated to introverted self centered obscurity."^{xiv} Skirting back and forth between sorcerer and apprentice, The Player has no choice but to try and keep hold of the forces he has unleashed, in the hopes of being guided through this mysterious sequence of play unscathed.

"The artist, like the alchemist, would become his own Philosopher's Stone, both the subject and the object of his performance-work..."^{xv}

- Urszula Szulakowska



(fig. 7) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

ARTIST-ALCHEMIST --> ARTIST-SCHIZOPHRENIC

"(Beyond merely) peculiar representations of bodily extremities—these objects can be looked at as an extension...of something that is potentially more significant and broader in terms of parameters. Like the imagination." ^{xvi}

-David Diviney (on the "curious appendages" at play in the work of artist Jason de Haan)



(fig. 8) An appendage moves into frame, not a finger but finger-like, an imagined wand whose imagined wielder can only be pointed to by tremors that may or may not originate from a very nervous system. The wand trepidatiously yet purposefully pushes discs of colour along invisible but palpable trajectories. Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

How did avant-garde artists come to be associated with supernatural practices? In her book *Alchemy in Contemporary Art*, Urszula Szulakowska suggests that during the sixteenth century "art-making came to be regarded as a supernatural practice in its own right due to the peculiar nature of the artist's creative *imagination*, which was regarded as being a type of magical implement" (11, italics added).

The game-space of *9 Sum Sorcery*, a type of magical implement or system, is conceived three-fold: by the imagination of The Player; by the formal qualities of the materials he is gaming with; and by an 'unseen force' that may or may not originate from The Player himself. The lines of affect created and projected outward by the game's actions are a collaborative

effort. The potency of these lines relies on the fact that they are not considered to be localized to a solitary human agent. As game master, The Player acts on the behalf of others, as well as himself. He becomes a conduit through which human and non-human forces can be expressed. Joshua Ramey elaborates on this formula in his book *The Hermetic Deleuze*, "the power that *mana* is, is nonlocal: it is simultaneously the magical will of the operator, the correct arrangement of materials, and the influence of the spirits upon the work undertaken" (188). Ramey describes Marcel Mauss' concept of *mana* as "a deep structural reality that under certain conditions the mind has access to and can act in concert with" (188).

Szulakowska continues to trace the development of artist as supernatural practitioner: "from the eighteenth century, as Western society became secularized in response to the development of *capitalism*, religion was displaced from its ideological function at the heart of the socio-political order. The existentialist void resulting from the diminished importance of the Christian world-view was partially alleviated by an evolving concept of the artist as seer and prophet and of his art product as an almost sacred artefact" (1, italics added).

If early capitalism had a hand in bringing about the archetype of artist-as-magician (alchemist), then late capitalism (with its obscene material abundance and focus on productivity and consumption to the point of alienation) can be seen as pushing the artist-as-magician archetype towards a new threshold. Whether this push results in renewal and emergence or regression and breakdown, will depend on the successful integration and transmutation of the vast amounts of material, psychological, and spiritual detritus that late capitalism both exposes and produces. The pressure to push against and to break through this limit may overwhelm the artist to the point of sickness, and/or paralysis. The outcome could be a mental fragmentation where the artist can no longer make sense of the relationships between mind, body and spirit. His/her perception would become faulty and at times even delusional. Pushed to this extreme, the archetype of the artist shifts from magician or alchemist to that of mental patient, from artist-as-magician, to artist-as-schizophrenic.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari "argue that even if the *délire* of sorcery tends to manifest, in modern and secular culture, a kind of psychotic or schizoid self-

destructiveness (or even more generally the infamous self-destructiveness of the artist), it may be that the disturbed nature in many an abnormal type is actually a reflection of social formations determined at any cost to maintain a mode of 'normalcy' intent upon the suppression of the most vital and creative elements of humanity, elements sometimes trapped in the ghettos of the occult."^{xvii} Where the avant garde artist of the twentieth century was in a position to plot "an ambitious trajectory in promoting his own political role to that of prophet, priest, or shaman"^{xviii}, the artist of the twenty-first century who shares this same flight path will find that it leads to "the signature disorder of contemporary capitalism"^{xix} —to the less romantic (and more troubling) role of the schizophrenic.

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) operates between these two poles. His work (his personal mythology) was intimately tied up in his identification with shamanic practice. He worked and performed with abject materials (fat, felt, used batteries, assorted domestic and medical debris)^{xx}, charging them with significance and using them as tools for re-birth and renewal. Beuys performances (or 'actions' as he called them) involved "an 'alchemical' transformation: an introspectively enacted and materially symbolized healing process."^{xxi} Similar to the alchemical wager of *The Player* (the understanding that his on-board actions could have off-board consequences), Beuys believed the actions he performed had the power to 'lift' his own trauma and the trauma of the larger social body he operated within.

In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys used the coyote as a symbol for psychological trauma points, whereas in *9 Sum Sorcery*, *The Player* uses the wall poster of a nonhuman 'face'. Beuys addresses the trauma symbol directly (and shares it through live performance), while *The Player* communicates with his through the intermediary of the game-space (and shares it through recorded video). It could be suggested that the performances of Beuys and *The Player* both produce and are able to contain anxiety. Their actions demonstrate a self-containment: an ability to help and heal themselves, an effort to establish reciprocity between split parts.^{xxii}



(fig. 9) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

(fig. 10) Joseph Beuys. *I Like America and America Likes Me*, photograph. 1974

What is psychologically at stake in Beuys performances is a movement from sickness to health^{xxiii}; a new configuration of both himself and the larger 'social organism'.^{xxiv} For a malignant body/system (social, psychological, political, or spiritual) to be healed, a method of re-*organ*-ization must first be imagined.

THE BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

"When you will have made him a body without organs / then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions / and restored him to his true freedom" ^{xxv}

- Antonin Artaud

"In many shamanic rites, initiation involved removing and washing the organs, so as to create a subtle or astral body capable of shifting between liminal realms" ^{xxvi}

- Joshua Ramey



(fig. 11) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

Within the game structure of *9 Sum Sorcery*, The Player aims to explore the role of the schizophrenic. This 'role-playing' allows The Player to freely conduct "experiments in modes of actions and perception that would otherwise be utterly traumatic, leading to catatonia and madness." ^{xxvii} These experiments centre around The Player working with the game-space as a type of rigid and malignant *body* (social, political, psychological, and spiritual). In this way the game's components operate as organs within this body, organs that The Player has the ability to de-organize and re-organize in an attempt to liberate them from the despotic systems they find themselves trapped within. Joshua Ramey elaborates on the 'body without organs' as "...the contours of a body liberated from the restrictions of habit, memory, and societal expectations, a subtle or ethereal body that would be capable of perceptions and sensations beyond the limits

of the organism as we know it" (190).

French playwright Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) coined the term 'body without organs' in his radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947), using it to refer to a "symbol of the liberated human psyche".^{xxviii} Artaud "considered art-making to be a magical procedure, a ritual performance"^{xxix}, and that by engaging in this magical practice he held the potential to heal himself of his severe schizophrenia. Artaud believed that to relieve himself of his condition (to escape the judgment of God), he would have to imagine a body that was not "a static concretion of discrete organs" with a "tendency towards stasis". He would have to overwrite this fixed organism, *re-organizing* it into something fluid and capable of *change*.^{xxx} Artaud's healing practice involved drawing the outlines of objects representing "the structured human frame that he regarded as a metaphor of social and spiritual imprisonment". He would then violently draw over top of and within these outlines, "seeking to re-design the physical body in order to break open the cage of this own mind" (Szulakowska 47); to arrive at the 'body without organs'.



(fig. 12) Antonin Artaud. *Je Souffre d'une Effroyable Maladie de L'Esprit*, drawing. date unknown.

(fig. 13) Antonin Artaud. *Self Portrait*, photograph. 1946

(fig. 14) Antonin Artaud. *The Projection of the True Body*, drawing. 1947-48

Twenty-five years later Deleuze and Guattari (in their theory of schizoanalysis) proposed that the 'body without organs' and the disorder of schizophrenia could be re-imagined on a larger social scale as "not just the locus of repression but the potential for freedom".^{xxxii} In

his introduction to schizoanalysis, Eugene Holland discusses schizophrenia in terms of a *process* and an *entity*. He suggests that as an *entity*, schizophrenia is expressed as a repression and defeat of creative forces, manifested in the miseries of a personal affliction. However, as a *process* that is allowed to unfold and be fulfilled, schizophrenia becomes a means by which systems (on all levels) can re-imagine themselves, to grow, and change, and adapt to new conditions. Holland uses improvisational jazz as a way to illustrate this unrestricted free form positive re-structuring.^{xxxii}

This 'body without organs' points to the positive potentials of the schizophrenic state—alternative modes of being, where the possibilities of perception go beyond the paradigms we are currently entrenched in. Through the game actions of *9 Sum Sorcery* The Player pushes into this state, working with schizophrenia as a *process*. This is the *ilinx* (the whirlpool) game-type at play, a chaotic vertigo that subsumes. Cultivated as a way to re-imagine, through a process of dis-organization and re-structuring, this whirlpool offers a remedy. It becomes a process of healing. As such The Player is deeply immersed within the game, but also desires to be released from it. The Player oscillates at the fork in the road, where one path leads to schizophrenia as a process and the other to schizophrenia as an entity. Within the game, there is a deliberate effort on the part of The Player to breakthrough to the path of *process*. Thus the game *9 Sum Sorcery* has the potential to operate as a powerful transformative tool—not only for The Player, but also for the community at large.

It is The Player's physical interaction with the game materials that allows for this possibility of renewal and regeneration. By *playing* with the objects, by re-arranging them and extending their use beyond that which was originally intended by their makers, The Player encourages the materials to take on new life and new meaning. A symbiosis is attempted between The Player and the objects: one scrapes away the surface of meaning so that new meanings/narratives can be applied, while the other absorbs identity so *ilinx* can be accessed and catharsis achieved.

THE GAME COMPONENTS (the materials)

"...certain types of activity, from the work of art to the work of the shaman, can only be described in terms of transformations that occur at this level of abstract composition, on a kind of transversal plane cutting across nature and culture. The ritual or thaumaturgical use of materials (whether these be hair, mud, semen, alcohol, music, drawings, dances, **even garbage**) is a matter of activating transformative potentials that are uncannily suggestive to the initiate." ^{xxxiii}

- Joshua Ramey

"Object Oriented Ontology is dedicated to exploring the reality, agency, and 'private lives' of nonhuman (and nonliving) entities—all of which it considers 'objects' (—coupled with a rejection of anthropocentric ways of thinking about and acting in the world)" ^{xxxiv}

- Dylan Kerr

As suggested earlier, the game and The Player can be seen as microcosms of a much larger set of systems/bodies (social, political, physical, psychological, and spiritual); systems that have become malignantly contained within one another. *9 Sum Sorcery* brings in the waste materials of these systems/bodies (of capitalism and consumer culture specifically) as a way to begin a conversation about their despotic nature; to use the symptoms of the disease itself as (potential) tools for healing.

Within the game, The Player aspires to release transformative potentials from materials that could be described as 'merely garbage' (post-consumer products and retail detritus). These materials are immediately recognizable (to the point of being almost invisible), yet when re-framed, when arranged under a new light, they can be re-cast in the creative imagination of both The Player and the visitors.

Philosopher and video game designer, Ian Bogost, elaborates on object-oriented ontology (defined above), "Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. Object-oriented ontology puts things at the center of this study. Its proponents contend that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally—plumbers, DVD players, cotton, bonobos, sandstone, and Harry Potter, for example...." ^{xxxv}

If *nothing* has special status...then *everything* has the potential to *become* special...that is precisely what the alchemical process suggests...that the *prima materia* is present everywhere...in *all things*...that *anything* can be brought in as a starting material, or point of

transition. Set within the game-system of *9 Sum Sorcery*, all materials have the possibility of possessing transformative powers, of culminating in the Philosopher's Stone.

So part of this game asks, how can The Player get there? Once the materials have been gathered (once it is understood that the board surface and game's components can be anywhere and anything), how can the pieces be transmuted into objects with transformative powers? If the artist/chemist is considered to have the capacity to 'prepare' matter, how exactly does he or she prepare it? And for who (or what) exactly is he or she preparing it for?

THE SANCTIFICATION OF CONTAGION (a sacrifice)

"The alchemist believed that he was a priest and his laboratory-bench an altar on which he performed a miraculous sacrifice and resurrection" ^{xxxvi}

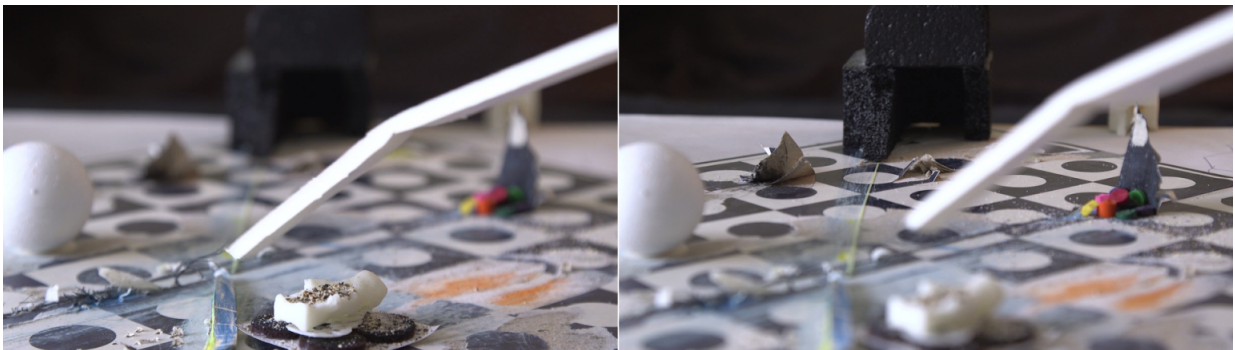
- Urszula Szulakowska

"In order to escape their subjugation to utility and reification, an object must be taken out of the network of human ends. This is best done by destroying it" ^{xxxvii}

- David Pan on George Bataille

"The artist is a symptomologist...the world can be treated as a symptom and searched for signs of disease, signs of life, signs of a cure, signs of health...the artist is not outside the symptoms, but makes a work of art from them, which sometimes serves to precipitate them, and sometimes to transform them" ^{xxxviii}

- Gilles Deleuze



(fig. 15-16) *Black and white grains are scattered over a featureless human form (porcelain in colour). The sound of grit clinging to shifting surfaces is heard as a warbly appendage manipulates the form into position. The appendage rehearses a path from the (grain-covered) form to the entrance of a cave-like structure (coal in colour). Once the path has been established, the appendage delicately pushes and pulls, spins and drags; it guides the featureless form along an abrasive surface, across a threshold, and into an unknown...*

Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

If *9 Sum Sorcery* operates on the assumption that *all things* have the potential to become *the thing* (i.e. the Philosopher's Stone), how do objects become elevated to sacred artefact? How does the space become sanctified? Is it enough for the artist to simply claim them as such?

Szulakowska brings in ideas expressed by Celia Rabinovitch to explore the sacred, "...she settles on the idea of an object and a space that is set apart from everyday consciousness within a frame, or *an exclusive boundary*. Frames fix an object in 'imaginal space'" (39). The objects of *9 Sum Sorcery* call for this kind of space, The Player answers this call by displaying

them in a vitrine and by framing them within the monitors. The vitrine and the video screens become the boundaries by which these objects are "set apart from everyday consciousness", they become the frames by which the objects transition from the *profane* (the everyday) to the *sacred*. What were once post-consumer products and retail detritus are transformed into powerful game components. Rabinovitch suggests that the 'sacred' object serves as a portal between the material and spiritual world.^{xxxix} This lines up with the old alchemical goals set to The Player and with the strategies of display in the gallery: boundaries are established in order to create objects that in turn, are capable of dissolving those boundaries; capable of bridging the gap between spirit and matter. However, Szulakowska argues that fixing the objects within this "imaginal space" is not enough. It is necessary to consider the *sacred* in terms of the *sacrifice*, "The term 'sacred' comes from the term *sacer* ('sacrifice'), while a priest is a *sacerdos*, one who makes the sacrifice. The concept of the sacred *implies a preceding sacrificial action*" (39, italics added). If the game components of *9 Sum Sorcery* are to be sacredly charged, and the actions carried out with these components are to be considered sanctified...then the whole game system must adhere to this sacrificial requirement. This process (sanctity enabled through sacrifice) has the potential to be continually at work in *9 Sum Sorcery*. The Player is constantly negotiating with the game's components in an attempt at sacrality. The Player goes through an intuitive and intimate process of immersion with the objects, both in the preparation of materials (in the 'studio') and during gameplay; the result often being the destruction (or re-imagining) of the materials themselves.



(fig. 17-20) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video stills. 2017

The validity and success of this process (sanctification through sacrifice) is left in the hands of the visitors: with how *they* chose to move through the gallery space, with how *they* chose to construct meaning from monitor to monitor. What they come across *here* will affect what they encounter *there*. Thus part of the visitor's role is to piece together and interpret each game action. Because the process of sacrifice and sanctification is occurring simultaneously across multiple screens, the visitor's physical path through, and psychological mapping of the game actions, determines *how* and *if* the requirements for sanctification are met.

In an effort to stick to the goals of alchemy (the dissolving of boundaries and marrying of opposites); *9 Sum Sorcery* places the visitors into the role of both sacrificer and sacrificed, both priest and oblation, both subject and object. Through the first-person perspective of the camera, *9 Sum Sorcery* invites one to become multiple, to disperse themselves into the actions and objects of the game, to sacrifice their own identity so that the game components can have one. In this way the visitors become implicated in the creation of the sacred game-space. By participating in the cultivation of this space they open themselves up to the boons (and possible banes) in thereof.

Just as the frame of the vitrine (and screens) can suggest a *sacred space* in which the visitors have a hand in conjuring, it could just as easily suggest a *viral space*, sealed off from the visitors in an attempt to protect them from contamination. The game components contained within the vitrine are collectively titled *(Post-Consumer) Vectors of Contagion*. This title is put in place to suggest the possibility of dis-ease. A dis-ease that could be of a physical, psychological, or spiritual nature and that has the potential to both stem from, and work its way through, individual, social, political, and spiritual bodies. The title also evokes the thought of vehicles (the game's components) which have the potential to *carry* a disease-causing organism (the game itself) from reservoir (the vitrine) to host (the visitors).

Similarly, the films of David Cronenberg deal with (human) bodies being contaminated, dis-eased, and transformed by the objects they interact with. In *eXistenZ* (1998) virtual game-worlds are accessed by players plugging organic game consoles (technology constructed from amphibian organs) directly into their spinal cords.^{xl} These consoles become diseased, affecting the bodies (and minds) of the players attached to them and altering the game experience at hand. In the case of *9 Sum Sorcery* however, it is implied that The Player/the visitors need only be *in proximity* to the game's components for contamination to occur. In this way the contagion suggested by *9 Sum Sorcery* operates closer to the transmission of disease at play in Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). In *Videodrome*, the characters need only be exposed to a *video signal*, to simply stand in front of a *television screen*, for disease to be introduced...a disease "that eventually transforms the viewer's experiences into a video hallucination indistinguishable from lived experience".^{xli}



(fig. 21) David Cronenberg. *eXistenZ*, film still. 1998.



(fig. 22) David Cronenberg. *Videodrome*, film still. 1983.

The suggestive titling of *(Post-Consumer) Vectors of Contagion* is compounded by the The Player's appearance and demeanour: he is always shown with his face covered by what appears to be a dust or surgical mask, and his physical reaction to the game components is consistently coloured by both a reverence and a fear. Alternatively, it may be suggested that the vitrine is in place because *the visitors* are a threat to the game-space (the sacred space) and to the delicate psychological narrative constructed by The Player. It may be that the visitors are considered to be carriers of dis-ease, contaminants of the sacred, that must be kept out at all cost.



(fig. 23) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

These poles between 'sacred' and 'viral' indicate a simultaneous longing for and fear of the game-space. Neither The Player nor the visitors can be one hundred percent certain as to exactly how the game-space is operating, as to what its intentions (if any) truly are. This element of the unknown is cultivated by *9 Sum Sorcery* as a lure. The only way to unlock the secrets of the game-system is to push oneself further into it, the only way to cure the disease (the only chance at "re-organ-ization") is to risk contamination. Caught between longing and fear, The Player acts with abandon, empowerment and in complete immersion one moment; and with inhibition, cowardice and from arm's length the next.



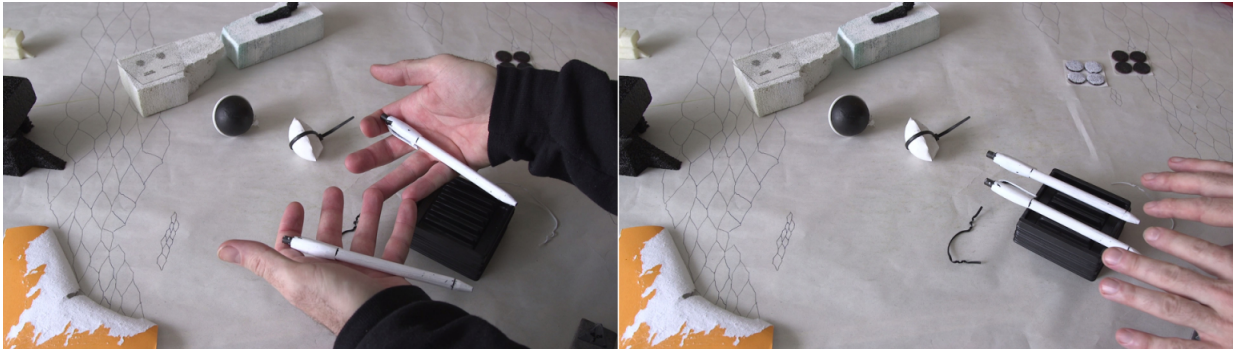
(fig. 24-25) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

The game system of *9 Sum Sorcery* becomes a platform on which The Player can 'experiment' with the schizophrenic model. It works as a test bed for intuitive action, where The Player can immerse himself in (and attempt to integrate) experiences that sit outside the socially acceptable ways of being, doing, and thinking in the world. The game's components and the mask of The Player bear the weight of this deep immersion, allowing psychic energies (or powerful magics) to flow freely. However, as Ramey points out, these 'experiments' are "dependent upon delicate mixtures that can and do fail to transmute the forces coursing through them. Surfaces that are not plastic, not flexible enough, or are expected to bear more than they can, fall apart. Worlds then become alienated from things, meaning fails, and the psyche fragments. At the extreme this failure becomes the nightmare of psychosis, where the body and language are at war" (Ramey 175).

MAKING MEANING (a conclusion)

"To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied"^{xlii}

- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari



(fig. 26-27) Alexis Grey Hildreth. *9 Sum Sorcery*, video still. 2017

The Player's game actions are complicated by three competing desires: a desire to project his *own* visionary experience onto the game components, a desire to create a space for the visitors to project *their* narratives onto the game components, and a desire to allow the game components *themselves* an opportunity to 'speak'. For any of these desires to be met the game components must be stripped of their culturally prescribed meaning. Any cultural expectation or inherited understanding of how these objects should operate (what they are and who they are for) *must* be sacrificed in order for new meanings (new sanctifications) and alternative narratives to be constructed (regardless of where these new meanings and alternative narratives are projected from).

In his book *Waste/A Philosophy of Things*, William Viney discusses the peculiar nature of the waste object, "the discarded object is released from a state of tension, the obligation to and expectation of a functional future" (Viney 9). In being considered 'waste', the objects are liberated from their enslavement to utility.^{xliii} As Viney points out, the narratives (or the tales) "woven around things" have a habit of unravelling when the arrow of time pushes them into a state of disuse.^{xliv} With this in mind, waste objects (post-consumer products and retail detritus) become the *most* sought after real estate, the *most* fertile ground, the *very* prima materia by which any, or all, of The Player's three competing desires may be met.

If the game's components are successfully unfixed from the profane meanings that had been previously prescribed onto them (and there is the potential for this to happen continuously), there will be a window of opportunity for the expression of chaos. The nine screens of *9 Sum Sorcery* broadcast a series of inconclusive signs, a nonsense of events, an "occult communication between otherwise impossible affects, precepts, and events".^{xlv} In the *Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze suggests that such a window could "permit several stories to be told at once".^{xlvi} If *9 Sum Sorcery* were to make good on this opportunity; new voices, meanings, and narratives could be projected from The Player, the visitors, and the game's components simultaneously. Together, these three entities could "elicit resonance where there would otherwise be only static".^{xlvii} This window is where the powerful collaborative potential of *9 Sum Sorcery* really lies, in a collective engagement with uncertainty.

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