

# Contraption

s. de Jager

*First one must be fed.* Or so was he told by the superiors. They'd always had peculiar ideas about how experiences should be regulated. What parameters should be taken into consideration when preparing for an experience, during the actual experience, after the experience, and all such matters. All such irrelevant matters. He would've given up on their guidance had there not been some ulterior truth pushing to break through their arcane beliefs. Something sincere and authentic he could perceive but not really grasp. For this, he blamed his weak intellect, though it must be said; they did come across as a bunch of phonies from time to time. Rumor had it they had recently acquired some artifact of some sort, *the contraption*, they called it. Not much was said about its origins. For some reason or another, they had chosen him to deal with this object. Very briefly they had told him he was to carry and explore what he felt was the relevant conceptual weight of the artifact. Should he find himself unable of this, he was to quit the task immediately. The contraption itself was rather simple; six panels held together by hinges. On each panel a mirror suspended. Each mirror about two meters high by half a meter wide, same proportions as the panels they were suspended on. It very much resembled a Japanese screen, only that what is normally covered by decorative beautifications was in this case a reflective surface.

He had no real motive not to obey them, neither vice versa. He had an incongruent, faint yet latent feeling that they were determined to make this attempt his last. As if this game of theirs was some sort of final test for him. A test they had previously established he'd fail. Nevertheless, he had already decided to play along. He was determined to make them believe he was abandoning the business altogether, once and for all. In the beginning he did a quick mental scan of everything the object reminded him of. Any connotations he could think of, anything at all related to the nature of the

contraption. This sometimes fruitful mental exercise yielded little more than a blinding migraine. He still did not dare facing the machine itself. He was given a limited amount of time to complete his assignment. And even though he felt the deadline was a not-so-distant horizon, he still couldn't get around to having a closer look at the object. He'd avoided taking a good look at it for the simple reason that it puzzled him. The artifact, slightly, frightened him.

He heard a polite knock on his door. He put away some of his papers and hurried to answer. He found nobody in the hallway, only a blank envelope lay at his doorstep. He picked it up and went back in. Inside it he found a photocopied page with the following text on it:

*[...] The world we live in, which we declare real, is purely a creation of our [mind]. The mind cannot go outside itself; and the things it believes to be outside it are only its ideas. To see, to hear, is to create appearances within oneself, thus to create [...]. But the baneful habit of creating the same things has made us lose the joyful awareness of our own creative power; we thought real the dreams we gave birth to, and also this inner self, limited by objects and subject to them, that we had conceived. Consequently, we have been the slaves of the world, and the sight of this world, where we engaged our interests, has since ceased to give us pleasure. And the life which we had created –created in order to give us the joy of creating– has lost its original character. It is necessary therefore to recreate it; one must build over and above this world of defiled, habitual appearances, the holy world of a better life: better, because we can make it intentionally, and know that we make it. This is [supposed to be] the very business [...]*

He put the paper down. This he knew. This was at least what he had been taught, or what he believed he had learned from them. He knew there was more; in any case, the object imposed it. It went in line with what these ideas proposed but suggested to be beyond them too, succeeded their rationality. How to decide whether this inherent quality should be dismissed to keep the officials satisfied, or whether to expose it and postulate it as a new truth, or at least as a new version of these old ideas and beliefs. He had a deadline, a time limit. The clock kept going in circles, as one would expect, but with a maniacal repetitiveness. The echoing thoughts that repeated incessantly did indeed drive him to have new, refreshing ones, but didn't cease to bounce around, and so created a web of infinite noise that numbed his mind and reduced it to a useless space filled with screams. A space composed by so much liquid he feared it was coming close to a boil. His mind was sinking into itself. He laboriously forced himself to give the matter no more thought and decided to shut his eyes for a moment. This did not free his

mind of any heaviness, but it did lead him to be able to displace his thoughts uninhibitedly and even allow himself to have slightly delirious hallucinations. One of them went something like this;

*The town of Alcea was a peaceful one. It was positioned in the center of the valley, south to the mountain spring waters, north to the forest. It was small enough for its inhabitants to know each other well, yet big enough for everybody to have a certain level of privacy. Not that there was something to hide, in any case.*

*Nobody in Alcea was really aware of the town's origins. What everybody could see, however, was that the early settlers had left a few deep and ugly scars in the face of Alcea's architecture. The monastery by the lake was an unforgivably distinct one. An unpleasant wooden structure which yielded no shelter during the winter and was heavily plagued by mosquitoes during the summer. It stank of humidity; rotting wood and dense, sweaty incense. It seemed as though its architect had attempted to design something minimalistic, but ended up with something which looked rather unfinished. The entrance door, with its two small windows on each side gave the impression of a screaming face. The monastery was screaming out to be accidentally burnt or struck by lightning. Some buildings have this quality, this nature which had them mistakenly born as the Notre Dame hunchback instead of the cathedral. Another building that pained the retina was the watchtower. The watchtower had originally been built to keep a look out in case of invaders. Alas, nobody had ever bothered to invade. Alcea was too small and worthless. No precious metals or stones; no books; not even women. The few women who were allowed to live in Alcea were on the lesser enticing side of appearances. As it was with the tower. The tower watched, presented itself with pride every morning, being the first building to be touched by the Sun. Over the years, the residents had grown particularly tired of that old, wretched town center watchtower. There was no need for it, and it appeared to cast sinister glances at the passers-by. They decided to bring it down.*

*Those residing in the nearest vicinity to the tower would decide in what direction the tower was to be dropped. This quickly developed into fights and arguments since; the residents north to the tower wanted it to fall south; the ones south: north, the ones east to it west and vice versa. Each neighborhood decided to take matters into their own hands; they each tied ropes tightly to the top of the tower, and pulled it down in the respective directions desired. All found themselves pulling at the same time. And the pressure caused the tower to sink into the marshy grounds of Alcea.*

After a moment of perspective, he realized –or decided– the apparatus could only yield two different infinities when closed into a hexagon. Infinity type one: the receding ouroboros. Full of himself, territorial. The classical ouroboros that eats itself. A land animal, limited. Of a temporal nature; once conceived it ceases to exist. Moreover, its conception comes into contradiction with its existence. The selfish ouroboros, it is infinite and exists only for and because of itself. A single infinite road. It is like that cartoon where the scared kangaroo jumps into its mother’s pocket, the mother into its mother’s and that mother herself, unable to find her next of kin; jumps into her own pocket and dematerializes. Infinity type one proves false the postulation that an infinite set is that which can equal all/one of its partial sets. Like a Moebius ring infinity, *a priori*. Like sperm cells that choose to fight each other instead of aiming for the target. Achtung! He remembered; *definitum in definitione ingredi non debet*. He thinks it possible for a second to abandon the task. But something that resembled a new thought fixes his joints back together; the issues arising from the paradox of solitude and multitude when enclosed within the hexagon.

Moving on. Infinity type two; the expanding ouroboros. His take on the classical ouroboros. An ouroboros that is its own tongue. The multiplying one, adding and enlarging. Arising from itself. Soft, usually covered in slime, as opposed to the scaly receding ouroboros. A sea beast; without spatial limitations but restricted to a world of water. Which, in turn, allows it to reside everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Of a non-temporal nature; once it is conceived –under unknown circumstances– it exists forever. The *sui generis* ouroboros. The connections and paradigms emerged one after the other, there seemed to be no end to their tropical growing. Pushing up from all four corners of his mind, springing with imprudent obscenity, developing into nothing incubated in the cultivatory that was his head. He abandoned the ouroboros analogy at this point.

There were a couple of contradictions and –special– concerns he had to get his mind wrapped around, namely, what is the point? Using this contraption for the creation of a private space contradicts privacy. As an art-object, the peep-show space creation contradicts the nature of peeping. The infinity created inside the object exists as long as it is not interrupted, thus makes it pointless for a viewer to enter the hexagon. When the infinity is ‘peeped at’ the essence of the contraption collapses. If one could but spy on this infinity. How to do this without disturbing it? Without the system collapsing? *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate!*

Later that night he had a dream. He was sitting at a table having his breakfast and a thought came to him, right after his spoon and bowl had turned into a bunch of shiny little green numbers. It is so ridiculous, in that movie, the way

they all of a sudden show how that whole cyber-world is composed of green zeroes and ones in the shape of the things they hypothetically code for. First of all, if they were coding for these things they would indeed be just codes and not codes in the shapes of the things they code for. Preposterous. It cancels out the whole point of compression through coding. Thus in the dream, following this thought, he took upon the task of encoding everything in the planet, and compressing the code, simplifying it so much that he ended up with the Earth as a 1 and the Universe as a 0. He drove himself crazy trying to compress the two together into something else. The ultimate compression. In the end the dream dissolved into something abstract and bizarre, he had no recollection of the dream’s conclusion after waking up. He continued with his real world task; deciphering the code of the artifact. There was no real code to crack, but he had been assigned to figure it out in one way or another. What the object proposed made his knees weak. He was greatly concerned with the idea of reversing the effect of the machine. The physical implications it might have were it the case that a contraption of a similar nature could be developed, with the key variation that it would reverse the process, instead of infinite replication of a parent image, infinite division. And, laugh away, there was also the matter of how seriously this thought should be taken.

Among the many abstractions maneuvering themselves out of proportion, there was one in particular, one at a peak of lucid delirium, which had an unusual effect on him. Here goes;

*I sit here demanding thoughts. Demanding and calling upon them with a loathsome shame that I cannot overcome. As if they were better than me – better than me? I am your master and creator, what kind of a thought is that? An inferior one, a pawn-thought, a mere stand-in. Not a fit candidate for my selection in any case. Away! Be gone! I shall hear none of it.*

*I sit here at the mercy of my hunger and try to recall those peculiar moments when these intellectuals managed to manipulate my amusement. Ah, sweet memories. A kind of cold sweat sensation mixed with that of achievement, superiority, genius! The moments when these remarkable thoughts jump out of the top-hat and stare at one, full-frontal, with their menacing little black ball eyes. That’s where the bad cold sweat comes in. The regret, the hysteric fear they provoke. And I am creating these monsters-- going to the far ends of extreme scrutiny and consciousness, to reach them, knock on their door, and just before the handle turns, just before they open the door to that abstract, structureless mansion of theirs – faster than myself, I run away. I do keep a watchful eye on them from around the corner though. I watch them as a child would; with a guilty grin, full of*

adrenaline. They often look disturbed. 'Who was that now? Huh? Show yourself! Come back if you dare, we're busy in here, don't you know?' *And the cycle repeats itself endlessly.*

*I don't know if you know, but, at certain times the mind can indeed have itself for dinner. But come on, who am I fooling? I might as well not enter this cycle, I can choose not to summon them, for that matter, just as easily. Who are they anyway, they're no better than me. They do however have the ability to start up the process. An ability I myself, alone, do not possess. They are the ones who will choose what and how to go about it. Argh, damn them. Fools, only fools. Discrete, yellow, righteous fools. I once had a thought –a distinct, precise thought– it fooled me into believing it, it lured me in. With a few words only, it read:*

NOW THAT THE LANGUAGES ARE GONE; A society where language has died out due to a slow but steady process of rule implementation. Instructions for every action that would yield positive results for the community were set up, to the point that communication between individuals ceased completely. A silent society, fully functional. One day a man awakens to discover that the medium through which these instructions are conveyed is not just a one way road. *Sounds fancy, right? You can imagine I had a reason to fall into this thought's trap. It did take me a day or two, however, to realize that this thought could not be realizable as anything. The gaps it avoids mention of are just too wide to fill in, no matter how many other thoughts one calls upon. An incomplete thought that poses as a complete one. Those are the worst, the real clever ones. The mean ones. Damn them, damn them and damn them again.*

*But perhaps I am being too harsh. Who am I to treat them as I please? To convoke them and assemble them in such a diminishing fashion. To select some of them and dismiss most... What kind of an ugly dictator am I? Poor thoughts, dear thoughts, I work through them as if I were chopping corn on a field. And what liberties do I grant them? What consideration do I have for their efforts and wishes? Oh, oh thoughts, forgive me, I have long wronged you.*

*Stop. What am I saying? What are they making me say? Stop that at once! They are mine, YOU are mine. You are my tools, my utensils, my medium; method and mechanism. I am NOT your vessel. You are not worth any more than the nails sprouting from my fingers and even TOES! The efforts and wishes I spoke of are those of mine and you are in no position to mislead me into this. Insolent insulters – the unimaginable insolence! Be gone, at once!*

The ranting grew fainter and eventually faded out. It wasn't the first fit of this kind he'd endured during the process. Imperfect replication and degenerate fractality. These two are basically the same thing. When they happen in the mirrors the desired perfection that creates true infinity is lost. They both grow exponentially like a cancer. The parent version is altered after every new generation. A fake infinity is rendered. He remembered the beginning of a story he'd once read. The setting was unzipped by describing the skies as a mountainous landscape, mirroring it to the Earth, opposing the ephemeral to the eternal, and vice versa. Maybe, he thought, there could be errors in the coding of the artifact. Maybe after so and so many reflections there would be increasing differences to the parent version. For example, in panel/mirror 3 after 422 repetitions the 423<sup>rd</sup> image would be wearing a Napoleon hat. Or other changes that shouldn't necessarily be perceived visually, changes in atomic structure, for example. Logically, he thought, perhaps every repetition is different from the parent image, but most of the time the differences are so delicate that they pass one by. Some systems seem to have random behavior even though they are not random at all. Chaotic systems may have roughly predictable behavior. They are fundamentally unpredictable in detail, however, the possible behaviors they can have and the transitions between behaviors can be calculated, and even drawn. But this didn't resemble what happened inside this machine at all.

A different thought. A (movie) theatre where the spectators watch themselves watching themselves watching themselves watching themselves watching themselves, *ad infinitum*. Like the Magritte painting. Or like Borges' book of sand. A new page rendered every time, impossible to get back to once dismissed. He fell back into a deep and heavy sleep, trembling, sweating, and proceeded to dream once again. This time he dreamt he was two men; one rich, the other poor. They lived in the same village, sometime in the middle ages. They hated each other with a passion, for no apparent reason. Due to this mutual hatred, the men decide to have a duel. An ultimately fair duel. There should be no variables; both men should fight under the exact same circumstances. They decide to undergo symmetric training, in a house the richer man had ordered some famous architect to build. Once all was prepared, the men divorced themselves from their families, their lives, their previous selves, and embarked upon 8 years of symmetry. They began by imitating each other's movements, each other's rituals, each other's biological clocks. After those long 8 years they behaved like mirrors and had even started resembling each other physically. The question whether their hatred for each other was still as strong as 8 years back did occur to both of them, but neither of them gave it too much thought. When the day of the duel came, they locked themselves in the central room of the house, which neither of

them had previously entered. Their ceremonial robes and swords lay there. With a controlled, passive adrenaline, both men put on their robes, picked up the swords and assumed positions. The duel began. Unsurprisingly, they both made the exact same movements, so every move made was cancelled by the same move returned from the counterpart. The duel lasted days, and eventually they died of exhaustion. They were found years later by the new generation of villagers. They were skeletons already, of course. Covered in sword dust. A pathetic scene.

The self-reference. The ultimate guide to this guide. It was beginning to draw his attention indeed. Everything he researched related to and echoed everything else he researched. It all seemed pointless. Every path led him to another two, and another two and another two. He thought at last of erasing the noise in his mind through the means of some mindless action that wouldn't require much effort, something that wouldn't stir up any abstract delirium. He thought of observing an individual while they observe themselves in a mirror. This ritual appears to be so absent-minded, the grooming and closely analyzing oneself. The jaw drops, the eyes take the shape of dropped jaws, full of primitive concentration. The need of hyperawareness to detail puts an awkward expression on the face, the face transforms into something foreign to one, something unfamiliar and almost unrecognizable. He kept on staring for a while. Some areas of the face seemed to change shape artificially. They shifted back and forth from the identifiable to the bizarre and uncanny. He couldn't tell what it was that made this happen. The hands close to the face, sometimes running through its surface, exploring it with a methodical, childish curiosity. As much as he tried he couldn't cross that barrier that separated him from that other which looked so familiar and so strange and unknown at the same time. The pupils dilated and constricted intermittently. He continued to watch the man watching himself and at a certain point he had to step back and take a breath. A breath he had forgotten to take for about a half a minute.

How can one decisively determine certain behaviors while being aware of the paradoxical *observer's effect*? Expanding into the dilemma of the observer. The first, easiest example that can be given of this concept concerns basic aspects of the human mind. In psychology it is known as the *observer-expectancy effect*. Under observed circumstances, an individual will behave rather differently than when unobserved. The awareness that one is being watched leads one to set a different control over one's behavior, for several different reasons, which he didn't go into, perhaps because he was aware he was being watched. In physics, the *observer's effect* refers to the effects that observation of a phenomenon will have on the phenomenon's state or outcome. A different thing occurs in Information Technology, *the observer effect* is

referred to as the effect a system might have on itself, by running both the observed and observing programs.

Given the circumstances, he felt he had no reason to call upon these thoughts, had they not been pertinent. Similarly; he felt he had no reason to speak of them, had he nothing to be dissatisfied about. Language probably came about, flourished, out of a need to complain about our consciousness. As the second hand took over the minute hand and the minute hand over the hour hand, they sort of raced each other aimlessly, for they knew the mechanism is set and cannot be altered. The slowest will always remain the slowest. And the hour hand; the big dog—the top cat, simply advanced as a result of the minute hand advancing; which advanced as a result of the advances of the second hand.

The mere idea of a committee of 'superiors' who'd judge his thoughts about the contraption started worrying him beyond all other worries he'd had so far. This committee, these officials, he realized their demands were actually those of his own. Perhaps this was their plan all along, to convert him. This could be their rite of initiation. They asked of him only what he had asked of himself. Had he ever relegated their affairs, this was the moment to regret that. He had not expected them to arrive so soon, but now there they were. All standing there, all facing him. Tens, tens of thousands, millions of them. Moving in synchronicity. He took a step back and bumped against some of them. Now they all looked confused. One of them looked particularly frightened; he approached him and tried to shove him aside. He returned the shove and then a loud crash. After that, everybody was gone. Broken mirror scattered on the floor around him. He was standing in a room, alone.

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## THESIS DEVELOPED INTO NARRATIVE

At the Photography department in the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, we were encouraged not to write a thesis in the classical sense, but to explore the boundaries within academic writing in the same fashion we normally elaborate our visual work. This written work is not an essay per se. It emerged as a piece of creative writing when the assignment I chose to undertake was to develop *map-like* explanations to the conceptual grounds of different works of art. The work I found myself engaged with at the moment of writing was a mirror installation, description follows;

The installation is a six piece mirror screen, each mirror panel measuring two meters high by fifty centimeters wide. These dimensions were sensibly chosen after research pertaining spaces that are designed to contain no more than one individual, where an action is to be performed (i.e. telephone booths, fitting rooms, peep-show booths, etc.) The screen can be folded out since it is held together by hinges, however its standard assembly is to be folded into a hexagon, allowing its user to be enclosed within it. My reason for developing this work was to tie together many of the different concepts I had embraced during my years at the academy. The ideas that kept me busy found their voice through the execution of this particular work. Existentialism, identity and self-analysis, particularly in relation to different physical dilemmas and postulations are what this installation encompasses and underlines.

The text written after the installation is narrative which places a fictitious individual under circumstances which oblige him to analyze the installation as an -autonomous- object. By doing this, my intention is to arrive at the core of my concept bundle. My hope is that you, reader, will be able to engage with the different layers offered by this short story.

S. DE JAGER