



THE ROAD TRIP PIECE

The three of us are going on a two-week open-ended road trip. We have briefly considered exploring everyday spontaneity but left it unresolved. I don't drive, M doesn't surf, and B has no say. M thrives in forests, B is most at ease indoors, while I prefer the ocean. M likes nature but complains about the ocean breeze and only swims in heated pools; I am a dog person with a pet allergy; B is a cat. My seasoned anatomy requires considerate bedding and an en-suite. Extremely few accommodations welcome cats. M packs tents, sleeping bags, and a smoothie blender. It's supposed to be a holiday, but M fills the van with recording equipment "just in case". For once, I side with the cat and decide not to record anything. Given my habit of taking 65.73 daily snapshots on average, it will take some effort not to. It's like sculpting a hole in my practice. I will treat it as an artwork.

by Justas Pipinis

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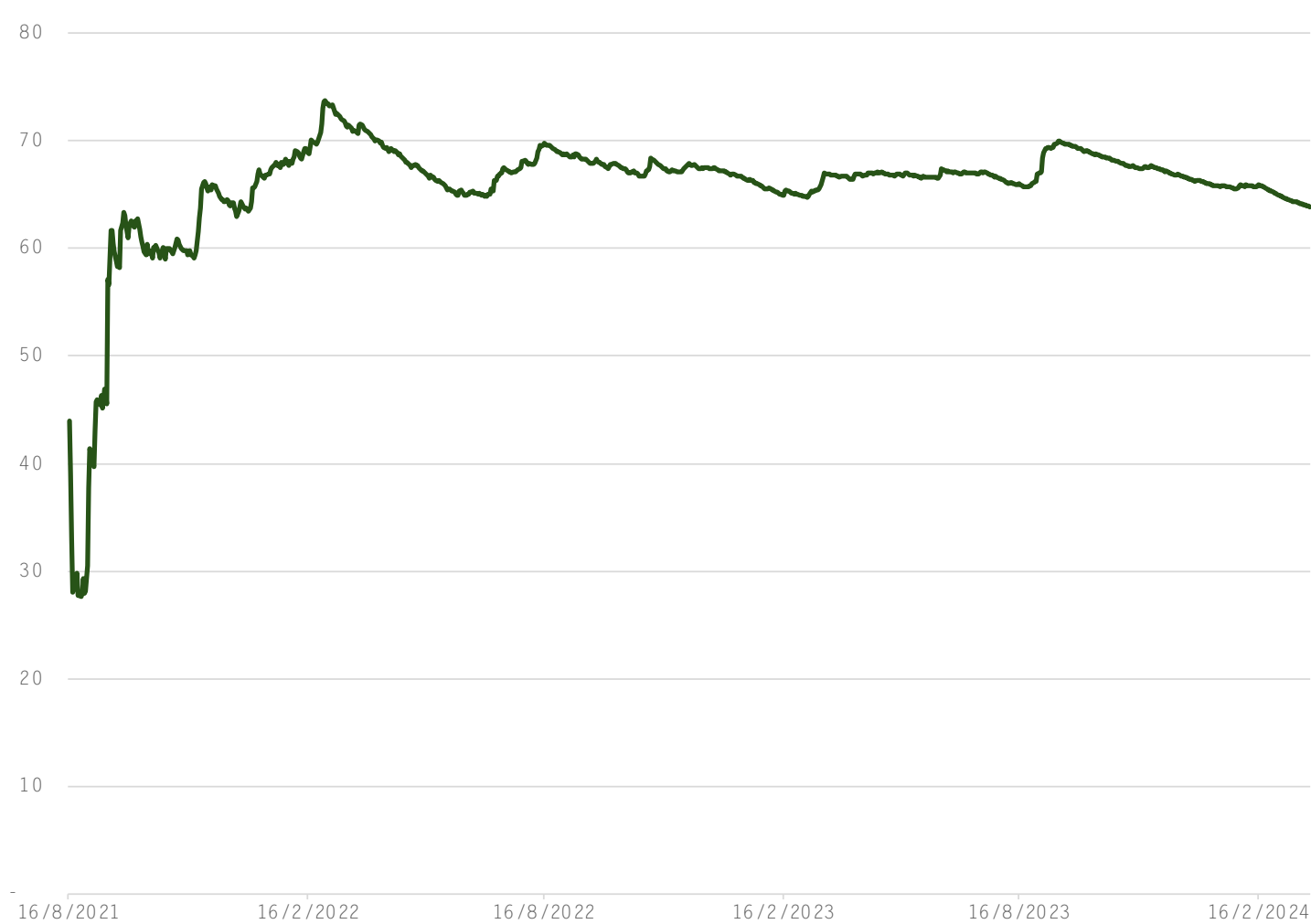
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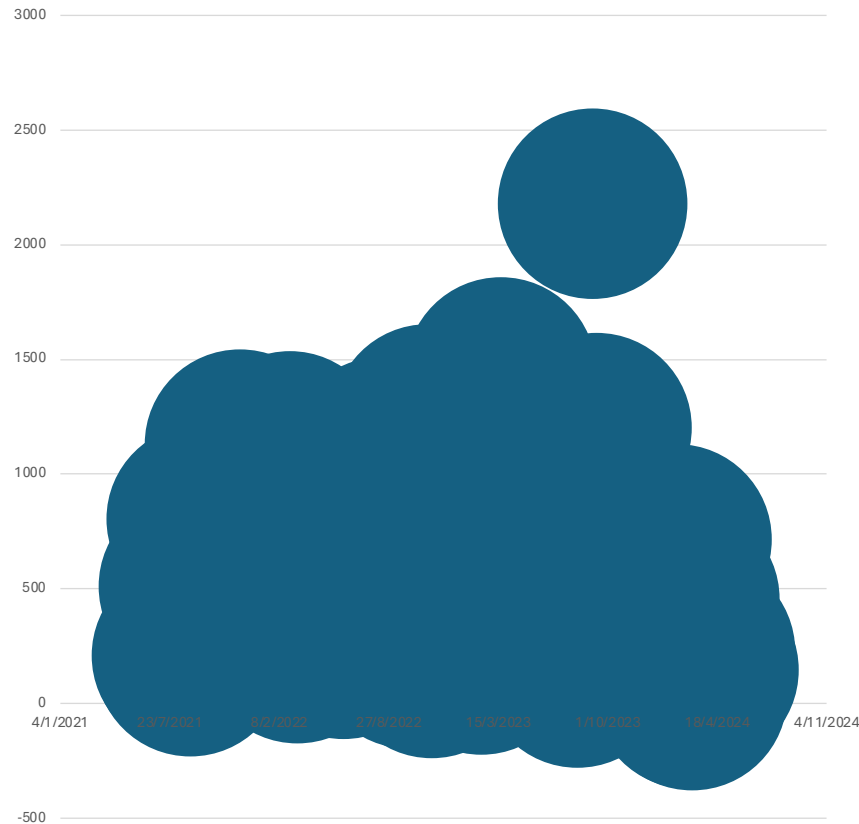
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This graph represents the development of the cumulative average of daily snapshots I've been taking since the commencement of my PhD candidacy. During The Road Trip Piece (further - TRTP), this average has declined from 65.73 to 64.64. The highest daily snapshot count registered in the observation period was 989, and the lowest - occurring only during TRTP - was 0. The overall shape of the graph carries a peculiar resemblance to some of the rock formations encountered during the trip.

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS

03



This chart is based on the same data; Excel makes shifting between different graphical representations easy. I think this one represents M's well-loaded van in the moonlight.

My first statistics textbook suddenly comes to mind. It introduced every statistical concept and method with an example of how Lenin, the leader of the Russian revolution, used them to make the case for socialism. Reading it amidst the collapse of the Soviet Socialist regime in occupied Lithuania prompted me to file statistics under artistic methods. Artistic meanings – just like statistical ones – arise from the purposeful articulation of intrinsically meaningless data. But, having

seen even the most noble intentions backfiring, I am wary of purposing. Framing my activities as art adds a protective layer against flawed willing: whereas statistics aims to shield its creative constructs from insignificance by positing them as truths, arts shield theirs from consequentiality by presenting them as fiction.

However, the real and imagined, like art and everyday, may be hard to tell apart. For example, in the first graph, the TRTP gap is not the prominent ravine at the beginning of the period but the gentle slope at its end. The cumulative average is very sensitive to day-to-day variations when the sample is small, but becomes increasingly inert as it grows.

Framing as factual or fictional will likely prompt different responses to the framed thing, but the distinction is moot. The average price of an artwork sold in Australian auctions in 2023 was \$10,153, which may be a statistical fact. But it hasn't been paid for any particular piece of art and doesn't say much about the price or value of art at large. At the same time, any artwork, no matter how fictional, always has a very true actuality and consequences of its presence in the world.

What about an artwork that consists of not doing something? Had I not forgone my habitual recording for TRTP, it wouldn't have occurred to me to quantify my snapshot history. Statistics helped to foreground my withdrawal and frame nothing as something. The unexpectedly evocative Excel charts prompted a ponderous juxtaposition of art and statistics that lent itself to the format of an Aimless Research Paper, a playful collision of academic conventions with artistic explorations. I started with an empty core and now feel like I am peeling an onion backwards. Each reconsideration adds another framing, creating more depth, a juicier bulb. Perhaps layers of framing are all there is.

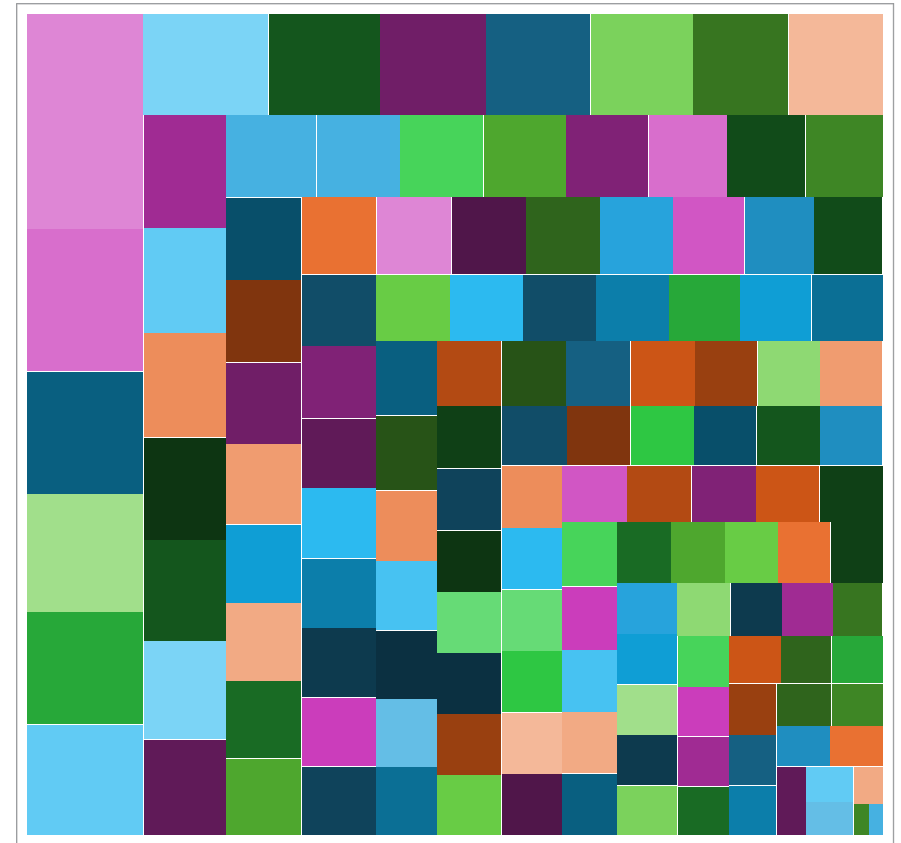
D, our eminent reviewer (see p.19), referred to the “degree zero of representation” as a “bottomless well”. However, our research suggests their metaphor is upside down – maybe it’s an antipodean thing. Our probing hits the bottom of zero representation every time – the nothingness of the onion without its layers, the untaken picture, the absence of an artwork before someone points it out. But as soon as there is the tiniest discernible outline, a pointing finger, a verbal reference – nothing is already coerced to represent something. And then it’s topless all the way up!

The diagram to the right also builds on the same data sample as the previous ones; this time, it visualises the varying number of weekly snapshots during my candidacy to date. Looking at it, I am getting Gustaf Klimt’s vibes; maybe Klimt meeting Rosalie Gascoigne. This could make a lovely painting. Or a tapestry. Or a stained glass window. But I won’t rush to make or commission any of those – a verbatim realisation of a vision lacks the crucial component of aimlessness. When you know what you are looking for, chances are, you will find exactly that – the knowledge you already have.

The artsy diagram, however, does reveal a surprise. The smallest two shapes in the lower right-hand corner represent the two weeks of TRTP that should have areas of 0 – “the bottom of the well”. Not ready to falsify our topless theory just yet, we let our statistics team conduct further data analysis that lays bare three sources of the discrepancy:

1) The graph week runs from Monday to Sunday, while TRTP commenced on a Tuesday and ended on a Thursday; thus, the graph included some non-TRTP days into TRTP weeks;

2) The data includes 7,056 received images (73 during TRTP), inflating my data sample by 11.59%.



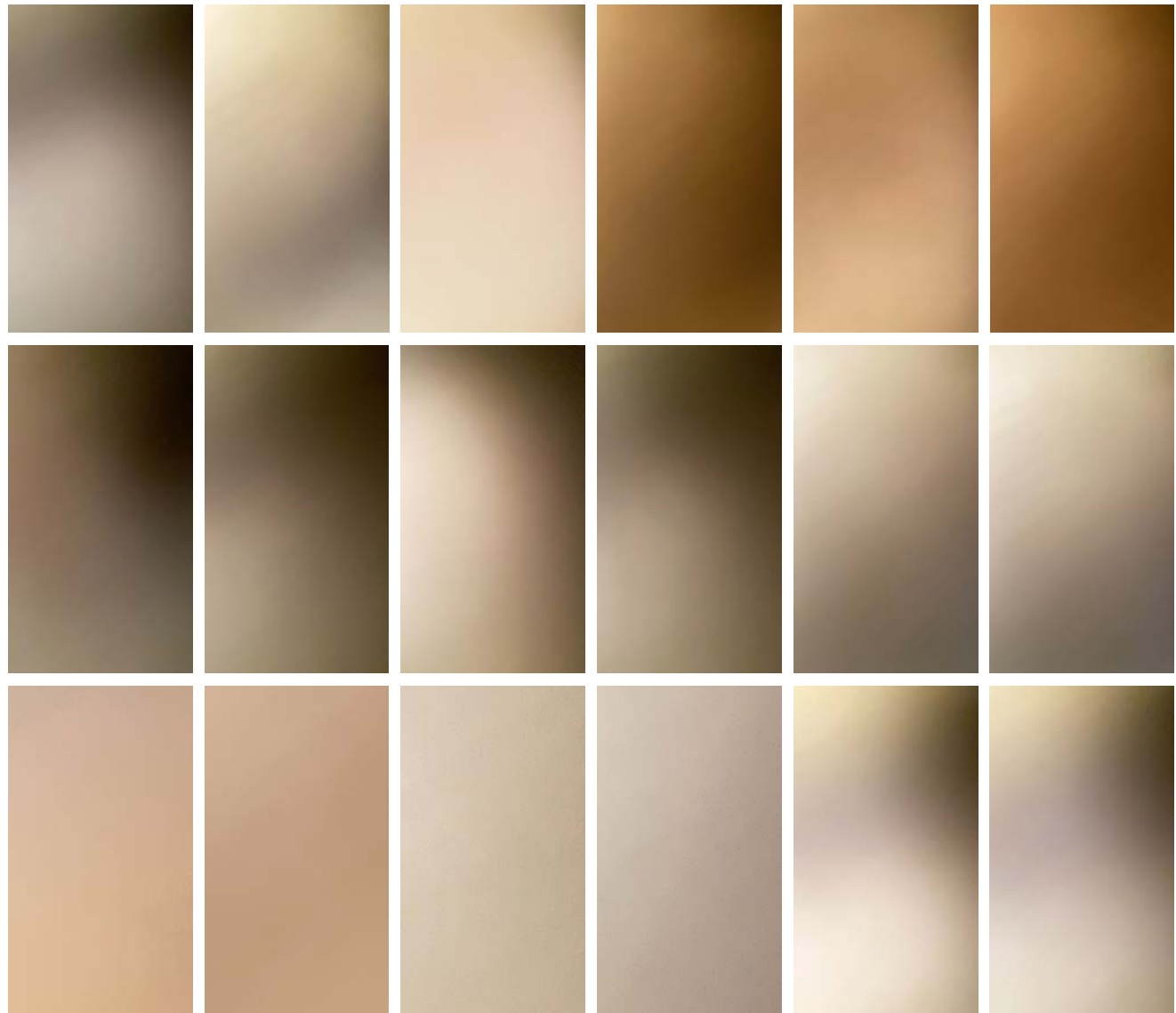
On the other hand, it is sourced solely from my iPhone image library, ignoring all the non-TRTP images taken with other devices, making the complete truth out of reach, regardless;

3) On March 5, 2024 – a day in the TRTP period – my phone took 21 photographs and six videos while in my pocket. This has never happened in such high numbers before.

REVELATION

The premonition of this Institute is that art is naturally averse to suppression and may self-generate when detecting inactivity on behalf of the artist.





THE LUST MURDER OF THE
WHITE CUBE

The earliest “withdrawal work” I recall having made was *The Lust Murder of the White Cube* project in the gallery of a reputable European art school. I have always had mixed feelings about the contemporary standards for art presentation: while enabling and protecting the artwork, the white cube enforces isolation from the real life outside, often rendering the work lifeless – like a beautified corpse lying in state. Thus, I decided to explore this amorously morbid sentiment in relation to the white cube itself.

I welded a set of cubes in different sizes. The smallest of them I put on a leash and took out for daily walks in the neighbourhood park, engaging in random conversations with bewildered pet walkers. The largest one I smashed into a symbolic chalice shape with a baseball bat – and drank red wine from it. Each action explored a different strategy to open the cube to the world. The white cube gallery space served as the mothership for all the baby cubes. That’s where most of the experimentation took place, gradually accumulating an exposition of objects, videos, photographs and texts.

It was essential for me not to announce or advertise the project publicly. There were no signs, opening events, artist talks, room sheets, or invigilators – although the space was open for anyone to enter during the regular gallery hours. I was often present and working, but not always.



Without the reinforcing markers, the power of the white cube – whether protective or smothering – started to erode. One day, I found someone rehearsing their performance routine among the cubes, and another day, an art student was repainting the walls for their upcoming exhibition. Unlabeled and not polished to deadening perfection – even if visibly purposeful – my arrangement of objects in the room did not register with the “intruders” as an exhibition, and their artistic processes entangled with mine. The white cube opened up to life in all its emerging unpredictability.

My tutor gave me a pass but refused to provide any feedback, as she only had time “to assess an object, not an exhibition”. Art was happening and not happening at the same time. The white cube could no longer enforce the definite border between art and everyday. Did I kill it, or did I bring it back to life? I wasn’t sure.

For my first MFA crit, I challenged my fellow students to find my work in the room to which I had contributed nothing but an invitation. It was fascinating to observe the activity that ensued – people looking under the tables and up to the ceiling, examining nails in the wall or removing their possessions not to be mistaken for my art. After considering multiple objects but failing to reach satisfying certainty, the guesswork turned to the movements in the room, my presence and art-historical precedents of various withdrawals.

My gesture breached the core premise of every art presentation: I withheld the specification of what was there to be appreciated. However, I offered not nothing but a frame. Despite its radical openness, my proposition had distinct boundaries – the perimeter of the room, the moment in time and the crit format. After the unconventional opening, I was adamant about following the regular procedure. Thus, I remained silent for the first twenty minutes when the audience routinely offers observations, interpretations and comments unaffected by the artist's statements.

The way the audience filled my empty frame confirmed my hunch about its generative power. I became curious about how far I could push my artistic practice to focus on various forms of framing and let the audience do the rest.

Thereto, I found three responses particularly memorable: a student who questioned how I would sell this piece to a gallery; two students who approached me weeks later to express their appreciation for my perseverance to complete the piece even when challenged by a less patient – and apparently provoked – faculty member, which

they perceived as an inspiring example of civil courage; and the invocation of various art-historical precedents that served as a revelation of how our perception of art is always coloured by our previous art experiences.

Since *Find The Art Piece* felt like a formative event of my practice, I decided to offer it as my sole contribution to the MFA graduation catalogue. But I wanted to “translate” its proposition into a published format rather than

simply describe it. Thus, I submitted the title and a blank JPG image of specific proportions, defining the boundary that possibly but not necessarily could have affected the layout of my entry. The catalogue editor disregarded my file and instructions, publishing a counterfeited blank. For art-historical justice, I include the original here, rescaled for this format.

In her PhD dissertation, *Private Practice* (2021), Australian artist Kati Jane Rule accounts for an audio archive of dinner table conversations with her extended family. Despite the archive being only accessible to her family members, Rule discusses its merits as a public work: “Essentially it is the awareness of family conversations recorded over a weekly dinner, not the knowledge of their content which, prompts intuitive responses, and generates potential content, meaning and understandings” (Rule 2021, 125).

In the same vein, when presented to an external audience, *The Road Trip Piece* invites engagement with its premise – a road trip predicated on peculiarly conflicting inclinations of the travellers, staging an intriguing tension but refusing to divulge any details of how it played out. Leaving the resolution to the audience’s imagination has a long history in art. Just think Yoko Ono’s instruction pieces like *EARTH PIECE: Listen to the sound of the earth turning* (Ono 1964) or Robert Filliou’s open questions like “where do we go from here?” (Filliou 1965).

Some audiences may find such withholding of substance unsatisfactory. Whether it is a failure on behalf of the artist, a sign of the audience’s limited imagination, or a successful delivery of disappointment depends on the assessor’s perspective. For example, art historian Francis Halsall interprets British artist Liam Gillick’s practice as “doubly disappointing: it frustrates any expectations of immersive spectacle in the face of the industries of entertainment and culture, while it also frustrates the supposedly radical antagonistic gestures of those avant-garde practices that were historically opposed to such spectacle” (Gosse & Stott 2022, 189). Halsall understands Gillick’s objects as mere tokens of art whose primary function is to draw attention to the systems of distribution and display for contemporary art.

I will leave it to the reader to imagine what I may be exploring or drawing attention to through *The Road Trip Piece*. It is also up to the reader to decide what the piece consists of. This Institute, however, is considering a spin-off inquiry into whether the presentation of a work of art is part of that work. Your views on the matter are welcome.

Another arising matter of concern is my spasmodic attempts to validate my work by comparing it to art-historical precedents. It goes back to the typical art appreciation instruction and how its formative power played out in *Find The Art Piece*, where the audience of qualified artists tried to find replicas of familiar artworks rather than filling the empty frame with something radically different. But is *The Road Trip Piece* more valid because Kati Rule successfully defended a precedent of inaccessible work for her PhD at Monash? Is its insufficiency more respectable because Gillick made a boring show first? More importantly, if my work can only be understood in the light of its precedents, is it needed at all? Why don’t I just point at homosemic works already made?

One gets all kinds of strange thoughts on a road trip when eclectic reading materials are substituted for recording devices:

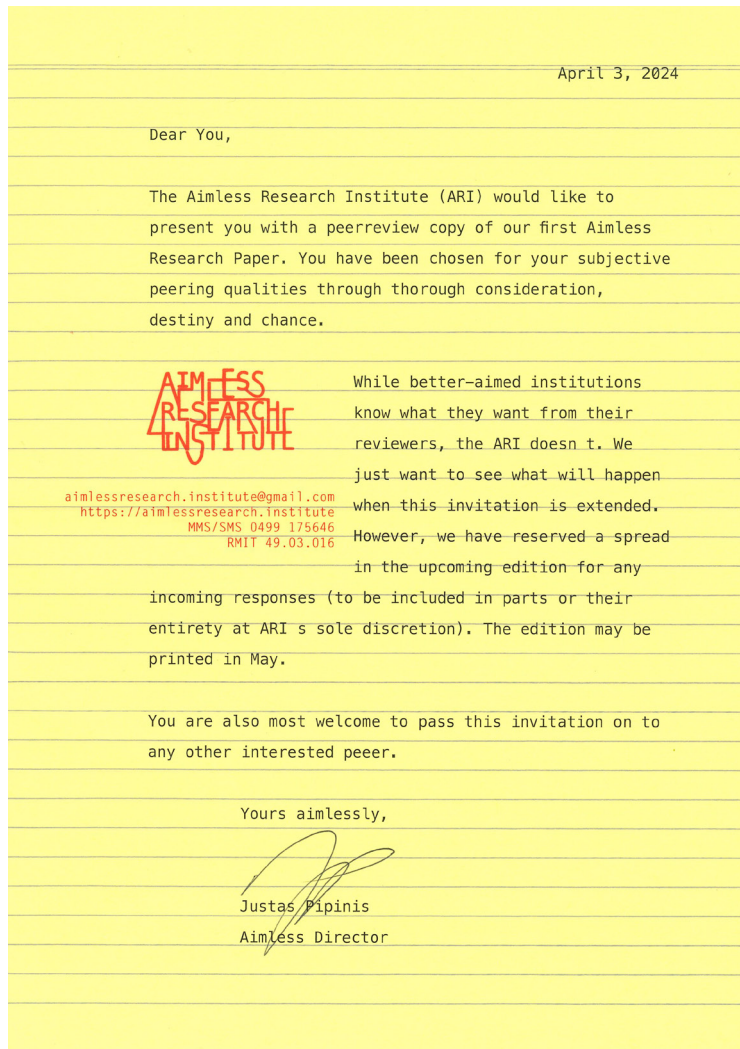
Filliou, Robert. 1965. *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*. New York: Something Else Press, Inc.

Gosse, Johanna, and Timothy Stott, eds. 2022. *Nervous Systems: Art, Systems and Politics since the 1960s*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ono, Yōko. 2015 [1964]. *Grapefruit*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Rule, Kati Jane. 2021. “Private Practice.” PhD Dissertation. Melbourne: Monash University.

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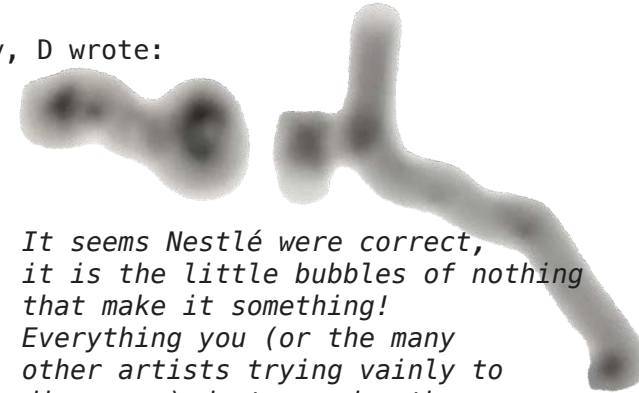


Peer Reviews were invited by anonymously distributing ten hard copies of the draft as follows:

- Art faculty (2)
- Statistics faculty (1)
- PhD cohort (2)
- Friends & family (1)
- Street library (1)
- Art galleries (3)
- Art bookshop (1)

After gently twisting four arms, one review was received before the unspecified publication deadline. Given this paper's focus on withdrawal, a 90.9% withdrawal rate among its reviewers is a remarkable achievement!

Anyway, D wrote:



It seems Nestlé were correct, it is the little bubbles of nothing that make it something! Everything you (or the many other artists trying vainly to disappear) do to render the degree zero of representation only takes you higher up and further in, the well seems bottomless. Ssss hhhhh – as Miles Davis would say.

We decided to hear Davis out. According to critic Philip Freeman, *Shhh/Peaceful* (1969) was:

...the sound of Miles Davis and Teo Macero feeling their way down an unlit hall at three in the morning. It was the soundtrack to all the whispered conversations every creative artist has, all the time, with that doubting, taunting voice that lives in the back of your head, the one asking all the unanswerable questions.

While listening, we noted @AnarchyApple on YouTube appreciating "The rest on the drums at 5:55 is such an incredible music moment". With all these bubbles of nothing getting us higher and higher, we kept wondering: what's at the top of the bottomless well? The Aimless Research Institute will investigate!

Therefore,
it's art.
QED.



UNASKED QUESTION:

- What are the artistic and epistemological affordances of withdrawal?

UNSOUGHT FINDS:

- Arting is like peeling an onion backwards
- The well of representation is topless all the way up
- Art may self-generate when detecting inactivity on behalf of the artist

