

Contemporary artist Thomas Broomé, born in Malmö in 1971, uses interactive technology with the same ease as he uses painting, sculpture or video. In the exhibition *ModernMantra* at Borås Konstmuseum, psychology, poetry and politics are recurring ingredients in a unique oeuvre in which Broomé, with a precision bordering on the maniacal, has created his very own imagery. An imagery that behind its decorative surface harbors a critique of the way society oppresses our thinking.

In his work, Thomas Broomé uses repetition as a recurring technique, making the viewer realize how absurd certain messages created with different media such as image, film, music and advertisement may be. The repetition becomes a mantra designed to create needs and arouse desires so strong that they overshadow existential issues of far greater importance. In the series of drawings, *ModernMantra*, we face interiors constructed with words in which the artist, by repeating a word such as CHAIR, has drawn, shaped and described a chair in a way that with the aid of our concentration the different words thus become all the descriptions Broomé strives for. For example, Broomés imagery shows how fashion is created by functioning in the same manner as a constructed epidemic; if a sufficient number of people repeat a logo or a brand, it finally becomes a confirmed truth. According to Broomé, it is important to point out in this context that the English language is the most important weapon for quickly spreading these truly interactive messages all over our world.

In this retrospective exhibition we see many of Thomas Broomés most talked about works, such as the moving sculpture *KnifeHand* (2004), where a boy plays Finnish roulette, and *HowAnEmptyVesselMoves* (2005), where an empty vase moves across a table, as if controlled by an invisible power. We are also invited to experience the almost mythological *DogCat* (2005), which indefatigably chases its own worst enemy itself; and parts of the installation *Locust* (2002), where Broomé has left the immaterial in order to craft hundreds of locusts from Coca-Cola cans. In the pamphlet-like information to *Locust* the artist, in a manner reminiscent of the political rhetoric of the 1970s, reminds us of the effects of globalization with phrases such as: Did you know that Coca Cola is used to rinse rusty nails?

It would be no exaggeration to claim that *ModernMantra* is a thought-provoking exhibition in the true sense of the word. In contrast to their simple and, on the surface, restrained tones, a powerful will emerges from the core of the artworks, a surge to revolt against the apparently infinite artificial desires and commercialized values that are today being offered to the world, and that like a mantra reproduce and spread to peoples' eyes and the brains.

For us at Borås Konstmuseum the pleasure in showing Thomas Broomés special work is all the greater given that it was here, at the now legendary exhibition *What is Political, Anyway?*, curated by former director Tomas Lindh in 1992, that Thomas, then 21 years old, decided to become an artist.

Hasse Persson
Museum Director

Elisabet Haglund
Curator

ullus alicubi locus
Notes from Thomas Broomé's limbus

Ronald Jones

I

Judging from Andrea Mantegna's 1492 painting *Descent Into Limbo*, entering the netherworld is a little bit trippy. Its bleak and weathered entrance makes planet Mars look hospitable, while the five figures attending Christ at his sendoff stand there soaked in dread, expecting the worst. Mantegna gives us the crucified Jesus seen from behind. While victorious over death, his mortal frailty seems hard to shake; balancing himself with his staff he hesitates before stepping off into Limbo's abyss. But why shouldn't he think twice? An uncertain wind blows up from this murky and indeterminate place making a flurry of the diaphanous robes worn by Limbo's doorman; he is offering his hand to Christ, making steady His downward climb. For everyone on this side of Limbo it is a place truly unheard of.

This month a gaggle of theologians assembled in the Vatican at the bequest of Pope Benedict. Following through on the late Pope John Paul II's wish to mothball Limbo as a relic of church doctrine, they sketched Limbo's inevitable fate: going forward, it will become theologically unheard of. Limbo has been in service over the last couple of thousand years, providing an afterlife for innocents, the "hem" St. Thomas Aquinas envisioned between heaven and hell where babies went if they died before the church could baptize them. In 1905 Pope Pius X described Limbo's neither-nor-ness with uncommon clarity: "Children who die without baptism go into limbo, where they do not enjoy God, but they do not suffer either." Limbo was the place St. Augustine righteously condemned, the place that inspired *The Inferno* and more recently the place that has troubled the Catholic Church in its fight against abortion. What afterlife aborted fetuses can expect isn't a question easily answered, but the existence of Limbo makes it more comforting for those who choose abortion, and that's exactly what the Catholic Church wants to avoid. Prospects are that when the theologians reassemble next year to take a final decision concerning Limbo, they will align with Pope Benedict, who concluded in 1984 - when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger - "Limbo has never been a definitive truth of the faith."

II

Theologically speaking Limbo's days are numbered, but within the cultural realm it is interesting to note that neither-nor-ness has never enjoyed such prominence or influence in shaping the way people think about art, create and write about it. Ambiguity, indeterminacy, relativism, imprecision, hybridism, transdisciplinarity are rich with explanatory powers when it comes to unpacking the meaning of contemporary culture. It is all at least as rich as the explicit meaning of limbus, the Latin root for limbo, which literally translates

as “hem” or on the “border.” This is, of course, hardly the first time artists have worked in indeterminate zones while critics assemble a nascent language to describe what they are up to and then speculate over historical consequences. Artists like Eva Hesse, Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman helped to bring Robert Pincus-Witten to his definition of Post-minimalism, although that stylistic idiom was not in Pincus-Witten’s first draft assessing their work. Within a period of art history in which theory had eclipsed the object, Pincus-Witten neatly surmised in the work of these artists a shift from ontological to epistemological sculpture, or a shift from defining what sculpture essentially was to a more free-form investigation into what it could be, an inquiry into what Pincus-Witten first termed “non-sculpture” before ultimately settling on Postminimalism. He could just as well have said that Hesse, Serra and Nauman inhabited limbus, because while Postminimalism tells us where they are situated historically – after Minimalism - it originally signaled nothing about their practice as artists. Pincus-Witten’s notion of “non-sculpture” was an expression of limbo, where art does not yet enjoy History’s blessing, but does not suffer from anonymity either.

III

Thomas Broomé lives purposefully within limbus; I cannot imagine him elsewhere, nor can I detect a hint of his suffering wistfulness for anything pure or pedigreed; perhaps it’s best to think of him as the doorman for our own state of cultural Limbo. The delicious ambivalence of his practice was never more explicit than in *NerdNerd*, (DATE?). His self-portrait stands in the long line of the monuments of self-portraiture – think back to Rembrandt’s *Self Portrait as Zeuxis*, c. 1662, where the old man presents himself as he imagined his audience would understand him. Instead of Greek mythology it is popular mythology Thomas taps. Here is the *NerdNerd*, the innocent anti-hero aimlessly slouching towards some half-baked future in a Limbo he will never escape for the simple reason that like St. Thomas Aquinas’ babies, he doesn’t fit in anywhere else. The receding hairline, the nutty-professor hairdo combined with nerdy porkchops are compulsory for his ilk. Part artist, part programmer and all nerd, he is the marginalized character trapped in a hybrid state where Iron Maiden lies down with Texas Instruments. As much as William Hogarth’s satire or Gustave Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* Thomas shoulders the unbecoming caricature only to shove it uncerimously off the edge of ludicrousness.

The comic-tragic episode of schizophrenia *NerdNerd* puts across speaks volumes about a culture where it is routine to see exhibitions straddling two or three artistic practices. But these are most often compound affairs, not amalgams, meaning that the artists are blatantly better at one thing than another; more skillful at making sculptures than editing video, or if they excel at sceneography, their abilities at performance need polish. But Thomas’ exhibition in Boras is something else altogether, it effortlessly fuses practices rather than just assemble them. First, it is exceedingly rare when the hard sciences have any role at all to play in contemporary culture; a symptom of a condescending prejudice from the science side, and the pitiful inferiority complex that is debilitating for art. It is rarer still to find an artist who is equally accomplished in art and the hard sciences but

Thomas Broomé is one. Formally trained at the university to be an artist, Thomas then studied software design, and that his dual education in art and science was so seamlessly braided together is evidenced by the way he moves with uncommon grace and confidence between various disciplines purposely blurring his practice into an amalgam along the way. He is one of a recent generation of artists whose practice may be fairly characterized as a hybrid-fusion; not merely an interesting artist good at software design, or a programming expert with a deep appreciation for installation art, he strategically amalgamates his art into a third thing. There is historical significance to this. Thomas is one of a small number of artists who have successfully negotiated a détente between art and the hard sciences, often with enduring results. Like the others Thomas’s practice speaks in the first person but in a third language, the result of fusing art and science in a way that makes them impossible to tell apart.

IV

Legend has it that the nerd sprang to life at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; a student who would chose the study hall over the beer hall came to be known as a “knurd” – that’s “drunk” spelled backwards. Like Dr. Frankenstein, Thomas fuses the cliché of the alcoholic artist with the cartoon of a fastidious programmer creating his own self portrait from monotonous clichés supposedly incompatible. Isaiah 11:6 tells us about an unheard of place where the wolf and the lamb lie down together to live in neither-nor-ness, in an uncanny sanctuary in peaceful Limbo. Hold your finger to the pulse of our culture and you will feel the relevance of neither-nor-ness, a culture somewhere in the future that will become a fusion of what was once irreconcilable. Perhaps that is the overriding message of Thomas’ exhibition in Boras, the construction of the ullus alicubi locus, a somewhere, anywhere, elsewhere.

The Mutant Nerd
Kim West

There are many ways to understand and relate to the development of the media technologies and the role they have come to play in contemporary society. Of course, one could choose the common path and embrace them for how they make life simpler, communication faster, increase accessibility, improve choice, create flexibility and abolish borders, etc. Each period in the modern age has probably had its own version of today's (or yesterday's) IT-prophets and electronics retailers, who preach an equally comfortable and naive faith in progress (it's getting better) in order to convince people of the necessity in buying new machines for more money at a quicker pace. One could also choose the opposite path, and view the technological present as the height and the endpoint of human civilization's inherent and self-destructive search for power and control. In this way, a big part of the critical artistic and theoretical production today seems to be informed by a more or less paranoid and dystopic worldview that weaves together themes from thinkers such as Heidegger, Debord and Deleuze into a loose theory of a form of society where technology has fulfilled its essence and instrumentalized our relationship to world and being, where the entertainment industry has infiltrated and taken command over the social field in its full extension, and where capital can always immediately assimilate all deviations and disarm all forms of resistance.

Thomas Broomé is tired of computers. He certainly does not profess to any naive faith in their liberating powers, but neither does he condemn them as the devil's latest plaything. He is just tired of them. They create more work, not less, and they are expensive and bad, even dangerous. "There is a huge debate over issues like DNA-mapping, cloning, integrity and humanism, he explains when I visit him in his studio one December evening. At the same time we transfer the responsibility for our whole infrastructure to a couple of vulnerable computer cans, without anyone discussing it or criticizing it in the least. That Broomé is tired of computers does not, contrary to what one may have thought, entail a radical turn in his practice. He is not now and has never been a computer artist in any strict sense – an artist whose work is exclusively based on digital technologies or new media. On the other hand, I believe one could say that a central point of departure for his work has, from the outset, been his explicitly devoted, often sarcastic, and always skeptical relationship to his media technological age. Since the early 90s he has, in a long series of works made in many different media, genres and techniques – from *The Kill* (1995) and *NerdNerd* (1999), over *BrainBall* (2000) and *HellHunt* (2001), to *Desktop* (2001) and *Pixelman* (in progress) – been engaged in processing, criticizing and satirizing the media technologies that have surrounded him and shaped his existence.

What would characterize a critical stance towards the technological present – a

stance built neither upon blind acceptance nor categorical condemnation, which is neither naively embracing nor despairingly dystopic? What would it be critical against? Let us start from two simple hypotheses. First, that digital technologies are today present in all places and spaces in society (homes, working sites, public spaces, urban spaces, institutions, communications systems, etc), where they exert a big influence over the way people act, relate to each other, and experience their surroundings. At the same time an almost total “computer alphabetism” reigns, to refer to Friedrich Kittler’s concept – that is, basically no one can understand, read or write the code that forms the basis for how these technologies work, but instead everyone is compelled to use the machines and interfaces that are available and allowed on the media technological market. This in turn gives the corporations that manufacture and sell these machines and interfaces a significant, silent, and non-negotiable power over the fields in which these technologies work.¹

Second, that in order to understand the effects of these technologies, consequently one cannot think of them only as tools manufactured to simplify human activities, but one should rather imagine that they influence the human conditions on a fundamental level – what she can see, say, and do as such, and thus how she understands herself and relates to her surroundings. In other words, it would be a mistake both to understand the media technologies as something completely secondary in relation to the human being, and to think of their effects as limited to the sphere of these technologies themselves. Instead, one should imagine that the media technologies change the conditions for how we understand ourselves as human beings, ultimately for what we believe that a human being can be, in a fundamental sense, and that their effects thus spread into and influence all human activities - all levels of human life. In this way it can for example be tempting to see a connection between, on the one hand, the appearance of digital technologies that allow for the reduction of text, image, sound, and film into one and the same code, and for them all to be processed within one and the same machine, and, on the other hand, the development of a “post-medium condition” in contemporary art, where the material support of a certain artistic expression is no longer thought to have a unique essence, and where the artist becomes someone who can move freely between media, expressions and genres.

According to a simple sketch like this, the central problem would be connected to the design of the world – the distribution of the sensible – to use Jacques Rancière’s concept – that the media technologies contribute in establishing, and to who has access to this world and who has the possibility to influence its design.² A critical stance towards this situation would not only consist in actually resisting those who seek to establish a monopoly over the media technological fields - by creating alternative technologies, destroying existing technologies, questioning copyright structures, and so on – but also in processing, criticizing, and reconfiguring the symbolical regularities this “distribution of the sensible” is built upon in a wider sense, the relations between what can be said and what can be seen it holds available. Regularities and relations that thus define the world in which we move, and consequently how we understand ourselves and our possibilities to act within this world.

It is in such an extended field of technological critique I believe one should situate Thomas Broomé’s artistic practice. One of his latest works, *ModernMantra* (2005), in a clear way marks which position he takes and what themes he works with.

ModernMantra is a series of 18 “text drawings”, made in Indian ink on white paper. In a somewhat schematic fashion they portray sterile and depopulated interiors, often simply but properly furnished. One does not have to get very close to them to see that the drawings are really calligrammes, that the interiors are drawn with words that simultaneously describe what they depict. Thus the figure of a table in one of the drawings consists of the word “TABLE” repeated over and over again, according to the following model:

TABLE TABLE TABLE TABLE	
T	T
A	A
B	B
L	L
E	E

– but much more detailed, set in perspective, and so on. The operation in these “text drawings” is simple but contradictory. The words within them are on the one hand precisely words: they are denominating and can without further ado be read and understood – “TABLE”, “CEILING”, “MIRROR”, etc. On the other hand the words are also image: they are organized into shapes, they are mimetically portraying, their “transparent significance” is denied because they are reduced to pure, material figures on the surface of the paper. On the one hand, the words are thus linguistically denoting, on the other hand they are figuratively portraying – but furthermore these words name exactly what they depict when their linguistic transparency is denied and they are reduced to material figures. That is: the words are (denominating) words, the words are (non-denominating) images, and the words denominate what they depict themselves (in a non-denominating fashion). I believe one could say that the fundamental quality of *ModernMantra* resides in this doubleness, this simultaneous presence at a multiplicity of levels of significance. A doubleness that one could describe in classical philosophical terms as a play with the difference between the superficial, imagerial quality of the words and their linguistic significance, between “letter” and “spirit”, etc. In this reading, *ModernMantra* would point out a position difficult to determine on the border between the different levels of significance, a position where the many simultaneous and contradictory functions of the words ultimately show how problematic it is to maintain a strict separation between these levels of significance.

But *ModernMantra* not only puts different semantic levels in play. What do these “text drawings” show really and how? The sterile and depopulated rooms they depict give a completely artificial, constructed impression, reminiscent of computer-generated environments such as virtual spaces or computer game interiors or something similar. At the same time, the objects that are depicted in *ModernMantra* are characterized above all

by one trait: they bear their names on their surfaces – or rather, the surfaces of the objects are constituted by the names of the objects, and nothing else. If these “text drawings” depict computer-generated rooms, it is thus as if these rooms would be simultaneously depicted and “decoded”, as if one could look both at the objects and through them, to the code they are constructed from – or in other words, as if we at one and the same time had access to the code and to the interface which interprets it, translates it, makes it meaningful and useable (for us “computer alphabets”). In this way *ModernMantra* can make you think of a classical topos in all science-fiction stories: the scene where the hero is suddenly struck by a certain clarity and learns to see through the surface of the simulations and appearances (the interface) to the true reality behind them (the code). *ModernMantra* points out a similar position in relationship to the interface and the code, with the important difference that there is nothing in these “text drawings” that corresponds to the radical separation or hierarchy between different levels of reality, between the merely simulated and the really real, which is central to the science-fiction fantasy. Instead it is as if *ModernMantra*, here too, would point out a place difficult to determine, at the border between different levels of significance and symbolic systems – a place which, in this case as well, would ultimately show just how problematic trying to separate these symbolic systems and levels of significance in a strict sense would in fact be.

One can view *ModernMantra* from yet another perspective. When I mention to Broomé that his text drawings make me think of the scenes in a certain science-fiction movie, he is surprised, admits that there is a similarity, and establishes that he had not thought of that at all. The text drawings in the series *ModernMantra* depict, Broomé explains, interiors from different luxury apartments. The images that have served as their models come from real estate agents webpages on the net. And the signs that the text drawings are constructed from, he corrects, only in a very superficial manner resemble the signs that all computer-based interfaces are constructed from. They are analogous words, not digital code. More precisely, they are nouns that name different things. The title *ModernMantra*, Broomé continues, simply refers to the mantra of the modern man, according to which you realize yourself by buying expensive things. The text drawings in the series show environments that are completely constructed from luxury goods, from the flashy apartments the original images depict to the furniture, gadgets, and clothes these flashy apartments are filled with (note for example how the clothes in one of the text drawings are drawn using their brands). The fact that *ModernMantra* depicts a world whose sole principle is pure commodity fetishism using the names of the goods that fill up this world, thus becomes a commentary to how the values that drive this fetishism are completely abstract, immaterial: it is not the possible usefulness of the things that render them desirable, but the symbolic system they are inscribed into. In this way one could say that *ModernMantra* points out another symbolic system that determines our access to the world, this time not in order to present any ambivalent border position in relationship to it, but only in order to present it and produce an awareness of it, according to an equally simple and traditional critical model.

First, *ModernMantra* thus designates a kind of semantic border site, an unstable

place between the levels of the words in terms of image and meaning. A place that can be said to reject the strict separation between these levels. Second, it points out an equally unstable border site between different signifying or symbolic systems, between code and interface. Here too the strict separation between the different signifying systems is rejected. And third, *ModernMantra* points out the symbolic system that can be said to “overcode” all the others: capitalism (to put it succinctly). Taken together, one can say that with these operations *ModernMantra* marks the position Broomé takes within his work. He seeks a critical stance starting from a location at the border between different levels of significance, at the border between apparently opposite symbolic systems.

Broomé has made several works that are situated precisely at the kind of border locations *ModernMantra* points out; works that seem to be present simultaneously at a multiplicity of levels of significance and symbolic systems, and there play with the differences in levels and satirize over the systems’ rules. To take only two clear examples, one could name the sculpture project *Pixelman* (in progress) and the installation *Desktop* (2001). The project *Pixelman* is simply based on the idea that Broomé will create an exact three-dimensional and life-sized reproduction of a computerized, pixelized 3D-image of his own body. The play with levels is apparent: the sculpture will not be a reproduction of Broomé, but of his digital image, complete with pixels and everything qualities that of course are only the results of the technical limitations of the computer: processor power, screen resolution, etc. The installation *Desktop*, in turn, consists of a number of life-sized copies of office stations, with desks, office chairs, computers, screens and keyboards, all made in paper. The play with the levels is not as apparent here, but on the other hand it is taken a step further. At a first glance *Desktop* only seems to consist of paper copies of usual workstations. They look completely useless. But soon one understands that the work is also built on a play on the word *desktop*. *Desktop*, of course, is the name of the navigation window in the user interfaces of (basically) all operating systems. As such it is the most obvious example of how these interfaces are not only there in order to make operating systems and technologies easy to use, but also serve the purpose of anthropomorphizing them, making them feel human, natural, self-evident, so that one disregards the artificial, technological status of the interfaces and consequently also one’s own (possible) inability to actually handle these technologies: one’s own computer alphabetism. Broomé’s very useless paper copies of actual, material desktops and computers effectively satirize this anthropomorphization. At the same time as the desktops in *Desktop* constitute a clear reference to the “desktops” of computers, no one would ever mistake them for being authentic, but on the contrary they are almost exaggerated in their artificiality and falseness.

But Broomé certainly also works in other, less literal ways with the borders between the symbolic systems and the levels of significance of the media technologies. One could discern two groups of works within his oeuvre, in which he in different fashions processes, perverts and criticizes the regularities that characterize the distribution of the sensible that the media technologies take part in establishing. The first group would consist of works in which Broomé, using various methods, shows the arbitrariness, sometimes even

the absurdity, of the logic of the media technologies, and of the rhetoric that aims to market them and justify their proliferation. Here, one would find works such as the witch hunting web robot *HellHunt* and the joyfully sarcastic installations *BrainBar* and *BrainBall*. The second group would consist in works in which Broomé rather plays with the idea of a creature that can inhabit the world of the media technologies, a creature that can move between separated symbolic systems and levels of significance, a creature whose very body and life form is adjusted to the technologies' multiplicity of orders and layers: the mutant. Here, one would find works such as *Locust*, the brand that transforms into a swarm of insects, *Afterlife*, the flower that dematerializes and never withers, and *NerdNerd*, the invincible crossbreeding of a network developer and a heavy metal drunk.

PSYKO (1999) and *HellHunt* (2001) stand out as clear examples of works that would belong to the first group. They are both based on surveillance technologies, and with a certain accuracy disarm the rhetoric of mathematical precision and exact programming that surrounds these technologies. *PSYKO* consists of a computer-driven camera eye and a laser sight. The camera eye scans the room in which the work is installed and the information is interpreted by a program that identifies human figures. The program randomly chooses one of these figures and tells the camera eye to follow the victim's movements and the laser sight to mark him/her with its characteristic red spot. Everyone who has seen the films of Harun Farocki knows that these technologies today find a very broad application and are used in the military industry as well as in civilian and commercial fields, in public spaces and in shopping malls. What *PSYKO* shows is perhaps above all the fundamental indifference and arbitrariness of these technologies: the pedagogically exhibited computer shows how the program chooses its victims without discrimination and how the laser spot follows them relentlessly, until they disappear out of reach. *HellHunt* is based on a similar idea. The central operation of this work is carried out by a web robot that scans images on the net, identifies certain points within them, and controls whether any of these points form the pattern of the diabolic pentagram. If it finds such an image it downloads it, draws on it the points and the upside-down, five-pointed star, and sends an email to the proprietor of the webpage in which he/she is told to immediately cease with his/her Satanic activities and take the image off the net. What is essential in *HellHunt* is not, as one may have thought, how there seems to be a suggestive logic to how the web robot finds pentagrams in the most (or least) likely of places: in Britney Spears' face, between the tied up arms of an Asian porn star, over the womb of the Madonna, etc. What is essential is, on the contrary, that this inquisitorial web robot is lousy: it finds pentagrams everywhere, without any logic at all, and when it finally comes across an image with a goat's head, Satanic hieroglyphs and a large, distinct pentagram, it misses completely and draws the star somewhere between two of the real pentagram's points and the left horn of the goat.

The two works *BrainBar* and *BrainBall* (both 2000) in a similar manner satirize the brave new world of precision, perfection, and harmonious interactivity that a certain rhetoric of technology promises. *BrainBar* (which Broomé has made in collaboration with Ingvar Sjöberg) is, as the name suggests, a kind of mechanical bar that mixes drinks that

suit the brain activity of the customer. The machine is endowed with everything one may need: information technology, electronics, lamps, tubes, bottles and EEG-sensors. The visitor puts on the headband with the EEG-sensors, allows them to register his/her brain activity, temperament, etc. and then *BrainBar* mixes exactly the drink that the brain of the visitor asks for. Fantastic technology. What is in the bottles? What relation could there be between brain waves and the proportion of liquor varieties in a certain drink? Unimportant. There are EEG-sensors, technology, software and booze: of course the drink will be perfect in some sense. *BrainBar* is a stupid machine. And as such it gives a sample of Broomé's nerdy humor, his joyful sarcasm: to use state-of-the-arts technology and a whole staff of utterly competent programmers to manufacture a drink mixer and present it as interactive new media art is not to make fun of others, it is to have fun at the cost of the system one is at the same time satirizing. *BrainBar's* sister work is called *BrainBall*. If *BrainBar* shot a hole through the IT-ideal of "interactivity", *BrainBall* is the artwork that once and for all sunk it. *BrainBall*, which Broomé has made in collaboration with the members of the group Smart Studio, is a technological ballgame for two players. The players sit down next to each other, one at each side of a table. At the table there is a playing board with two goals and a small ball. By each player's side there are EEG-sensors. The game is simple: the ball moves towards the side where the player with the highest brain activity sits. The purpose of the game is to score against your opponent. There are incredible images from matches in *BrainBall*: at the ends of the oblong table sit, hang, lie two completely lifeless bodies on chairs with electrical cords attached to their foreheads. When Broomé, together with his colleagues, realized this project, he was employed as an artist researcher at the Interactive Institute, where ambitious investigations with hundreds of test subjects were carried out about *BrainBall's* effects and studies were written on the possible societal applications of the game. I am surprised he got away with it.

On the side of this group of works - in which Broomé satirizes the rhetoric surrounding the politically progressive power of the media technologies, draws their modes of functioning to absurd conclusions, and in this way shows how their symbolic systems and orders can be said to break up from the inside - one could find another group of works, which is instead based on how Broomé plays with the idea of the hybrid and mutated life forms that populate the border zone between different levels of significance and symbolic systems that he points out in his practice. One of these works is *Locust* (2002), which consists of three-inch models of locusts made from Coca-Cola cans. When *Locust* is exhibited it is showed as a mass, an innumerable multitude of Coca-Cola locusts that, accompanied by the sound of swarming insects, in a suggestive way invades the exhibition space. Of course, *Locust* has been accused of being banal, and perhaps there is not so much to add concerning the swarming imperialism of the Coca-Cola brand. What one could note however is that the model for how *Locust* is designed, installed and presented does not really seem to come from the empire of bugs, but rather from how the threatening insect swarm is represented in certain adventure and horror movies (Broomé mentions a scene from *The Mummy 2*). In other words, when *Locust* crawls in through the ventilation system at SOC in Stockholm it probably does not so much resemble the behavior of the grass-

hopper swarms that destroy harvests in North Africa, but rather the digital special-effects swarms that invade the hero's last claustrophobic refuge and fill the film screen in the latest Hollywood spectacle. In this way *Locust* becomes a work that, like certain of Christian Andersson's works, plays with creating actual, material versions of "impossible" special effects. In extension it thereby also becomes a kind of nightmare vision in which the immaterial, digital monsters of the media technologies leave their "purely artificial" sphere to invade "reality" as real, physical, living creatures. In this sense it is not unessential that *Locust* at the same time shows how a certain, completely "constructed" and "artificial" brand assumes living shape.

But how should one understand this device? Should one imagine that Broomé is trying to pose the traditional question about the border between simulation and reality, between artificial media technologies and true nature, between digital monsters and living beings? Another of the works where Broomé deals with the idea of hybrid and mutated life forms, *Afterlife* (2001), shows how he actually seems to be searching for a different problematic. *Afterlife* consists of potted plants, biosensors, software and more information technology. The biosensors register the electrical activity that the flowers generate. When the flowers wither the information is translated into binary code and transferred to a program in a computer, which from this information creates a kind of representation of a flower. This representation of a flower, which is thus arguably no less complex than the original flowers and which, furthermore, has a certain indexical relationship to the same original flowers, then "lives" on in digital form on the computer screen. Now of course one can imagine that *Afterlife* in this way wants to pose the question of the nature of life and of the difference between the "merely artificial" and the "authentically real," but it is not certain how far one will get in such a reading. Perhaps one should not think that the point of *Afterlife* is to show how the "organic" flower and the "artificial", "digital" flower are the same, similar, of the same status, the same nature – which they are obviously not. Rather, I think *Afterlife* simply wants to point out that the digital representation of the flower is no less real than the "natural" flower itself, just as special effects-locusts in a Hollywood blockbuster are no less real than models of them created from Coca-Cola cans, and the interface is not less real than the code, and so on. Images, interfaces, pixels, information, code, brands, and potted plants are all to the same degree real phenomena, and as such they influence the design of the world in which we move. That is, they are not all of the same nature, but they are separated from each by other things than their degrees of reality – by inhabiting different spaces, by functioning within different fields, by belonging to different symbolic systems, and different levels of significance, etc. And the critical problem is not the question of the difference between simulation and reality, between the artificial and the natural, between man and machine – the critical problem is, to repeat, that everyone does not have access to these spaces and these fields, these symbolic systems and levels, and that everyone thus does not have the possibility to influence their design.

In other words, there is something absurd in the idea that people today spend half their waking lives in front of different screens and that we still stubbornly persist in discussing the ontology of the screens in terms of unreality, illusion and simulation.

What would it take for us to start seeing them as real? No one would deny that the media technologies have a completely central position in contemporary society, that they consequently assist in shaping the world in which we move and in extension the conditions for how we understand ourselves and our relationship to this world. But at the same time as we delegate the definition of our own existence to a couple of vulnerable computer cans that basically no one really has the capacity to control and handle (computer illiteracy, again), the critical discussion often seems to be stuck with a moderately productive problematic concerning the difference between simulation and reality, between the artificial and the human, etc. In one way it is as if we had let ourselves get separated from our own existences: we have happily and uncritically allowed the media technologies to take a completely determining role in our existence, and thus we have also transferred the control over the corresponding part of our existence to those who have the power over the media technological fields. Broomé has made two works that can be regarded as kinds of allegories over this situation, *DogCat* (2005) and *NerdNerd* (1999). *DogCat* is a life-sized sculpture showing a creature whose front half comes from a dog and whose back half comes from a cat. The sculpture seizes this double creature engaged in a furious hunt for its own/the other's tail. The work can be said to demonstrate the dilemma of a certain case of split personality: *DogCat* has been separated from itself, one part of it has been transformed into its own worst enemy – and thus it cannot free itself from the part of itself that has become another without thereby also destroying itself. *NerdNerd* is *DogCat*'s opposite. Where *DogCat* shows a strange creature that consists of two competing parts, *NerdNerd* places us before another, no less bizarre being, which is also split in two, but whose parts rather complete and support each other. *NerdNerd* is simply a photography of Broomé himself in which he is wearing a costume whose one half consists of an ordinary office-slave suit, complete with shirt, tie and ballpoint pens in the breast-pocket, and whose other half consists of the patented uniform of the sloppy nerd: Iron Maiden T-shirt and blue jeans. One can imagine in what ways these apparently opposite halves complete each other. On the one hand, both the former and the latter figure's life takes place in front of a computer screen: the one develops network solutions, software and surveillance technologies, the other plays network games, downloads death metal and breaks through firewalls. They both thus have a certain extent of computer illiteracy, to play with Kittler's concept. But at the same time these halves come from completely different worlds and their alliance has devastating consequences: when the former half believes he has developed a perfect and flawless control system, the latter destroys it all by demonstrating that it cannot even find the devil on the internet, and when the former manufactures a sophisticated hardware system for human-machine interaction, the latter uses it to guzzle booze. It is a singular creature Broomé gives rise to in his search to question the given role of the media technologies, pervert the symbolic systems they establish, and show that anyone still has the possibility to take power over their design. One could call it a new species: the mutant nerd.

Footnotes

1 Cf. Kittler, "Datoranalfabetismen", Sw. trans. Lars E Nyman, in *Maskinskrifter*, eds. Otto Fischer and Thomas Götselius, Anthropos, Gråbo 2003. German original: *Computeranalfabetismus*, in *Literatur in Informationszeitalter*, eds. F Kittler & D Matejovskij, Frankfurt/M.- New York 1996. E.g.: "The computer analphabet as such has in other words become the subject to a corporation. He is as massively and obliquely subjected to the digital code as he is to his own genetical code."

2 For the most thorough presentation of the concept "distribution of the sensible" ("le partage du sensible"), see *La Mésentente*, Galilée, Paris 1995, ch 2: *Le tort, politique et police*. See also *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London 2004, and *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Galilée, Paris 2004, ch 1. A selection of Jacques Rancière's texts will be published in Swedish translation at Site Editions in 2006. Bernard Stiegler has criticized Rancière's concept for being naive and simplified, and instead talks of "the disaster of the sensible" (*le catastrophe du sensible*), a concept that refers to how the use of media technologies today not only defines what is available to the human senses, but also impoverishes her ability to sense as such, on a fundamental phenomenological level. Cf Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique* 1, Galilée, Paris 2004, ch 1.