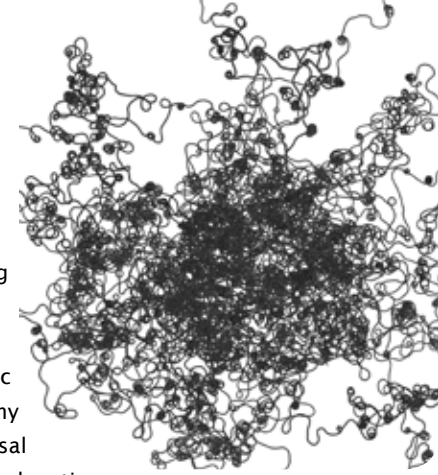


A Snake Eating Its Own Tail

Ruba Katrib

Throwing himself headfirst into a tautological slew of ideas, images, and slogans, Siebren Versteeg is not unlike the protagonist of Philip K. Dick's semi-autobiographical novel *Valis*. Horselover Fat, who also represents Dick, is a genius or schizophrenic or both. He examines the depths of philosophy and religion to find the solution for universal problems, but continuously returns with explanations, patterns and systems whose logic and source are elusive. The problem and its solution become confused; the goal of this quest muddled:



The interlocking between the defective instrument and the defective subject produced another perfect Chinese finger-trap. Caught in his own maze, like Daedalus, who built the labyrinth for King Minos of Crete and then fell into it and couldn't get out. Presumably Daedalus is still there, and so are we.

- Phillip K. Dick, *Valis*

Searching for the answer or proposing a solution to existential concerns goes nowhere. The quest for meaning or a sense of purpose becomes aggravated as we end up right where we started. Perhaps the best solution is to acknowledge we are trapped in a labyrinth of our own doing, and instead of trying to find a way out, we try to gain a better understanding of our confines.

Examining these very paradoxes, Versteeg engages in cyclical notions that simultaneously offer both freedom and imprisonment, and then freedom through imprisonment. There are no straight answers, logic is disrupted and randomness becomes organized. He employs everyday tools and technologies to visually manifest dizzying philosophical concepts. The works expand but then contract, the images and concepts collapsing in on themselves. Time becomes the essence of this dilemma. A central aspect to Versteeg's work, time is consistently defeated even as it is expertly exemplified.



In *Untitled Film #4*, a constant flow of images from Flickr.com, an image sharing website, is streamed to a projection as if a film. Stripped of color, the black-and-white images arrive from the Internet source, never repeating. The visual effect is perplexing and the theoretical limit to the content of the images is wide open, as people, pets, and places are represented. However, despite the randomness, patterns are created and boundaries formed. Overall the visual content is homogenized and difference dissipates. Although, the work creates a visual reflection of time, as people continue to upload images, the work will be continuously updated,

changing to represent the current image data bank. Versteeg's unknowing collaborators also change and shift as time goes on.

Significantly, the soundtrack to *Untitled Film #4* is derived from *La Jetée*, Chris Marker's seminal film about the collapsing of time, images and memory that is also comprised of still images. Versteeg has deconstructed the soundtrack, pulling it apart, to create an endless remix. Like the images, the combinations of sounds never repeat, continuously shifting. And also like the images, an order invariably arises and the soundtrack doesn't deviate too far from this order.

For a number of new works, *Red Dragon*, *Super Highway*, *Hungry Ghost* and *Untitled Painting I*, Versteeg has written computer programs that output lines extending from a central point. The lines infinitely stretch out according to their own logic, until Versteeg puts an end to the system by pressing the pause button. The growth of lines has stopped, but their continuation is suggested by their extension off the surface of the work. In *Untitled Painting I*, Versteeg makes this logic most apparent by wrapping the image around itself into a donut shape. The lines streaming around the tube extend from an undefined center and flow continuously. The work suggests speed and movement as the lines widen and narrow as they extend the surface, although they go nowhere. The work also functions as a framing device, creating a hole in which we can view a center, which is contingent on the context.

left: *Sponge*, 2007 (top left) enamel, sponge, motor, pine

right: *Untitled Film IV Stills*, 2007, framed c-prints, 11"x14" each



fought and ended. I see, then, that time is

I should agree if anyone says that time is

the battle was fought and ended. I see, then,

In time, I do not know, time does not

the sun ran his entire course. In the period

course, from morning to morning, I shall, therefore, not

cannot attain to it. But I shall be enabled

In that case, that which was not at all

time, and if nothing were still coming, there would

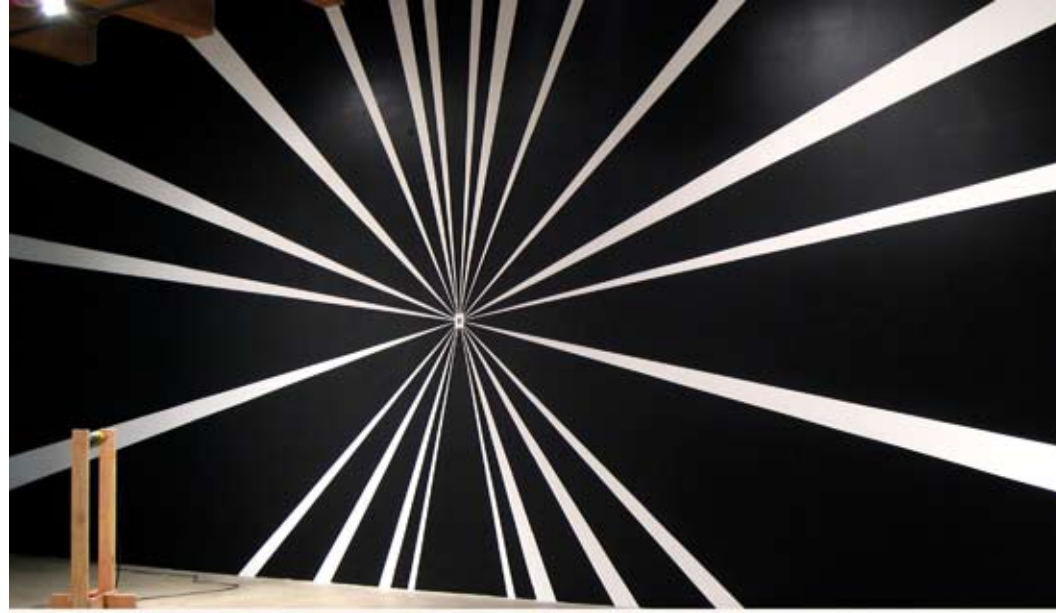
for the foretelling of future events that is, of the

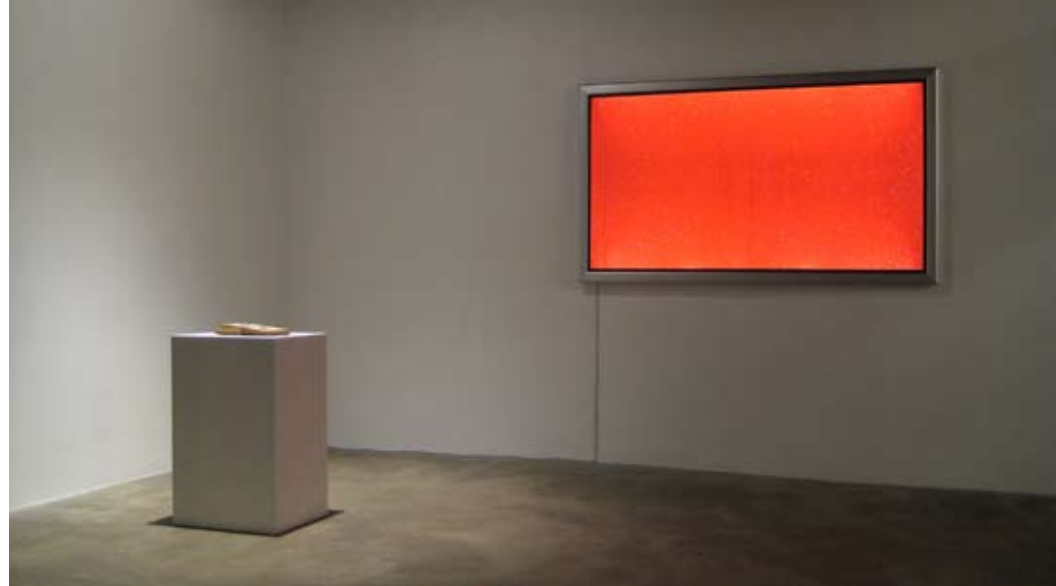
In *Own Nothing*, thick black and white stripes shoot out of a center covering the entirety of a wall. At the core of the work is a tiny LCD screen with the Napster logo, fading in and out. This elusive image and slogan, “own nothing, have everything,” refers to Napster, the website which was on the fore of the free music download phenomena. The founder of the website was eventually sued for violation of copyright. Napster was a pioneer and the legal battle that ensued became a symbol in the complicated clash between the concept of free file sharing and until recently, the more common avenues for the exchange of goods, i.e. record companies. A compromise was formed when Napster was sold and became service, for a fee we can have unlimited use of the goods with restricted downloading ability. The slogan used in the marketing campaign proffers freedom, we can have access to anything without the burden of owning it. But we still have to buy something.

Looking at Stars from Inside a City is a found object. In this work, a Victorian photo album features portraits of pilots in the science fiction TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. The contrast between the futuristic styling of the images and the antique look of the photo album creates a strange collapsing of time. Combining emblems from two different times and aesthetics creates a sense of a ‘perpetual present.’ As a result, both become fictions of any defined time or place.

right: *Own Nothing, Have Everything*, 2007, wall mural and LCD screen

below: *Looking at Stars from Inside a City*, 2007, mixed media





Paradox is key. Instead of working our way out of it, there is something to understanding the redundancy inherent to life. It may be worthwhile to accept our always-impending doom. Ending with another, more recent, author who has explored existential concerns by experimenting with the sci-fi genre, Michel Houellebecq pairs the irony of human desires in the face of notions of progress:

The society Huxley describes in Brave New World is happy; tragedy and extremes of human emotion have disappeared. Sexual liberation is total – nothing stands in the way of instant gratification. Oh, there are little moments of depression, of sadness or doubt, but they're easily dealt with using advances in antidepressants and tranquilizers. 'One cubic centimeter cures ten gloomy sentiments.' This is exactly the sort of world we're trying to create, the world we want to live in.

– Michel Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles*

Do we get what we deserve? Are we in an endless loop that just plays out with slight variation? To exemplify reason is to disrupt it, as Versteeg has illustrated. Logic in the forms of programming, pattern and form are simultaneously employed and threatened. Versteeg's work explores the crevices of these contradictions.

left: *Untitled Painting I*, 2007 enamel on canvas, bungee cables, 88" round
 above: *President's Choice*, 2007, Duratran in Prismex lightbox, 74" x 42"

left: *Hungry Ghost*, 2007 Duratran in alluminum lightbox, 29" x 41" x 8"

below: *Jpeg*, 2007, archival inkjet print on bent alluminum, 12" x 15"

cover: *Red Dragon*, (detail) 2007, archival inkjet print, 40" x 40"

