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SPELL CHECK: SPIRITUALISM, SHAMANISM,
SORCERY & the REINCARNATION of the
Occult in Dark Times

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Haunting Conspiracy. Conspiratorial thinking and Summoning as artistic practice

Liese Schmidt & Lisa Hoffmann

Abstract

Haunting Conspiracy: Conspiratorial Thinking and Summoning as Artistic Practice reflects on Summoning, a twelve-hour performative exhibition held in June 2024 at The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER) in Berlin. Conceived as a séance, the project invited participants to respond to the question «*What haunts us?*» through acts of calling and appearing. The text situates this artistic practice within the recent «magical turn» in art, where occult practices re-emerge as tools for critical reflection. While «the occult» trends in the arts, cultural production is haunted by a renewed rise of conspiracy-theoretical movements merging with esotericism. *Post-truth* reflects a culture where truth is treated as perspective; counter-narratives in the form of speculation or fabrication can resist or reflect this, yet artists remain part of these dynamics. Tracing the etymological and conceptual proximity of *summoning* (*Beschwörung*) and *conspiracy* (*Verschwörung*), the essay examines how both operate as communicative formations producing counter-publics and affective cohesion, and asks: how does our practice of *Summoning* relate to conspiracism?

Summoning was a performative exhibition that took place in June 2024 at The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER) in Berlin. Beforehand invitations asked the contributors to join a séance responding to the question: <what haunts us?> Over twelve hours and loosely structured around the three parts – *establishing contact*, *appearances* and *reflection* – all contributions appeared and were continuously (re-)arranged. Hosted by us it featured contributions by Yelyzaveta Burtseva, Karin Ferrari, John Facenfield, John Hussain Flindt, Lisa Hoffmann, Sebastian Kokesch, Olivia Lennon, Arjuna Neumann, Stella Ruszkowski & Naomi Heimann, Miriam Schenkirz, Liese Schmidt, Marco Schröder and ess whiteley.

Aligning with knowledge production modes that challenge conventional scientific paradigms, the project reflects a renewed interest of the art field in self-critical, system-challenging methodologies and engagement with the irrational, intuitive and ritualistic. A variety of recent art exhibitions, symposiums and magazines, such as this one, but also phenomena like witch-tok and the popularity of astrology and tarot card readings in popular culture signal a return of occult or esoteric practices and histories as a focus of art production around the <irrational>.

The recent surge of interest in the esoteric and or occult, in particular, is not limited to the art field, but may well be a significant marker of this time. A troubling recent trend is the increasing intersection of conspiracy theory and esotericism. Terms like <post-truth> or <post-factual> reflect a cultural moment where truth is viewed as perspective, fact blurs with fiction, amid real fake news and simultaneous <lying media> (Lügenpresse) accusations claiming journalism to be propaganda. The rejection of dominant narratives often results in the establishing of counter-narratives or alternatives that resort to those that have historically been rejected, such as the occult or esoteric.

On the other hand, counter narratives such as speculative fiction, fakes and fabrication can be joyful resistances to or reflections of, for example, a <post-truth culture>. Methods with very different political aims resemble each other in this way and only their context marks their impact and orientation, calling for precision. As producers of cultural content, artists are part of and may even propagate these trends. Some contemporary art traffics in hoaxes, speculative fictions, fakes, and fabrication. Our project is no exception and our usage of occult tropes as well as artistic tactics such as <cultural hacking> are open to be (re)appropriated and inverted.

This article is neither meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the re-emergence of the <irrational>, nor will it successfully break down the potential involvement of art practices in the creation of fake-truths, <alternative facts> or myths. While reviewing our own practice, this text forms through an initial interest in the etymological relatedness of summoning (Beschwörung) and conspiracy (Verschwörung) and is dedicated

to our own feelings of caution. In this ambiguous terrain, art reflects and participates in post-truth culture – a participation that can haunt us.

We refer to *Summoning* as a collective effort to call the ghostly into the particular area of the gallery space. As Summoning is not free from its occult origin, both our project and summoning in its multiple occult meanings may appear conflated. Precisely because of the multiplicity of available definitions we did not provide a succinct definition for the project, but in this text, we differentiate the artistic practice by using a capital S. Generally, when we refer to the occult and esoteric we are referring to Western history, mostly Anglo-American or Northern/Central European, except when discussing specific artistic contributions.

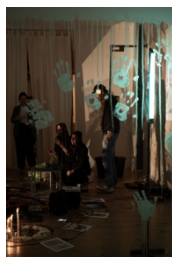
I. establishing contact

Where do we feel haunted and what is haunting us? ghostly matter? These were the questions framing our format or medium was indicated: a contribution could simply of a question, a picture, a video, a quote, a <calling> for contributions, as it is well-established in open calls, contained already the first aspect of a summoning.



What is call. No consist text, etc. The

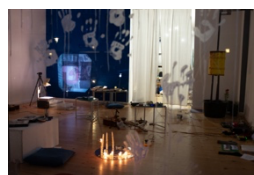
Defining the ghostly is what extent. The destabilise a certain is not allowed to exist. or repressed, and these exclusionary



asking what exists, what does not, and to underlying mechanism of <Summoning> is to order and challenge concepts of what is and It calls those who have been excluded, denied points to the systems and demarcations of movements and patterns: «After all, we need to know that something is missing in order to even begin to look for it or its dispersion of gestures anywhere, in the archive or in the imaginary zone. The ghostly haunt gives precisely this notification.» (Gordon p. 178)

In *Summoning*, we wanted to examine the ghostly both as method and as content in a hauntological and sociological sense¹. We were testing a method <to let the ghosts in>, to analyse feelings and fleeting states in order to name political and social systems, theories, and events, but also what future (im)possibilities affect us without fully showing.

Rather than imposing one curatorial narrative, a pluralistic definition of the <ghostly> was meant to be summoned, letting connections materialise in our shared presence. As an open group process this hints at haunting as «a shared structure of feeling, a shared possession, a specific type of sociality». p. 201)² A summoning differs from haunting is a deliberate contact, a suspicion or curiosity, a discovery without fixed revelations or an act of confronting a ghostly presence.



(Gordon insofar as it mode of actively

Opening up to the ghostly is at once a danger to invite the uninvited, but is also a possibility to allow for a many-faceted, multi-perspective, «patchy» (Tsing, p. 4-5) knowledge that is countering the <secret knowledge> only accessible for the <initiated> which characterises conspiracism as well as some forms of esoteric occultism.

¹ Following the hauntological and sociological definitions after Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher and Avery Gordon.

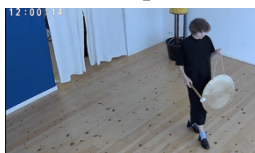
² Avery F. Gordon: *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*.

I.I. stigmatized knowledges and where to find them

Initially, *Summoning* corresponds to various occult and esoteric practices which - etymologically – concern invisible or inner knowledge. This can take the form of empirical methods that operate outside of recognised science or secret knowledge that is only shared with a select few. either way, it is usually about all-encompassing (e.g. cosmological) connections.

In «A Culture of Conspiracy»³, Michael Barkun defines these practices primarily as a communication milieu, as the field of «stigmatised knowledge»; meaning that conspiracy theories as well as folklore and occult stories share the same modes of propagation (oral history, legends, rumours, myths) and the same premise: their existence beside or counter a mainstream (Barkun p. 26 f.). As variant of James Webb's term «rejected knowledge», it describes belief systems and worldviews that are marginalised or dismissed by mainstream science, religion and academia, work analogical rather than logical and are therefore persistent and emotionally resonant for individuals and subcultures, especially during times of crisis or transition.⁴ A turn to «stigmatised knowledge» as a reaction to global crises is observable today in the so-called «magical turn» in the art world and in academic theory.

«Rejected knowledge» reminds us there are no universal definitions of «occult», «esoteric», or «magical». Delimited from the Enlightenment's notions of the «rational», they became umbrella terms for what was deemed non-existent, illusory, less-than-human, or irrational – making them powerful to reclaim by those similarly marginalised (mostly in the same gesture).⁵ Given the semiotic emptiness of the terms, it would be too simple to treat them as containers for marginalised narratives, models of thought and ways of life. They are ghostly par excellence because they are indexical for difference itself.⁶ Therefore, *Summoning* is also an index of the porous boundaries between occult practices and conspiracy thinking.



I.II. a gong, then a candle is lit

Starting at noon with a room as empty as it can be, *establishing* contact began with a gong, followed by a performative process in which we acted as mediums, realising, (un)installing, and (de)activating the contributions. First installed was Olivia Lennon's «candle clock» marking time by lighting a candle each hour, its melting wax

³ Michael Barkun: A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America.

⁴ James Webb: The Occult Underground.

⁵ exemplary in the colonialist function of the term animism, cf. Isabelle Stengers: «Reclaiming Animism» or Anselm Franke and Irene Albers Introduction to «Animismus. Revisionen der Moderne»

⁶ cf. Michael Lehrichs notion of magic as a «system of differential relations» in regards to Jacques Derrida's «différance» mentioned in Witzgall, p. 16



dropping embedded nails to produce unpredictable sounds. Other works similarly played with the magic of basic physics: water's surface tension in containers by windows recalling a practice to ward off spirits, or wondrous symmetries in John Facenfield's magnet-manipulated metal powder patterns. These familiar yet surprising effects evoke estrangement, reminding us that science emerged from alchemy, occult experiments or coincidence.



Most works were participatory—for example, visitors could tune in and out of audio pieces broadcast on different frequencies through radios placed throughout the space. While ess whiteley's audiovisual piece «Memories are ghosts» addresses the ghostly corruption of both digital and analogue media and perhaps the question of what is lost in medial translations, memories are haunted multiple times in «belly to bell» by John Hussain Flindt. The remix of the calypso song «Zombie Jamboree» performed by Harry Belafonte appears through a dark and blurry soundscape radios. The piece points to the afterlife British identity and the unfathomable complexity within the song and within



amongst the static of the of colonial cultures within entirety of historical personal memory.

Likewise meandering through songs Arjuna Neumann's



Hand, Take Me Wherever You May Go» reflects on a shared <refugee feeling>. Neumann explores how this sense of dislocation and longing has become universal – amplified by technology – yet often repressed or projected onto others. In contrast, the narrator

embraces haunting and memory as ways to stay connected. A denial, he suggests, leads to isolation and fuels geopolitical violence. This links back to the subject of conspiracy. In the case of the audio piece, it is itself haunted by the direct consequences of what it describes. Among the musical fragments that illustrate «this ghostly feeling of loss is a track» by Ariel Pink, who caused controversies by straying into conspiracy theory and attending the rally for Donald Trump that preceded the storming of the capitol⁷.

The loss of intimacy and the haunting character of technology is also the subject of «mobile phone love poetry». In their audio piece, Stella Ruszkowski and Naomi Heimann similarly superpose intimacy and obsession within feverish texts of romantic longing, based on automated text suggestions from the artists' own mobile phones – traces of a heteronormative patriarchy that haunts their own desire.

⁷ Neumanns piece appears subsequently haunted by questions of the separability of author and work, their affiliations and the platforms one may offer them.

Ghosts of patriarchy, colonialism, and techno-capitalism appear – but remain unexplained. Memory is weird. History is weird. Technology is weird. Physics is weird. Nature is weird.

I.III. the shock of the weird

Haunting can start with the feeling that that something is weird. Isn't it weird umbrellas you find in the street resemble Isn't it weird that water doesn't flow over



there is a something,
that broken
animal skeletons?
the edge?

The phrase «isn't it weird that ...?» is a popular beginning for conspiracy theories. The feeling of something being <weird> can also stem from a lack of understanding, feeling disempowered, or a desire for simple explanations in a complex world. Conspiracy theories can be seen as symptoms and amplification of crisis: «The shock of the weird can result in a crisis response. Am I mad? Am I possessed by a malevolent spirit [...] Am I an extraterrestrial healer [...] awakening to my true mission?» (Pilkington p. 66)⁸ And seeing everything that used to be familiar as weird is also a response to crises.

Summoning as an active <weirding> can offer a perspective change as «a particular kind of perturbation» (Fisher p. 15)⁹, an impulse to wonder about what appears natural or given in order to distance oneself from the circumstances in which our lives take place. It might be a kind of phenomenological practice of <bracketing>, after Husserl, not as a rejection of science but rather as a temporal suspension of that which we know is true (Lachman p. 2 ff.).¹⁰ Weirding as bracketing is a different way of knowing, one of relating and of participation in the world, rather than an observative and controlling way (ibid.).

I.IV. Nothing is as it seems?

By now plenty of terms refer to <alternative> ways of thinking/experiencing: «magical consciousness» (Greenwood)¹¹, a «transformational diagrammatic practice of alternative perception» (Witzgall p. 44) or an alternative reality-creating epistemological

⁸ Mark Pilkington: How to Believe Weird Things. In: Documents of Contemporary Art: Magic

⁹ Mark Fisher: The Weird And The Eerie.

¹⁰ Gary Lachman: Rejected Knowledge. A Look At Our Other Way of Knowing.

¹¹ Susan Greenwood: A spectrum of magical consciousness: Conspiracy theories and the stories we tell ourselves.

system altogether (Campagna)¹². They refer to ways of knowing that are patchy, empowering and critical, probably best summarized by Patrica MacCormack with the neologism <occulture> as «an entirely adaptable creative mode of activism – individual and collective, DIY, anti-hierarchical, and driven by commitment to and compassion for



absolutely alterity»¹³.

Like in the examples described above, knowledge is often used synonymous with

<rejected
<alternative

knowledge, an ethical upgrade in a way, which entails a choice to a better option. While the political party <Alternative for Germany> is appropriating this connotation for a right-wing nationalist purpose and <alternative> media and medicines have been popular since COVID-19 at the latest, it would be dangerous to assume that artistic practices like *Summoning* could offer an alternative in terms of either a ready-to-use

(and therefore of <rationality> feature this loses herself in mind, breaking paranoia in



commodifiable) solution to the ideological baggage or a replacement of rational thought. Instead, they shock of the weird, the moment in which the medium the presence of the spirit called into her body and the barrier between her and the world. A moment of which nothing is as it seems.

<Nothing is as it seems> is a claim that characterises conspiratorial thinking, suggesting planned deception behind appearances and a unique ability of the conspiracy thinker to see the plot behind the veil of deception. The ghostly on the other hand mostly embraces complexity without assuming a hidden plot—pointing instead to the limits of understanding: «That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance». (Gordon p. 3)¹⁴

¹² An admittedly a bit simplified understanding of Federico Campagna's <Technic and Magic. The Reconstruction of Reality>.

¹³ Patricia MacCormack: *The Ahuman Manifesto. Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* p. 102

¹⁴ Patricia Williams: *The Alchemy of Race and Right* in Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.

II. appearances

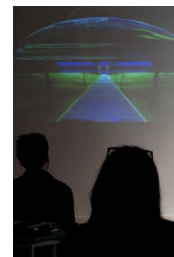
The second part of *Summoning – appearances* – screenings, performances, readings and a lecture. classically theatrical division between performer, audience we directed the attention to one focal point at a time, mediating the <magic show> of an art evening, letting videos and contributors appear over the already ghostly channels of chatrooms and video conference tools moderately unmoderated.



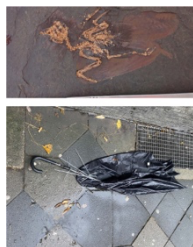
II.I. ghostly aesthetics

Appearances was initiated with a screening of Karin Ferrari's video essay «DECODING The iPhone Xs. A Techno-Magical Portal», part of the artists video series «DECODING (THE WHOLE TRUTH)», a humorous <trashy> replica of conspiratorial reveal videos. It is an illustration of Barkun's first principle of conspiracism that «nothing happens by accident»: the idea that things only ever happen because they are intended to happen, mostly creating the ghost of a supposed elite.

Conspiracists are often obsessed with finding occult symbols world, especially amongst the privileged, which serves as that it is not them but the <elites> who are actually obsessed with the occult.¹⁵ Similarly, in «DECODING THE iPhone Xs», references serve as evidence that the device actually exceeds known functions – that is in fact a portal into another dimension, kept a secret by Apple. The development of communication technology has been accompanied and influenced by the hope to bridge divisions between life and death, ideas about telepathy and contact to different spheres. The illusion that digital features just work on their own, without large server farms, without their immense consumption of resources, ghost workers etc. might be the real systemic deception.



Our use of <medium>, <materialising> features in metaphorical, Mimi



juxtaposes deep time and contemporary waste eerie similarity of fossil imprints of dinosaurs umbrellas found on streets. As witnesses of the

technology played with layered meanings of <media>, <material>, <immaterial>, and The material aspect of the immaterial ghost works that evoke containers, literal and for ghosts and Schenkirz's



their stories. <Schirmtiere> through the and <dead> past and as

¹⁵ For a fantastic explanation of this whole thematic complex watch: Contrapoints: Conspiracy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teqkK0RLNkl>

trash piles materials haunt and are haunted, changing our environment in predictable yet ignored ways. Similarly, Marco Schröder's sound performance used contact microphones and transducers to amplify, distort, and arrange material sounds, letting them speak and interfere, technology acting as medium to render signals audible.

Most contributions were addressing certain ghostly clichés, like material imprints or traces of events and persons absent, action at a distance, candles, circles, disembodied sounds, noise and visual glitches, radio transparency, though this cliché aesthetic in the collectivity of the materials gathered.



transmission or
of the ghostly appeared

II.II. staging evidence, playing the ghost

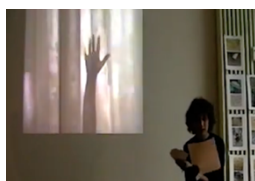
Online, evidence for ghostly appearances is often presented as staged image, frequently as hoax or trick. These visuals haunt the internet.¹⁶ A similar <appearance> is also staged and performed in the video «(ghosts are made of bedsheets)» by Lisa Hoffmann. Through the deliberate mis-use of an online meeting tool's algorithm, a ghostly female figure repeatedly appears and disappears in various domestic settings and poses. The work draws both aesthetically and in its production process from early ghost photography, referencing the <mistakes> made by the camera or by algorithm and its <incorrect> representations. The title both the materiality and the fabricated nature of the video captures the lonely, spectral existence of image within digital spaces.



alludes to
ghosts. Yet
the self-

Manipulated photos, glitches and technical errors are often read and constructed as evidence. Marco Schröder fabricated a spook drawing on ghost's traditional communication channels: Knockings, scratchings or squeakings were, particularly in the early séances of the 19th century, often staged by famous female mediums.¹⁷ Many of them conspired with their <ghosts> against their audiences, often against the roles society had assigned them. In that sense *Summoning* as mediumship is a form of roleplay which engages a belief in clichés, such as the feminine being essentially nervous or highly sensible for various signals.

Appearing
fictional
utopian



likens a magic trick: a <bracketing> and staging of evidence to generate belief. As fabulation, it opens spaces for embodying identities that are

¹⁶ Sometimes literally, like the creepy figure <loab> created by the task to AI generate the complete negative of a prompt.

¹⁷ Such as Kate & Margaret Fox.

systemically repressed. In Liese Schmidt's reading performance «magnetic fanfiction», scientists, principles of physics, and historical figures are invoked through a card game inspired by pen-and-paper roleplaying <clairvoyants> appear. Only their visions are their biographies remain absent, shaped by their interchangeable blueprints of the patriarchal ghostly presence of the absent biographies, but stereotypes, haunts science and femininity alike.



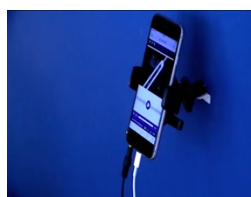
games. Four recorded, while <magnetisers> into feminine. The present cultural

Sadly, even as satire, fiction, or artistic speculation, constructed evidence often develops a life of its own once it's detached from its context. In the same way roleplay of mediumship often created more evidence for that which it was supposed to be subverting: In reaction to the empowering stagecraft of mediumship, female mediums were pathologized as hysterical, their performances providing the supposed evidence that they indeed possessed weak minds and nervous bodies.¹⁸

II.III. I want to believe

There is one foundational pillar of magic: that words can change the material world. That things can indeed be spoken into existence, whether it's manifesting one's desires, speculation, storytelling, imagining futures or through collective agreement. One of the main characteristics of conspiracism is the creation of a shared reality, one that requires a group of people to want to believe enough to <swear on it>. <I want to believe> as in the famous phrase from the X-files signals both a desire and a practice – a mode of perception one chooses to inhabit or the desire for an alternative – a version of reality that feels more coherent or more endurable than the truth.

Claiming that every event is makes most conspiracies a empiricism (Barkun p. 21). taught to keep the illusion of



reducible to one super-plot matter of faith disguised in Evidence is constructed and empirical logic alive. Signs and

weird things appear in the world and sometimes they are *seen into* the world in cases of pareidolia. Conspiracy theories are a specific type of apophenia: They become non-falsifiable through self-validation. The difficulty of understanding certain connections between events becomes the evidence for its secrecy. And as soon as the evidence is questioned, the sceptic is seen as deceived by those hiding the truth in plain sight. Yet often, finding exactly the ghosts you were looking for reveals that «it is not weirdness that is the illusion... but our sense of separateness from it» (Pilkington p. 67).

¹⁸ cf. f. e. Cathy Gutierrez: From Electricity to Ectoplasm: Hysteria and American Spiritualism.

II.IV. playing evidence / placing evidence

The internet is a place where <the shock of weird> makes something real by pure repetition and quantity of links, clicks, re-posts and forum discussions. Reversely, many social media videos present fabricated content with the appearance of factual reporting – often in pursuit of clicks. Yelyzaveta Burtseva's video «On Ugodnichestvo pt. 1» plays with this style. The video recounts the fictional story of a cult, showing imagery of children in an educational institution drawing strange symbols. Words in an invented language flash across the screen so rapidly that viewers are left with only fragmented impressions. The video is unsettling, because, similarly to Karin Ferrari's work it offers no artistic distance to the content presented.

How do we <place evidence> in art? While artworks act as evidence, documentation often outweighs itself – a piece only <exists> once it's recorded. Denying an audience a critical view on staged evidence raises more general questions of comprehensibility and traceability in the art world, mostly requiring financial and cultural capital to participate. Who can decode an artwork? Especially in this case, the institutional and discursive frame becomes essential for its interpretation. Without it, meaning shifts, collapses, or multiplies.



The art world creates insiders and outsiders, initiates and the uninitiated. Value is often retroactively validated by market performance, once sales or reputation are established, they tend to self-perpetuate – regardless of the actual content of the work. Ultimately, the question of profit can serve as a sharp indicator: «There always seems to be someone profiting from a good ghost story» (Clarke, p. 286).¹⁹ This applies equally to conspiracy theories, esoteric belief systems as to the art market. But this very question is also co-opted by all conspiracist thinking. The iPhone, focal point of Ferrari's video, is a product clearly made for profit in the capitalist system. Conspiracy theories distort economic critique into simplistic, scapegoating, often-times anti-Semitic and/or anti-migrant, Islamophobic, or misogynistic narratives, or reductive explanations.

Conspiracy theorists attempt to be inclusive – they seek to convince others with elaborate documentation of their evidence. But this inclusivity quickly turns into exclusivity. The non-believers are dismissed, and within tight-knit groups members elevate themselves above the <masses> or so-called <sheeple>. There are no alternatives.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Clarke: A Natural History of Ghosts. 500 years of hunting for proof.

II.V. Nothing happens by accident

While the phase of *establishing contact* was about learning to see ghosts, once you start seeing them, they appear everywhere. We created a certain densification (*Verdichtung*) that acts as a kind of poetic compression or fictional sealing of reality, a *Dichtung*, a fabulation. The self-referential nature of conspiracy theories operates in a similar way: they are a form of *condensation* or *fabulation* – where information folds in on itself, generating meaning not from evidence but from internal coherence.



external

Susan Greenwood suggests that conspiracism is magical thinking: As part of <magical consciousness> it is then an expression of a rather universal human mode of participating in the world through storytelling. Much like imagining alternative futures, feminist fabulation and <thinking with> conspiracy theories provide a feeling of agency – one reason why we see so many practitioners of occultism or esotericism drift into or forming the right-wing and neonazi spectrum. The crucial difference is again that «the context is all» (Greenwood p. 7).

In this regard, *Summoning* is a play on a magical milieu²⁰, where the difference between fact and fiction is less important than its effect, engagement and emotional truth, both utopian and harmful. And it's precisely here that play, accident and incoherence become important counterforces. Things we let into the world cannot be fully controlled and haunt even their creators. This challenges a core tenet of conspiratorial thinking: *Nothing happens by accident*. When accident and coincidence are removed, «At [world] ... far more 18).



its most extreme, the result is a <fantasy coherent than the real world> (Barkun p.

Some parts of *Summoning* happened by accident. As initiators, we neither contained the works nor dictated their connections. Without explanatory framing, the audience was left to fabulate. *Summoning* was an acknowledgement that while *some things are staged*, much remains open. Our counter-spell was to let the unplanned unfold as a <wild pleasure.>²¹

Because conspiracy and occult lore are pleasurable but haunted by <alternative> facts, racism, antisemitism, misogyny and queer-phobia, it can be hard to still have fun with them. Thinking about conspiracy theories as the literary genre <fantasy> may help to understand their appeal and lift lingering guilty feelings when enjoying a far-off conspiracy theory for the level of its absurdness. An erotic thrill of storytelling – suspense and mystery – is especially evident in conspiracy theories, where

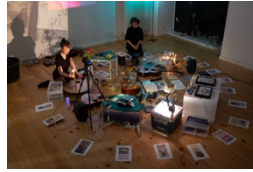
²⁰ cf. Isabelle Stengers description of the <magical milieu> in Reclaiming Animism.

²¹ <https://culturalhacking.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/ch-history-liebl.pdf>

every hint is always followed by the next without end. Engaging with the pleasurable side of the mediation of conspiracy theories can provide a way to emotionally engage and, possibly to interfere and write against some of the harmful conspiracist narratives where they are written. Nevertheless, such a playful subversion is not capable of entirely re-writing harmful narratives and may risk to extend their harm as consumable and unthreatening fiction. Sometimes, decided rejection is needed.

III. reflection

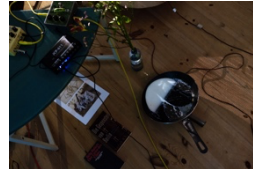
Until midnight, *reflection* rendered that had emerged. We gathered all circle at the centre of the space. By removing the objects from their original contexts and reassembling them together, the circle became a space of resonance, a haunting but also a gathering.



visible the connections the materials into a large

III.I. (everything is connected)

Barkun's third principle of conspiracy thinking is: *everything is connected*. By inviting participants to identify where and how the ghostly surfaces we conjured connections that might otherwise remain hidden behind the fabric of the everyday. These moments encouraged attentiveness, pattern-seeking, meaning-making. But the ghostly doesn't claim to connect *everything*, at least intention or certainty.



not with

The idea that *we are all connected* – molecularly, ecologically, by the air we breathe – can be a humbling reminder of the scientific impossibility to isolate things entirely. This does not imply a coherent story, unified meaning, or orchestration. The ghostly invites us to say: *things have an afterlife*. Not all connections are visible. Not all stories align. But things return – altered, unresolved, and quietly persistent.

Already during appearances the political implication of the ghostly was reflected in the contribution by Sebastian Kokesch²². Their lecture «Dead, but unburied, the ghostly labor of mourning» explores mourning as a form of labor that resists closure and challenges the isolation of death under capitalism, instead urging us to engage with the unresolved dreams and injustices of the past. Using the séance as metaphor, it argues for mourning as a process of transforming historical imagination into revolutionary potential: «Mourning needs to work with a past that is saturated with thoughts of its otherness» (Kokesch).

²² Who was so kind to also peer review this article.

III.II. summoning: reflection

As a collective endeavour
Summoning helps move
found in conspiracy theories,
between mainstream and
good magic potion, balance



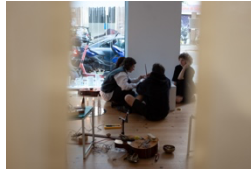
exploring in-between states,
beyond the Manichaeian binaries
esotericism, and the duality
<alternative> knowledge. Like in a
matters. While conspiracism
claims access to one truth, it is riddled with contradictions, exemplary in its relation
to the occult. The conspiracist's fear of occult powers expresses a hidden fear of sci-
ence, which is ultimately a fear of sorcery, of powers or knowledge gained outside
the institutionalised.²³ At the same time, conspiracism is entangled with esoteric
practices, casting itself as a rebellion against scientific gatekeeping, yet rationalizing
these practices through pseudo-empirical language. In doing so, it echoes the exclu-
sionary logics of empiricism, often reproducing racist, anti-Semitic, and colonialist
tropes. This contradiction is embodied by figures like the QAnon <shaman> and the
<conspiritual> right, where esotericism fuses with fascist or reactionary politics.

In light of the <magical turn>, we must remember that ghosts provide no solutions but
reveal what is unseen. When faced with forces out of control – financial speculation,
authoritarianism, systemic violence, and ecological collapse – the ghostly becomes a
method for sensing what defies explanation. Embracing <magical consciousness> is
crucial for *Summoning* to counter conspiracism effectively, but should not replace
scientific approaches and empiricism solely on the basis of their exclusionary his-
tory. Instead, <rejected knowledge> has the potential to counter what Isabelle Sten-
gers calls the <epic story of Science> with the <adventure of sciences>, a pluralistic ap-
proach towards scientific achievements and the creation of new conditions for them
(Stengers p. 2).

Still, one of the pitfalls of *Summoning* is to stay in the loop of the method instead of
its application, methodology replacing knowledge. Just as the abundance of religious
symbols suggests a <greater whole>, unmediated and especially large exhibitions take
on a ritualistic quality. In conspiracy theories quantity trumps factuality and dis-
guises the fact that nothing is being proven at all. Without further consequence,
<weirding> remains an occlusion of the complex mechanisms and intraactions that
we were hoping to point towards. Instead, *Summoning* creates meaning through the
quantity of works and the social signifiers of the invited artists, pointing towards a
<bigger politicality>.

²³ Victoria Nelson: *The Secret Life of Puppets*. p. 8

Magic shouldn't be practiced alone. Rather than being a mere aid to endure the systems we live in, art's ritualistic function conspiratorial moments in the sense of against any plot»²⁴; complicity as a form of constantly challenges the self and refuses



might profit from «conspiring sociality that coherence. Artists

can play with open cards and still create something enchanting, through <magic tricks>, the compelling experience of both the phenomenon, its mediated effects and its explanation. This is a practice in dealing with simultaneities, contradictions and complexity and to resist the drive to easy answers and blame narratives that conspiracy theories propagate. After all, how much do we really understand magnets – or microphones?

²⁴ Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri: A Conspiracy Without a Plot p. 125 f.

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