Colophon

The Ambiguous Relationship
between Human and Object,
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THESIS
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The Ambiguous Relationship between Human and Object

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Introduction

Texture has always interested me. For a long time I assumed it was merely something to perceive with your hands. That is all I consciously thought about it. Though, as time passed, I figured you can experience with your whole body. You can touch, hear, smell, taste or see textures. Being conscious of the way we perceive is something I am currently becoming aware of. Unfortunately, our current society primarily revolves around our sight. As humans are mostly triggered by visualized matter we tend to forget our non-ocular senses. Why do we not focus more on other parts of our bodily perception? In *The Eyes of the Skin* Juhani Pallasmaa illustrates how the rise of images made the eye so dominant and why this is not supportive to our experience of the world around us. I think we have to get back to tradition, working with our hands and taking time for what we make in order to get more focus on our other senses. We need to transfer our soul into the thing we create, wear or use. This way the perceiver will not only see the object, but will also perceive the life of the object, which we are surrounded by every day. How can we have a better emotional experience with clothing and other objects and how can they become a higher valued piece? How can it become something we do not throw away, but cherish as if it is a human being? There is need for getting the life back into things. Nowadays we can see an upswing in the believe we have to be more careful with the earth and ourselves and raise awareness about our treatment of fashion or clothing. From my point of view, I think it is important to raise awareness about the way we deal with environmental issues, yet to start it is more important to make people aware of what objects, textile and clothing can actually mean to people. Make them conscious of the way we deal with objects now and how to add more emotional value. In this essay my aim is to show the relationship between human and object by using different perspectives such as bodily experience, experience brought to us by memories and usage, and the object as a being.

✦

Tradition of the new

Currently, the eyes are the sensory organ we use most[1] and most consciously. Almost everything we perceive that is man-made is focused on the use of our sight. Our sight is of great influence on social media, a way of communication that has many good aspects to it, such as the possibility of sharing art or other visuals around the world and sharing ideas with as many people as possible. However, we must not forget that tactility can also be felt through images, it only happens very quickly. Pyke Koch makes it possible for us to experience this tactility. By using shadows, very few elements and a small range of colours, your focus is drawn to the materials in his paintings (See Fig. 1). When you see a physical painting, you see 3d: texture, shape, light, shadow, tactility and possibly even smell. When you see a painting on social media you will see 2d: all the above is missing. The only thing you are able to see 3d is your phone or laptop. Although a photo is a 2d work, here too the context in which you see the work contributes to the perception of it. The dimensions of the photo on your screen can, for example, differ from the original dimensions. The physical is an important element in the value of an object but, unfortunately, nowadays it is more about image than our relationship with matter. This leads to the disappearance of experience.

Fig. 1 Koch, Pyke. *The Contortionist*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk museum, 1955.

Unfortunately, this also happens in fashion. However, it is not the case that experience disappears completely. It only appears to be more ephemeral. Within fashion and other disciplines there are different ways of experiencing. This might be a more ephemeral overall experience, one that you can remember, but that often happens at a certain moment: a short-term

[1](Pallasmaa, 2005: 19)

relationship, or a more specific, personal and emotional experience that lasts longer: a long-term relationship. It seems that for fashion shows clothing is increasingly being created in order to make it look attractive on screen. It is therefore fashion is more about form and colour, since you can experience the material used to a lesser extent. Smell is not present either. As for sound, you can perceive it via a fashion video, but just as the example of the painting, it will barely be a total physical experience. The connection between the work and the observer is pushed to the background. Sound consists of vibrations which you experience to a lesser extent when it plays from your computer speakers in front of you than when speakers would be specifically placed to complement the sound. Just like a painting on a screen, sound takes on a more 2d form. Unless the maker intended it that way, it is an imitation of the original. In making imitations, we lose the emotional value of an object because how dear can an object on a screen really be? It seems to be more about aesthetics and thoughts on something than how your body reacts to something: a feeling that only you experience. An experience that you can not explain in words.

Today, others determine what we experience. The viewer or reader is expected to strive for the exhibited ideal and not to develop a personal relationship with an object or garment in this instance. The relationship of these garments to the body is therefore less important.[2] Partly because of this, anti-materialism is very present in our world. We live in a capitalist system in which people buy a lot and want to innovate time after time, but the question is whether it is actually innovative. It seems more like an 'illusion of the new'.[3] In real innovation there is much more time spent on working out an idea than is happening now. Because of this, a lot of things are cheap, which is good on one hand as this makes them available to a large part of mankind and the speed with which we work allows our inventions and innovations to express themselves. On the other hand,

Fig 2. Rojas, Adrián Villar. *Poems for Earthlings*. Wood, sandbags. Amsterdam: Oude kerk, 2019.

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[2] (Bugter, 2019: 10)
[3] (Jongerius and Schouwenberg, 2015: 3)

one buys too much and too fast and one hardly values what is bought anymore. It is mostly about the idea of having something and to become as you are expected to be on platforms like social media or magazines. It is just a quick pleasure for the eye. Not only is it more about the image than the experience, additionally the necessity and layers of cultural and historical values disappear. They only play a small role in the quality of objects and so our value changes from value of quality to value of quantity. Objects form an empty shell in which meaning and content are absent[4].

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The sensory body

We take things in with our bodies, which makes our body part of a total experience of what surrounds us. The human being is just as much a part of the environment as everything else. All sensory experiences are ways of feeling and therefore related to tactility.[5] For example, when you are in a church you can be quite conscious of what kind of influence the space has on you. The space resonates sound that makes your body perceive the space. Also our sight and the idea of the cold from marble tiles has an influence on your body. Of course this does not happen for nothing. A church is built to give you the overwhelming feeling of religious devotion and greatness. The space of holiness (See Fig. 2). This is why our whole body reacts to things we perceive, whether it is with our ears, eyes or hands. Our body is our medium through which we experience the world.

Currently, in fashion, the focus is primarily on sight, but does fashion also address other senses? How do fashion houses deal with this? An atmosphere is created that suits the fashion house. Although sight, hearing and perhaps

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[4] (Jongerius and Schouwenberg, 2015: 3)
[5] (Pallasmaa, 2005: 10)

scent, which is mainly thought of during fashion shows, also respond to feelings, an important part is missing: touch. Models walk by – usually quickly – and you may catch a glimpse of the type of material used, but a touch will never succeed. This is different in case of a showroom or tableau vivant. The idea of a showroom is often that there are clothes hanging that you can look at, touch, smell – if you want to – and fit. In these kind of presentations, the magical atmosphere that can arise at a show is probably not present: an atmosphere created by the presence of many people, sound on which models move, the use of light, etcetera. All eyes are focused on the spectacle of the show. The downside of this is that it is hardly about the clothes themselves anymore. In a tableau vivant models often wear the clothes and you have the opportunity to get close to the clothes, have a good look at them and possibly feel them. The same counts for a showroom. One of these two is therefore a much more realistic way to show clothes to the audience. By using your feelings you get closer to the power of the object. You basically enter into a physical relationship with the object. Similar to this can happen to you during a show: you become part of the total experience. You enter into a relationship with everything that happens at that moment. Light, sound, walking models, shown clothing and audience. Without an audience there is no show. The acknowledgement from us human beings is non-existent. This kind of is what a virtual show would look like. It does not matter who is watching, you will not contribute to the atmosphere of the show, just like the show will hardly contribute to the atmosphere that you are surrounded by.

Fig 5 Own images. *Grandma's house.* 2019.

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Perceptive experience

Returning to the idea of space in a church: children who have never had to deal with religion within a church deal differently with such a space than adults. This has to do with knowledge and memories of the person concerned. It goes without saying that children usually have less experience in life than adults and so children behave differently from adults. Adults feel that they have to behave respectfully, while children can run around. Their associations change as they attend church more often or are told more often that they should behave differently in specific situations for a variety of reasons.

Our identity influences our perception and is determined by various factors such as knowledge, experience and imagination. Memory and imagination exist by touch. With knowledge about materials you build up sensory thoughts[6] that help you to perceive. Without actually touching anything, it is possible to know what something feels like. I have been experiencing my grandma's house (See Fig 5) since I was little and even though I changed, the places photographed never changed. When looking at them I know how the light enters the space, what sounds belong to the space, and how the materials feel like that are part of the space.

Children are often very sincere and unconstrained. Through their eyes, the environment is still pure and everything is trustworthy. If they see a luminous dandelion under a bell jar, made by Studio Drift[7], they will see a dandelion and will not look for more. With adults this is usually different. Adults are already shaped by society, experiences, political opinions and know that a dandelion grows in nature. As a result, adults are generally convinced that a dandelion does not belong under a bell jar and is therefore not real. Of course adults can be amazed by the magical appearance, the poetry, which possibly brings them to a different way of looking: like a

[6] (Pallasmaa, 2005)
[7] (Dandelight, 2007)

child. Another way an object can make you perceive differently is when an object is able to lie to you. A draped fabric (See Fig.6), can have a different appearance in tactility than it actually is. It is able to confuse and surprise you.

Fig. 6 Own work. *Object research*, collection 2020.

Perception is also influenced by mem ories that often have to do with smell or sound. These can be scents that you associate with a certain place or period in your life, an experience that happened several times in a certain period of time, or your parental home. Since the two senses smelling and hearing are the most powerful, these experiences linger in our body or brain. For example, the elderly, although suffering from forgetfulness, can often recall when they smell a certain scent that reminds them of the past. Because these smells can evoke a certain image, you may also be reminded of a certain object. Whether you still own it or not, whether it is organic or not, in this way the object gets a life again and remains present because you have unconsciously linked an emotion to it.

We could say that everything made by nature can not be judged. It is simply present, for a longer period of time than we exist. We can barely have an opinion about it. This is why man-made objects that tend to be on the side of nature are more often appealing to humans than man-made objects that have a very industrial and plastic appearance.[8] These objects are basically closer to ourselves. Nature is universal and therefore accessible and understandable for many people. You do not have to look for meaning behind it, because there hardly is any. The recognizability of natural forms ensures that you are not distracted from the sensory content of an object. This also counts for archetypal shapes (See Fig.7). Archetypes are the basic

Fig. 7 Jongerius, Hella. *Red White Vase*. Assignment for Koninklijke Tichelaar Makkum. Porcelain. 16 x h 41 cm. 1997.

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[8] (Studio Drift, 2016)

shape of everything that exists around us: the shape that we recognize something by and that other shapes are built from. Think for example of a basic white t-shirt. These shapes help us to appreciate the used material more, even with our eyes.

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Object as a being

Within current society a distinction is often made between animate objects such as people, animals and sometimes plants, and inanimate objects such as furniture, clothing and technology. However, there are cultures where they consider objects animate. A for some known example of this is the traditional Japanese culture in which wabi-sabi plays an important role. Wabi-sabi is a form of perception which, because it concerns a deep feeling, is very difficult to put into words. According to Leonard Koren "wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete."[9] According to the wabi-sabi approach, all objects made by man with reason and time, have a soul. Through utilization the objects are part of our life and gain content and meaning and, in fact, a kind of memory.

Fig.8 Own image. *Traces in Grandma's house*. 2019.

An object comes to life through the recognition of living or what we see as non-living objects, through use and abuse. Matter is 'recording material'[10]. It actually refers to what it experiences, through wear and tear, discoloration, stains and other imperfections (See Fig. 8). The use and time become visible by these marks that according to the tradition of the new, do not 'belong' there.

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[9] (1994:7)
[10] (Koren, 1994: 62)

We could look at objects as living things, just like we humans see ourselves or like we possibly see plants. Just like humans enter into a relationship with each other, objects or human and objects do the same thing. Everything is possible to exist through recognition of the other. By being able to compare oneself with something else, one becomes aware of what one is. Objects may not have that awareness, but they do communicate with us. They are a reflection of our thoughts, memories and our vision of the world. Although these objects are valued when it comes to price, when it comes to emotion and soul, they are not. Without these objects, our communication would probably not even exist, but then why do we tend to not see objects as something we should cherish? Everything that surrounds us can be seen as an orchestra of matter. Every object is an instrument and all of them together create a total experience. An experience we deal with every day, but of which we are not always aware. Each object has different characteristics that partly determine what it conveys.

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The shape of emotion

At the start of this essay I wrote about how we lose the emotional value of an object due to our current sight based society and how we could preserve this emotional value by being conscious with our whole body. I explained how people's perceptions differ due to the role of events during our life and how like people, objects are actors and can influence our perception.

By becoming aware of the role of these objects and giving the objects room to be, you can make the experience you have through these objects more conscious. Where objects play an increased conscious role is for example in a ritual. In a ritual you limit yourself to what you are doing. My mom makes porridge every morning

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Fig. 11 Own image. *Ritual.* 2019.

and although the picture (See Fig. 11) is made during renovation it shows a situation of this ritual early in the morning, when it is still dark outside and the only sound you hear is simmering porridge. By giving your emotion the form of an activity, you may be able to experience your own emotion better.[11] Where attention is usually focused on the task and other stimuli, a ritual revolves around a certain simplicity that ensures that you can pay attention to the feeling that comes with the task. An example of such a ritual is a Japanese tea ceremony. Often these ceremonies are held in Japanese tea houses of quite small size with low doors.[12] Entering these tea houses, which takes more effort because of the low doors, prepares you for the ceremony. Because entering has to be done on your knees, you pay more attention to what you are doing as it is different than usual. You also experience the space in a different way when you look at it from a different point of view. Because the experience is different from what you are used to, you are very much occupied with it at this very moment. In these traditional tea ceremonies wabi-sabi has its origins.[13] With things wabi-sabi, action and use are important factors of experience.

Fig. 12 Own image. *Laura's pants: ongoing project.*

Thus, through use, you create emotion.[14] Through use, an object becomes part of your life, your daily activities or yourself (See Fig. 12). Utilization becomes visible in an object as time goes by, for example by stains or wear and tear. In addition to products made because they can be sold cheaply, some modern products such as synthetic quality products are made with the idea that they will last

[11] (Bouchez, 2017)
[12] (Koren, 1994:)
[13] (Koren, 1994:)
[14] (Bouchez, 2017: and Koren, 1994:)

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longer and wear less quickly. For durability it is not per definition wrong to use these kind of materials, but assigning value to them is important. An important aspect that applies more quickly with a lot of use.

In addition, the sincerity of craft objects in which you see the hand of the maker, plays a role in creating emotion. Nowadays you see a brand in many products so you know where the product originates from, but this is not necessary for traditionally made products.[15] Here, the love for the object has not to do with popularity or design, but with the soul of the maker which is in the product. In these objects there is a certain kind of anonymity, an absent need to let people know who you are. Where the maker has put his or her soul into the object, now the person who uses the object cherishes the object and in fact the maker as well, without knowing who he or she is. Appreciation is in making and using, not in having the object.

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Clothing to wear

People have different opinions about the phenomenon of fashion. To me it seems like there is a difference between clothing and fashion. Fashion is fast, is made fast and is pleasing to the eye, but is also fast to wear. Clothing, on the other hand, is made to wear and has a long durability (See Fig. 13). Fashion is often about desire, wanting to be part of trends and to show off, while clothing is originally something we wear to protect ourselves. There are different sides to this notion, as there has not always been a difference. Especially social media has made the difference between clothing and fashion nowadays. Before social media, the majority of mankind could barely or not at all catch

Fig. 13 Walker Evans, *Dock Workers* (Havana), 1932

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[15] (Koren, 2994:)

on to new trends, so that the modern prevailing feeling of desire was not present. In a text about clothes Charlie Porter, a fashion-journalist, wrote that 'the language of fashion is often about this fantasy: what we might have, rather than what we actually own'.[16] Other than the downside of this desire, this imaginative effect has a fascinating side too. We have to appreciate that we are capable of dreaming and that sometimes we can achieve what we dream of. Fashion can create a world next to the world we live which you could compare to a movie, a game, or a theater play. An imaginary world or a longing for something you want to be or have. This is therefore not a bad thing at all, only sometimes it is better to stick to the dream to prevent disappointment and to avoid ending up in a new dream again, so that what has been purchased does not disappear into the background.

This is why, although fashion is often seen as clothing, I see clothing as something other than fashion. I see clothing as something that is worn, something you love, something you have a personal connection with. It is therefore not something you are instructed to wear, which is very often the case with fashion. Fashion is often referred to as a must-have, the trend of the season, etcetera, without the person who writes about it having seen, touched and/or worn the piece in real life. You usually do not know in advance whether a piece of clothing is a piece that you will wear often. You will only appreciate it the more often you wear it. Do not get me wrong: fashion can also be clothing, but clothing doesn't have to be fashionable. Clothing can be in and out of fashion, whatever its shape, as long as you value it.

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[16] (2019)

Conclusion

Although we have always had a relationship with what surrounds us, it is not a very visible factor at this time. Apart from our sight, which has been especially popular in recent decades, we are hardly aware of our other senses, which are very important for our perception. The connection between human and object is pushed to the background. This problem stems from today's society, which is mainly focused on the new and thereby on the innumerable. It seems to be about quantity instead of quality: the many products should replace the value of one product, with the advantage that it is available to many people. What we should perceive is determined for us even though we would be able to decide for ourselves what we perceive by listening to our body, formed by knowledge, experience and imagination. The personal connection we can have with objects and the emotional value of those objects is thereby lost. By acknowledging the use and the object's right to exist, objects come to life and you will find that you will appreciate them. Similarly, in fashion, the value of garments seems to disappear. Predominantly, fashion is no longer about clothing, but about an undeniable desire. Let's start perceiving objects and clothes again with our whole body and use our valuables until they fall apart and beyond.

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The Ambiguous Relationship between Human and Object

THESIS
Inge Vaandering

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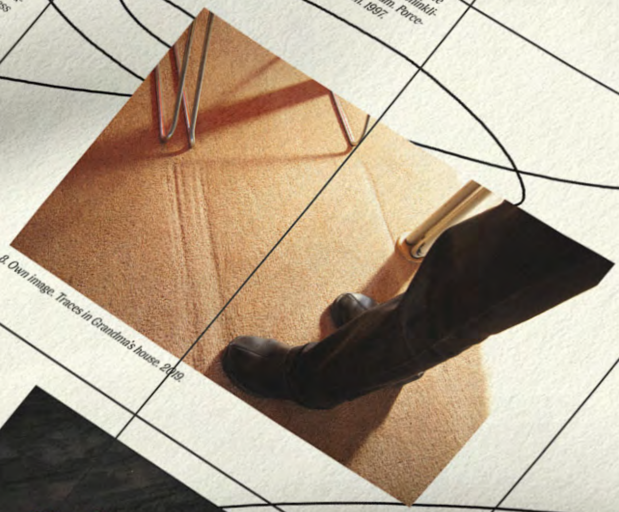

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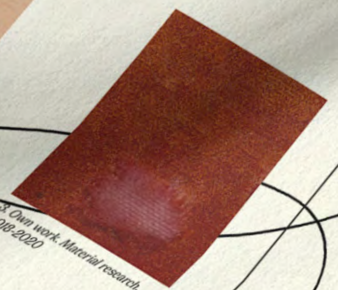

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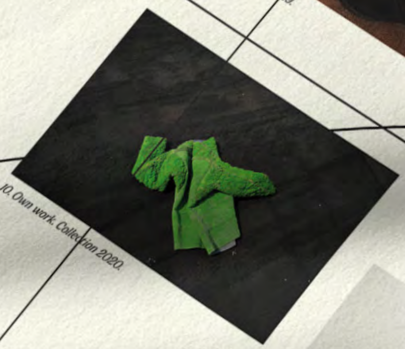

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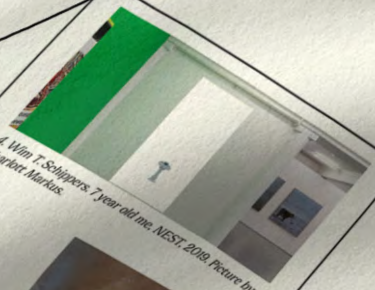

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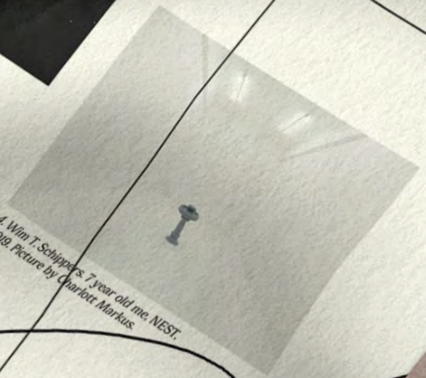

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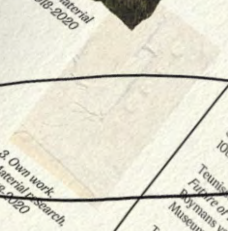

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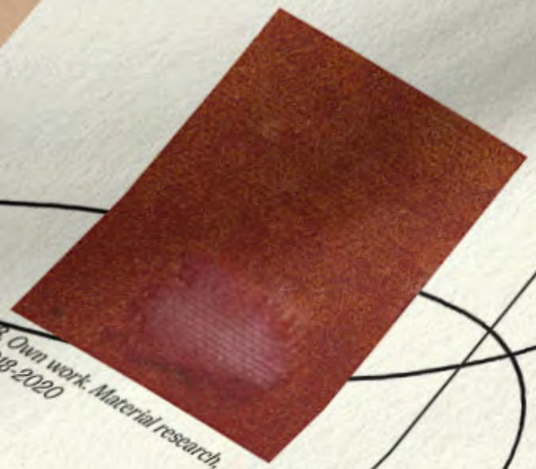

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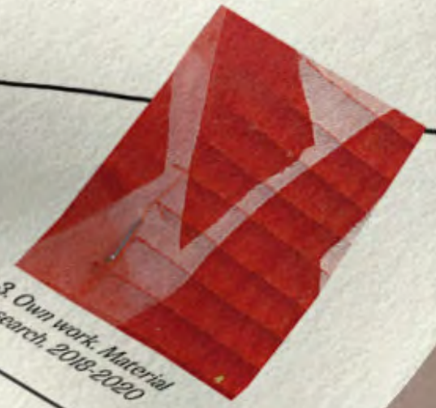

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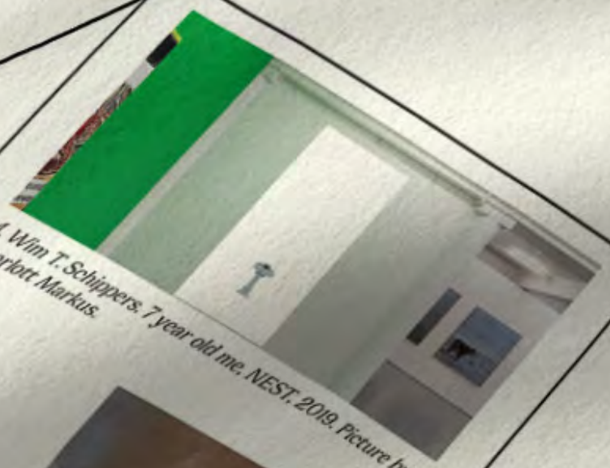

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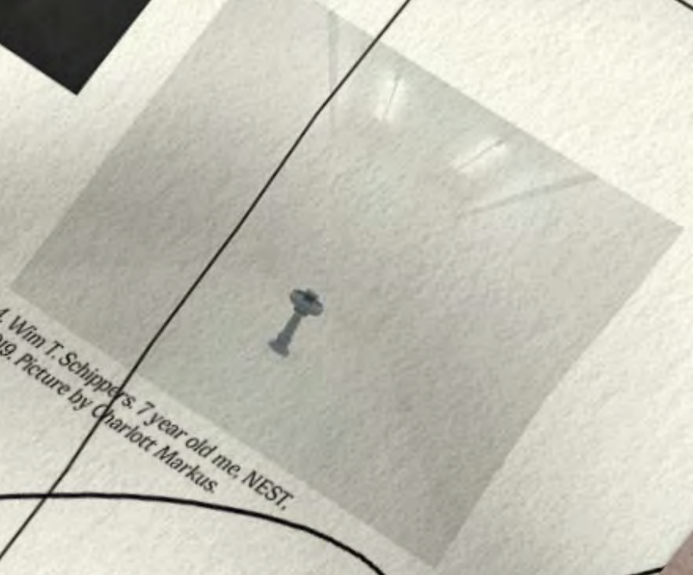

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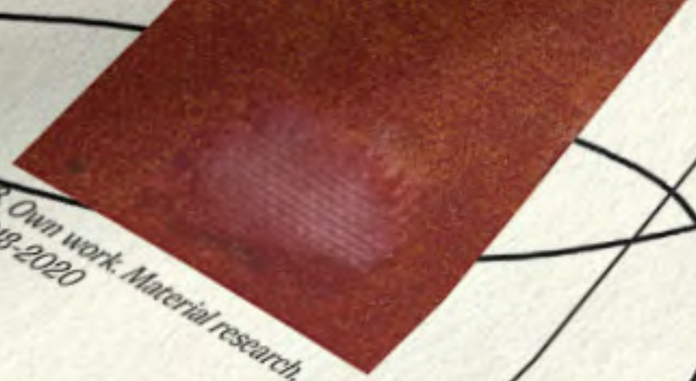

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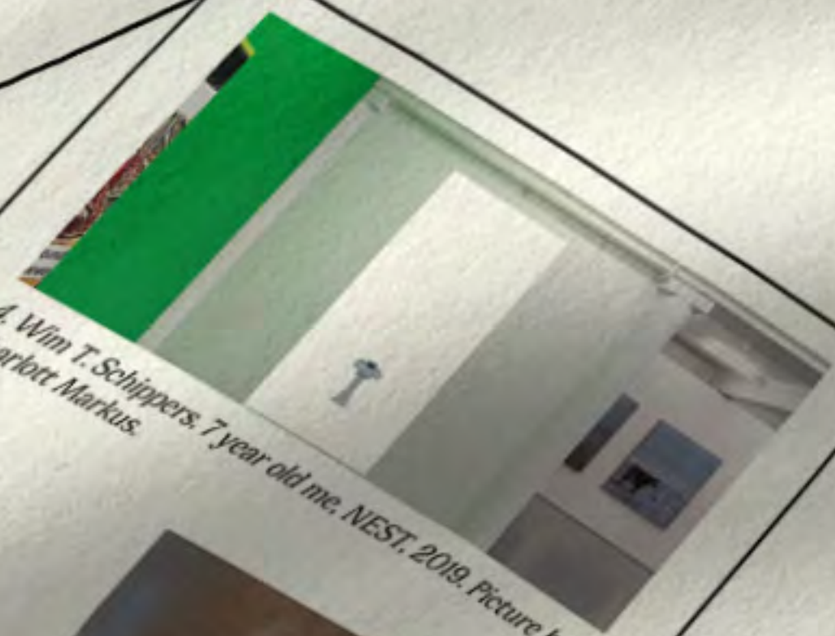

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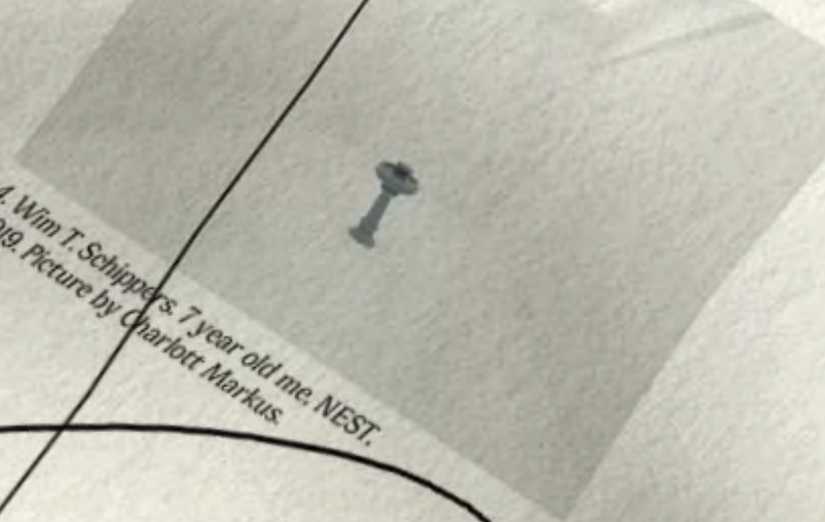

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