

## Art and the Pataphysics of Exception

Or, How a Sieve Becomes a Time Machine

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### The Sieve

What is a pataphysical gesture if not that which falls through reality to encounter itself on the other side of exception? It's no longer impossible because it has strangely happened; and yet it remains exceptional and so is not quite possible either. And yet it is here. We see it. Even if we don't quite believe what we see.

In *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, Dr. Faustroll sets sail around Paris on a sieve—a purposefully porous surface that acts as both a container and strainer; an object made as much from negative space as by the wires that give it shape. Jarry describes the vessel as follows:

This bed, twelve meters long, is not a bed but a boat, shaped like an elongated sieve. The meshes are wide enough to allow the passage of a large pin; and the whole sieve has been dipped in melted paraffin, then shaken so that this substance (which is never really touched by water), while covering the web, leaves the holes empty—the number of which amounts to about fifteen million four hundred thousand.<sup>1</sup>

Because it is a perforated utensil, the real challenge of setting sail in a sieve is that of keeping the water from seeping in; it requires a constant attention to the act of bailing out the boat in order to maintain a precarious balance at the intersection of imminent submersion and pataphysical buoyancy. This is not simply to “suspend

disbelief” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge prescribed for readers about to embark on vicarious poetic journeys.<sup>2</sup> To set sail in a sieve is to make suspension one’s immediate priority, not simply a mechanism of belief or of willingness, but a material condition of imaginative engagement. The sieve is a vessel that requires the constant attention of participants—what Peter Sloterdijk calls a form of “critical proximity” required for embodied philosophical engagement.<sup>3</sup> Pataphysics, in this way, might be thought of as an insistence on suspension as the exceptional condition of engagement—as an act requiring concerted and sustained attention.

But it is worth spending some time imagining the details of this vessel—the bed that is a boat that is a sieve—since the entire journey of Dr. Faustroll, and in a sense the consequent buoyancy of pataphysics, is implicated in the question of how such a vessel stays afloat. It is a paradoxical question, for the goal cannot be to simply plug the holes—a utilitarian solution that might well increase the flotation capacity of the vessel but with the unfortunate side effect that the sieve then becomes merely a boat and the constant attention of the participant is no longer required. One must maintain the holes in the sieve, perhaps even the holes in the believability of the story; the aspirations of pataphysical proposition must always remain overextended. It is an argument that only makes partial sense, premised as it is on the flotation capacity of a porous vessel.

Yet for Jarry even porous vessels can retain buoyancy, in part through the labor of those who bail out the interior and in part through the surface tension created between the holes in the sieve and the molecular membrane of the water underneath it. One might even propose that any surface that is perforated with holes—or questions—might be thought of as a sieve, and open up the metaphor of the sieve as a vehicle for the artistic imaginary. Many thinkers of the past have proposed variations on this theme, from Aristotle’s “plausible impossibility”<sup>4</sup> to Immanuel Kant’s gaze of “disinterested interest”<sup>5</sup> to Marcel Duchamp’s “art coefficient,”<sup>6</sup> but Jarry goes beyond this to suggest an ideology of aesthetic engagement that is *technologically facilitated*. That is the promise of the sieve: nothing short of a machine designed to facilitate aesthetic engagement, a machine in the form of an imagined vessel, indeed an imagined solution to the problem of there not being a functional vessel. In fact, the sieve is not even just a vessel machine in this case, but a time machine as well, reinforcing the duration of aesthetic experience and, in so doing, making exceptional the moment of viewer interaction.

What follows are three suggestions for ways to approach the pataphysical question, each of which treats Jarry’s life and thought as catalysts for thinking about works of contemporary art. These suggestions explore the ways that Jarry’s science of imaginary solutions travel alongside the evolution of creative thought, manifesting in the future that is now, following a vision of speculation that “consists of a ‘what if’ . . . , that treats this unreal navigation in the most rigorous possible way.”<sup>7</sup>

Each of these suggestions might also be seen as a speculative suspension of creative thinking, exceptions that are sieves that are also time machines that amplify the duration of aesthetic engagement: by taking the imagination literally; by thinking of pataphysics as a friendship; and by examining how a pataphysical imagination can dissolve the boundaries between the speculative and the real.

### Taking the Imagination Literally

A first suggestion for approaching pataphysics might be seen as the simple act of taking the imagination seriously (and by seriously one might imply literally), engaging with acts of imagination precisely with a scientific candor that insists on taking for granted the story that presents itself, replete with details that seem insignificant but can (and perhaps must) be accounted for, even if the act of counting undermines the story from which we began.

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#### *The Time Machine*

Jarry's conception of his time machine was anchored in the idea of finding a mechanism to isolate a body from duration—to slow one down relative to the temporal succession of the world around us and thus open perception to the infinite flow of space instead. For this reason, Jarry also called his time machine a “machine of absolute rest” since it was premised on the idea of making its pilot transparent to the succession of events:

By gyrostatic action, the Machine is transparent to successive intervals of time. It does not endure or “continue to be,” but rather conserves its contents outside of Time, sheltered from all phenomena.<sup>8</sup>

From this moment of “absolute rest,” the machine would accelerate gyroscopically. Under normal conditions the machine simply isolates the voyager from time by providing a gyroscopic “counter-momentum” to the usual progression of moments. When the machine speeds up, it first moves into the future, then begins to exceed the momentum required to witness the future and actually starts to travel backward—past the moment where one entered the machine (which Jarry termed the “imaginary present”) and into the past itself.

From a certain perspective, the details of the machine do not really matter. Instead, what is most important about Jarry's essay is the way it functioned as a social catalyst, piquing the curiosity of artists and scientists who—even if unconvinced, annoyed, or angry—took the time to engage with his ideas.

To make this claim is to recast Jarry's time machine for its social effects, sustained by harnessing the time others take to engage. This reinforces what many critics insist is the necessary condition of artistic interpretation—namely, the viewer's

investment required to sustain the operation of the machines of speculation.<sup>9</sup> And while Jarry's theory might have holes, in this case the holes create a sieve that reinforces the lived attention required in order to sustain its speculations. For a time machine without a pilot is not a machine—it's just time. The pilot adds the necessary ingredient of social engagement to the equation, required in order to keep the machine afloat. It's as if Jarry in some way anticipated what Marina Abramović would popularize a hundred years later: projecting himself into the future propelled by those who continue to take the time to engage.

### *The Artist Is Present*

In a widely celebrated 2010 performance, Marina Abramović sat at a table at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and spent more than seven hundred hours staring at people who waited in line to sit down across from her.<sup>10</sup> The performance, *The Artist Is Present*, was an extension of a lifestyle philosophy the artist has created (known as the Abramović Method), a compelling process of elongating activity to emphasize the durational moment of time itself. In some ways it's the opposite tactic of Jarry, not isolating the body from duration, but making it hyper-aware, so a new sense of duration is created. The strategy is simple and purposely time-consuming, outlined with basic exercises such as drinking a glass of water slowly, so slowly that it might take fifteen minutes or more, or taking the time to count, one by one, every grain in a bag of rice, an exercise that could take as long as twenty hours and creates an absolutely new sense of duration for the person actively engaged.<sup>11</sup> It is as radical as it is simple: attuning to one's place and activities and, in so doing, entering into a fundamentally different relationship with time.

This is not a *dérive* of the wandering twentieth century but a concerted counter-attention that responds to the politics of digital speed by creating, out of one's own body, a machine of absolute rest, focused as it is on the enduring present rather than on the efficiencies of on-demand productivity. This is to make out of one's own body what Jean Baudrillard calls a "useless function," an imaginary solution to the problems that arise from a culture of hyperactivity, a resistance tactic that can be effective because it precisely refuses to participate in an economy of streamlined efficiency, preferring the playful to the useful; the ridiculous to the operational; the imaginary to the real (even if, from some perspectives, it makes no sense to do so).<sup>12</sup> Instead, for Baudrillard, when the social and political world increasingly prioritizes "intelligent" solutions, the only effective resistance strategy is to embrace that which is literally counter-intelligent:

When the hypothesis of intelligence ceases to be *sovereign* and becomes *dominant*, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes sovereign. A stupidity that might be said to be a sort of higher intelligence, on the verge of a radical thought—that is to say, beyond truth.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this notion of radical unproductivity that the pataphysical importance of the Abramović Method begins to truly congeal, counter-tactics to the operationalized speed of a culture of productivity—taking time and, in so doing, reclaiming time—redistributing attention in ways counter to the currency of operational culture.

In the case of *The Artist Is Present*, Abramović herself sat at the table, waiting for people to sit down and meet her stare. And people quickly lined up for their turns, spilling out of the museum and around the block, curiously making time not just to sit down and look at the artist, but to wait in line for their turns. Indeed, while the title of the piece focuses on the presence of the artist, the real effect of the work itself is that the viewers become hyperaware of their own presence, intensified under the gaze of the artist but, perhaps more importantly, building anticipation along the way as they wait alongside many others. With this in mind, one might recast *The Artist Is Present* for an even more radical redistribution of time: not the ambitious durational performance of the artist herself; nor even the intensity of the moment when a viewer sits down to look at Abramović; but the seemingly tangential experience of waiting in line for one's turn. The point of the performance is its exception, that which is precisely not seen but nonetheless transpired in anticipation of the encounter, the long lines of people patiently waiting, taking time before they even take their turns in the presence of the artist. People will wait for their moment in time.

### *Drawing Your Attention*

Ironically, what is truly radical in a culture of digital speed and high-performance efficiency is to take literally the premise for Jarry's time machine as a machine of absolute rest and to begin to visualize ways to put rest into motion, suspending time to bring attention to the space of the moment. Why not make waiting itself the project? Such is the innovation of Seattle-based artist Andrew Buckles's performance work: waiting at a bus stop, waiting tables in a restaurant, asking other people what they are waiting for in life. It is not a spectacle. In fact, it is perhaps the opposite of a spectacle: cut out the spectacle altogether and just focus on the waiting. The project *Why Wait?* is ephemeral, relational, social, and involves nothing more than treating every moment of the day as one that leads to the next: a catalyst for prolonged and purposeful engagement.

In one iteration of the project, Buckles sits waiting for a bus with a notepad and a pen, drawing his surroundings, refusing to let moments of transience disappear into the boredom of directional time (fig. 9.1). The bus stop is not (or not only) a place between work and home, but a site of creative possibility, activated as much philosophically as it is artistically, by the act of waiting on purpose. In doing so, Buckles also becomes a social catalyst for others, literally drawing their attention at the same time as he's drawing the scene around him, drawing others into



9.1. Andrew Buckles, from the *Why Wait?* series, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 11 × 14 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

the conversation about what they are waiting for. This takes the act of waiting literally, for its complex speculative possibilities, but also something more important: to “take the imagination literally” as Buckles insists, as a real solution to the challenge of creative engagement.<sup>14</sup>

The suggestion seems simple but has sophisticated possibilities, some of which have potential for disruption. In some ways it is almost like suggesting that the imagination is the accident of the real, following Paul Virilio’s logic by which every invention of a technology or method heralds the invention of a new accident:

When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane, you invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution. . . . Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress.<sup>15</sup>

With the invention of accelerated living comes the accident of waiting, just as with the invention of the real comes the accident of the imaginary solution, that counter-intelligent solution that undermines the world of the everyday by injecting a form of suspended contemplation, time machines that slow us down to the state of absolute rest, from which new imaginative possibilities begin to emerge. For Buckles, the question of “why wait?” is not rhetorical; it is philosophical, requiring an answer that is also a proposition that is also inevitably an imaginary solution to the question of what one is already doing anyway. And to see waiting in this way is compelling precisely because it avoids the spectacle of duration altogether in favor of simply engaging in life as it is already lived.

In the end, the time machines created by Abramović and Buckles are exceptional not because they take us to the future or the past but because they bring us back into the present, accentuating the fact that it takes work to keep a moment in play. The future is here, and we are living it already in our minds and imaginations. These artworks are important because they reveal the pataphysical undercurrent of social misunderstanding. We need a machine to get us back to the everyday moment. In a strange twist, taking the imagination literally actually moves us through time: beginning in the future where our minds are already focused, to the past that began with Jarry’s time machine, and then back to the present where our engagement holds steady the pataphysics of speculation.

### More Like a Friendship

A second suggestion for approaching pataphysics might be seen as the act of treating the imaginary as if it were more like a friend than a phenomenon, developing a relationship with the imagination in ways that personalize, and perhaps even personify, the stories we engage, making literal the interpersonal dynamics by which both anecdotes and friendships are sustained beyond the situations from which they arise.

#### *The Toothpick*

Legend has it that, while sick in the hospital at the very end of his life, Jarry’s final words were a whispered request for a toothpick. Nobody present had one, and so in true collegial spirit one of his friends went out to get some, returning shortly with a package of toothpicks, which he offered to Jarry. As the story goes, upon taking one, “an expression of joy crossed his face” and a moment later he was dead<sup>16</sup>—the Cheshire image of a lingering smile might be imagined as Jarry’s last performance for the world around him.

One might even think of this philosophically, as an extension of Michel Onfray’s argument that the foods we ingest actually influence how we think. For Onfray,

there is nothing innocent about dietary choices, insisting instead that the choice of food is “an existential choice through which one accedes to self-constitution.”<sup>17</sup> And seen in this way one might look to the dietary habits of Jarry as well, to foreshadow the story of the toothpick. For it has been said that Jarry’s eating habits were perhaps as eccentric as his ideas, that when dining out he ordered and ate his meals backward, beginning with dessert and ending with soup. When eating at home his meals often consisted of fish he caught himself from the Seine, or chickens he caught from his neighbor’s yard with a fishing rod.<sup>18</sup> But Jarry’s best-known dietary fondness was for absinthe, which he consumed liberally—sometimes even (when finances were tight) mixing it with ink:

Once, when he was dying of thirst and there wasn’t enough absinthe for a good gulp, Jarry got to experimenting around in his own inimitable fashion and came up with . . . a glassful of absinthe, vinegar, and ink.<sup>19</sup>

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Absinthe is thoroughly mythologized for its psychotropic effects, so it is easy to claim that it had an influence on Jarry’s way of thinking. The act of adding ink to absinthe links the drink itself to Jarry’s written words,<sup>20</sup> anticipating Antonin Artaud’s notion of “thought as incantation” by turning willful ingestion into an anticipatory manifestation of thought.<sup>21</sup> For, according to Onfray, the choices of what we consume must ultimately be seen as “a stratagem for the construction of the self as a coherent work of art,” a reversal of how we generally think about food, no longer simply a required energy source to sustain the human body and mind but itself implicated in the intellectual destiny of the minds it feeds.

#### *Untitled 1992 (Free)*

To take literally the idea that what we eat influences the way we think would be to reevaluate some of the social and artistic rituals surrounding food consumption and relational proposition. In 1992 Rirkrit Tiravanija converted 303 Gallery in New York into a kitchen, serving Thai food to those in attendance and revolutionizing the connection between social space and artistic production in the process. Indeed, the work—*Untitled 1992 (Free)*—was a provocative intervention because it bypassed expectations for artistic objects and instead presented something simpler, a meal and a gathering, as a gesture of creative hospitality.

Tiravanija, prominently featured in Nicolas Bourriaud’s 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*, has established a celebrated artistic career by doing many other similar works, bringing people together for an evening, for a conversation, over a meal—often green curry, tom kha soup, or pad thai. What caught Bourriaud’s attention so forcefully about Tiravanija’s work is the way that it prioritizes social interaction as its medium; “lots of people” is often among the list of artists materials on his gallery labels.<sup>22</sup> In a sense, however, Bourriaud’s point wasn’t about a really new practice,





but a recasting of Joseph Beuys's notion of "social sculpture" from the 1960s: the idea that collective engagement creates shared social futures (hence, for Beuys, "everyone is an artist").<sup>23</sup> What is new with Tiravanija is the spotlight on food as the catalyst for shared experience—the medium or even the machine, so to speak, through which the social spaces are formed.

To supplement Bourriaud's reading of Tiravanija's work through the lens of Onfray, then, would be to make another suggestion: that it's about creating unified social conscience, not through conversation or shared community but by recasting the people involved as choreographed ideologues, digestively unified into similar ways of thinking. Food is scripting the thoughts of the participants, taking literally the claim that we are what we eat and coming to the conclusion that a work of this sort can be powerful, not because of the social spaces it creates, but because of the ways it aligns participants' bodies at a precognitive, digestive level. If the food is the script, Tiravanija's work turns each of us into an actor in the drama of the meal itself. Making literal Jarry's act of drinking delirious ink, Tiravanija's work scripts the shared ideological experience of those brought together through food. It's not that strange; however, it is different from the way we normally think about social space—and about food. This performance is not just designed for the mind, nor even for creative interpretation, but for digestive response: an artwork directed toward the very physiology of human experience itself. This amplifies Bourriaud's ideas: not just creating social space but literally turning each of us into a host for the artwork, animating bellies that synchronize bodies that unify minds. That each of us still remains ourselves is the great illusion that is also the hole in the interpretation, an artwork in the form of a sieve where each of us is a hole in an otherwise unified social moment.

It is one thing to assert that pad thai unifies us digestively (and thus ideologically), and quite another to ask what pad thai makes us think, the digestive unconscious hard at work building its social future. All this is speculative until the point where food, or stomachs, become something more than metaphors for social observations. The risk is that, at a certain point, the idea that what we eat influences how we think becomes more of a rhetorical gesture than one with lived implications, unless the proposition can be made more literal. If it could be made more literal, it would become more scientific and more imaginative at the same time, more solution-oriented while also more speculative—that is, more pataphysical.

When the Canadian artist Doug Jarvis wanted to find out what his stomach was actually thinking, he attached a brainwave sensor to his belly to register and record its musings. It's not quite as strange as it sounds: Jarvis had read Michael Gershon's 1999 book *The Second Brain*, in which the author outlines research showing that there are neurons in the stomach, forming a second neural network in the human body.<sup>24</sup> Taking this research literally, Jarvis initiated a series of performances,

collectively titled *Minding the Belly Brain*, in which he stimulated his stomach in different ways, ingesting different types of food and drink, sometimes while exercising vigorously or subjecting himself to media stimuli that might make one's stomach feel weak (fig. 9.2).<sup>25</sup>

In one iteration of the project, Jarvis watched disaster videos on YouTube, comparing his physiological responses to seeing the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan, horror movies, and animated caricatures, curated purposefully to make him queasy. In this series of actions, the stomach became the audience for the work, and the work became a conversation between Jarvis's two different brains. The result was "more like a friendship" than an experiment, in the artist's words; a purposefully extended proposition brought from the imagination into the world of material (and digestive) reality.<sup>26</sup> The language used to frame the project is important, because it suggests a social interaction between the belly and the mind, not reducible to either but interdependent in ways that promise conversational and creative possibilities.

One might even go as far as to think of this project as taking a trip with one's own body aboard a vessel made from scientific literature. And what's particularly inter-

esting here is that such an approach might be made of any type of literature, since at its core this kind of approach involves making an interpretive error, purposefully overextending the claims of the research to build out an alternative form of presence, if not another form of reality. Insofar as it involves overextending the terms of the literature itself, it is a reality filled with holes, but built on a gesture of interaction and cocreation that is not bound to conventional social codes. This might even be seen as a tenuous—but possible—application of William Rawlins's "dialectic of friendship," which outlines a series of contextual and interactional dialectics such that "appropriate behavior is determined within the friendship and is upheld principally by each individual's affection for and/or loyalty and commitment to the other,"<sup>27</sup> and not in any real way by established norms and codes of more formalized relationships. For Rawlins, friendship is based on a series of "contradictory requirements," some of which involve

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9.2. Doug Jarvis, *Minding the Belly Brain*, EEG performance, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist.

upholding untruths strategically, even lying at times in order to preserve the trust, the feelings, and the good intentions at the core of the relationship.<sup>28</sup> And while Rawlins's text stops short of discussing imaginary friendships, one might suggest that many of these same principles would hold true in a pataphysical context: what matters is not whether a friend is real or imagined, but whether one can sustain the reality of the relationship without compromising the social intentions on which it is based.

The idea of thinking about the imaginary as if it were a friend is not that radical. It is to purposefully develop an imaginary friendship that takes exception to the idea that the world around us is reducible to the real, instead insisting on our inalienable right to imagine.

#### *More Like a Friendship*

Seen as time machines, the works of Tiravanija and Jarvis are exceptional not because they transport us out of the present and into some other timeline of engagement, but because they reveal that other timelines are already present—time progresses differently depending on the perspective one adopts. To gain access to the social spaces of community engagement, the biological spaces of digestive process, or the contradictory spaces of imaginary friendships is, in each case, to transport oneself into a different form of interaction. These are works that speak powerfully to the imagination because they are made out of desire, imagination, and a belief in the human capacity for relationships. They constitute artistic propositions less as creative interventions and more as friendships, thus acknowledging the shared social spaces that become catalysts for the pataphysical imagination.

#### *Into Which Things Dissolve*

A third suggestion for approaching pataphysics might be seen as the act of integrating the imagination into the medium of life, recasting imaginary solutions not as answers to riddles but as performative substrates, pools of liquid into which one jumps, or on which one sets sail, as if to suggest that pataphysics may be less a way of thinking than an environmental trajectory that sets in motion our stories well in advance of the moments we encounter them for ourselves.

#### *The "Ha Ha"*

Much has been made of the eccentricities of Jarry's writing and ideas, though one cannot underestimate the importance of always insisting on an essential linkage between the concept of pataphysics and its practice. The destiny of pataphysics is to be a mode of engagement. Deeply performative in its implications, what pataphysics does so well is highlight the lived and experiential absurdities of imaginary

practice. This “science” is not so much about providing solutions as it is about injecting the imaginary—in real ways—into the everyday world that the artist inhabits.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this perspective, by which pataphysics is best understood as a performative philosophy, finds correlations in Jarry’s own life, and there is perhaps no better example than the way he adopted performance as a central and integrated component of speech itself. Well known for his affectations, Jarry’s way of speaking involved “hammering out each syllable, inventing bizarre words, strangely deforming others”<sup>29</sup> and was marked “by the habitual use of the phrase ‘celui qui,’ meaning ‘he/she who’ or ‘that which’”:<sup>30</sup>

Alfred Jarry had a very particular way of speaking that was disconcerting to those who heard it for the first time. He said “we,” when referring to himself and substituted verbs for nouns, in imitation of ancient Greek. Example: “celui qui souffle” (that which blows) for the wind, and “celui qui se traîne” (that which crawls along) for a train, even if it was an express!<sup>31</sup>

Jarry’s practice of verb-based speech is of the utmost importance for its emphasis on the function and performance of things, rather than their static or objectified states; and what seems a mere quirk of character is in fact the materialization of Jarry’s philosophy of life. By extension, one might insist on an equally performative definition of pataphysics: perhaps thought of as “that which imagines” or simply as “that which laughs.” To suggest this latter is to tie the verb-based ways of thinking about pataphysics back to *Faustroll*, wherein the laugh of Bosse-de-Nage, the dog-faced baboon, is perhaps the paradigmatic pataphysical response to the challenge of the real. The “ha ha” by which Bosse-de-Nage periodically punctuates the conversation is a social toothpick that preserves the porous nature of relationships by injecting opposing perspectives when needed, which is to say at every moment.

The reversibility of “that which laughs” means that it must laugh at itself, too: a joke that never quite ends and always continues into its next iteration, a spiraling logic necessary to keep in motion this most performative way of thinking. That a tension arises between the realities we take for granted and the new possibilities that emerge is purposeful—the suspended engagement that always demands a return to the sieve for its ability to insist on constant attention and care. The sieve is not just a joke; it is a broken vessel requiring consistent timing in order to sustain the communities its journeys make possible.

### *Take Care of Yourself*

There is an art to laughing at oneself during moments of duress, and an equal art to creatively reinventing the world to accommodate one’s act of the imaginary. One might go as far as to call it an act of building a shared imaginary space—the constitution of a world in which others can similarly imagine together. Sophie Calle

created such a space (and made headlines) at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, forming a creative community around interpretations of an electronic breakup letter she had received. The project, *Take Care of Yourself*, included works by 107 women, who were each asked to interpret the breakup letter in their own way, according to the parameters of their professions: from anthropology to criminology, opera to psychiatry to athletics, yielding works that included songs and dance, scientific analysis, crossword puzzles, origami, a shooting target, a parrot, and a forensic study.<sup>32</sup>

Calle's work is often acclaimed for the ways she humorously troubles clear boundaries between privacy, public living, and the imaginative reinvention of the lives of those around her. This project also does something else, however, bringing together communities united by imaginative responses to a real-life event. In defiance of many internet theorists who insist on the ways electronic culture increasingly isolates human sentimentality and interaction, this work precisely does the opposite, using an email as a catalyst for real-world interaction. In a way, Calle's work refutes Sherry Turkle's argument that electronic living threatens to leave us "alone together,"<sup>33</sup> by providing a platform that brings together perspectives that would otherwise be isolated—united through the extended contemplation of electronical correspondence.

Unified by art, and making artworks out of what were previously discrete professional activities—psychoanalysis as art; grammatical analysis as art; Braille as art; parrots as art—*Take Care of Yourself*, is at once about laughing at Calle's situation and about taking care of others. The project provides a platform for voices of interpretation that transform Calle's breakup forever; it is no longer just a breakup, but a catalyst for collective creative action, and indeed laughter. This is not just an imaginary solution but the creation of a culture of care, a bringing-together of imagined responses and contributions that collectively animate and interrogate the electronic breakup, reattaching it to the cultural world in the process.

In a sense, using the electronic breakup letter as a catalyst of this sort is also to push it out to sea, to turn it into a vessel on which others can sail, too. In this act of curatorial self-extension, Calle begins to reverse the direction of digital ideology, no longer a system of communicative data, but one that facilitates the seductive celebration of cultural catharsis. It could even be made to seem like the next evolution of the readymade—not simply objects waiting to be repossessed, but activities, too, making artworks where there were none before, and literally growing a culture of artists. Less a project than a collective setting-sail on the back of the breakup letter itself, with Calle having the last laugh—a laugh that is also the theme song for the voyage.

#### *Observation Diary of a Hydroponic Nose Hair*

Imaginative encounters can be compounded by taking literally their terms of engagement. Such a strategy embraces different kinds of cultures and different forms of solutions, like those alchemical solutions that the Japanese artist Tetsushi Higashino



9.3. Tetsushi Higashino, *Observation Diary of a Hydroponic Nose Hair, Day 3939, May 28, 2020*. Nose hair, petri dish, 4 × 4 × 2 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

uses to culture an artwork he has been growing. The work, *Observation Diary of a Hydroponic Nose Hair*, consists of a nose hair that the artist planted in a petri dish (fig. 9.3). Since August 2009 he has been waiting to see if it will grow, nourishing it with various solutions: hair-growth formulae, plant nutrients, even energy drinks like Red Bull. The nose hair resists but Higashino keeps trying, in a dedicated comedy of persistence, until whatever he has been doing has the exceptional consequence of making the petri dish grow instead. The artist continues to nourish this unexpected cultural growth, carefully documenting the nose hair and the petri dish each day. And now, for more than ten years, this petri dish has been growing its own jungle of molds that fester and stagnate and expand, the explosive pataphysical potential of the project revealed in exactly the unintended consequences of an artistic proposition.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways it is the perfect solution, a nonsolution, an answer that resolves the question before it is even constituted as a question. It is also a solution of a different sort: a mixture rather than a combination, or a dissolution rather than a solution proper. One might adopt Jarry's vernacular and call it "that into which things dissolve," highlighting the various nutrients that are absorbed by the nose hair and the dish. Or one might equally adopt the opposite tack and name it "that out of which new things grow," despite the fact that the growth is an accidental byproduct of a ludicrous experiment. In a curious twist, what is so compelling about this project is the way it extends the vernacular of care from a gesture of shared imagination to one that is transformed into a properly ecological manifestation. It is almost as if the nose hair developed a mind of its own, or decided it was going to contribute to the culture around it rather than focusing only on its own well-being. One might

even go as far as to attribute a properly nonphilosophical imperative to this project, building an analogy between François Laruelle’s “non-philosophy project” and Jarry’s ‘pataphysics. For Laruelle, “the question ‘what is non-philosophy?’ must be replaced by the question about what it can and cannot do,” which is also to say that “non-philosophy is performative and exhausts itself as an immanent practice rather than as a program.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the destiny of nonphilosophy is precisely to disappear to itself, to simulate philosophy until the point where—without even intending it—philosophy becomes not something one thinks but simply something one does. To make an analogy of this sort is to claim that, like Jarry’s affected speech, pataphysics is a verb-based ideology, focused on performance and suspension to ultimately become (like nonphilosophy) “performed without an act of performance.”<sup>36</sup> Higashino’s nose hair functions in exactly this way, the imagination exhausting itself by finding a new kind of solution in which to grow.

From the care involved in the cultivation of an imaginary community to the imagination that grows a culture of its own, a theory of nonimagination is born: a performance that makes real what would otherwise only be imagined, suspending the imaginary in a mixture, a solution or concoction called reality.

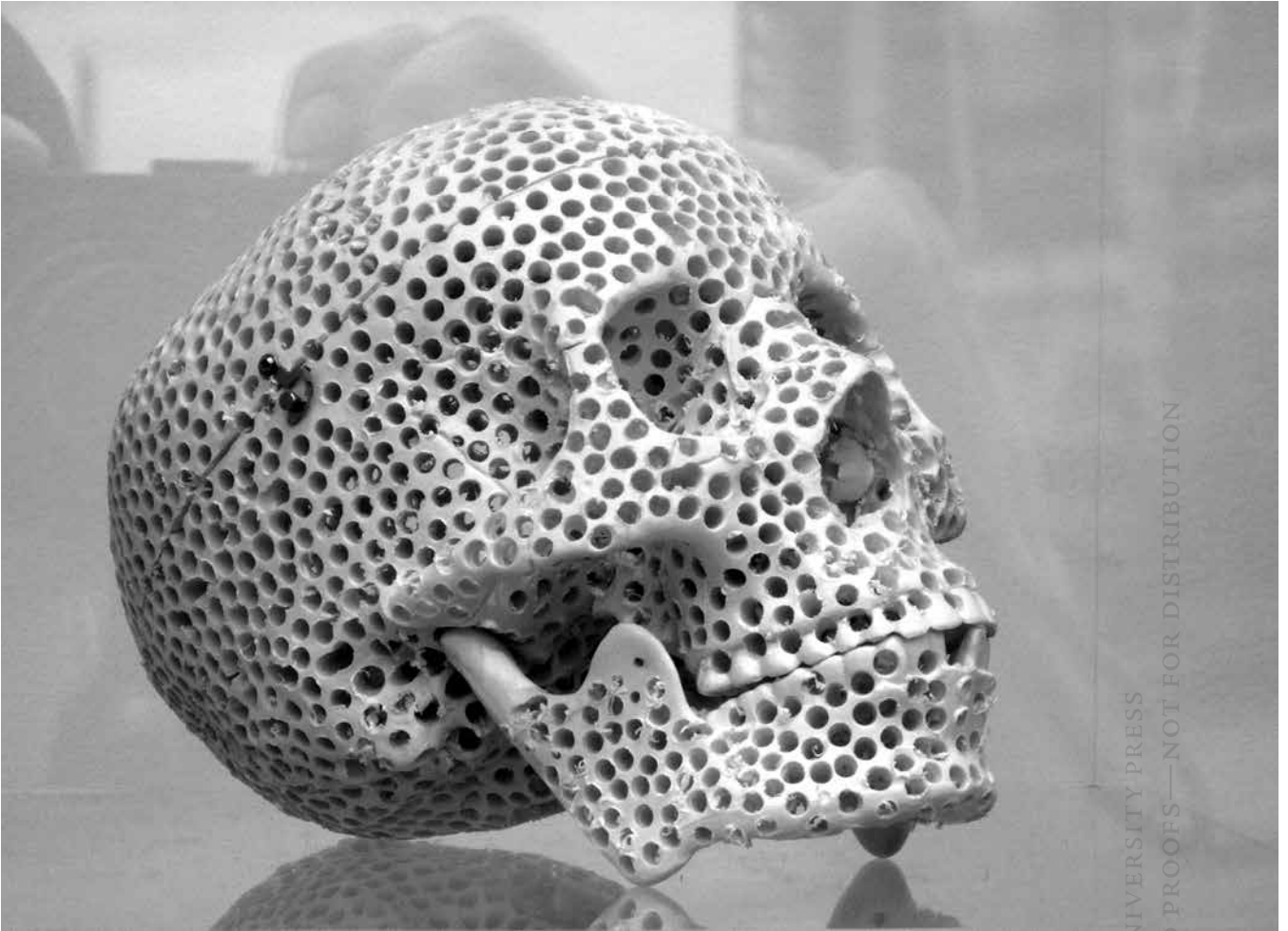
#### *Into Which Things Dissolve*

To call these works time machines is to understand that both Calle and Higashino have premised their work on the creation of a future context—a solution in the biological sense of the term such that the “science of imaginary solutions” begins to look more like alchemy than idle speculation, creating concoctions within which life and the imaginary fuse and grow. Perhaps the destiny of pataphysics is to become “that into which things dissolve,” exactly realizing the project of the speculative imagination by exhausting the imagination. This is a time machine that sets in motion future cultures and future imaginations, building on the non-imagination of a realized pataphysics, tempered only by the lingering laughter of the artists from which they were initiated.

#### Conclusion: How a Time Machine Becomes a Sieve

The artwork of Steven Rayner provides the perfect image with which to conclude an essay such as this—a collection of “sieves” in the shape of artworks. These works—shovels and tables and plastic skulls and garbage bins—have been ravaged by a hand drill and an artistic imagination, punctuated and perforated until all that remains is the connective tissue between hundreds of tiny holes. Interestingly, they are not conceived as objects at all, but as “air sculptures,” opening up the objects to allow the air around them to take new shapes (fig. 9.4).<sup>37</sup>

Like Rayner’s work, this essay is built to be full of holes, filled with porous moments that allegorically come together to render an oblique and ephemeral idea:



9.4. Steve Rayner, *Something*,  
air sculpture, 2012. Plastic  
skull, air, 8 × 8 × 8 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

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that the exceptions provided by pataphysics are in no way exceptional. That is the only possible conclusion, since, as that which surpasses metaphysics, pataphysics is only viable from within. As such, it is a vehicle, a machine, a relationship, an environment, a solution. Insofar as it affects modes of movement through life, it is a time machine, too. This is not to state the obvious, but to make obvious what cannot quite ever be stated—to contour the holes that allow the sieve to float and prevent it from otherwise becoming just a boat. In this, perhaps Rayner's work gives another suggestion, that the task of art (and perhaps of pataphysics, too) is not simply to make, but also to unmake: to allow life itself to be penetrated by the imaginary, even if that means a constant state of mediation, of presence, and indeed of exception to the rule. To poke holes in this way is to make a sieve out of time, to rupture the contour of temporal thinking, offsetting the way time is supposed to work by adding an imaginary counterpart. To drill holes in reality is to provide new shapes for the imagination to take: artworks that are not artworks but sieves shaped like artworks, time machines that allow us to travel through reality on the back of an imaginary friend.

## Notes

1. Alfred Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician (A Neo-Scientific Novel)* (1911), trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), 14.
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. John Shawcross (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1907), chapter 14.
3. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xxxiii.
4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), xxv.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 173–74.
6. Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act” (1957), in *Marcel Duchamp*, by Robert Lebel (New York: Paragraphic, 1959), 77–78.
7. Andrew Hugill, *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 219.
8. Alfred Jarry, “How to Construct a Time Machine” (1899), in *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, trans. Roger Shattuck (London: Patakosmos Press Open Access, 2013), 12.
9. Consider Roland Barthes's eloquent anchoring of the photograph using the self as foundational mediator of the image (*Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981, 8–9) or—equally—his assertion in “The Death of the Author” that the reader is the site upon which meaning is made (*Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977, 148). Nicolas Bourriaud's puts it still more bluntly, insisting that a viewer who finds no meaning in an artwork is not trying hard enough, effectively shifting the interpretive operation to the viewer themselves (*Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002, 80).
10. See the Marina Abramović Institute, <http://www.mai-hudson.org/about-mai>.
11. Marina Abramović, “Have You Got What It Takes to Follow the Abramović Method?,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-method-video>.
12. Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* (1999), trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), 40.
13. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* (2004), trans. Chris Turner (New York: Berg, 2005), 179.

14. Andrew Buckles, interview with the author, January 2014. See also Stacey Soli, "Thirty Art Works This Month? I'll Start Them Tomorrow," *Crosscut*, October 2, 2012, <http://crosscut.com/2012/10/stacey-solie-30-day-art-challenge>.
15. Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview by Philippe Petit* (1996), trans. Michael Cavaliere (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999), 89.
16. Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 194.
17. Michel Onfray, "Introduction: The Banquet of Omnivores," in *Appetites for Thought: Philosophers and Food* (1989), trans. Donald Barry and Stephen Muecke (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 13.
18. Nigey Lennon, *Alfred Jarry: The Man with the Axe* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Books, 1990), 59–60.
19. *Ibid.*, 60.
20. The role of the vinegar here might be as simple as that of a household preservative, or as complex as a symbolic reference to the vinegar that Jesus was given to drink on the cross.
21. See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), trans. Victor Corti (London: Calder, 1970), 35–71.
22. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 25.
23. See Laurie Rojas, "Beuys' Concept of Social Sculpture and Relational Art Practices Today," *Chicago Art Magazine*, November 29, 2010.
24. Michael Gershon, *The Second Brain: A Groundbreaking New Study of Nervous Disorders in the Stomach and Intestine* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).
25. For more on Doug Jarvis's *Minding the Belly Brain*, see <http://www.dougjarvis.ca/belly-brain.html>.
26. Doug Jarvis, interview with the author, July 2012.
27. William Rawlins, *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992), 9.
28. *Ibid.*, 22.
29. André Gide, quoted in Fell, *Alfred Jarry*, 7.
30. Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 181.
31. Rachilde, quoted in *ibid.*, 181.
32. Louise Neri, "Sophie Calle," *Interview Magazine*, March 7, 2009, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle>.
33. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
34. For more on Tetsushi Higashino's *Hydroponic Nose Hair*, see <http://hnh.workth.net>.
35. François Laruelle, *The Non-Philosophy Project: Essays by François Laruelle*, ed. Gabriel Alkon and Boris Gunjevic (New York: Telos Press, 2012), 207.
36. *Ibid.*, 219.
37. Steven Rayner, "Air Sculptures," <https://www.stevenrayner.net/new-index-1>.