

Poetics of Encryption

Art and the Technocene

Nadim Samman



HATJE
CANTZ

*God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere.**

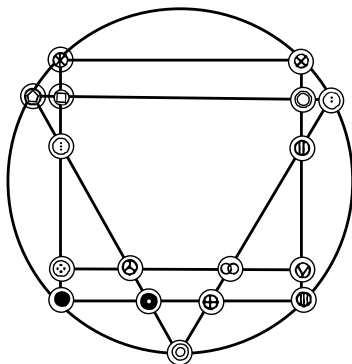
—Nicholas of Cusa

For Dehlia

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Dark Arts

Contemporary life plays out amid a profusion of technical systems whose inner workings are obscure—if not locked. There is no master key. And yet, this encrypted world must be borne *somehow*. Fortunately, the term “encryption” contains a latent spatial imaginary. And this imaginary yields insight into what is hidden by and within tech. In the face of information asymmetries, and when cryptographic de-coding cannot (or does not) happen, this perspective affords aesthetic purchase.

A spatial imaginary enables *poiesis*—the sense of making or creation which lies at the core of art—even in the face of the uncrackable. If an encrypted matter cannot be opened up and inspected, it may yet be rescored. *Poiesis* supplies narrative and pictorial inroads, a kind of endogenous psychological map of strange terrain—or, at least, certain points of orientation. While reviewing select artworks from the last decade, this book runs counter to Big Tech’s erroneous claims regarding a new culture of transparency and openness—showcasing, instead, a *poetics of encryption*.

The word “encryption” is built around the image of a crypt, as a primary figure for an enclosed or hidden place. Harking back to ancient funerary practices, the “crypt” *contains* a latent history that far predates modern technology. As an implicit corollary, the question of burial techniques, and the ritual and performative aspect of sealing-up are raised (like the dead) by the term itself. A crypt, by definition, contains a body. Negotiating its built structure thus activates drama concerning whether the buried figure can rest in peace, whether it may be disinterred by a sanctioned practice, such as archeology, or de-crypted by grave robbing.

A crypt is an occult place. The knowledge that it contains is esoteric, and may be gleaned only through recondite or suspect methods. As a work of criticism, this book oscillates between both poles, but leans more towards the latter. If cryptography exemplifies a lawful right-hand path for dealing with digital encryption—a scientific method—then *poiesis* and its interpretation pursue the left-hand path. It is the road of images and their dynamic imagination. This path may seem suspect if judged incorrectly. Yet, as the philosopher Gaston Bachelard reminds us, “Images are not concepts. They do not withdraw into their meaning. Indeed, they tend to go beyond their meaning.”¹ Furthermore, “If the image that is *present* does not make us think of one that is *absent*, if an image does not determine an abundance—an explosion—of unusual images, then there is no imagination.”² Through such abundance, the alienating, guarded,

or jealous implications of encrypted domains are revalued—a different operation from unlocking.

Lying partially buried within the term “encryption,” the image of the crypt does not only *hold* a store of latent spatial figures and language. It overflows with supplementary frames of reference. Indeed, the crypt image is the wellspring of a whole poetics, “an aspiration toward new images.”³ It is like a seed that, when properly cultivated, bears much fruit. While establishing a familiar architectural figure through which to speak about relations to encrypted space, it goes even further, emanating tokens for death, afterlife, and spirit. If the sublime object of a closed grave is the deceased’s soul, a cryptic imaginary introduces high stakes for what may lay buried in digitally encrypted domains, namely, an embodied, personified point of reference—the inscription of an individual’s “essence” or ontological status within the technological field. Here, the spiritual and political converge.

This said, endeavors to make poetic sense of encryption must reckon with gloom and spooky affects. For the crypt image does not merely contain darkness, safely, in the manner of spent nuclear fuel enclosed within a holding system. Whenever tapped, even slightly (and especially by Nietzsche’s tuning fork), it disgorges both optic metaphors and unenlightened effluvia. The latter washes over the cultural scene—a wave of mysteries, monsters, and hauntings that *should be* out of step with today’s scientism but which, in fact, track it like a shadow. As we shall see, more tech breeds more encryption. And with it, *Mehr Dunkelheit*.

According to the political economist Sarah Myers West, “Surfacing and making visible the imaginaries we develop around encryption provides an entry point to understanding the implications of encryption technologies in a networked society.”⁴ These imaginaries influence perceptions of “what encryption *is*, what it *does*, and what it *should do*.”⁵ Endeavoring to broaden the scope of her analysis, before taking on national security and state secrecy, West sketches a brief genealogy of cryptography—from Egyptian religious hieroglyphics, to the Renaissance occultist and inventor of steganography, Johannes Trithemius. In her view, this esoteric history still colors public attitudes. As she has it, “the association between cryptography and the occult is powerful: despite the efforts of cryptographers over centuries to establish the practice as a science, it retains the residual mark of these dark associations.”⁶ But what are these residual marks, beyond a general suspicion of secret practices? West’s article does not venture

any further, instead moving onto questions of policy. As we shall see, encryption's occult imaginary abides today—indeed, flourishes—in an updated and rather surprising iconography that does not only address code but all inscrutable infrastructures.

This book is structured with three sections; each is a meditation upon a particular mode of embodied relation to the encrypted “interior.” These are imaginative exercises that result in a cascade of images. The artworks and associations that make up each cascade imply distinct models for where an intelligent human is placed *vis-à-vis* the realm of digital secrets and/or hidden mechanisms. The first concerns being *locked in*: burial or entombment within a technological grave, and the labor of escape from this situation. The second explores the affective response to being intellectually *locked out* of ubiquitous consumer and industrial products; neither archeologist nor effective grave robber. The third offers an anatomy of strange effects associated with a scrambling of inside and outside, open and closed—oblique perspectives that are associated with being *locked down*.

That said, the more visible titles of each section deploy a metaphor of darkness classically associated with what is hidden from view. Following the Bachelardian logic of imagination, these dark tokens “go beyond” concepts of the *locked* while similarly emanating from the primary image of the crypt: “I. Black Site,” “II. Black Box,” and “III. Black Hole.” Each serves as a tag for the way encrypted objects are negotiated in the course of everyday life, and the way they order experience. If these names are not passwords, then they are incantations: spells that structure the discussion of visual art's interest in what cannot be seen, through a magical focus on sensory aporia.

“Black Site” opens with Jon Rafman's 2010 refashioning of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, setting up a discussion of who or what has been stolen away—through consideration of works by Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen, Lance Wakeling, Trevor Paglen, Simon Denny, Evan Roth, Julian Charrière, Mary Mattingly, Amy Balkin, Suzanne Treister, Vladan Joler, Critical Art Ensemble, Juliana Cerqueira Leite, Roger Hiorns, and Tom McCarthy.

“Black Box” unfastens with a melancholy rumination on the rhomboid in Albrecht Dürer's 1514 masterpiece, *Melencolia I*. The blurry outlines of a face appear on the surface of this object, presaging the following artists' reflections on the inscrutable: Carsten Nicolai, Félix Luque Sánchez, Britta Thie, Susanna Hertrich, Beny Wagner, Tillman Hornig, Adam Harvey, Mimi Onuoha, Joy Buolamwini, Timnit

Geburu, American Artist, Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, Zach Blas, Chim↑Pom, and Eva and Franco Mattes.

Finally, “Black Hole” unseals a monstrous triangulation between the myths of Bitcoin and QAnon, astrophysics, and the riddle of the Sphinx. The artists discussed do not escape its event horizon, including Jonas Staal, Émilie Brout and Maxime Marion, Omsk Social Club, Ed Fornieles, Joshua Citarella, UBERMORGEN, Brad Troemel, Jalal Toufic, Eva and Franco Mattes, Paola Pivi, Marguerite Humeau, Davide Quayola, Egor Kraft, and Nora Al-Badri.

But what of the term “Technocene”? It denotes a way of thinking about *the contemporary* from the perspective of art, addressing how the overwhelming prevalence of technology in all corners of life (and death) becomes the subject of cultural reckoning. A significant feature of this moment is a preoccupation with periodization—not least “Anthropocene,” “Capitalocene,” “Chthulucene,” and so on—which is arguably a result of tech both preserving and putting to work everything that can be datafied: *unsettling our place in time*. The Technocene is punctuated by anachronism: from a cryogenically frozen human head awaiting reanimation, to the roars of prehistoric mammals echoing through museums; from a zombie social media profile, still active after the passing of its subject, to the DNA of ancient—unknown—viruses, revived in laboratories; indeed, from a return to archaic religious affect in the presence of consumer electronics, to the possible next moves of a powerful AI. Such examples, among countless others, testify to the Technocene as a simultaneous provisional assembly of disparate historical traces, encountered in flux.

In the context of a *poetics of encryption*, the term “Technocene” fixes upon the scrambled or open experience of temporality that is generated by a landscape of black sites, black boxes, and black holes. It names the phenomenon of cultural superposition—simultaneous location and dislocation in time. In the Technocene, what has been buried, or has died, manifests in the present, both as what it is (or was) and as something new. Perhaps as a consequence, while the Technocene is not the “end of history,” it is epitomized by intensive efforts to *be in the now*. This dynamic unites new-age seekers and the non-human agent, scratching at the walls of its chrysalis.



Earthrise, December 24, 1968

Black Site

Cave and Camera

“O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.”¹ Hamlet speaks for all of us—bounded, surrounded, enclosed, inside this thing. And it could feel like infinite space. It *could*, save for bad dreaming. But what is this nutshell of ours?

There are various answers, depending on the dream. Let us imagine a shell for a king of infinite space: in some feudal past, it was conceivable as a suit of armor or a castle, protecting an inner sanctum to better enable foreign conquest. Today, a contemporary techno-shell likewise expedites the projection of will. But its complex dimensions prove difficult to encapsulate in a coherent image. Any representation of it must simultaneously contain a person sitting behind a control panel, in Nevada, operating a Reaper drone above Iraq; and another, at home in Bangalore, ordering home-delivery kombucha via mobile phone app. In fact, both figures—and many more besides—are part of an assemblage that has come to encircle the whole earth, while serving as a framework for life within.

This assemblage forms an “accidental megastructure”: an epic prosthesis for the exercise of power. As Benjamin Bratton has elaborated, planetary-scale computation introduces new forms of sovereignty and geopolitics.² Would-be kings of this planetary nutshell dream of moving virtually anywhere, and having any interaction, while ensconced in their redoubts. They dream of casting influence across



Bauhütte Gaming Bed
Bed Desk BHD-1200BD,
Adjustable Headboard
BHB-950, Gaming Suit
“Ninja Onesie” HFD-4G,
Gaming Bean Bag BHB 180,
Headphone
Hanger BHP-S100,
Energy Wagon BHS-430EW,
Slim Bottle Rack BHS-150,
Long Side Table BHT-800S,
Clothing Rack Table BHT-830

the surface of the system by remote control. Not for nothing do the lords of techno-feudalism dream of conquering new worlds.³ The ascendant sovereign does not have to move; they are always already everywhere by networked proxy, influential but obscure. The shell externalizes their volition. Indeed, it is a precondition for the emergence of certain desires, supplying technical support for a particular kind and scale of human *being*: a scaffold for ambitions that cannot be extracted from its edifice and atmosphere without losing viability. A hard nut to crack.

Another dream: In medieval England, an anchorite was a person (usually a woman) who was bricked into a small cell attached to a church (known as an “anchorhold”), to pass the rest of her life in intense prayer and contemplation.⁴ Having received the funeral office from a priest just prior to enclosure, such persons were considered dead to the world.⁵ Typically, their cells contained three small apertures: the first allowing for waste export and the receipt of food and water. Another, covered by an opaque veil, would let in air from outside. The last, at eye level, known as a “hagioscope,” afforded a view of Mass and the partake of Eucharist when its shutter was opened. Within this living tomb, the inhabitant sought visitation from angels and God. Thus, the anchorhold was an architectural focusing device for divine light and religious illumination. Though locked in, the anchorite’s dream was to have her life enlarged through communion with an infinite being, a goal pursued not despite the cell’s physical shell but *through* it.

Today, we can discern a secular parallel in the phenomenon of *hikikomori*—a Japanese term that describes the acute social withdrawal, isolation, and confinement of shut-ins, whose only significant connection to the outside world is through the Internet and video games.⁶ Like the anchorites, they trade physical mobility for concentration on a seemingly infinite dimension—the virtual scene. In so doing, they exemplify the enticement of the screen as hagioscopic aperture; the promise of rebirth in multiplayer game worlds and social media platforms; the scroll’s endless horizon; limitless hyperlinks; felicitous visitation by suggested content; and home delivery. They are avatars for a broader social fantasy that seeks virtual replacement for life beyond the hearth.⁷

Were it not that I have bad dreams... But they arrive. “I am thinking of those nights,” wrote Kafka, “at the end of which, having come out of sleep, I awakened with the sensation that I had been shut up inside a walnut shell.”⁸ Against the promise of unlimited extension and remote