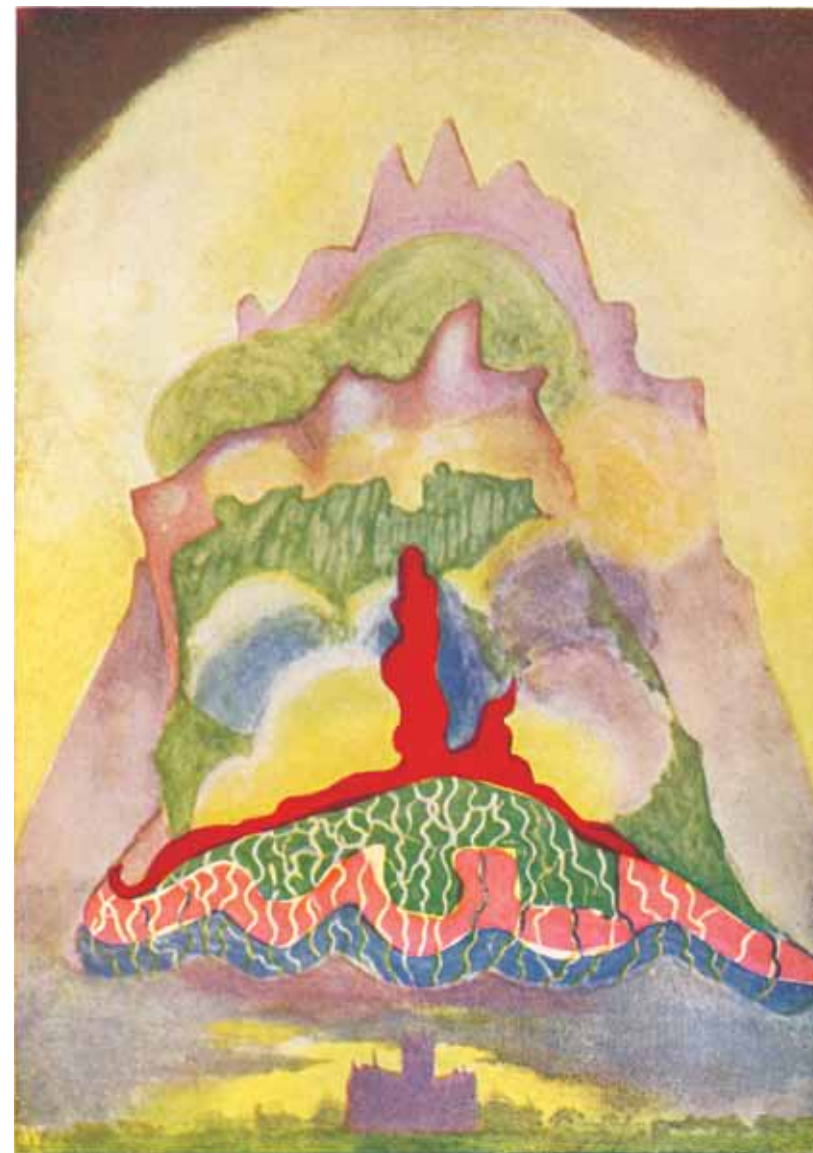


Ablaze with the Fires of Matter

Lea Porsager

Ablaze with the Fires of Matter

A symbolically authentic non-Euclidean conversation between



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attitudes towards institutional or traditional religion. An analysis of the role that communities such as Monte Verità played in all these fields frequently shows a rather liberal, progressive pattern that strongly contrasts with the widespread image of esotericism as an epiphenomenon of fascism. Alternative spiritual or esoteric movements often acted as a factor in social and cultural innovation, and sometimes anticipated changes that would affect society at large only later and at a slower pace. We cannot enter into too many details about this point here, but I would only emphasize that this is an important background for understanding some aspects of your work, since it is so closely related to the history of and the physical places at Monte Verità.

And I do think it is possible to see several elements that have been picked up by you from the original experience of Monte Verità and that are being re-actualized, also through the mediation of Harald Szeemann's interpretation. Gender issues, the body, sexuality, the exploration of the self: these are all elements that seem quite prominent in your work.

Now, the question might be, why should this have anything to do with a contemporary artistic discourse? Maybe this has to do with the constant attempt of contemporary art to transcend itself. I mean its constant dialectical attempt to transcend its own boundaries and push them further and further, in order to capture new, unexplored territories of cultural meaning. The question, in fact, applies not only to the single artist, but also to the superstructure of the artistic establishment: how can an artistic work be meaningful not just in a narrowly "traditional" artistic sense, but also in a broader cultural and social sense? Now, in the present political and economic circumstances, the answer to this question can have far-reaching consequences. In any case, this is why "experimentation" has always been an important component of the identity of contemporary art. There seem to be no real limits to the range of experimentation, and it is only natural that this would include items such as the "exploration of the self", or alternative models of society, politics, and sexuality. It is in this context that the legacy of "illuminate" revolutionaries from the turn of the twentieth century—of these nudists, vegetarians, Theosophists, occultists, and anarchists—can be revived and transposed into new frameworks of artistic discourse, as is the case with your *Anatta Experiment*.

This leads me to a general remark about a phenomenon that has been visibly emerging in the last few years in contemporary art, and in which I have been increasingly interested. I am referring to a certain curiosity about and fascination with esoteric, mystical, and occult themes, which is also so present in your work. Now, why is this phenomenon manifesting itself? It is not easy to give an answer and I wonder if enough thinking has been devoted to it. I would say that the trend probably started around ten years ago, and it has been growing since. There can certainly be different interpretations. Perhaps it could be seen as a kind of resistance to the disenchantment of the world and as a longing for re-enchantment. It would then be an attempt to rediscover a kind of magic that is felt to have got lost in the sheer materiality and triviality of our secularized lives, and a desire to find alternative dimensions in a much too monotonous reality. Now, in looking at this material, but more specifically at your work, one question I was asking myself was: if I were an artist interested in this kind of material, what could I do with it? I am of course talking about material related to mysticism, esotericism, or alternative religious traditions more generally. Well, some artists are treating it as a source for archival explorations. This seems to be the case, at least to a certain extent, and to mention just one example, with Joachim Koester. This kind of "documentary" choice, which by the way does not exclude forms of reinterpretation and re-contextualization, implies a certain degree of distance from the material itself. The material is displayed, pictured, even decomposed, analysed and explained, but the artist himself does not really seem to engage personally with it. Now, it seems to me that something different is going on with you. I see a different kind of approach to this material, partly because there is a kind of self-performative element, to which the installation and the film presented in Kassel bear witness.

Ablaze with the Fires of Matter

A symbolically authentic non-Euclidean conversation between Marco Pasi and Lea Porsager about her two weirdly related works: *Anatta Experiment* (2012) and *How to Program and Use T-F* (2013)

Edited by Synnøve B. Brøgger

Anatta Experiment (2012)

MP: First of all, I would like to make some general comments. I should say at the outset that I am more an historian of esotericism than an art critic or an art historian. In this respect, the reference to Monte Verità in your work is particularly intriguing for me. At the turn of the twentieth century, Monte Verità was part of a larger galaxy of communities, groups, and movements. If we want to borrow the term used by James Webb, an important historian of these movements, we might call it an “illuminate” galaxy. Now, what was the cultural value of this phenomenon? I think it is even more important to ask this question if we consider the way in which esotericism has been perceived from a political point of view (and I will return to this point later), also considering that your work has been presented in a city like Kassel, where the traces of the Second World War are still so visible and present, as in many other German cities. In a short essay entitled “The Modernity of Occultism” I wrote some time ago that, in order to fairly assess the cultural legacy of these heterodox and alternative spiritual movements, we also have to consider aspects where they acted as an enzyme of creative experimentation and progress. These aspects, or fields, are: gender relations and feminism; attitudes towards the body and sexuality; concepts of the self; imperialism, orientalism and attitudes towards cultural alterity; and attitudes towards institutional or traditional religion. An analysis of the role that communities such as Monte Verità played in all these fields frequently shows a rather liberal, progressive pattern that strongly contrasts with the widespread image of esotericism as an epiphenomenon of fascism. Alternative spiritual or esoteric movements often acted as a factor in social and cultural innovation, and sometimes anticipated changes that would affect society at large only later and at a slower pace. We cannot enter into too many details about this point here, but I would only emphasize that this is an important background for understanding some aspects of your work, since it is so closely related to the history of and the physical places at Monte Verità.

No one who has devoted any study to these musical forms would hesitate in ascribing the marvellous mountain-range depicted in Plate W to the genius of Richard Wagner, for no other composer has yet built sound edifices with such power and decision. In this case we have a vast bell-shaped erection, fully nine hundred feet in height, and but little less in diameter at the bottom, floating in the air above the church out of which it has arisen.

PLATE W. (MUSIC OF WAGNER),
Annie Besant & C. W. Leadbeater,
Thought Forms, Quest Books, Wheaton, Ill., 1901.

And I do think it is possible to see several elements that have been picked up by you from the original experience of Monte Verità and that are being re-actualized, also through the mediation of Harald Szeemann’s interpretation. Gender issues, the body, sexuality, the exploration of the self: these are all elements that seem quite prominent in your work.

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But there is another element that I think is very important and very conspicuous for me—also because of my particular background. It is a certain kind of creative approach that you have to the material. You use the material as a kind of palimpsest, and are basically doing what other esoterically-minded people have been doing with it before you. You actually create something new and original, not just in an artistic sense, which would of course be interesting enough, but also from an “esoteric” point of view. And this is where it gets a bit tricky perhaps. If I look at what you are doing with this material, it seems to me that you are putting together elements from different sources, different traditions, different movements, different currents. What you get in the end is a kind of new discourse, a new text that can be interpreted as an artistic gesture, but also as an esoteric gesture. And I would not be surprised if the kind of material that you have produced—the texts, the film, the objects—were to be used, for instance, by a new esoteric group. Now, this would surely be an interesting development. If you are at all familiar with the world of new religious movements, you will be aware that, in fact, this would not be an exception, because it happens all the time. It happens all the time that the starting point for a new religion is something that was not produced with the intention of creating a new religion. Would this be a problem? I don’t know for sure, but the point is that once the work is there—as with any text in general—anybody can do whatever he likes with it. Both in terms of interpretation and re-actualization of it. And then the other element which I think is very interesting is a certain kind of inspired tone which you use in your texts. If I read the text you have produced to accompany the Anatta project in Kassel, titled “Lebensreform, Triangular Attitudes and Mountain-sized Truths”, I can see a tone that is far from being “distant” or “aseptic”. Again, this might be used in a religious context, not just an artistic one:

“Love is the Law, Love under Will”

In the Sun, in Planets, in Humans, and in the Atom there exists a flame, a cavern of fire, a nucleus of heat. 7 friends on the Mountain of Truth, 7 egoic spheres ablaze with the Fire of Matter enter Strukturmutter’s wooden ark, her abstract triangles and palmate cunt-flower, on an obscure quest for the hidden eggs of *Anatta* [the Buddhist notion of “not I”, “not mine”]. Conducted by the coiling rays of the Sun, the 7 spheres rushed into Mutter’s index-body, revolving around, within and forward, slamming into her 7 planes of cosmic-physical realization. Under Mutter’s scrutinizing gaze, they dragged the thought-forms of LEBENSREFORM and its Group Perfection through the denser planes of *doing*. Thought-forms that, when confronted with the fleshy spheres of matter, became more like electrified sludge, not resembling eggs at all. The 7 geometrically inept spheres shifted and stirred, reorganized and regrouped in an awkward staging of an act that indeed was not an act, but a venereal plunge into lameness. [...]

Well, this is certainly a kind of inspired, poetic language that is not meant to “explain” or “illustrate” the work, but rather to enhance the aura of mystery that surrounds it and increase, using Bourdieu’s term, its “symbolic capital”. As the historian of religions Hugh Urban has shown, esotericists and occultists use

this strategy, consciously or not, all the time. It is in fact a significant aspect of the social behavior of esotericism. These are just a few general considerations that I wanted to mention about your work. Now perhaps I would like to focus with you on more specific aspects that intrigue me. The first one concerns sexuality, because this is an element that is very much present, at least implicitly if one reads between the lines of your text, but it is also manifested in the film. In the text you make a reference to Tantra. Now, as far as I know in the Indian tradition of Tantra, the idea of the polarity of sexes, the masculine versus the feminine, is quite important. And the persons you invited to participate in the *Anatta Experiment* were all women. This by the way also reminds me of another historical precedent, because it sounds so similar to what the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint was doing around the time when Monte Verità was being established, the early years of the twentieth century. In fact she had a group composed only of women, with whom she held spiritualist seances and other kinds of group work. It was called the “Group of Five”, because that’s how many they were. And I believe that later the number varied, and they became seven, as in your Anatta project. Now, the question is, how does an all-female group relate to, or possibly conflict with, the traditional tantric idea of polarity, since men were completely excluded from the situation?

LP: Hm. I guess it never felt like masculinity was excluded, considering that male energy was very much present on the mountain and in the source material itself. When I researched Monte Verità it was from the male figures that I got the most information. The Mountain of Truth is in itself an erected gesture of some kind. You have to stay on top of it and from there work your way down to the female energy which is way less talkative in the archive. In fact, the overexposure to male figures in the research material inspired a lot of male elements. On certain days my friends wore hats or erected elements on their heads—a reference to Hugo Ball—and they talked about literally feeling as if they were penises; that these props helped them get that *rising* feeling. So tantrically speaking there was actually a need for a feminine counterpart. But it is true, it could have been interesting to include men, and I also thought about it at the beginning—about what would happen if I did an experiment with both sexes. We would most likely have had to spend a lot more time dealing with sexual tensions, and I don’t know if it was that aspect of sexuality I was interested in. And if you go back in time to the pre-hippy nudity era on Monte Verità, they had separate areas for women and men. I think it felt right for the experiment to be just women when the decision to use Strukturmutter as an entrance point had been made. And that was Szeemann’s idea! In many ways, having it as a women-only group actually terrified me. I feared that if I stayed on the surface, the woman-thing would become a feminist cliché—this blunt, matriarchal, Goddess-cultic statement about women’s superior connectedness to nature and so on. In the post-production of Anatta it therefore became very important for me to take both the concept of Strukturmutter and the seven women themselves to a whole other level, one of geometrical-cosmical dimensions. And I do think that the intimacy that can exist among women is quite extraordinary, as may also be the case in all-male groups. There is a lot of accumulative energy.

MP: Well, the Multi-Breasted Monstrosity [the *Anatta Experiment* version of Szeemann’s Strukturmutter] makes you

think of a form of “excessive” femininity that might relate to masculinity in that particular way, I mean a single woman leading a group of men into this kind of experiment. Another question I was thinking about is the problem of consciousness. The performative element is in fact very important in this work. There is clearly a direct personal experience where you are pushing boundaries to the limit: group boundaries, but also boundaries of consciousness. This appears to be related to certain practices to which you refer in the text, but which you don’t explain exactly. So it is difficult to say what was going on. If you just watch the film it is hard to have a clear picture of the situation. I also remember that during our meeting in Kassel, somebody from the audience said that you used all your talent to cut the scenes in the film exactly the moment before the meaning of the situation would become clear. You always stayed behind a kind of hermeneutical climax, which I find a very interesting aesthetic choice. The result is quite impressionistic. You get the feeling or the impression of a situation, but you don’t understand exactly what is the sequence, where this is coming from or what this is eventually leading to. Now, the problem of consciousness affects the very title of your work, the “Anatta Experiment”. As you know of course—also because you refer to it in the text I have quoted earlier—in the Buddhist tradition *anatta* refers to the conscious realization that all that belongs to material reality is not really a part of yourself. You should not identify yourself with any particular “object”, and interestingly enough this relates also to your own body, which is external to your true self like any other object. Experiencing the body as a part of yourself is a subjective experience of reality that is in fact only an illusion. Now, in order to overcome the resistances that this kind of thought naturally produces in human beings, and to strip your perception of reality of all its illusions, you would normally need years of spiritual training, with the guidance of a master or of a person who has already gone farther than you along the path of illumination. So, I wonder how you dealt with this problem, also considering that the experiment was meant to last only a very limited amount of time. How were you able to construct this exploration of the *self*? And what was the actual goal of the experiment for you?

LP: It is very hard to say if we managed to do any of that. But I think Strukturmutter, the concept of the mother and the seven levels we went through, were very much devices, ways to structure oneself out of one’s *self*, if that makes sense. So I think that sometimes you need to have something to focus on, or at least have *something* ... I don’t know how to put this, but you need to *do* something. I can’t just say “O my friends, come and be not-yourself and not-identified with who you normally are”. I think that would be impossible. People would not know where to start. Try to be *not* yourself? That would be quite difficult. So there had to be some sort of vessel, a fiction of some sort to support that movement.

MP: But it wasn’t a random process, right? You were using some specific techniques?

LP: In a way, yes. The experiment was guided by an index—a seven-levelled system of spiritual enlightenment in Theosophy. The seven chakras of the body were also an inspiration. Each level corresponded to one of the seven days of the experiment. You might say that this created a schedule, if a loose one. The experiment conductor converted some of these

abstract devices and turned them into processes we could move through each day, because I was not sure I could do that myself. That’s very much how Strukturmutter herself sort of came to embody the Theosophical index.

MP: Was it important for you to have this extra person, the conductor?

LP: Yes, I think that otherwise I would not have been able to go as far as we did. It would have become something else. I wanted it to be a bodily experience, and I think that as soon as you work with something that goes beyond, like, “let’s sit and talk and try to analyze each other”, things start to happen on a whole other level. And the people in the group were all my friends and I think it was important to have somebody from the outside on the inside, so to speak. So the ones on the inside could go outside, or deeper inside. Who knows how this really works.

MP: It seems to me that you created a structure before and then a structure afterwards. I mean, the structure before consisted of exercises, where you let it go—or at least you try—with all these bodily activities. And then structurally back in the moment when you started to edit the film.

LP: Very true. It makes me think of a concept Lars Bang Larsen discusses in an essay he wrote for the congress [Anational Congress of the Multi-Breasted Monstrosity, Kassel, 26 July, 2012]. I’ve started using these terms myself. He talks about *doing* and *un-doing*. If the experiment itself was the *doing*, then I guess the *un-doing* part of the experiment was the development of the installation, the text you quoted earlier and the edit of the film. The process of finding the fiction that comes as close as possible to giving some visibility to the ultimate reality of the material. In my case, that often seems to involve making a lot of stuff invisible.

MP: I can assume it was a very personal experience, because as the director of the experiment you dealt with every aspect. So, how much were you affected by these bodily experiences, and also by your relationship with these friends of yours? From the film I think one can see that these practices were having concrete effects—you can feel it—but as you said yourself, what really went on remains invisible and unspoken.

LP: I see it a little bit as a mutated version of the *Theatre of Cruelty*, in the sense that there is something extremely, let’s say *real* about it. And it stays real, I mean, in the finished work. And then at the same time, I think the film looks very fictional. It must be a by-product of the aforementioned alchemy of *undoing*, some trick of the eye when playing with the shine that images give off when cut loose from individual mythology. I don’t know. But the actual events are imprinted on the material. To me the experience of being in Casa Anatta with my friends is still very much present.

MP: This is so interesting. It makes me think of René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue*. The story is about a mountain that is very different from Monte Verità, even if the metaphor points to similar aspects. Mount Analogue is the symbol of impossibility, of an immanent transcendence that we can only find absurd, and yet without which our life loses much of its

sense. This is made clear in a key passage in the book, where the protagonist, who to some extent is Daumal himself, says: “I was feeling that something deep inside of me, in spite of everything, had to believe firmly in the existence of Mount Analogue.” In fact Mount Analogue stands here for the sacred mountain of many different religious traditions, which is supposed to be the centre of the world. It is a legend, a myth, and a modern man should therefore dismiss it. And yet, the need to believe in its reality, even in its materiality—because in the story Mount Analogue is a real mountain that you can actually climb, not just a spiritual concept—can never be entirely extinguished.

Let’s get back now for a moment to politics. As I said at the beginning, we all know that there has been for quite a while, and there still is today in many quarters, a typical cultural resistance towards esotericism, occultism and related phenomena. It is often a resistance that takes on a political aspect. Part of it is based on historical considerations, claiming that esotericism had a strong relation with fascism. The implication is that there must be some common ideological traits between the two. Even when a possible relation with fascism is not emphasized, still you frequently have the idea that esoteric beliefs or ideas make you disconnect from reality. If you get too much into this stuff, then you lose contact with social or political problems. Because you live in a world of myth, you become insensitive to important issues such as exploitation, oppression, alienation. But then, when you look at Monte Verità and at what these people were doing, you seem to get a totally different picture. Without idealizing it too much, it is hard not to see Monte Verità also as a social, and even political, experiment. Many of the residents were actually anarchists, and it is no accident that authors such as Martin Green have described it as one of the historical roots of the counterculture of the 1960s. The residents of Monte Verità were trying to explore alternative visions of reality, but also of society. They wanted to experiment with alternative understandings of human relationships and with non-exploitative ways of living together. Whether they were successful is another matter, of course. So how important is the political dimension for you? Do you see your work also as a political statement in any way?

LP: Yes, or I hope so. I mean, anything political is problematic, so it is difficult not to be problematic. It’s problematic that eleven people went to Switzerland for this experiment, if you think about climate change and the environmental strain. It could have been done in a more eco-friendly way. There are a lot of things that aren’t exactly right to do. But I think that what I am interested in always involves some kind of transgressive behavior. It comes down to the relationship between me, people and things. Being together with my friends for a week on Monte Verità told me a lot about politics. And then of course the politics of undoing the whole thing afterwards—the power of the image, the supremacy of form. The mountain itself, heavy with politics—Theosophy, occultism, anarchism—and people like Rudolf von Laban, who performed wild rituals with his dance group on Monte Verità and then went on to work for the Nazis. Again, there is this link between spirituality, spiritual movements and fascism that you also talk about in your work. Misused, *anatta* can turn into fascism on a dime—the dark side of surrendering to *not me, not I*—ultimately just exchanging the individual ego for a collective one. And I think we all felt these ... conflicting impulses while we were working. The presence of tension, sometimes even violence. The inability

to observe one’s own or another’s expression without judgement—the seeds of oppression, I guess. But at the same time, this was intertwined with all the other things—empathy, love, laughter, intimacy. Respect and caring.

The connectedness that arises when people interact while in their *matter-ness* is a different kind of connectedness from the one achieved solely in the realm of thought-forms. And this difference is somehow connected to the role of the T-F 3 in *How to Program and Use T-F*. The point that anywhere matter is involved, there will be tension and resistance and laws like gravity to deal with. But out of that tension, great intimacy can transpire. Not in spite of—but because of—its limitations. In a way, the T-F 3 feed off the very same Fires of Matter that my friends embodied in the *Anatta Experiment*.

How to Program and Use T-F (2013)

MP: OK, let’s focus first on a few general aspects. Why *thought-forms*? Why is this concept so interesting and powerful for you?

LP: Again, it’s been on my mind for a long time. It just continued to come back to me, this idea that a thought has form. In visual art it has been used by many artists. It’s just a very powerful notion. That somebody else can see thought-forms around you when you are thinking about something specific, or that you are more susceptible to certain forms than others. For me, it was also the meeting ... I went on this dOCUMENTA retreat to Banff in Canada, and there was a philosopher, Catherine Malabou, who talked about how the brain has changed, how flexible the brain is.

MP: The brain has changed compared to when?

LP: It’s just constantly changing. Malabou talks about the plasticity of the brain and how this hyper-flexibility can easily lend itself to whatever form the ruling system demands. In that sense, our thoughts have become less resistant. It is as if we adapt into systems without the will and/or ability to say no. Our brains are constantly being influenced and formed by outside forces, and how do we escape that? As I understood it, she suggests that the space of fiction might propose a way out. This is probably a bad paraphrasing of what she said, but it was very inspiring. When I re-visited Besant and Leadbeater’s book on thought-forms [*Thought Forms*, 1901], I realized that I have always felt them to be more sculptural, and not so much these watercolor paintings. I don’t know if it has anything to do with our brains’ sculpting ability, but I found it fascinating to think about thought-forms as being sculptures flying around our bodies. Then, after returning from Canada I saw this Google live recording of the global satellite grid. They are all over, the satellites. They’re just ... they look like a hive of bees swarming around the earth. And I felt that it was interesting to think about how these communication matrixes in our atmosphere affect the behavior of thought-forms. I just ... I found it relevant to search for new thought-forms, thought-forms that might have an intrinsic resistance to surrounding systems. There’s this video on YouTube showing a map of the world’s satellite grid. You should watch it, it’s really scary.

MP: Yes, I would be curious to see it. It is fascinating that they go their way without colliding with each other.

LP: Yeah, it’s a whole science. Also because there are so many of them that are damaged. So there’s just all this garbage in space.

MP: Space rubbish, I love that! So in Banff you had this idea—this is where you decided to make a specific work about thought-forms?

LP: While I was doing *Celestial Body* and the *Anatta Experiment*, the concept of thought-forms was present all the time, so I just thought, “OK, now I give them my full attention, now I go into it.” So thought-forms have been there since, well, 2008. In all my pieces. Not only is the book by Besant and Leadbeater very strong visually; there is also an element of control that I find interesting. How a thought-form can be deemed “bad” or “good”.

MP: There is something very general that strikes me about thought-forms. Besant and Leadbeater were extremely successful with this idea, and the reason is quite clear. They just conceptualized something that has always been around. Because the basic idea is how you give shape to your thoughts, a shape that tends toward visibility. So, this is a kind of objectivization of thought, in the sense that something that you produce only with your mind can be shared by others. Maybe we can think a little bit about that. But first there is something more general that I wanted to mention. And it’s the fact that this idea of objectivization of thought is in fact the key to all magic. What is magic really *but* the objectivization of thought? Magic is based on the power of imagination. When you read theories of magic—not just modern theories but theories from the Renaissance and even earlier— you see that there is such a strong connection to imagination. But, of course, imagination is not understood here as fantasy, in the sense of producing images that are just in your mind and don’t exist in any objective reality. Imagination is understood as something that can give shape to or manipulate reality. Something that can interact directly with the outer world. So I think this is very close to the concept of thought-forms. But the interesting point is that Besant and Leadbeater presented this concept in a way that could be of particular interest to artists. The relationship between art and magic has always been around after all, and is not really a discovery of contemporary art; for the simple reason that art and magic are both based on the same powerful principle, which is imagination. And in art, imagination produces very solid effects as well. I see a very strong relationship between the two, and this, perhaps, is one of the possible ways to approach this particular piece of yours.

And then of course there is still the other problem, which we might call the sinister side of the idea of thought-forms. A friend of mine, John Crow, who is now writing a PhD dissertation on Theosophy, religion and the body, has recently presented an interesting paper on thought-forms at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion. John focuses on an aspect that, as far as I can see, has been neglected by historians and critics so far. Understandably, scholars have mostly been interested in the influence of the concept of thought-forms on art. But John focuses on another aspect, which is the fact that thought-forms could also be used in the context of the Theosophical Society as a tool to discipline and to exert power over other persons. Why? Well, because if you are a leader of the organization and claim to have the clairvoyant ability to see

the thought-forms of other people, then, of course, what happens is that ...

LP: ... you have the power.

MP: Yes, you have the power over them. Because thought-forms usually correspond to your inner feelings and emotions. In the context of Theosophy you are supposed to attain a certain degree of control over them. Now, if someone can see your thought-forms, he is also able to tell whether you are successful in disciplining your emotions and your feelings, and especially negative feelings such as anger, envy, lust. Knowing that someone can have access to your emotions may create anxiety, and will push you to discipline the emotional side of your personality even further. So, thought-forms show themselves here in a different light that is perhaps less immediately positive than the usual one.

LP: Yeah, as with Monte Verità, it’s really interesting how organized spirituality has these sinister aspects. Abuse of power, mind control etc.

MP: Absolutely. Now, can you tell me something about the actual thought-forms that appear in your work? I see that there are different kinds of them: T-F 1, T-F 2, T-F 3 ...

LP: T-F 1, T-F 2, T-F 3 are categories of thought-forms introduced by Besant and Leadbeater. Apparently, T-F 1 had to do with the projection of one’s self into the world. In *How to Program and Use T-F* they appear on the floor as a series of photographs that sort of constitute the solar panels of a satellite. T-F 2 has to do with old thoughts continuously being reproduced in the present, and they appear as the other series of photographs. They too are arranged like the solar panels of a satellite. In *Thought Forms*, I believe Besant and Leadbeater describe T-F 2 as ... I think they use the image of an author, writing, and then a dead author’s idea will suddenly plant itself into his or her script.

MP: In the text that accompanies the work the two first lines refer to T-F 1 T-F 2, but I am intrigued by the fact that they are crossed out. Why is that?

LP: It has to do with not wanting to draw too much attention to them, but merely having them point to where the actual focus is, which is the T-F 3. The lines also structurally resemble the lines that run through both satellites. In the beginning, I thought about having texts on them, but I found I wanted them to stay more open. They are mostly there to give T-F 3 something to be *other* than—be opposed to.

MP: And what about T-F 3?

LP: In *Thought Forms*, T-F 1 and T-F 2 are believed to be the most common but least important. According to Besant and Leadbeater T-F 3 are observable forms that can be glimpsed by *seers*, and all the illustrations in the book are of T-F 3—visual representations of those glimpses. Emotions belong to this category of thought-forms. This is where my work departs from Besant and Leadbeater, who identified T-F 3 as belonging strictly to the astral plane. In *How to Program and Use T-F* these T-F 3 have mutated and become resistant.

They’re iron and bronze and they’re *here*. They are the physical manifestations of thoughts and they are impervious to analysis. In *How to Program and Use T-F* all the physical thought-forms are resistant T-F 3. They are not convertible. They need to be here in physical form. Like this. They are unfit for the constant flow of communication, they defy the grid. And that is why I describe them as a kind of shell—that you can hold and in a way protect yourself. T-F 3, the silent speaker. The new thought-forms I went looking for happened to be solid. Today, we are so much in the field of thoughts. The field of transmission.

MP: ... of connectedness.

LP: Exactly. And how can we mobilize some *resistance* to this? I believe that matter may be key to that.

MP: It’s interesting, I think I had misunderstood the work at the beginning. For some reason I thought that T-F 3 did not have matter.

LP: No, no. T-F 3 are objects, they are *really* matter. That’s what makes them different from Besant and Leadbeater’s T-F 3. It is because of their *matter-ness* that they are resistant. They have become forms, specific to themselves and impenetrable.

MP: I understand. Now, this is how misunderstandings sometimes become interesting. In the history of esotericism you have an infinite number of them.

LP: I can imagine! New concepts born out of misunderstandings.

MP: Absolutely. Most of the creativity in esotericism comes through misunderstandings, actually. Now, what I had understood was that T-F 3 was something that did *not* take shape and could *not* take shape. Something that would not become visible. So, something whose presence would remain totally virtual. That is why I thought that they would always be with you wherever you went.

LP: Actually, I believe you can produce them and have others use them. But they will forever remain themselves.

MP: The interesting thing is that one day you are perhaps going to separate yourself from them and they will go into the hands of other people. You think they will continue to have the same function of resistance?

LP: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I’ve already tried to have somebody sit with it, just hold it, and apparently it had an effect. If you look at the text from the work, the concept of *cool thinking* is very much related to T-F 3. But again, that kind of thinking has its dangers, too. It might become too cool. I mean, if you are not flexible—not willing to be influenced or changed by existence—you are identified with a totalitarian state of mind. But I do think there is some kind of need right now for encouragement from something that is resistant and does not submit to all kinds of fluctuations.

MP: I like this idea of resistance. And I wonder if it has also something to do with a point that I raised when we were talking about the *Anatta Experiment*. I am referring to an attempt

at creating a narrative, or an artistic discourse, that resists disenchantment. I know this moves away from the way you presented your concept of resistance, but maybe the two aspects are not totally unrelated. In order to preserve an aura of fascination and to elude our consciousness or our ability to deconstruct what we see, you need to craft and present your story in a certain way. So the resistance is maybe also the resistance to the disappearance of mystery. You want to cut out a space of reality that cannot be deconstructed entirely, that cannot be understood completely. A space of reality that cannot be seen with the eyes of flesh, but only with the “eyes of fire”, as Henry Corbin put it.

LP: Yes. For me, it is something you decide to believe in—not as in religion or in politics—but as a commitment to an open mind. A willingness to slip into wormholes, murky worlds and universes of abstractions and sensitivities. I think I’ve just realized that sometimes you need iron or some other sovereign element to give some shelter to those tiny little human torches.

MP: Let’s see. The T-F Programmer in the text. That is you, right?

LP: Yeah, you could say that.

MP: So, who is the Cyber Pioneer?

LP: He’s the clairvoyant. The seer. Somehow, I’ve connected him with cyberspace. The Cyber Pioneer sort of became the facilitator of the darker aspect of “connectedness”.

MP: But is this an actual person you’ve met?

LP: Yes. But in the text he has been overwritten. Or fictionalized.

MP: So you met the seer, as if the seer was a representative of what Besant and Leadbeater did a hundred years ago?

LP: Yeah.

MP: May I ask you what kind of seer he was? What kind of powers did he have?

LP: Actually, I’m not sure. They called him clairvoyant, and I also felt that he was. I mean, there was a language barrier. He was Lithuanian, there was an interpreter present, he talked a lot, mostly about other things than my specific thought-form questions. But he was skilled.

MP: Speaking of disenchantment, are you comfortable with talking about this story, now, with me, knowing that it might become part of a publication?

LP: Yeah. I mean, it’s not a secret that I went to see a clairvoyant. But it’s not necessarily important for the work, either. It’s the *doing* and *undoing* thing all over again with the clairvoyant as the entry point. I’m not ... It’s the same as with the *Anatta Experiment*. A lot of stuff went on there, and the more private aspects of what we did exist in the work as undercurrents, as energies and atmospheres on which strategies—conflicting narratives, fictions, stories, I don’t know what to call

them—are built. The point of these fictions is not to keep reality a secret. To me, it’s the complete opposite. The *doing* is the catapult. The fact that the basic events are real—that they happened, that they left a mark—is what makes it possible to take flight. Not to get away from reality, to escape it or anything like that. But to transgress it. And in order to do so, something has to be *done*. Then, the *undoing* part is the weird alchemical labour in which Artemis transmutes into a seven-levelled geometrical multi-breasted monstrosity, friends turn into spheres and a nice clairvoyant man mutates into a shady Cyber Pioneer. Maybe you could call *undoing* some kind of “enchantmentification” process. To me, *undoing* has to do with ... I guess, making the *doing* resistant to individual mythologies and their restrictions on “what happened”. And in doing so, maybe even facilitating voices or gestures from other realms, other layers of reality or truth—from space itself.

MP: So what is the connection between the clairvoyant and the T-F 3?

LP: It comes back to needing a device, a catapult and a point of take-off. The nice Lithuanian man actually helped my imagination along and in some weird way he succeeded in disenchanting my “normal” thoughts, creating space for T-F 3 to land safely. The fact that T-F 3 later became resistant to the very man that assisted their birth is merely due to the T-F 3 being true to their own supreme nature. T-F 3 are not very polite. Or pleasing. They became his *undoing*, so to speak. And from that point on he was the Cyber Pioneer.

MP: Now, to move on to another point, why do you conclude your text with a reference to a “sturdy mental explosion”? What is it?

LP: In a way, I think it has more to do with potential. That there is also some kind of explosion that could happen. The way that these thought-forms are shells and somehow also weapons. There is something uncontrollable about them, because they are immune to judgement.

MP: So there’s an ambiguity attached to them.

LP: Yes, exactly.

MP: Now that I see the boomerang-shaped T-F 3 in your hands it makes me think that the shape is familiar, but at the same time I cannot really relate it to something specific, and especially not to the book by Besant and Leadbeater. On the other hand, I believe that something close to the other form of T-F 3, the bullet-shaped one, is in their book ...

LP: Yeah, that’s true.

MP: As I said, the boomerang-shaped T-F 3 looks familiar, so maybe I’m missing something ... Can you tell me something about it?

LP: The first thing I did after my session with the clairvoyant was just to make them in clay. I agree that the one in iron has this kind of bullet-shape that you also see a version of somewhere in *Thought Forms*, though not in three dimensions.

MP: But, this was intended, or you found out afterwards?

LP: Again, it’s hard to tell what’s what, because I have seen Besant and Leadbeater’s pictures so many times ... But these were the ones that sort of fell into my lap in my vision.

MP: Actually, in *Thought-Forms*, the bullet refers to an “upward rush to devotion”.

LP: Yeah, although I think it’s a little more ... I don’t know, I think it’s colder, somehow.

MP: Not so hot with devotion, then.

LP: No. No, I don’t think so. In my vision, the bullet was kind of in the distance. Hovering. It was further away, and, now that it’s made, it’s ... ten kilograms, or something. It’s really heavy. Ten kilos worth of “cool” thought.

MP: But what about the boomerang-shaped one then? Where is it coming from? I mean the shape?

LP: I’m really not sure. While I was making the form in clay, I felt that I could not be precise enough with it. The smoothness. So I got a good friend of mine to make it in wood. Afterwards we had it made in bronze. I think that Besant and Leadbeater’s thought-forms are very beautiful, and I love them very much, but it was important for me to keep this idea in mind that if our brains might have changed during the last hundred years, our thoughts might have changed, too. And if our thoughts have changed, so have our needs and demands. And a change in demand could also mean a change in supply. It was with this openness of mind I went to the clairvoyant, hoping to discover thought-forms not defined by Besant and Leadbeater’s book.

MP: Right. Well, I think this is perfectly consistent with how the book has influenced the world of art from the moment of its publication, in the sense that it is absolutely logical that artists did not take the book and just copy from it. But rather took the process of producing these images as a model. And in the process of course you constantly obtain different results. What is more interesting in the whole story about thought-forms is not the images themselves, but rather how you get to the images, and what the images do. I think that’s more important.

LP: Exactly.

MP: In the title you use an interesting formulation: “How to *program*”. Why do you think you can program thought-forms? The idea of “programming” has all sorts of associations, especially informatics of course, and seems to point more generally to something that has a specific computational technique to it. In that sense, it doesn’t sound like a mystical or spiritual revelation, it’s not something that takes shape all of a sudden. I mean, programming makes you think of something that goes in steps, like constructing something with building blocks. So it’s not something you receive in your mind with a definite shape and which is ready to use.

LP: True. I was playing with a notion I have that all thought-forms and concepts, like mindfulness for instance, are highly programmed. There is an irony to it. How to program your *self*, how to program your mind and use it correctly. To become more efficient, more productive as a worker or what-not. Corporations put employees through courses in mindfulness in order to maximize performance. In the text, I become the Programmer who calls on the Cyber Pioneer—very much in the spirit of wanting to program something, wanting to produce. And then somehow, it fails. Something very material, very much resistant to being programmed comes out instead. Does that make sense?

MP: Absolutely. But that also means that what you have with T-F 3 is not really a result of programming.

LP: No, it isn't.

MP: Right. That is an important point, because I understand more clearly now that the title includes this critical aspect—a kind of culture criticism.

LP: Yeah. Today we are sitting in front of our computers, programming our lives. All the time out there, projecting ourselves into the world. Away from matter. And I think it's interesting, because a lot of spiritual ideas are based on wanting to get away from matter. You want to be uplifted and freed from your body. But the way we use it today is more like ... we morph into 1-0-0-1-0's that can be flung through cyberspace. For me, the profile hell of *online-ness* relates more to T-F 1—this incessant projection of egoic selves connecting with other projections of other egoic selves. The photographs on the T-F 1 satellite display my personal hard-drives, placed in different Malevich-like constellations. All 12 TB of my transportable artsy thought-forms. But what if the absence of matter is in danger of inducing a carelessness of some sort, with the spark of life getting lost in some kind of cerebral haze? Come to think of it, in English, when we speak of worth, we talk about things “mattering”. I haven't thought of that before. “It doesn't matter”, as in absence of matter, or “it does matter”, as in presence of matter. Today, materialism is identified as the culprit, the evildoer.

MP: I sometimes think that, in fact, the Internet is the actual materialization of imagination, of human imagination. This means the realization of things that were perhaps abstract in the past and now get a concrete form through this information network. But again, there is a kind of ambiguity there, because that which is so powerful and gives you access to so much information always runs the risk of overload, as you said. That is precisely the same kind of ambiguity and danger that you also find in magic.

LP: Yes. I think that is what I'm trying to convey with the Cyber Pioneer. He is somehow the Internet, you could say. He's O-so-*connected*. Connected of course to another world, but today you could also say that the Internet is the one with the Delphic abilities.

MP: Yes, it is fascinating to connect clairvoyance with the Internet. As I said with respect to thought-forms in the context of Theosophy, one of the interesting things about clairvoyance

is the problem of privacy. When you are able to read the minds of others, well, the others cannot have secrets anymore. And this is so close to what happens with the Internet. There is a constant, growing erosion of privacy. Increasingly, all secrets are within the reach of everybody who has sufficient skills to use the Internet as a mouse would use a lump of cheese.

LP: And that is where I think matter needs to re-enter time. Because matter won't necessarily reveal its own internal doings. But on the Internet, online, you are revealing so many things about yourself, all the time. Now it's as if the Internet itself could find out about you. Your thoughts. It can scrutinize your thought-forms, your wants and needs, and respond with either praise or punishment.

MP: So the Internet is kind of a big clairvoyant, or, to use a more traditional image, the big eye in the sky. It is a very powerful image that has a long history and tradition. Maybe the Internet is this kind of eye that is able to penetrate all mysteries, to go through all barriers. Unless it finds something that has the power to resist, of course, such as T-F 3.

LP: Yeah [laughs]. People need to tap into the cosmic supply of T-F 3 so they can be a little more resistant!

MP: I wonder if this power of resistance also has to do with the fact that you can at least use T-F 3 to smash your computer.

LP: Exactly!

MP: I am almost afraid when you have it in your hand. I'm afraid that you will bang it on my head!

LP: [laughs] That's why I'm sitting with it, you know?

MP: Now, can I tell you a kinky thought I have about the boomerang-shaped T-F 3?

LP: [laugh] Yeah

MP: Well, I have to tell you, I mean, the first time I saw it, I thought it was some kind of sex toy.

LP: Yeah exactly, I know. In a way I'm happy you say it, because I was also thinking that when I was making it “oh my god, this is really strange”. But then nobody mentioned it, and I kind of went, “OK, people don't see it”. But apparently, some people do.

MP: ... or maybe they see it and they just don't say it.

LP: Yeah, maybe they don't say it.

MP: ... although I suppose Denmark is emancipated enough.

LP: [laughs]

MP: But this was not an intention, it was more like a side effect of how you conceived the T-F 3 ...

LP: Yeah, it was a side effect of how it looked when it fell

into my lap. Which is also kind of kinky come to think of it.

MP: Right. I'm usually very suspicious of coincidences like that. I mean, I am no psychoanalyst, but ...

LP: I totally agree, I also find it really interesting that there is this ... side to it.

MP: In any case, it makes sense in the framework of your artistic discourse, knowing that there is an explicit sexual side to it. This was visible enough in the *Anatta Experiment*, for instance.

LP: Yes, and I do believe power and sexuality are very closely connected.

MP: Absolutely. Now, to move on to something else, are you familiar with Gurdjieff?

LP: Yes.

MP: Because ... when I read the accompanying text for *How to Program and Use T-F*, the first thing that came to my mind was Gurdjieff. Maybe something about the language, but also something about the concepts themselves. I am thinking in particular of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. There is a lot about space there, the book in fact can even be seen as an early example of science fiction. But apart from space travel, the book is also full of fantastic neologisms. So, when I read “Cyber Pioneer” and “T-F Programmer” in your text it made me think of Gurdjieff.

LP: That's funny because, in earlier works, I have been very much into his notion of the many selves, hypnotic sleep—that we're constantly in a state of hypnotic sleep—and so on. But actually, I have never read the book, although I have it on my shelf.

MP: It's a very complicated book. Very, very hard to read and understand.

LP: [laughs] Yeah. I have browsed it and it's so long and I kind of went “oh I need to have like ... more time”.

MP: Yeah, it's quite a thick book, in all senses. And it's very difficult to understand because it's full of words he himself invents. So often you don't know exactly what he's talking about, apart from a broad picture of the evolution of humanity over millions of years, our destiny, our relationship with the Moon, and so on. And it boils down to the idea that we are all idiots in the end. Other books by Gurdjieff are a much easier read, such as *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

LP: That one I've read. You know, I made this piece around his female group in Paris, “The Rope”, in 2008. I based it on one of the members, Jane Heap. She was an American publisher who joined The Rope and then later became the leader of a Gurdjieff group in London.

MP: So you have an interest in Gurdjieff?

LP: Yeah, totally. Again, there's this ... if we talk about Gurdjieff, or Wilhelm Reich, they too have this sense that ...

that there's something about *matter*. Maybe for Reich especially. His Orgone Box, in which you put yourself and it vitalizes and heals you. That different materials—like deciding to use bronze and iron with regard to thought-forms—have different effects on how energies are conducted, and that structures emphasize this capacity. How energies enter wood, how iron contains them and so on. Reich was very specific about how things should be built.

MP: And yet again, with Reich we come full circle back to sexuality.

LP: [laughs]

MP: I suppose we'll have to leave it for another conversation.

LP: ... or another booklet!

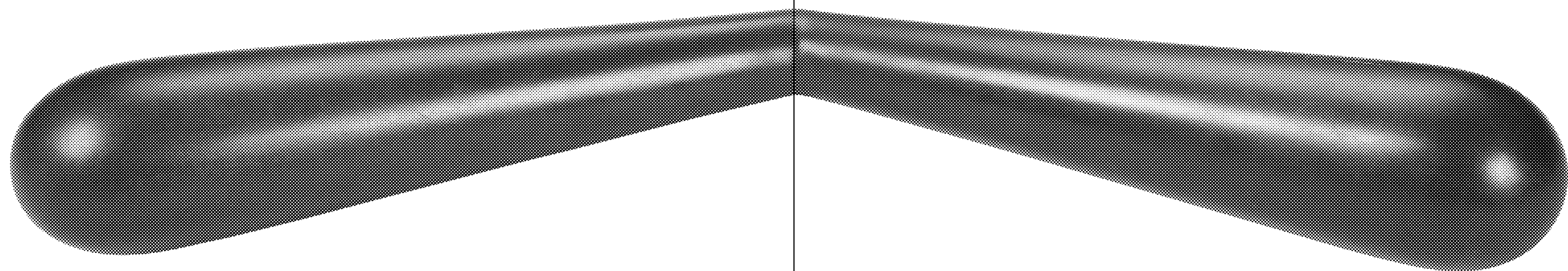
MP: Thanks. Lea.

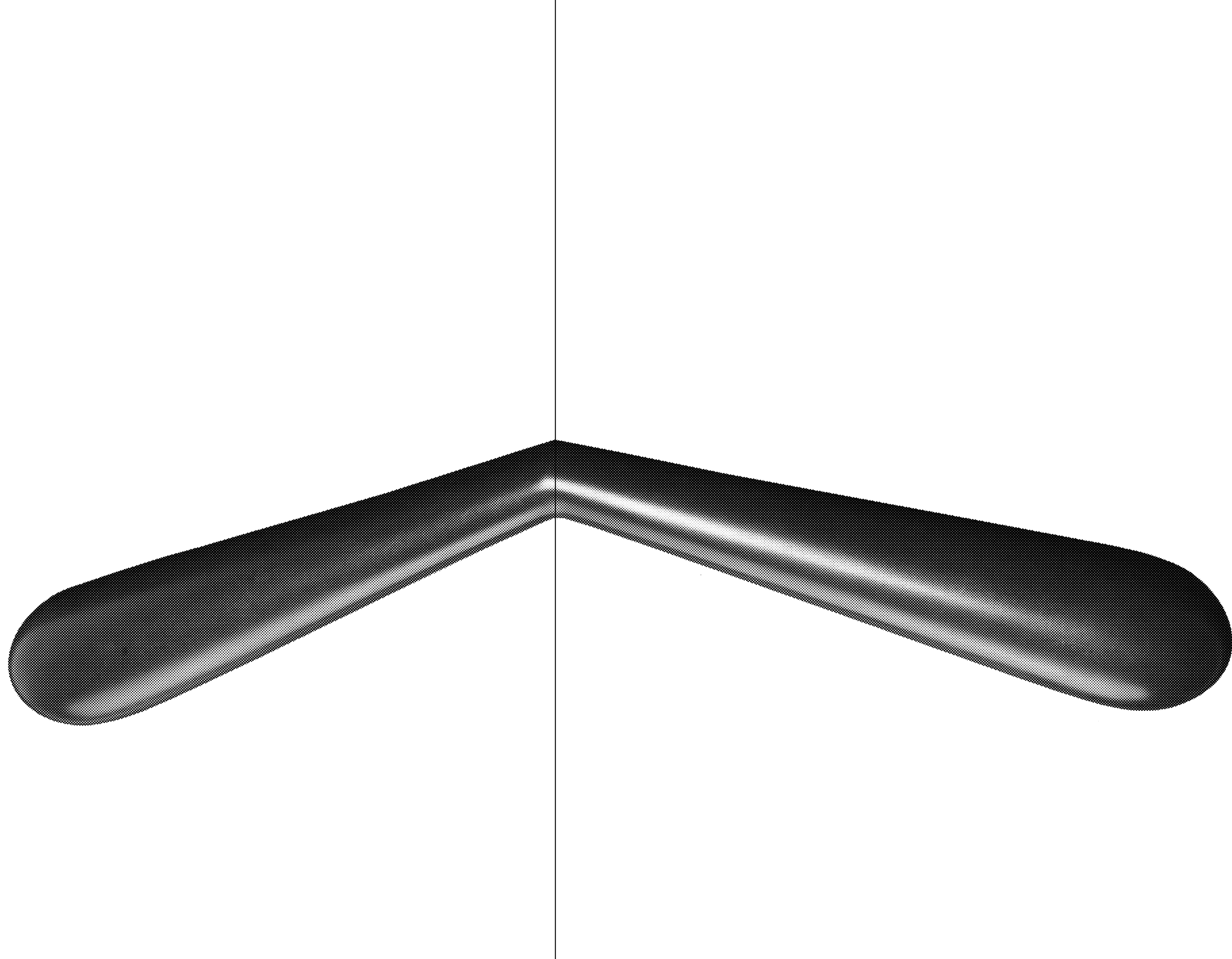
LP: Thank you, Marco.

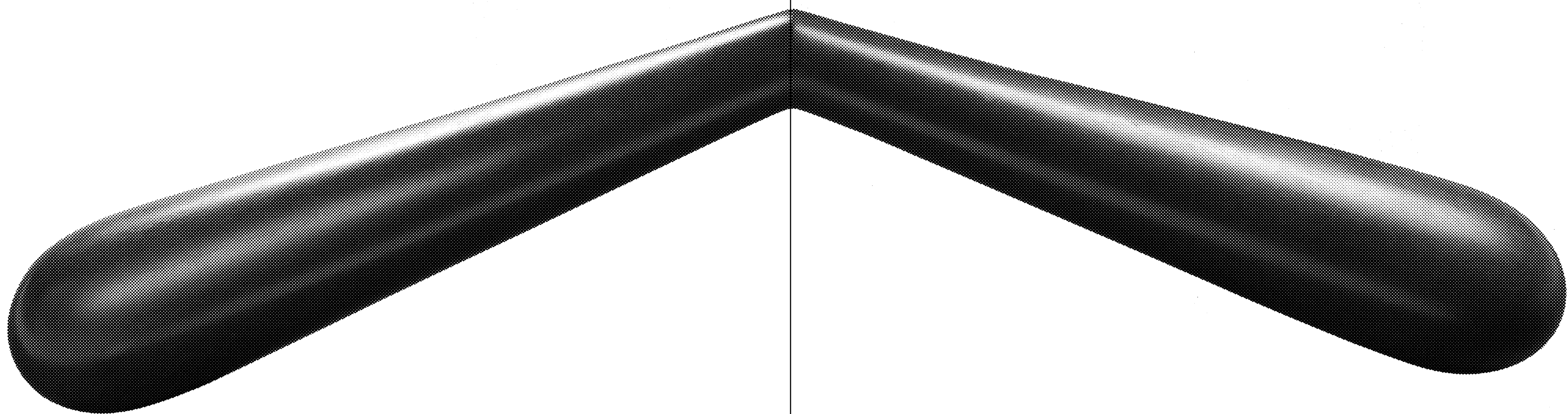
T-F 1 ~~Ego-hard drives, susceptible to ideological drifts~~

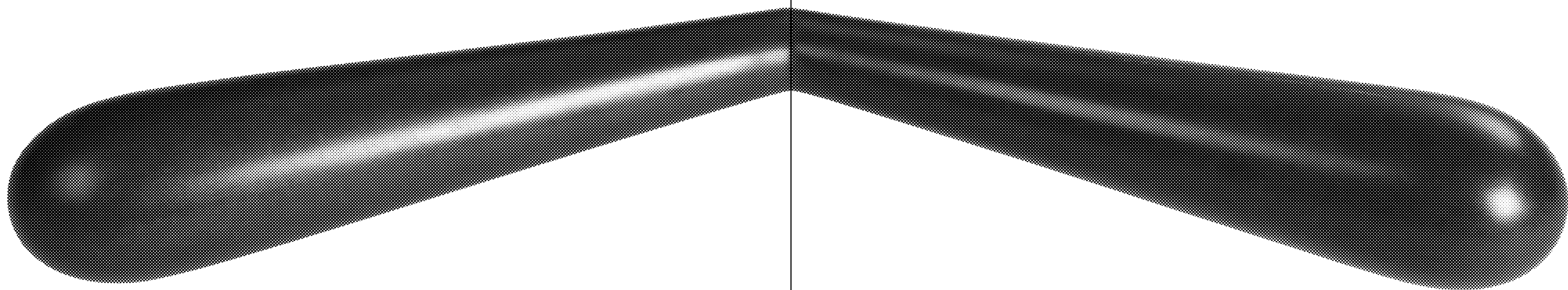
T-F 2 ~~Endless reproduction of frayed brown ideas and doctrines~~

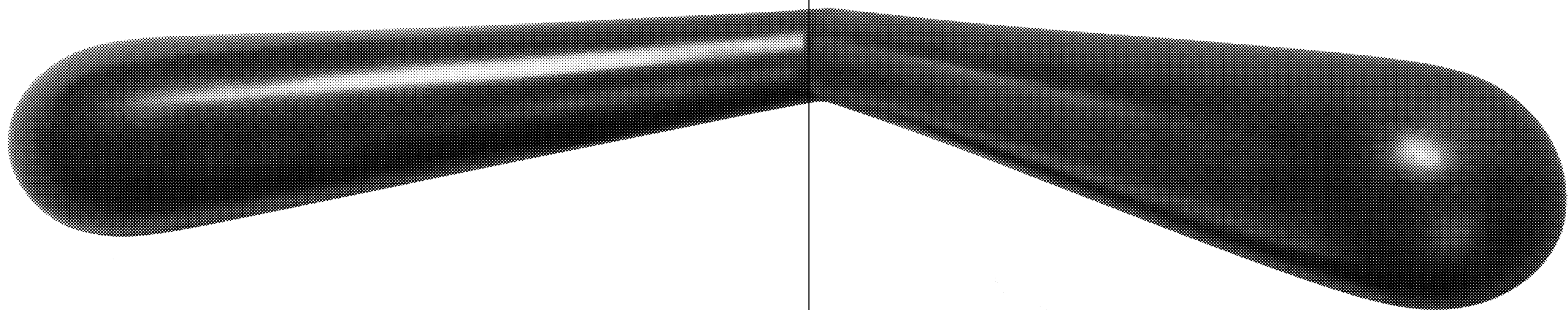
T-F 3 The psychometric event of being caught between a rock and a hard place had caused the Programmers spasmodic “cool thinking” to materialize. In a state of rare extremism, odd selfishness and unpleasant depression, the novice T-F Programmer met up with the Cyber Pioneer, one so seemingly connected, so thoroughly networked to the extent of being downright clairvoyant. Breezily bouncing off surrounding grids of communication satellites, this vertically challenged, multi-angular and neurally plastic Cyber Pioneer left the Programmer to her own lame devices. While the Cyber Pioneer spoke in a foreign tongue, the Programmer reached into the astral plane and pulled out a mutated mental entity, a T-F 3. It landed on her lap, on her knees and in her open hands. Shaped like some kind of boomerang, it was heavy and cold despite its dark brown color. On the horizon, right where the earth’s surface began, another one hung, blunt and cold. Above it lingered another shape, a silver bullet. It was as if these cool thought-forms themselves had willed their own matter into being. Opaque, inaccessible, heavy, meticulous and anti-plastic, it was as if the T-F 3 refused to become anything more or less than thoughts embodied. Let us assume for a moment that the Cyber Pioneer’s connectedness equalled panoptic vision. Let us furthermore assume that this vision—however casual and webby—is a potential power-tool for thought control. Let us then assume that these T-F 3 thought-bodies—sovereign in their matter-ness—disdainfully reflect the eye back to its beholder, resistant as they are to flattery, influence, control and judgement in any way, shape or form. And finally, let us assume that connectedness is synonymous with an outlandish state of exhaustion. That only in the very center of the purple and brown fog, an inorganic spark can be found. Thank you, thank you, thank you. T-F 3 the Shield. The Sturdy Mental Explosion. O!

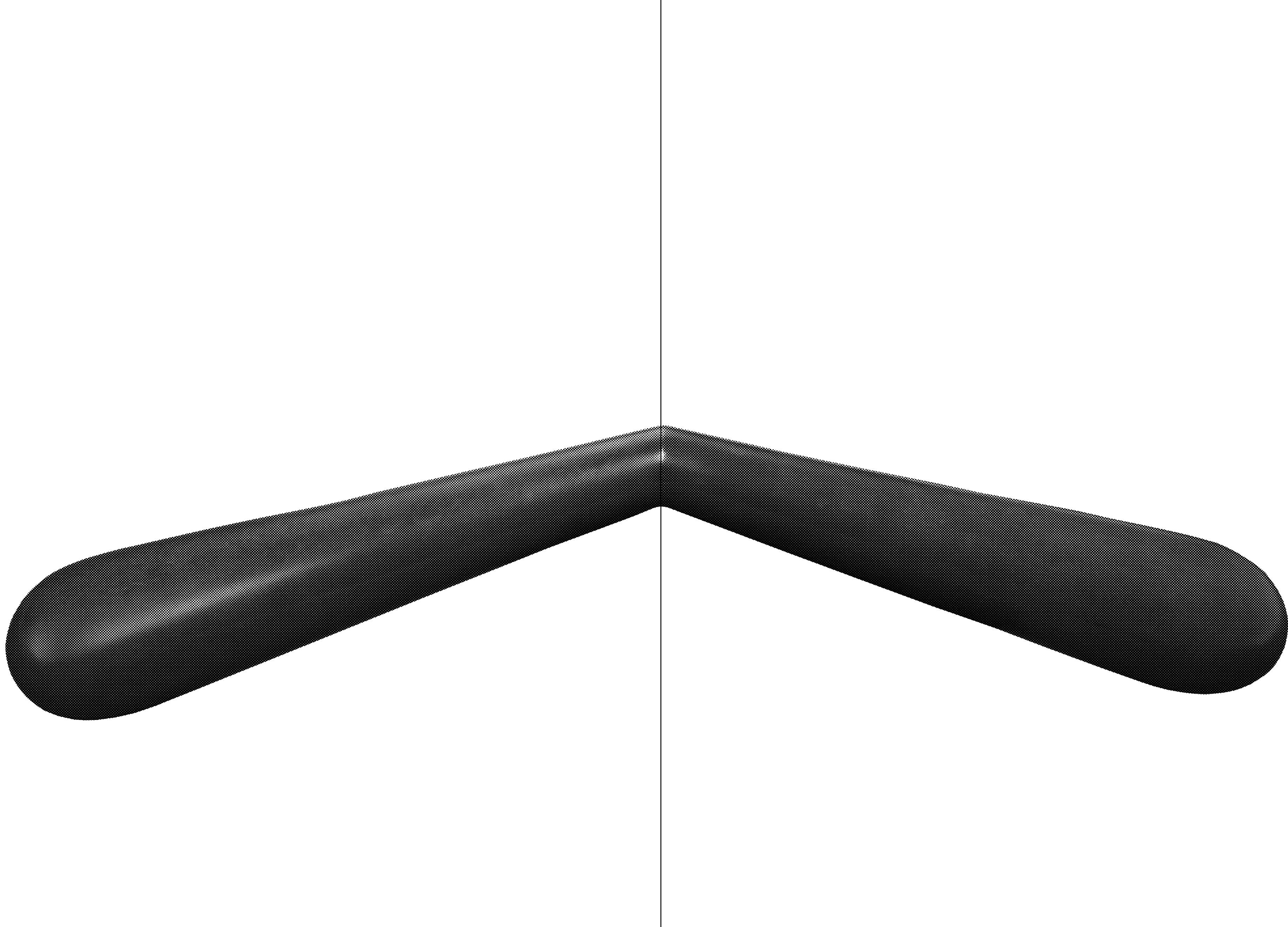


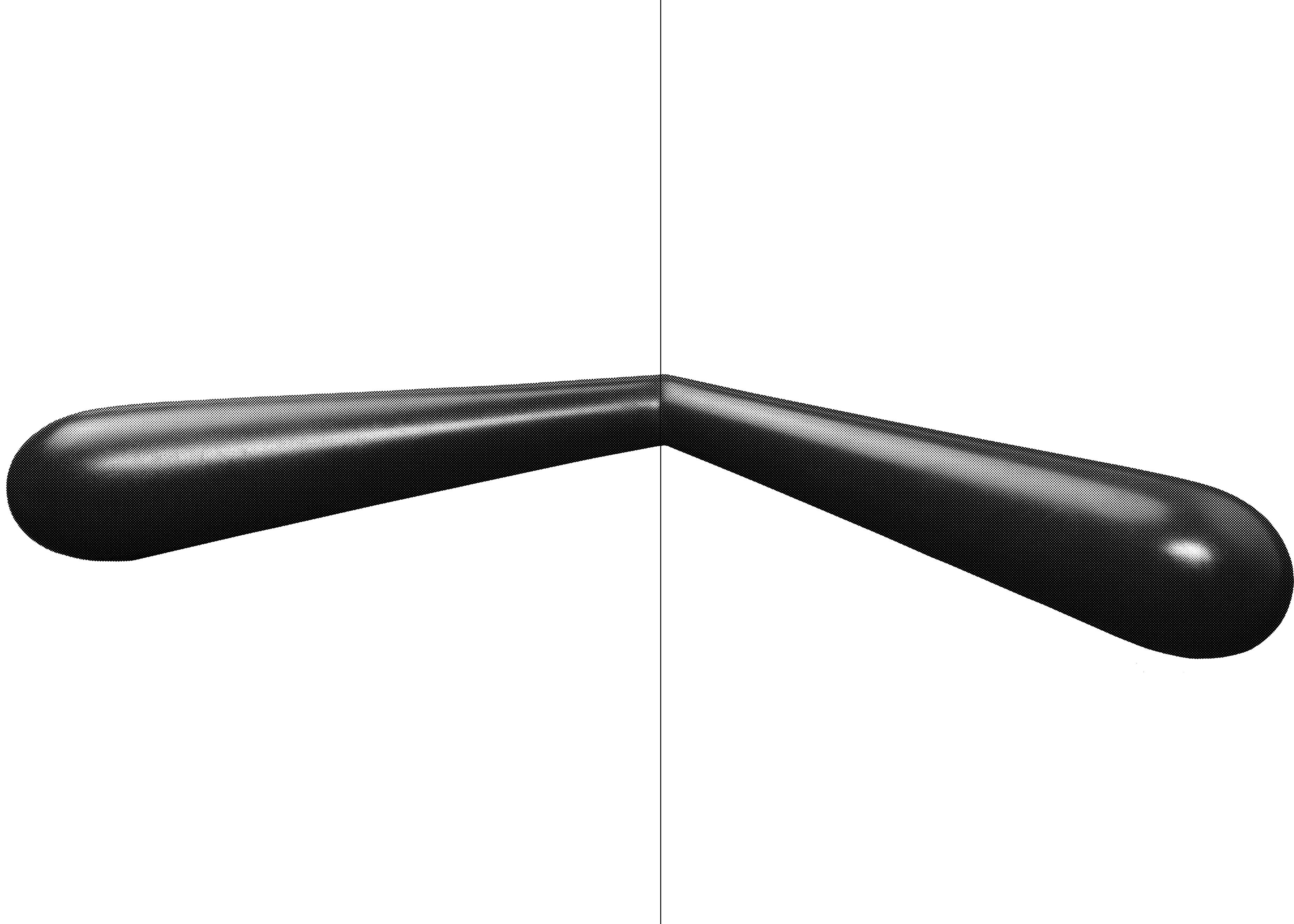












Colophon

Ablaze with the Fires of Matter is partly based on Marco Pasi and Lea Porsager’s public talk on the Anatta Experiment hosted by Kunstvlaai, Amsterdam and moderated by Angela Serino (1 December 2012) and their Copenhagen/ Amsterdam Skype conversation on *How to Program and Use T-F* (6 February 2013), subsequently amended and revised.

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Endpaper hand-dyed by the artist, inspired by “Selfish Affection” from “Key to the Meaning of the Colors” (color chart). Annie Besant & C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, Quest Books, Wheaton, Ill., 1901.

“Plate W”, *Ibid.*, p. 70.

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