

Robin Woodward

Contemporary Absurdism; Violence, Symbols, Politics and Downward Spirals.

The violence it takes to bring someone back from the dead is incredible. It is almost like the person refuses to come back. Pipes and tubes are thrust into the throat, inducing bleeding and vomiting. The chest is pushed down upon so hard that the ribs crack and break. Needles are jabbed around into veins and medicines are used to rouse the dead. It is harrowing and distressing. Maybe the person doesn't know but for those performing this act of saving a life find, it is a process hard to deal with, successful or not. I believe that it is in this act of violence that human existence is questioned, for me anyway it is one of the worst things I have witnessed as a human being and it is not something I had ever or will ever enjoy. Maybe that is why some of my colleagues hide once they hear the piecing alarm of the crash call. It is not the fact that the others are scared of their own abilities. I believe it is the violent act that persuades them to run instead of fight.

Introduction

This critical research paper seeks to unravel the * Absurd within contemporary art practice, through looking at themes such as **Violence, Symbols, Politics and Downward spirals**. It will seek to discover this through a practice led research base, investigating contemporary sources such as Computer games Films and Philosophy. Games allow people to react or act in ways that they are not able to do in the real world, allowing for a non-reality of what we would like to do, they offer an opportunity to change your consciousness to something else. Games replace the conscious world, appearance is reality, “consciousness consists in the appearances themselves” Ray Brassier (2007) others in the game perceive the player as they appear in the game, they are unable to make an “appearance-reality distinction” Ray Brassier (2007) meaning that the player is able to make their own world within the real world. The real world being the external world away from the digital. “The social construction of reality occurs naturally at an informal level. Informal conversations about events and experiences tend to take the form of “accounts ”—naturally occurring conversations in which people attempt to make sense of an experience” Scott & Lyman, (1968) These accounts of what may or may have not happened can fuel violence.

Films allow a discussion of thought, philosophy; they look at the world in an objective manor. Showing societies to the audience, almost warning the viewer of what could happen if we allow things to continue. The research paper will look at contemporary films such as *The Lobster* (2015) Yorgos Lanthimos and *High Rise* (2015) Ben Wheatley as the main schematic to navigate the themes mentioned above, video games form part of the investigation through the arena that situate them akin to film, both within a screen and outside the screen, a space lodged between reality and non-reality.

* It's common to assume that everything must have a purpose, a higher reason for existence. However, if one thing has a higher purpose, what is the reason for that purpose?

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When rationale fails the system fails, which consequently creates violence. The symbols within this research paper are focused around *architecture – superstructure and structuralism. When cultural structuralism reveals itself as cultural hegemony, this causes downward spirals aka anarchy. Through writing this paper I aim to get a greater understanding on how films and other art practices incorporate a contemporary absurdism within their works as a mode of opposition to rationale.

This paper will concentrate in arguing against tactics used against society for control, Governments seemingly follow the writings of Vegetius (4th/5th century) in particular “Si vis pacem, para bellum”- roughly translated to If you wish peace, prepare for war. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the absurdity within this statement.

The Absurd

Absurdity doesn't exist in a defined era, just as violence symbols and politics evolve/morph, absurdism moves fluidly through time. The focus of this essay is contemporary practice but as a way of navigating absurdity I will be looking at works of Le Corbusier, Antonin Artuad, Martin Scorsese and Chris Burden. I will also cross examine these artworks with contemporary artists Petr Pavlensky and Jon Rafman.

Violent Absurd; “Violence is not a single kind of activity, but rather a socially defined category of activities.” (Thomas Blume, 1996) Since world war two, western government has used the idea of war and the fear of war keep order. The idea that the bomb will drop annihilating all around us is still ever present since the end of the cold war in 1989. A loss of control on any level is disastrous for governments. Artuad (1970) “once the plague is established in a city, normal social order collapses” referring to the plague as a “mental freedom” Artuad comments on the loss of rule and regulation and the greed of the “scum” who take for themselves while the vain “fall dead...full of scorn for other victims.” Governments fear that ideas create revolt,

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through revolt comes war. Inject society with fear of war and nobody questions the lies and false truths built by the powers.

Symbolic absurd; No longer do the powerful use castles to show power or authority, Trump for instance is also known for Trump Tower, a building showing his financial prowess reflected to in the film *High Rise (2015)* by Ben Wheatley which has links to Le Corbusier. The tower block is owned by the Architect, he has money and power, living at the top of the tower much like Trump. Laing is part of a community ripping it's self apart from within. Laing's downward spiral is part of his own mental landscape where his consciousness deteriorates due to the control and violent act witnessed in the tower block. The characters within the tower block (a self-contained living environment) begin to destroy themselves and those around them— it continues to the point of depravity and total absurdity ending where the film began.

Political absurd; *The lobster (2015)* by Yorgos Lanthimos discusses the control that governments have over societies, the fear of becoming anything less than human (an animal). The society in the lobster is forced to be in a relationship with another, removing the freedom of individuality, if they fail to meet someone within thirty days they are turned into an animal of their own choice. This is a mechanism in the film where becoming a lobster gives the main character (David) the fear that he “will be thrown in to a pot of boiling hot water and claws cracked open” to be eaten. The fear of war can also be associated with the fear of cannibalism and other atrocities associated with the absurdity of violence. The society is lead by those who wish to remove individualism. Everyone must be in a relationship, with matching qualities to their partners.

Downward spirals the absurdity of life; finally in this section of the paper I will seek to understand the absurdity of living, what happens when life becomes too hard to endure? “Suicide is a solution to the absurd” (Albert Camus, 1955) this is an admittance of logic to the degree where life is no longer worth living? “Just when we think we have reached a climax of horror and bloodshed, of flaunted laws, in

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short poetry consecrating rebellion, we are obliged to continue in a vortex nothing can stop.” (Artuad, 1970) This is also discussed in online computer game *Players’ Unknown Battle Grounds* where this game take the opposing view to Camus, this game encourages survival; to live is the key to life.

Violent absurd

Martin Scorsese



[The Big shave \(1967\) Martin Scorsese](#)

In firm belief of the absurd and the government use of violence to control society I look to Martin Scorsese, in particular his short film *The Big Shave* (1967). The bathroom is where the viewer enters, the bathroom gleaming white, one can imagine this bathroom thoroughly cleaned with bleach on a daily bases, there is nothing out of place, regimented. A man walks towards the sink and selects a shaver he already appears cleanly shaven. The tiled walls and floor stark white like padded cell an infliction of his mind. Applying foam he shaves repetitively until cuts appears, as the viewer we become aware that he is no longer in control of his actions and that the regimented order is becomes a signifier to war and violence, he becomes aware that the only logical escape is suicide. The viewer, having seen no space outside the room, is also trapped within his cycle. The final gesture, a mark that defines the end, the blade with one stroke runs across the throat. Spilling a slightly darkened blood. It

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is this singular humane mark that breaks the terror of such whiteness “to purposefully wound oneself can be a physical release for psychological suffering...such behavior can constitute an act of liberation from prescriptive, authoritarian constraints.” O’Reilly, (2009) A militant strike to a military order. “I hope the film will express my sad feelings concerning the present general moral condition of my young country.” Scorsese (1967) talks about the political turmoil of the cold war, more particularly the Vietnam War. He is demonstrating the fear of war impending upon a nation controlled by the political party in charge, the use of propaganda is inherent within this era, be afraid, be very afraid.

Petr Pavlensky



Fixation (2003) Petr Pavlensky.

Petr Pavlensky is a Russian activist artist. ‘Fixation’ (2003) sees Pavlensky nail his scrotum to the floor on red square. This was in Protest to the “fatalism” that Russian society had become. Much like Scorsese Pavlensky is bringing notice to how the violence of his leaders affects the society he lives in, this was performed on the “annual Russian Police Day” News RU (2013), policing being the arm of violence for the government to maintain control?

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By nailing himself to the floor Pavlensky is disarming his ability to protect himself demonstrating how he feels towards his predicament under the current regime of control. He does this in a non violent manor but using a violent process to disarm himself, a solo rebellion against the state, against violence. Sitting himself in Red Square is also symbolic of the Russian revolution and the Russian stand against Nazi Germany in World War two. He is making his own stand for his own views and the views of his people.

Within a government intent on control of its people it can be very hard to break free and have your own choices this is non-pragmatically discussed in *The Lobster*. A character chooses suicide over becoming an animal; this is the only choice that she has. The main character (David) and another (unnamed Heartless Woman) stop and comment on her unbearable screams while she dies on the floor.

***“David: What happened?
Heartless Woman: She jumped from the window from 180. There
 is blood and biscuits everywhere.
David: I hope she dies right away.
David: On second thought, I hope she suffers quite a
 bit before she dies I just hope her pathetic
 screams can’t be heard from my room,
 because I was thinking about having a lie
 down, and I need peace and quiet. I was
 playing golf, and the last thing I need is some
 woman dying slowly and loudly. “***

David’s initial comment discusses that the biscuit lady chose her own freedom but his second comment discuss how he would still be stuck in his predicament; his

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freedom is that he can sand back and watch. He claims his own ability to do nothing. In contemporary society though this is usually the position of its leaders, on one hand to control through violence and on the other to sit atop hegemony.

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Symbolic Absurd



Hegemonic structure (2018)

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Le Corbusier

Symbols take many absurd forms; I will for this paper though concentrate on a hegemonic society structure more over architecture and societal structures. Looking at money, trump tower to religion, to the military/militarized policing, middle classes and the working class. Le Corbusier is an architect that is particularly symbolic in his approach to his architectural practice; through his buildings we can see the true face of Hegemony.



Church of Saint Pierre finished in 2006 (2006)

Above is Le Corbusier's Church of Saint Pierre finished in (2006). It is a Roman Catholic building but the outwardly concrete structure has a stance of a violent nature. It reminds me of a Pill Box Just below the – A military building focused on defense of a nation, Kind of a fortress, a violent build that pushes control. The tall nature over powers all around it and protects the Rule of God or the regions leaders inside.



Pill Box (2018)

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In looking more closely for a more contemporary understanding, Ben Wheatly adopts JG Ballard's novel, *High Rise* (1975) into a feature film of the same name in (2016). The film follows the story of Laing, a doctor who lives in a High-Rise tower block.

High Rise is a hegemonic society set in a tower block built and designed by the ominous Architect. He has placed himself at the top of the tower or hegemony. He is the money the influence leader and police. Ruling over the people in the tower block he sees that all in it are controlled from what they do, buy and what facilities they can use and when. This leads to a depravity an uprising of violent and sexualized acts from those who live in the block. Once the lower classes of the block become ultimately fed up by the lack of electric, food and use of a swimming pool they stand up against the militarized hand of the Architect.



[Ville Radieuse 1924 \(2013\)](#)

“For one thing, the film draws on important lessons from our past. In the naked ambition of High-Rise’s lead architect, Anthony Royal

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(Jeremy Irons), we can see traces of Le Corbusier's plans for his Ville Radieuse ("the radiant city"), first presented in 1924. In Le Corbusier's vision, high-density housing was arranged in a Cartesian grid, spread across a huge green area - it was intended to function as a "living machine". It was never built, due to the sheer scale and costs involved." (Anon,2016)

Relating to Le Corbusier whose post war housing was deemed to "ignore the deep concern for human comfort and health that underpinned his work." Gallagher (2001) Once was to have said "a house is a machine for living in". Le Corbusier's philosophies are said to be based on a political nature and that close to what Mussolini's Italy were based off.

"Le Corbusier was invited to Rome by Mussolini to lecture, and that same year he attempted to meet the Italian dictator in order to get the job of designing Pontinia, a new town built on drained marshland."- Hoare (2015)

The idea of the *Architect* is based of Le Corbusier, but what is most frightening for me that these ideologies still continue through the frame works of our most powerful leaders. Architecture is used as a power symbol as seen in Trumps Tower named *Trump Tower*.

The Architect- The Hegemonic Masculine Man



Trump Tower (2018)



President Trumps Twitter (2018) Twitter Posts

President Trump can be seen as the *Architect* and resembles a hegemonic social structure not only that he is a *Hegemonic Masculine Man*, according to Morettini (2006) men in power must not only control women and children but also display embodiments of “aggressive and violent behaviour whilst restraining the flow of vulnerable emotions. He should also exhibit strength and toughness, and be competitive and successful. Finally, and most notably, the dominant man should be heterosexual” He gained power by having money; he interacts with the religious areas of society and ultimately has power through militarized action of his populace. Who comes in and who goes out. His policies are aimed towards gaining more power for the rich and the middle classes and he attempts to regain control of the working class by offering jobs and security. He does all this by the use of technology. Donald Trump isn't violent physically. He has a violent presents online. With well over fifty million followers online trump massed a digital army of followers. I note above also a tweet posted to the fifty million plus followers of Trump.

“It's the Democrats fault; they won't give us the votes needed to pass good immigration legislation. They want open borders, which breeds

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horrible crime. Republicans want security. But I am working on something - it never ends!" (Donald J Trump 20/06/2018)

Actively Trump breeds hate and warns his follows against irrational fears, this all to close the country off to immigration. He blames others, opposition and immigration for violent crimes committed in America.

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Militarized policing-Jon Rafman



Images taken from 9 Eyes (2009-continued) Jon Rafman

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Artist Jon Rafman (2018) *9-Eyes* is an ongoing social investigation using Google maps. Rafman takes screen shots from the program and uses them as art works this is a giant amassed collection of photographs from around the world. I was particularly interested in the images that showed militarized police. These images are a true representation of hegemonic society from all around the world. In the images that I found out of the collection we can only assume that these are police but what is apparent is the lengths in which violence and force is used to control the populace of these societies. Each image has symbolic value, for instance a blue or black uniform and a gun of some kind; it is aggressive and controlling use of symbolism to maintain fear.

This shows how lonely and violent the world is “As social beings we want to matter and we want to matter to someone, we want to count and be counted, but loneliness and anonymity are more often our plight.” Rafman (2009) talking about the Google map images Rafaman identifies the issues with societies but also states “In theory, we are all equally subject to being photographed, but the Street View collections often reveal it is the poor and the marginalized who fall within the purview of the Google camera gaze.” Rafman (2009) Suggesting someone is watching but what is sad is that “nobody is watching.” Rafman (2009) even though there is a button on Google maps to “report” Rafman (2009) indecent imagery, what will this achieve, if the government doesn’t care who will?

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Chris Burden



Doomed (1975) Chris Burden.

“The piece ended when [a museum employee] placed a container of water inside the space between the wall and the glass, 45 hours and 10 minutes after the start of the piece. I immediately got up and smashed the face of the clock with a hammer, recording the exact amount of time which had elapsed from beginning to end.” Burden (1975)

Chris Burden incorporates symbols into his performance ‘Doomed’ (1975). Burden lies under a pane of glass in a gallery space and on the wall is an industrial clock. He stays lying in this space for five days without eating drinking or moving. During this time, a moment occurs when a friend brings Burden water and a bowl. Burden gets up and walks off to return and smash the clock with a hammer. Burden has his own arena this is his space with his rules where the viewer is not welcome to know or understand these rules and there construction. The real symbol of fear was the clock the outcome was violence Burden reacts to the environmental change. His position of power and control is broken.

Prior to the introduction to this paper I gave a grim incite to my feelings to most difficult arena I as a Staff nurse could be put into. At that point in time the thing I find the most disturbing is that I as a mere mortal am put into a situation of pure power, I either run or fight. I choose to fight, regain control over my own ability to choose my rights.

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Political absurd

Within any hegemonic society the fear that underlines the control is the punishments that may be received, a violent act, discussed in *The Lobster*. The narrator speaks of punishments that will happen to people who disobey the laws of the society they live within "It is not the red kiss that I am afraid of...it is the red intercourse that I am afraid of." By punishing people violently, generally people do not then fight back, revolt generally is put aside due to fear. This sort of control is not only worldwide but used in this country (UK). Recently I read about an orphaned Afghan child who had live in Britain for seven years until one day he was taken away to be deported by total surprise, locked up and tormented.

"He was locked in a small cell: a toilet, a bed, a small window he couldn't see out of, and a spyhole to allow officials to look in. There was shouting and planes roaring overhead and he had no idea what was going on. But when he told the officers that he wasn't well, that he had health problems, that he felt weak from fasting for Ramadan, they kept silent. Instead, they told him, rudely, brusquely: "We're going to deport you." They said it so often it became almost a chant: "We're going to deport you, we're going to deport you, we're going to deport you." (Chakraborty, 2018)

The western world caused war in Afghanistan, one could argue that we are now worse than any Dictorial rule; the UK is not a dictatorship more than now it's a hegemonic dictatorship. The fact that the fear of deportation now is a real method of control on a populace that we once gave refuge to due to wars we had created. The act of deportation may not necessarily be seen as violent, but by deporting someone back to Afghanistan the second most dangerous country in the world according to the home office is a violent act. It is violent politics at its worst.

Downward spiral the absurdity of life.

In this section, I will explore how causes, effects and momentums such as a downward-spiral begin to define new consequences in society, technology and the world. In discussing this, I will frame this within the idea of a feedback loop. Feedback loops work in two ways – negative or positive. Such as:

I'm bad at math, I struggle at math and I avoid math.

I'm great at math, I enjoy math and I practice math.

This is seen in the mythological story of Icarus. Icarus is vain and only thinks of himself, he believes he is greater than anything. While escaping from his prison using wax and feather wings, Icarus ignores his father's plea to not fly too close to the sun. He plummets to his death and in turn generates a feedback loop that is negative within the context of the story.

Icarus is vain, he ignores others, and he suffers for his vain decisions.

In looking more closely for a more contemporary understanding, Ben Wheatly adopts JG Ballard's novel, *High Rise* (1975) into a feature film of the same name in (2016). The film follows the story of Laing, a doctor who lives in a High-Rise tower block.† *High Rise* (2016) is more of a complex version of a feedback loop. And is shown by the way the film commenced and ended 'later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months.' J. G. Ballard. (1975) unlike Icarus, Laing is set upon a 'downward spiral

† High Rise - The tower block is in the mind of Laing. Laing's downward spiral is part of his own mental landscape where his consciousness deteriorates in a preconceived moment where he witnesses the vision of scan and is exposed to a brain tumor. The characters within the tower block (a self-contained living environment) begin to destroy themselves and those around them (parts of his mind) – it continues to the point of depravity and total absurdity ending where the film began.

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feedback loop' he does not suffer the fate of death but his circumstances are worsened as the film goes on.



[Clay Head. \(2017-18\) Performance](#)

In my performance Human Clay Head (2017-18) I demonstrate this or attempt to. I place a full block of Terracotta Clay onto my face. I choose to do this. The clay slowly removes the ability to see, hear and breathe. In actual fact, this performance is a physical representation of a distinct kind of 'feedback loop' one that suggests a curious relationship to Wheatly's film *High Rise*. By removing sensory functions, I become other and I no longer have the ability to control what I do and when I want to do it. Peggy Phelan (2005) "Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different." All my actions are unscripted and random.

In working with clay, I form faces which may or may not represent an inner self. In my performance I do not die, but much like Laing, I become more animal. I lose the restraints that society holds on me. A more devious, sexual and

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frightening character takes my place – I become, I transgress into madness. The feedback loop for these examples would be seen as:

A person, a Happening (negative), Loss of Identity, a becoming.

Government, Violent Control, Increased Tensions, Revolution.

When it gets to the point of no return the individual has a choice to but give up or fight back. The situation is absurd, being under that much control and having that little power to live is absurd, life, politics and violence is absurd. The only way to gain freedom is to take your own life. "In this way, suicide settles the absurd." Camus (1991). But I disagree with this philosophy. The absurd yes is in-condemnable but, life is not absurd. As the *Joker*[‡] would say; "why so serious!" Life's goal is to live, I will now discuss a digital game *PlayerUnknown's : Battle Grounds* (2017). This Digital game discusses the chance of survival when the odds are stacked against a player; the key goal of the game is to be the soul survivor out of one hundred players. Chance and Randomness, plays it part in allot of computer games, this is no truer than in Battle Royal games, I use *PlayerUnknown's Battle Grounds* Greene, (2017) (or PUBG for short) as an example. This Computer game is heavily influenced by the Film *Battle Royal* Fukasaku, (2000) your self-created character spawns into a plane which is flying over 'Erangle' a fictitious island with a vast land mass with many different terrain types. You are then required to choose where to parachute and start 'looting' equipment such as first aid kits, body armour, guns and attachments for said guns. This allows for a random outcome. The idea of the game is to be the last man standing. There is a high element of chance; when the payable area shrinks it randomly moves around the map so each time you play is different.

To live is a revolution against the hegemonic state; although the odds are stacked against you, we must fight to survive, by solely surviving peace may be restored and this absurd downward spiral will, maybe become a feedback loop, either way. Those empowered have us where they want us, and they won't let go.

[‡] The Joker- Villain in the *Batman* Series, quote taken off the Heath Leger's version of the *Joker* from the Film *Dark Knight* (2008).

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Medias such as news papers and online sources according to Blume (1996) “carry special responsibility” for the fear of violence portrayed as social norms. The government uses the power of these stories to carry a control over the individual in society. When shown violence continually one may become scared of this happening. But in the same notion this may fail as continuous exposure to violence breeds resilience to it.

“Fictional portrayals of violent heroes demonstrate unrealistic success...Films, music videos, and television programs promote violence by creating a social reality in which violent actions are the norm.” Blume (1996)

Hence the reasons for the up rise, people are no longer sacred of power; it is in this moment where the communities stand up for themselves they become powerful in their own rights. Enough is enough, *Post Truth* is over. I coin the term Pre Revolt. The truths don't matter, to us anymore we are aware of the ugly face of the hedonistic leaders of our hegemonic states, and we know all their sexual deviances and violent mannerisms and cruel intentions

“Cruelty is not adjunct to my thoughts, it has always been there, but I have become conscious of it...Gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue” Artuad (1995)

Much like Artuad I believe that the violence and cruelty committed by the government only keeps me going, in a fight for my own right to live. By living we only further more repel the violence and thus living is a rebellion in its own right.

Government – Violence – Survive – Living is Revolution

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Governments use poverty as a means of control “poverty itself is political, not a natural phenomenon.” Arendt (1982) these ideas are seen throughout all sources mentioned in this paper. In most if not all cases leads to a violent revolution. Through in sighting violence and absurd symbols the government maintains control through maintaining the fear of violence seen through militarized policing. Causing revolution and freedom. The paper will end with my own message for Vegetius.

Si vis pacem requirunt vim veritatis

If you wish peace, search for the truth in violence

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Image List

- **The Big shave (1967) Martin Scorsese**
- **Fixation (2003) Petr Pavlensky.**
- **Church of Saint Pierre (2006) le Corbusier**
- **Pill Box (2018)**
- **Ville Radieuse (2013)**
- **Trump Tower (2018)**
- **President Trumps Twitter (2018) Twitter Posts**
- **Images taken from 9 Eyes (2009-continued) Jon Rafman**
- **Doomed (1975) Chris Burden.**
- **Clay Head. (2017-18) Performance**