Our Narcotic Modernity
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Our Narcotic Modernity or, 
Drugs are Eccentric

Drugs defy “conceptual arrest,” they exceed and curdle the “frontiers of traditional disciplines,” they “resist presentation” in language.* Drugs, nevertheless and more intensely than ever, persist as an object of knowledge for disciplines from physics to metaphysics, of arrest (conceptual, or otherwise) for juridical institutions, of exchange and “war,” as a subject and impetus for literature, as an unstable nexus of “symbolic values.” From this paradox derives the potency of drugs for the theorist: drugs flail octopus-wise across and beyond popular discourses and disciplines, always evasively, “in their virtual and fugitive patterns.”*  

Accordingly, Avital Ronell’s “Narcoanalysis” in Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania proceeds disjunctively through mirror-sites, quotation and appropriation, assumed identities and fiction. The experience design of Ronell’s book might be 

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*Ronell 51.
understood in terms of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot’s sense of “désœuvrement—a project without an end or program, an unworking that nonetheless occurs, and whose contours we can begin to read.”* Ronell, in other words, attempts to replicate for the reader the evasiveness of subject; themes are developed, patterns suggested, analogies offered, but closure and revelation are deferred indefinitely as “[Crack Wars] tries to understand an object that splits existence into incommensurable articulations.”*

*This “unworking” is also the aesthetic and theoretical site at which Ronell links “electronic culture” and “drug culture,” and speaks to the project of our accompanying video. Ronell 68.

Architecturally, Crack Wars is characterized by interruption and juxtaposition over continuity and sustained argumentation. The chapter or “part,” as a means to circumscribe objects for interpretation in the service of a broader argument, is here reconfigured as something unfamiliar: a series of prefatory aphorisms, for instance, is set against a long and technical reading of Heidegger on addicted Dasein in Being and Time, a “Doctor’s Report” that

*Ronell 49.
takes Emma Bovary as the subject of a pseudo-Freudian case study is followed by a series of "Installations" consisting of short conversations between Bovary herself, Jacques Derrida, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Faust, Walter Benjamin, and others. Standards of discourse fluctuate erratically between and within Ronell’s six sections. And, if the recognizable voice of philosophically-inclined literary scholar emerges in the book’s second and fifth sections, “Towards a Narcoanalysis” and “Scoring Literature,” the brevity of it’s emergence suggests that it is only one voice among others, that drugs as an object of analysis resists any singular, synthesizing presence.

At the level of information design, Ronell again frustrates the expectations of the reader of literary criticism. The book’s layout varies subsection to subsection, including, by turn, large uncited quotations, frequent typographical variation, a ‘poetic’ employment of line breaks, blank pages
(paginated and unpaginated), capacious margins often including printed notes (oriented vertically and horizontally), repeated aphorisms or invocations (“what do we hold against the drug addict?”), sections of dialogue, etc.* Just as the literary critic cannot approach drugs from a single position, but must inhabit a number of critical and theoretical vantages, the reader of Crack Wars is forced to adopt a flexible mode of reading, not only with regard to the book’s shifting voices, but the space of the page as well. As a ‘trip’, Crack Wars tempts both the Scylla of inscrutability and the Charybdis of narcotic oblivion.

From, or perhaps in spite of, this dialogical, often chaotic schema, Ronell develops a number of themes, concepts, and patterns, which are central to our installation. Most importantly, we are concerned with Ronell’s claim, developed through a reading of Flaubert, that “[t]he horizon of drugs is the same as that of literature: they share the same

*Ronell 102-103.
line, depending on similar technologies and sometimes suffering analogous crackdowns before the law.”* If drugs defy direct conceptual apprehension, in other words, one might approach drugs through analogy: drugs and literature are both subject to censorship and regulation; they are both associated with disassociation and hallucination; both pose the risk of addiction; and both depend on a dynamics of, to use Derrida’s terms, “prosthesis” or “supplementarity.” We understand this argument/analogy to have wide-ranging implications, not the least of which is the repositions of “drugs,” the risks and technologies, to a place closer to the center of Modern experience. As Ronell asks in the first section of Crack Wars, “[w]hat if ‘drugs’ named a special mode of addiction, however, or the structure that is philosophically and metaphysically at the basis of our culture?”* 

*Ronnell 78.

*Ronnell 13.
An Exhibit Space of “Fractal Interiorities”

In practice, our installation will encompass multiple floors and will invite participants (hereafter “users”) to be in two (or more) places at once. Inasmuch as drugs resist “conceptual arrest,” the presentation of Crack Wars as a conceptual experience presents unique challenges in the domain of experience design. Just as Ronell upsets readers’ expectations for coherent style and tone, so does our exhibit upend users’ expectations for a curated continuity. Users will enter the exhibit via a glass elevator from the floor below, in the center of a large, low-lit circular space, moving towards a high
of sorts. As each user exits the elevator, the immediate experience will be one of aural overdose, of overheard conversation with clear direction or narrative. The volume of the words will be uncomfortable sonically.

Initially impossible to locate, the source of these dialogic exchanges, this abstract, cacophonous aural bombardment of overlapping and overloading overheard conversations is only revealed by progressing onward through the space. In the midst of this sensory overload, users will be searching for a fix. Enter the guides (hereafter "pushers"). Just as the identified and recognizable voices of Emma Bovary, Jacques Derrida, Nietzsche, a psychoanalyst, and a Heideggerian ground the disjunctive thematics of Crack Wars, these pushers will provide a recognizable and familiar genre of interaction within the traditional space of the museum. Yet, like the voices within Crack Wars, this familiar relationship—guide and guided, pusher and
user—will not prove safe to stand. Much like answering the phone only to hear “Hello? Yes?” our tour guides (actors tutored in the idiom of their character) will immediately interrogate users, effectively throwing the user back upon herself in confusion and challenging the passive experience design of the museum. As in Ronell’s “Installations,” pushers, channeling the “spirit”—and here we accede to Heidegger’s plaintive request in Ronell’s Installation .01: “at least put quotation marks on spirit”—of their roles, will interrogate users about their last trip, the “weird pairs” of “desire/chastity,” “male/female,” “knowledge/innocence,” the horror and ecstasy of literature, etc.* The dialogues will evolve uniquely within each pair of pusher/user and will be broadcast into the central shaft of the exhibit via concealed microphones secreted on the pusher’s person. These ever-shifting and mobile dialogues thus constitute both the meat-and-potatoes of the exhibit as well as that which makes

*Ronell 153.
it tough to swallow.

While one-to-one connection of pusher and user would ordinarily act as a grounding mechanism in a theoretically challenging exhibit, this connection will turn out to be more like Bovary’s with her pharmacist.* Indeed, through shooting up fictions, the stable subjectivities and identities of characters and addicts/users become amorphous and elided in “Part Three: EB on Ice” of *Crack Wars:* “I couldn’t stop reading, it was like I was becoming these persons.”* It will be hard to tell the difference between one and the other, between user and pusher. Yet, by contrast, the physical space of the exhibit will consist of an ascending spiral pathway with blank, white walls. This minimal aesthetic is designed to focus the aural and dialogic events experienced as each user moves upward through a spiraling path—and here it should be said, we are looting the stash of Tino Sehgal, specifically his 2010 piece “This Progress” staged at the
Guggenheim Museum.

If we’ve done our job right, the experience will be prove an anxious one (How else to be free if not open to anxiety?).* Perhaps the interpersonal relationships of the encounter with the pusher will begin in part to alleviate that anxiety. But not for long, as (after a certain interval and something like a human baton), the user will begin being-alongside a new pusher. The initial strangeness of meeting a new pusher will call for yet another interpretive act, enacting a kind of endless vertigo of repetition. The five guides present will ensure ongoing and circular encounters, a series of performative accompaniments.

*Ronell 79.
Afterword: Can’t you ventilate this textual space?

Museums are, in one rendering, the tombs of culture. Baudelaire finds the stomach in the logic of the tomb, where “the stomach became the tomb.”* *Ronell 5.

The addiction that Ronell concerns herself with is, indeed, partially an addiction of consumption, an eating disorder: “Drugs make us ask what it means to consume anything, anything at all.”* *Ronell 63.

The implied materiality and permanence of the exhibit raises the question: how to consume and contain such an experience? As Ronell points out: “There is no system that can presently hold or take ‘drugs’ for long.”* *Ronell 61.

—April 2011/August 2012