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**GEORGE HENRY
LONGLY**

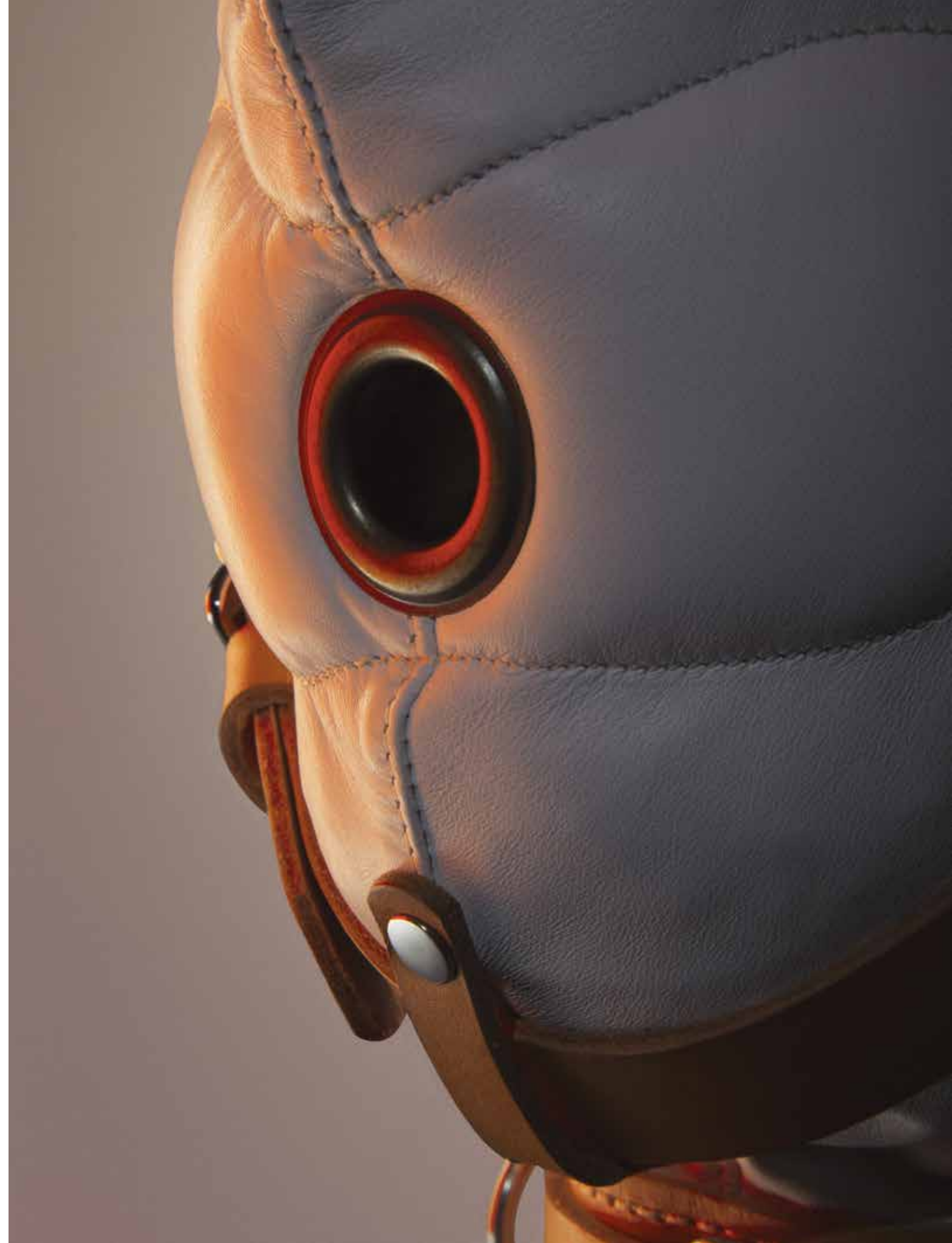
THE TISSUE EQUIVALENT IN THE SENSITIVE FABRIC OF PERCEPTIONS

One of the strategies employed by the artist George Henry Longly to question presentation systems, be they commercial, museographic or scenic, consists in “producing breaks in the sensitive fabric of perceptions and in the dynamics of sensations.”¹ As a result, in his installations, the presentation and the devices directing the gaze are manipulated and corrupted. In *The Smile of a Snake* (Valentin, Paris, 2016), Longly questions the very nature of the exhibition, the staging of which creates a virtual image that recalls a 3D simulation in its appearance. As soon as we enter the exhibition, the physical reality of the gallery fades into an installation that is nevertheless fully perceived through sight, hearing and smell. The performance *Parks Night* (Serpentine, London, 2013) reproduces and distorts with irony the codes of the fashion show. The presentation of the clothes disappears, shifting the focus onto bodies and poses, the true protagonists of a choreography positioned halfway between fashion, advertising, and the performative aspects that our lives can have.

The artist continues his exploration of presentation strategies with a personal exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, which he describes as a “4D exhibition experience.” Traversed by a liminal movement, the installation skirts and changes while it is being perceived. The lighting, the sound and the set up devices appear to be animated by an aleatory mechanism that innervates a space undergoing movements of retraction and expansion.

Invited to participate in a joint exhibition between the Palais de Tokyo and the Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, which presents an exceptional collection of objects related to *daimyo*,² Longly develops an installation involving armors, banners and spear shafts from the 18th and 19th centuries, examples of an outstanding technical mastery. Made by master armorers to protect the *daimyo* at war, the armors also showed their power and authority in peacetime: in a sitting position, the empty armors were displayed in the homes of their owners. In Longly’s exhibition, the perception of these objects, exerting strong symbolic power, is constantly altered, creating the conditions for a fresh outlook.

According to the artist, the attempt to change the perception of the exhibition space and, more in general, of the contemporary world, can be revealed through a phenomenological approach to what surrounds us. “To feel means to rely on appearance without trying to possess it and to draw a truth from it.”³ *The Tissue Equivalent* is based on what the philosopher Merleau-Ponty describes as a return to the body, to the embodied consciousness, according to which the subjective knowledge of the world is based mainly on its physical and sensorial understanding. The title of the exhibition refers to such a body, crossed by sensations, and recalls the name of a material that mimics cellular tissue and allows a measuring of the waves that



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cross the body when it moves for a lengthy period of time out of the atmosphere. A receptacle of invisible waves, the tissue equivalent takes the shape of torsos. While Longly's exhibition *We All Love Your Life* (Red Bull Studios, New York, 2016) aimed at representing "the body in relation to external forces," his installation at the Palais de Tokyo exposes the visitor to distortions, compression effects and other external movements. From the entrance, the exhibition space falls over thanks to the image on the floor of a grid of stretched and suspended chains. Constrained and contorted sculptures seem to bear the weight of gravity, nevertheless challenging it through their being placed on walls.

The experience of the exhibition differs from phenomenology as conceived by philosophy: it is in fact made up of a layering of references and a network of correspondences. The video installation *ROV* consists of robot-shot images from underwater explorations. The work shows a still unexplored deep-sea world populated with unknown shapes. The robots that explore, analyze and sample this underwater world are able to reach depths whose pressure man could not stand. Like *daimyo* armors, robots are technological wonders that extend and duplicate the human body in its exploration of the territory. From bioluminescent fishes filmed in deep sea, to an elongated image of a male nude, and from the pop love song heard throughout the space, up to the representation of a sensory deprivation mask,⁴ the work swings between skin, protective casing and exoskeleton. Longly's work dwells at the intersection of experiences and references to popular culture, the unconscious, beliefs and sexuality, in a space impossible to grasp fully, in constant change from an arena to a battlefield to a stage.

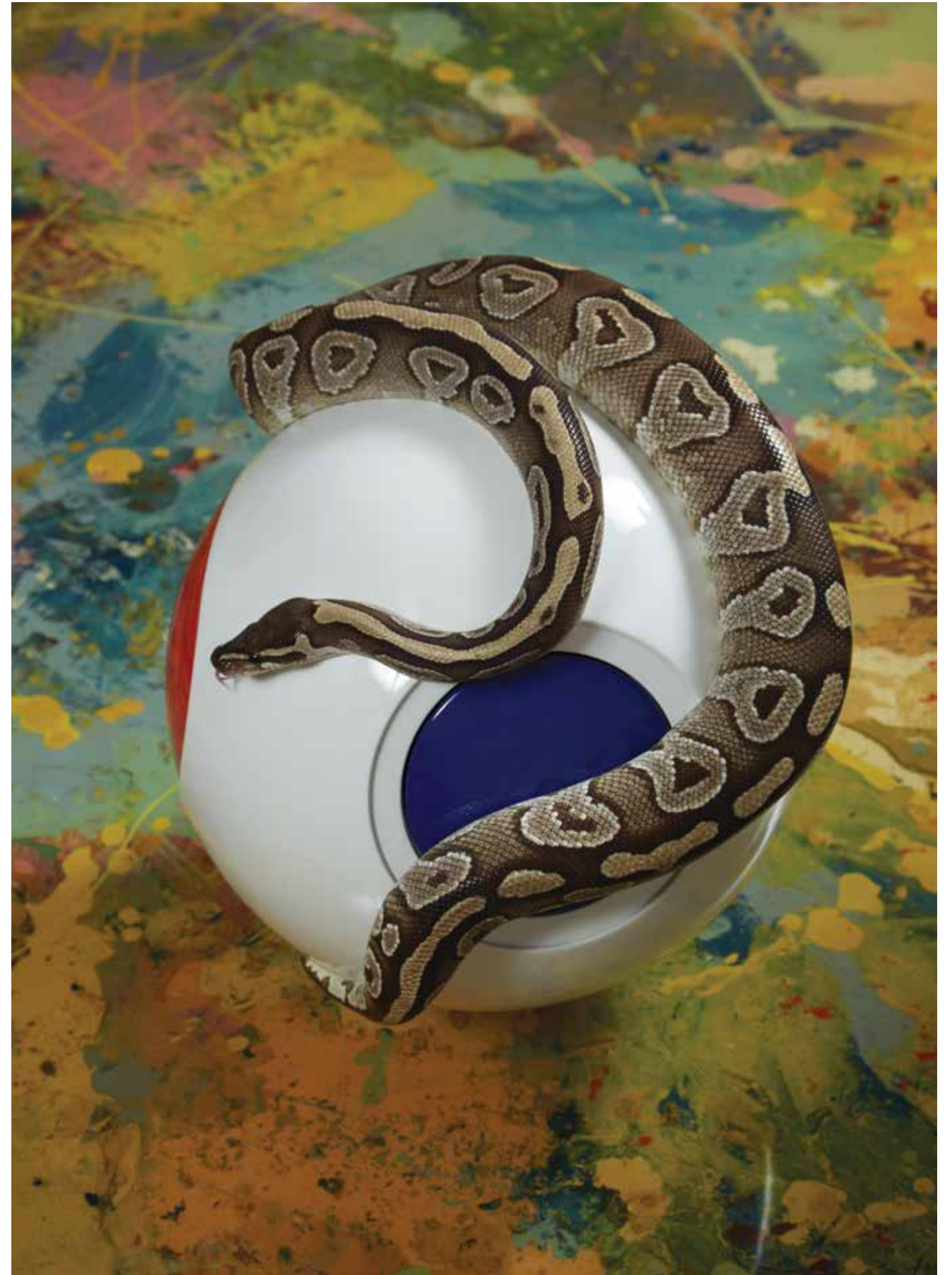
1. Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2008).

2. The *daimyo* were powerful feudal governors who ruled most of Japan between the 12th and 19th centuries.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

4. A mask that isolates the individual from any external sensory perception. Sensory deprivation is used for therapeutic purposes, as an instrument of torture, and in sadomasochistic practices.





A MATTER OF SKIN

My home breathes, covered by the traces of *Toxungenous Activities*. Semantically speaking, a process of contact poisoning. No bites, but instead a contamination, a silent process of invasion. In less threatening terms, a new skin for the premises of the Fiorucci Art Trust, of which I am the director, and in which I live. Operating between the figure of the film director and that of the artist has now become an integral, endogenous part of Longly's practice. Just like with the use of the photoshoot as a tool for production—which the artist has turned into a medium in itself and for itself—or the habit of painting the walls of blue, so that a certain aesthetic prevails, or at least becomes identifiable, although respecting the specific nature of the elements that characterize the space in which Longly works, or of the objects that inhabit it. Movements, substitutions, sinkings of the image and into the image take hold. Photography shows an activity, a production in which some actors played a fundamental role, while others served as extras. Some will remain, others will leave.

What survives is an ontological work in perennial, alchemical transmutation: *Exactly what part of don't you understand don't you understand?* A full-size metal detector, a door, a portal in constant evolution, made of toxungenously copper-plated steel, which, if eaten, oxidizes, changes with each passage, with every touch, even incidental. A performance, the turning into a non-static object. A work that wears out, which suggests a frenzy, a sense of restlessness, which reveals aggregations of multiple fantasies, iridescent clouds and barely hinted traces of imagination, sinuous and inscrutable figures, perhaps reminiscent of the energies held by those who ventured into crossing it. From where I am, I can check how it changes, when at the end of the day I am left alone in this skin, which transpires and breathes, adapting itself while I adapt to it.

Fluctuating, asymmetrical, the image of a green marble tablet¹ pierced by a recurring leitmotiv of perfectly round holes, covers a large portion of the wall, like an unexpected wallpaper. I wonder if it is possible to slip a hand or maybe even a head into it, to explore the other side of the stone slab. In a fantasy world, the royal python in the print immediately next to it escapes from the photographic paper, decidedly unrolling from its improvised cradle of hands—followed by a perplexed, disgusted or mesmerized look—gradually slipping into the liquidity of the blue wall, to then slip quickly through the curves of the marble circles. And this marble slab inside a reptile house inside the frozen paradise of the exhibition *Prediction* (Mendes Wood DM, May 2016), in its actuality and non-photographic reproduction, had already been penetrated by the spell of three (a number that keeps coming back) royal pythons.

Whether a tablet or a reptile house, it is definitely also reminiscent of a design object. Another occurrence in Longly's practice: to allude to a potable, unnecessary, sometimes banned functionality. As for the multitude of phallic, curly, sensual hangers in *Projecteur*—inviting, yet hanging at almost unattainable heights—or in *She*, a bar-less wet bar, which contains dozens of bottles of water, rigorously sparkling. The bottles are clearly visible from the edges of the console, but impregnable, because the whole structure is held in place by their very weight. Another quiet presence in my living room, in spite of its flashy appearance, is *John*, a trestle with blue, black, white and red

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wood elements. A silent pet? Not harnessed by a collar, but decorated with a series of light chains, which some have even run their fingers on.

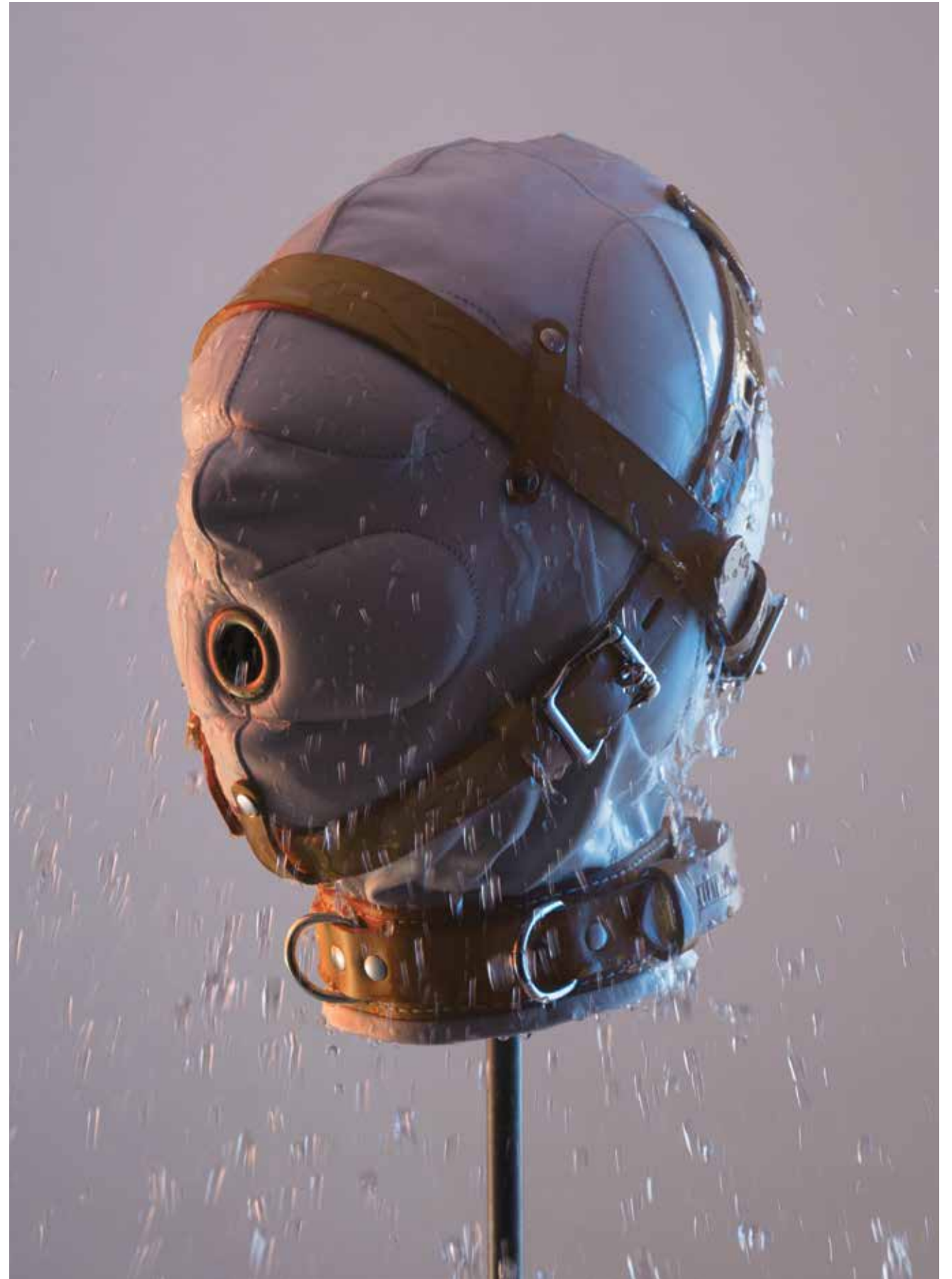
The house certainly does not lack security measures. From the top of a portion of the staircase designed by Le Corbusier, a pre-existence incorporated by Longly in his totalitarian setting, I find myself constantly watched by an all-seeing and all-knowing eye.² Maybe... I can spot the recurrence, in its iris, of red (danger?), white (purity? yang? After all, seen up close, the royal pythons look like fairly candid, aseptic and even apathetic animals), of black (if not the yin, surely a stain). But it is, as I have discovered, a non-judging observer, a liberator, in fact.

The passage, the trace of others, the shedding of a skin which is left behind, the infiltration into a vital space, mine.

*I heard the snake was baffled by his sin
He shed his scales to find the snake within
But born again is born without a skin
The poison enters into everything³*

Evening has come. Time to forget metaphysics, time to go out, to bring the nocturnal dimension into the work. Anal House Meltdown is a title and a collective; a shared project and a club night invented by Longly together with Prem Sahib and Eddie Peake. Alternation of specific music with scene effects, performance decorations, extra collaborations. I have participated in several of their evenings in many London clubs, and I have also been an initiator in a couple of cases outside the British territory: the first time in Stromboli, in the summer of 2014, and in downtown São Paulo in the spring of the following year. And with this information I can now only imagine another location, both imminent and looming, on the ground floor of the Palais de Tokyo, crossed by chains printed on a carpet that changes from blue to black. Overwhelmed by the image hanging upside down of an S&M mask that removes every echo and inhibits the senses. Not to talk, not to see, not to listen, not to perceive when and why something could happen to you or around you. A multitude, or rather a legion of tubular metal presences, a forest of straight or kneeling lines at various levels that pierce the floor; they are fastened to it or peek out from the walls. They always feature the same colors: red, blue, black and above all white. Among them, supported by solid plinths, lying on suitable thrones especially designed by the artist, the eight real Japanese *daimyo* armors from private collections, dating back to the late 17th-early 18th century. In the background, digital views from the deepest seas, monitored while two of the four supporting columns seem to rotate on themselves, metaphorically opening the possibility of an unregulated elsewhere. Longly's solo exhibition *The Tissue Equivalent*, which for the moment I can only envision, is the result of a collaboration between the Palais de Tokyo and the Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet.

1. *(Promo II)*, 2016.
2. *The Liberator*, 2016.
3. Leonard Cohen, *Treaty*.





FINGERTIP/MEMBRANE/FINGERTIP

The following thoughts emerge from a conversation I had with George Henry Longly in January 2018 about his exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Moving through a Sketch-Up model, George described the ideal experience, affective and phenomenological, of a visitor in the space. This is what it would/will/might feel like to me.

George Henry Longly imagines (as embodied life) something between the interior of a sensory-deprivation bondage suit; the churning of cold, slithering and prosthetic bodies in the deep sea; and a ketamine-and-pop-fuelled erotics of the drop.

The glass has cracked; the unbreakable pod implodes soundlessly; the centre shrinks and vanishes. Bridges fall, people fall, water rises, membranes rupture, limbs collapse. This is an attempt to write about extreme pressure underwater, and maybe about love, too. That of the Young Werther, via Roland Barthes' fragments, yelping *this cannot last!* but never ever, never, crying out the safeword.

... like, say, the love affair (the threesome) between a giant squid, a swimmer, and the painter who imagined it all.

... or the slowed-down clanking of metal-on-metal underwater.

The West Gate Bridge rises above the Yarra River, connecting downtown Melbourne and its Western suburbs. It is said that one person every three weeks attempts suicide by springing from it. Many fall on dry land. In 1970, two years into its construction, parts of the bridge collapse, killing 35 workers. Some 30 years later, the Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin conceives *Structure and Sadness* as a way to translate structural engineering, social policy and emotional pressures into dance. To reflect on structure via the medium of movement, she explains, requires identifying some fundamentals of architecture (support, tension, release, collapse) and articulating each of these in turn.

... or the carcass of a whale dissolving and drifting to the bottom of the sea as it loses buoyancy, feeding so many fish on its way down.

For Haraway, "co-constitutive companion species and co-evolution are the rule, not the exception." A whale fall is no tragedy.

... or hugging.

... or the cliff beside which their mother, a sleepwalker, chose to spend the night.

... or a migraine. No, migraines.

On a wall of the Sketched-Up Palais hangs a large-scale photograph of an upside-down sensory deprivation hood. It is a sickly-sticky-creamy beige; leather straps wrap around the head, twice. Only the mouth is an open hole, with a red, plastic rim. In Longly's photo-story, matter (liquid and dusty) is thrown at the head, virulently, while the hood does nothing at all, as impassive as a perfect, unrequiting lover.

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... or the mural of an ocean view, on the walls of an asylum.

The narrator of Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom is Dead* mourns the death of her child in a diary, ten years after he fell off a window. Traumatic loss begins as a scream (as it must): "I'm enclosed in a red, cube-shaped room. I am in a red cube. The walls are padded in a weird way: a damp material into which you can sink your fist. I am a moving blade that vibrates like a gong. I am in a red cube-shaped scream and I slam into blood-drenched walls; nobody hears me." My father remembers it quite the same way.

... or whether they could (or did) make a sound, as they breathed in the water.

The Paracelsan/Rosicrucian/alchemical figuration of a sylph is that of a female-identified being, hovering between materiality and dissipation: an elemental spirit of air. In 1832, Filippo Taglioni choreographs *La Sylphyde* for his daughter Maria, introducing into the classical ballet repertoire the technique of the pointe, executed with graceful, merciless, simulated weightlessness. Have you ever seen a ballerina's feet? Or stuck your finger into an open sore?

... whether you could breathe in a solid thing and part-become it.

Anticipating his deep-sea project, Longly researches plastics, tissues and organs synthesized to be sent into extreme conditions, in order to evaluate potential damage to human bodies. In *Sylphides*, a dance work by Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud, performers are vacuum-sealed into large latex bags, with only a thin tube to breathe through. The rubber clings to their skin, reducing oxygen intake and vital functions, slowing down the dancers' movements to minimal, pained stirs. When the bags are re-inflated and open, the dance becomes jerky, repetitive, orgiastic, hysterical. The sylph (and the classical ballerina) is, to Bengolea and Chaignaud, a liminal being between life and lifelessness, a mortified fetish.

... or the topological elusiveness of the g-spot, compared to other, easier, things (fingers, it turns out, were built to curl the wrong way round).

... or fingertip, then a membrane, thin as dust, then fingertip.

Some images last a whole life. Touching, two hands exchange fingertips. A recent photo-story by Longly captures a gecko crawling on a semi-nude model. Geckos, he explains, possess a quality that makes their feet particularly adhesive. It is as though, he says (the suggestion is in no way scientific) it were ultimately trying to *become* the thing it touched. This is, for other reasons, true of chameleons as well. And maybe snakes. It is everywhere in our ice-cold, slick reptilian dreams. And so long as there are hairs and sheaths and skins and films and mucous membranes, so there will be the erotics of touch, the romantics of microbiology and the great and silent hope that if I just push, push, push hard enough...

... or stanchions, crushed to sad, post-coital bends (by the time I'm done with you, they say, there will be nothing left).

