

APORIA

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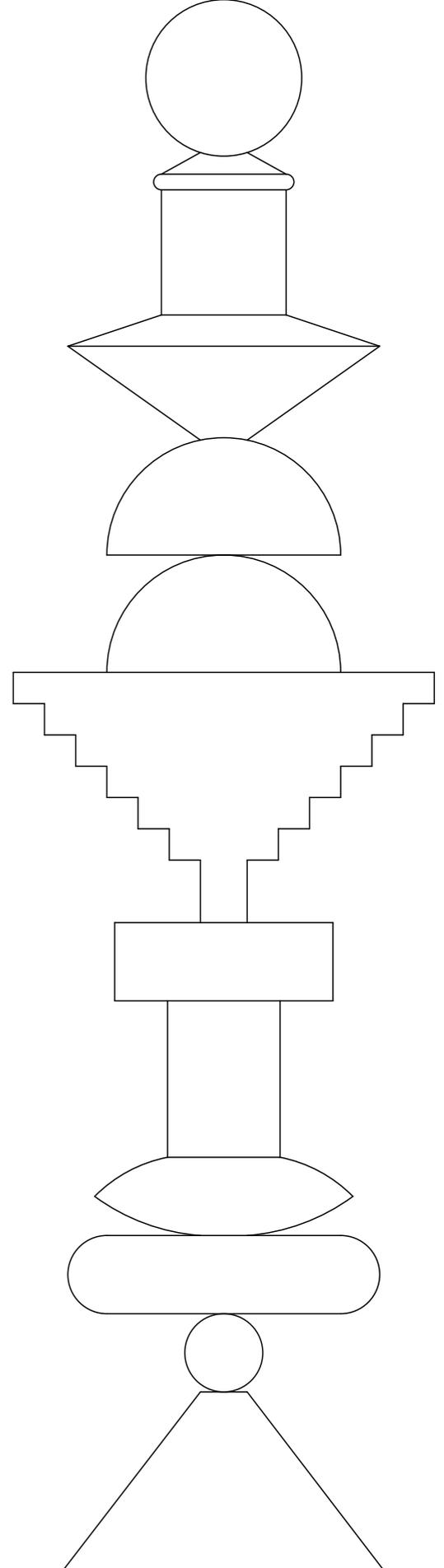
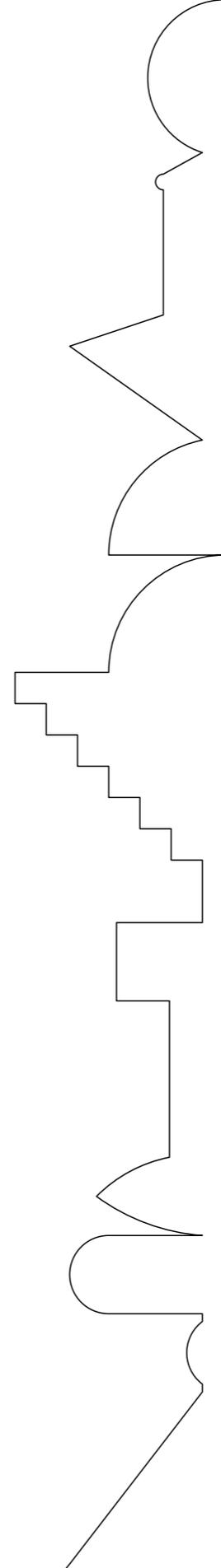
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Shadow Architecture
Dream Adoption Society
Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute



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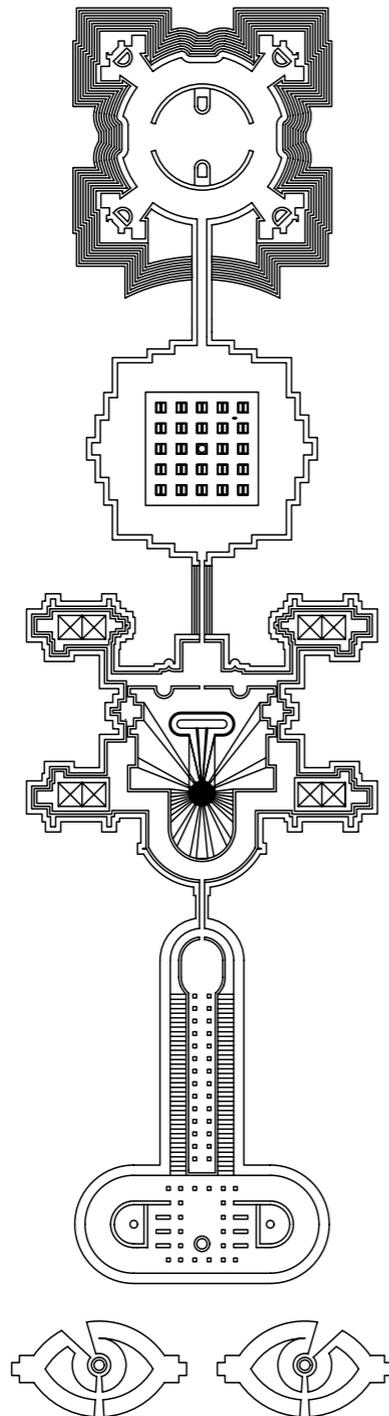
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Shadow Architecture
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Warsaw 2019

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On Utopia and Boredom

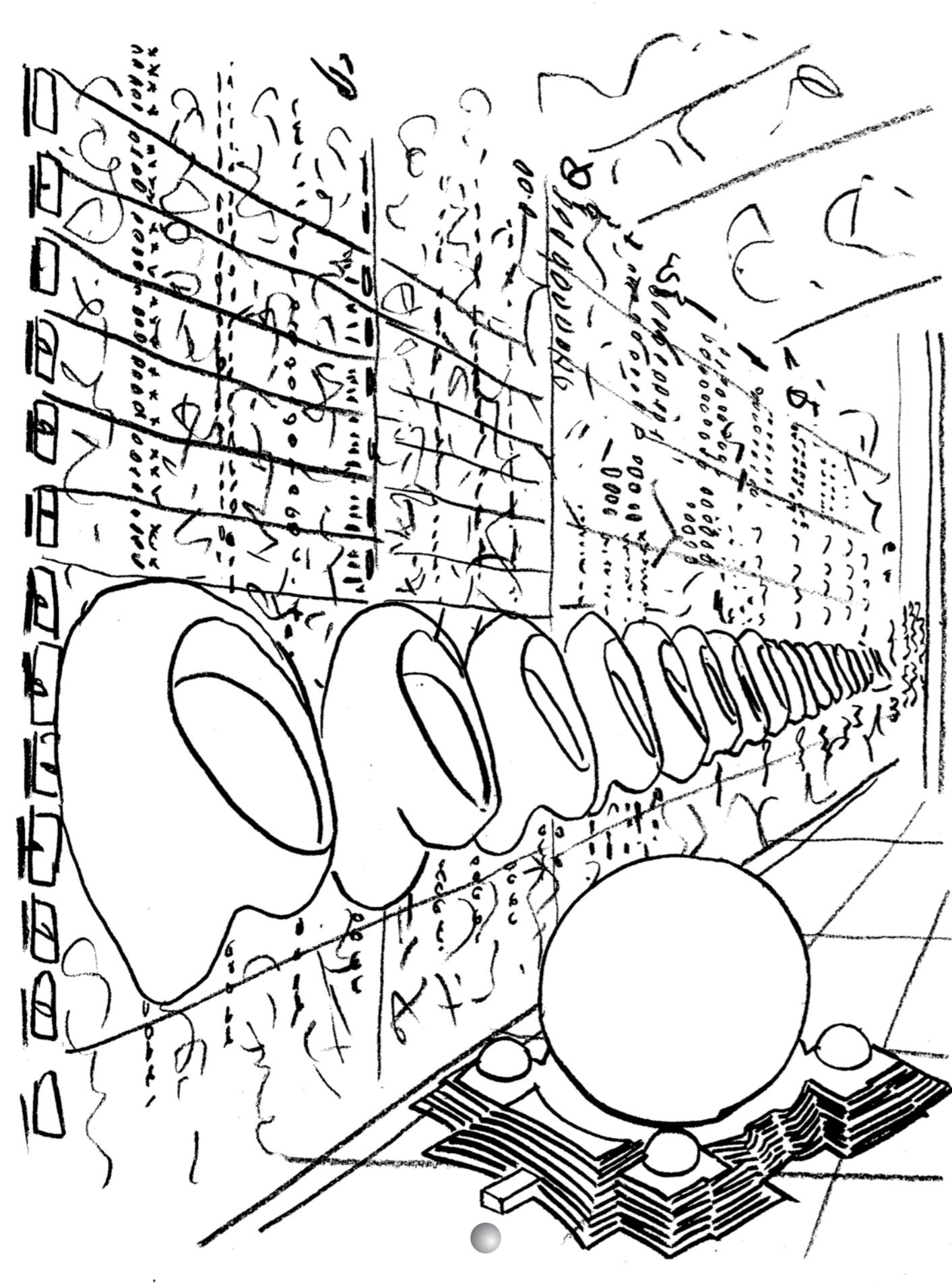
John Menick

Utopias—with their perfection, their symmetry, their happy sameness—have always been troubled by boredom. No utopia can admit boredom within its walls, because boredom is a variety of dissatisfaction, and all utopias aim for total satisfaction. In utopia, the only thing one is allowed to lack, is lack. In utopia, there are no food shortages, no bread lines, no one is deprived of sexual activity or intellectual pleasure. Utopias anticipate every want, deliver on every whim. Charles Fourier, the greatest of nineteenth-century utopians, believed that his utopia would bring about an “overmuch”¹ of pleasure, heightening the emotions by satiating the desires. (“Full satisfaction in material things is the only way to elevate the feelings.”) Only a man who lived before the twentieth century could nominate pleasure as “the everlasting principle of social organization.” Fourier was a man of his age, one far from our own overabundant century. If he had been born in 1972 instead of 1772, he may have been more doubtful of overmuch’s benefits. Roland Barthes, in his essay on Fourier, noticed that Fourierism professed a “counter-Freudianism” that stood Freud’s theory of the emotions on its head. For Freud, emotions came about from a lack, not from abundance, and sublimation of the desires, not their fulfillment, is what brought about contentment. One may sense that Freud is right. After the rise of consumer culture and sexual liberation, we know that

pleasure, taken too far, becomes its opposite. And we know that to have everything is to be bored of everything.

In 2019, overmuch is the norm. Diseases once associated only with the rich—obesity, gout, diabetes, drug addiction, sex addiction—are today endemic among the poor and working class. We all suffer a digital Stendhal Syndrome when faced with millions of hours of low-cost entertainment. Online, nothing is forbidden, everything is index-able—any news image, any birth date or film resume, any scientific paper, any drug, any weapon, any work of art or lost instruction manual can be referenced or viewed or bought within minutes. Then there is pornography, the greatest synecdoche for online overmuch, with its endless terabytes of made-to-order sex. In pornography, like utopianism, desire manifests itself without obstacles. People are reduced to the props of authorial fantasies, and after they are no longer needed, the people-props are dispelled. Pornography, like dystopian science fiction, reminds us that there is nothing more terrifying than being trapped in someone else’s fantasy. Utopia may be nowhere, but it is also, necessarily, populated by nobody. Readers of Marquis de Sade sense this after only a few pages: The Marquis doesn’t need a human race to be an audience to his fantasies. For him, people and readers are part of some enormous fantastic machine, one that is as anti-human as the gulag. All utopians have a bit of the Marquis in them—this was Barthes’s genius in grouping Fourier and Sade together in his book-length

1. Roland Barthes emphasized the word, originally Fourier’s, in his 1971 study, *Sade: Fourier: Loyola*. All quotes are from the Barthes study, translated by Richard Miller.



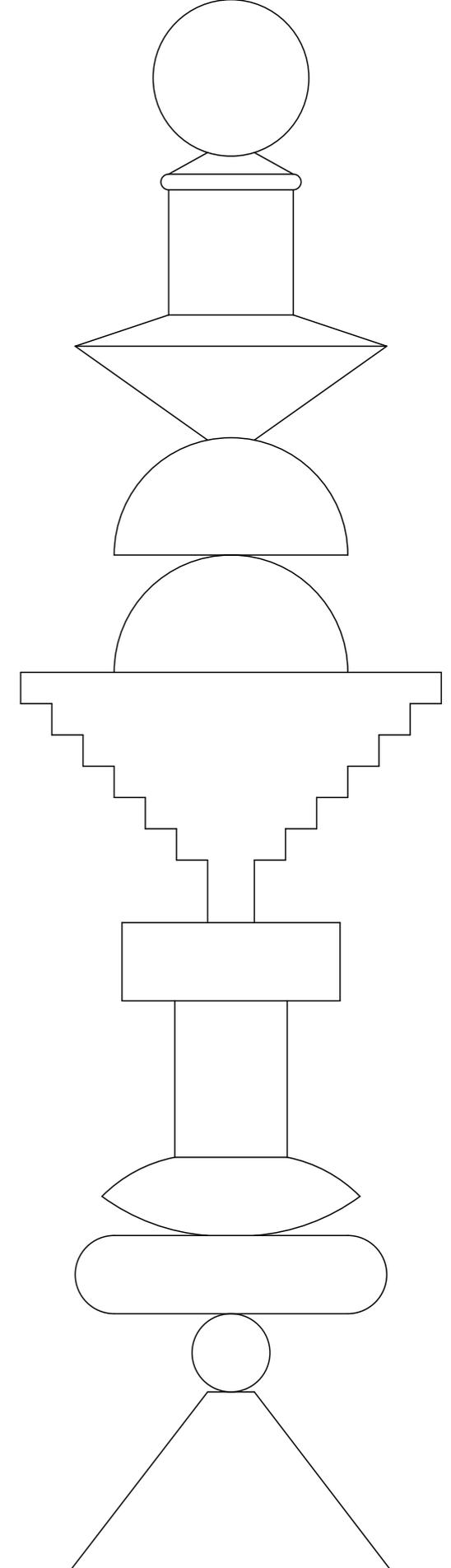
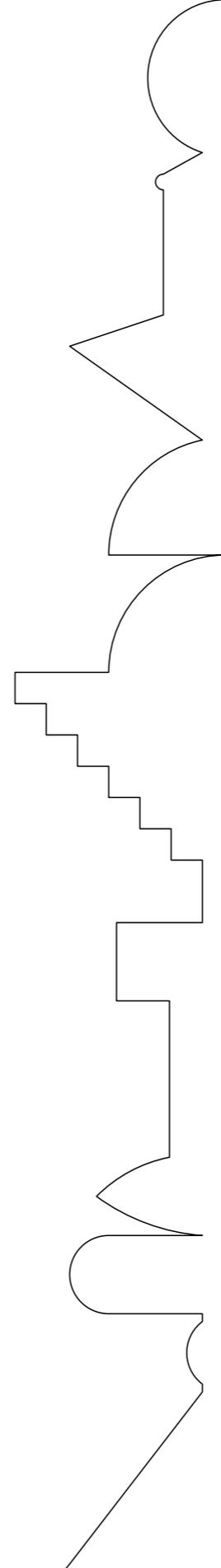
study. As Barthes writes, both Fourier and Sade had penchants for maniacal categorization. They both excluded the arbitrary, and, as should be added, both Fourier and Sade wrote against humanism. The Soviets understood the connection between utopia and Sade much earlier than Barthes, however. Their utopia began Marxian and ended Sadean, and for those lucky proletarians who avoided the gulag, they were left with unending boredom. In between, linking utopia and boredom, was revolutionary terror. As Charles Citrine, protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Humbolt's Gift*, writes: "What could be more boring than the long dinners Stalin gave? ...What—in other words—would modern boredom be without terror?"

After the gulag, modern boredom became modern art. One hundred years earlier, francophone writers were already preoccupied with boredom, casting it in monstrous forms. Flaubert called it "the silent spider." Baudelaire labeled it "that delicate monster." It was not until the twentieth century, though, that high culture strove to be boring itself, not only as a mark of seriousness, but also as a reaction to the overmuch culture around it. Beckett, that great anti-utopian, made drama inert, while Antonioni lost his protagonists in wide-angle ennui. In visual art and music, repetition won over variation, monotony over novelty. Steve Reich and Philip Glass reduced music to maddening repetition. Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt exhibited industrially-produced cubes. Lucinda Childs turned the body into a wind-up automaton. The titles were even more boring, with Beckett's *Play* and *Film*, Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, Child's *DANCE*, not to mention countless *Paintings* and *Objects* and *Untitleds*. Meanwhile, conceptual artist John Baldessari wrote: "I will not make any boring art. I will not make any boring art. I will not..."

And what of utopia? After two world wars, literary utopia detached from the propositional, drifting further into the purely fictive, eventually becoming world-building science fiction. H.G. Wells was among the last writers to enjoy a career as both a literary utopian and a novelist. As anyone who has glanced at the young adult section of the bookstore knows, if utopia survives in fiction today, it's only as its opposite: dystopia. To be an adolescent reader in America is to entertain an eschatological imagination, one concerned with hopelessness, collapse, and secular judgment days. Away from the page, onscreen, Hollywood evokes the same end-of-times fantasia. One of the few consistent plot points of any blockbuster film is worldwide annihilation, one that transcends traditional national boundaries. Several left thinkers have claimed that it's easier today to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. But plenty of films, including many apocalyptic films, depict post- and pre-capitalistic societies. *Star Trek* is set in a post-monetary, hyper-abundant economy, and historical dramas routinely depict feudalism. What no single Hollywood production can imagine is Marxian communism. After the terrors of twentieth-century Marxism, however, the failure is understandable.

Just as the twentieth century marked the end of utopia, so, too, did it doom boredom's possibilities. Art, once heavily invested in boredom, has achieved blockbuster scale. Video artists collaborate with movie stars, sculptors build dancing robots, museums resemble theme parks. Philip Glass recently scored a superhero movie, and minimalism is routinely the norm in home decorating magazines. Boredom isn't what it used to be. Boredom has become an educational tool, another flimsy lifehack for our overworked productivism. Magazine articles implore

readers to let their children be bored again, so that they can get serious about drawing and doing their homework. But children can't be bored again, not in the way their great-grandparents were bored, and certainly not in the way that the writers of the *fin de siècle* were bored. Technology is a one-way street. Our satellites won't all fall into the ocean at once. Our phones won't all simultaneously short circuit. Regarding boredom, there is no turning back. Overmuch is here to stay.



Exhibition Colophon

The book coincides with the project *APORIA. THE CITY IS THE CITY* that was created by Dream Adoption Society and Shadow Architecture, and produced by The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute as part of the main program of the Prague Quadrennial 2019.

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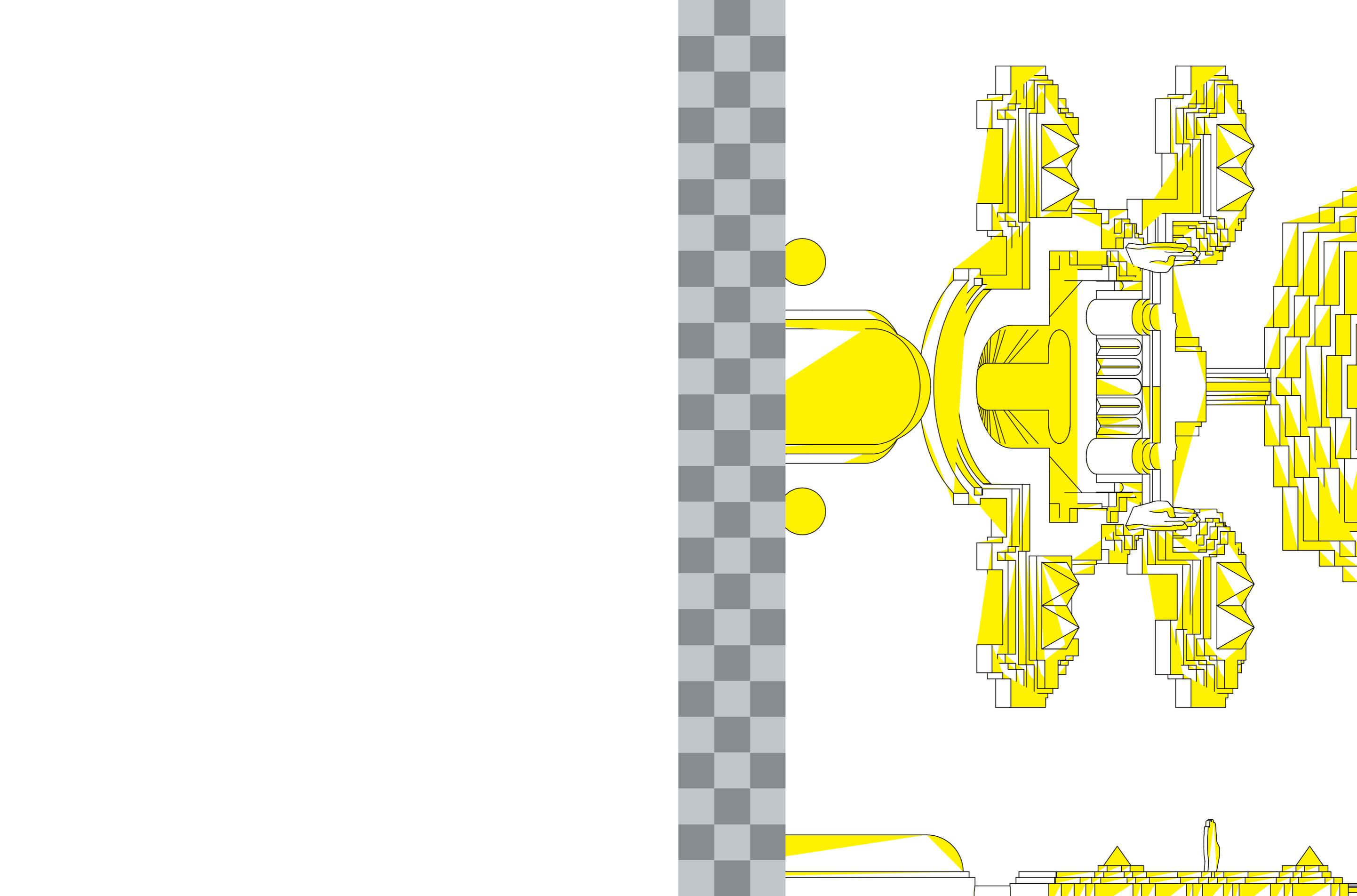
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