

**MACHINES OF LOVING GRACE**

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Terminal Creative Project Report  
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*Machines of Loving Grace*. Installation image. 2024.

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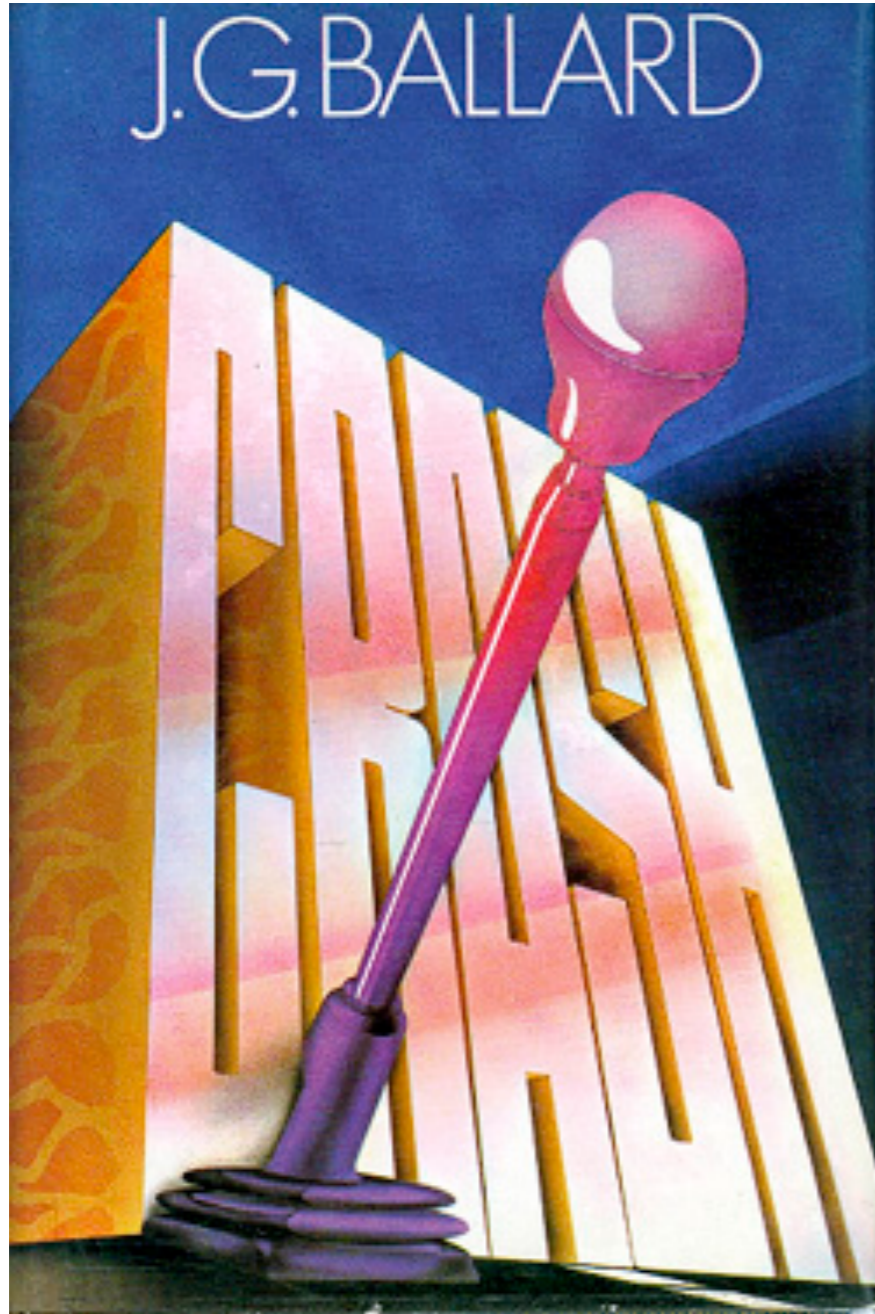


*Crash* (2024). DVD. 2024.



*Machines of Loving Grace*. Installation image. 2024.

# INTRODUCTION



*Crash* by J.G. Ballard. Cover of first edition (hardcover) by Bill Botton. 1973.

This terminal creative project report is the written accompaniment to the art exhibition *Machines of Loving Grace*, originally installed at Ditch Projects in Springfield, Oregon in May 2024. As such, it examines the contexts and implications behind the work and the media it contains. At its core, *Machines of Loving Grace* recreates and re-examines *Crash*, a 1996 David Cronenberg film based on the 1973 novel by J.G. Ballard. The goal of this introduction is therefore threefold. Firstly, to give the reader a basic understanding of *Crash*, in terms of plot line and thematics. Secondly, to outline how *Crash* has been integrated into broader visual culture, focusing on its popular, artistic, and theoretical seepage. Finally, to answer the question of why *Crash* deserves revisitation, especially within a queer context, given that it has already been rehashed several times in the fifty years since its publication.

## *Crash* — An Overview

*Crash* was originally published in 1973, the sixth novel by New Wave science fiction author J.G. Ballard. The novel, set against the backdrop of London's brutal concrete and metal roadways and the vehicles that incessantly circulate within them, centers on married couple James Ballard (named after the author) and his wife Catherine who fall in with a group of car crash fetishists after Ballard is severely injured in a collision. Vaughan, the group's ringleader, and Ballard circle each other, forming a mutual attraction. The novel was adapted into a film by David Cronenberg in 1996, starring James Spader, Holly Hunter, Elias Koteas, Deborah Kara Unger, and Rosanna Arquette.

Obsession is thematized in *Crash* through the characters' relationships to technology and each other. While the fetishist group continually seeks car wrecks as erotic fodder, Ballard's obsession with Vaughan permeates the novel and film. The novel also identifies an undercurrent and future trend of celebrity fascination, as Vaughan is driven to plan and die attempting a collision with the actress Elizabeth Taylor. While this is omitted in the film, as Elizabeth Taylor did not carry the same pop cultural weight in 1996 as in 1973, the thread of popular icon obsession carries through: Vaughan drives a 1961 Lincoln Continental, the same car President Kennedy was assassinated in, and the group of fetishists re-enact famous celebrity crashes like the deaths of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield in a perverse form of performance art. This celebrity fascination proved rather prescient, predating the vehicular death of Princess Diana; Zadie Smith writes wondering "how did [J.G. Ballard] know that the price we would demand, in return for our worship of the famous and beautiful (with their unique bodies and personalities) would be nothing less than the bloody sacrifice of the worshipped themselves?"<sup>1</sup>

Critically, both the novel and the film were received with ambivalence. Upon its publication, the book was condemned by readers as "fantastical pornography."<sup>2</sup> While the film was awarded the Special Jury Prize at Cannes, Cronenberg notes the criticism it received: "someone once wrote somewhere that a series of sex scenes is not a plot. This was someone who had seen the film in a sort of a test screening, and my answer was, well, why not? Why can't it be?"<sup>3</sup> Thematically, *Crash*, in both the 1970s and 1990s, has

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Zadie. "Sex and Wheels: Zadie Smith on JG Ballard's *Crash*." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

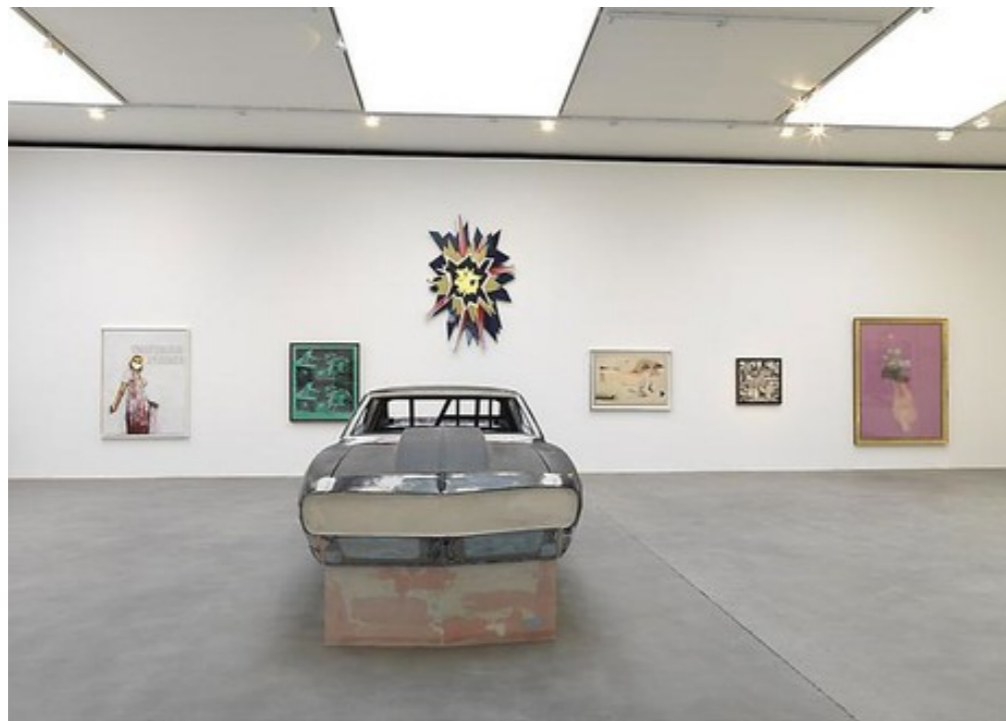
<sup>3</sup> Longworth, Karina. "Erotic Nineties: *Crash* and David Cronenberg." Podcast episode. *You Must Remember This*, 2023.

touched on the effects of rapidly advancing technology and its infiltration “into even our most intimate human relations. Not man-as-technology-forming but technology-as-man-forming.”<sup>4</sup>

### Crash — Culture Seep

*Crash* has remained prevalent over decades through its influence on theory, art, and popular culture. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard dedicated two chapters to the book (expanded on later in this paper). The late Mark Fisher took up this mantle on his blog K-Punk, including Cronenberg’s film adaption and expanding Baudrillard’s visual focus on the role of photographs in the novel to how *Crash* might be read in broader visual culture.

Within visual culture, the 2010 Gagosian exhibition curated together a selection of “Ballardian” art works. These pieces ranged from the Surrealist works that Ballard himself was inspired by to the pop art that made up his contemporaries, as well as and postmodern and contemporary pieces inspired by his writing. With featured artists such as Helmut Newton, Andy Warhol, Hans Ballmer, Douglas Gordon, Chris Burden, Jenny Seville and Rachel Whiteread, the exhibition *Crash: An Homage to J.G. Ballard* essentially constitutes an artistic canon pivoting around Ballard’s writing. Prominent themes addressed in the exhibition include celebrity obsession and the connections between man,



*Crash: Homage to J.G. Ballard*. Installation image. Gagosian, London, 2010.

Wall works from left to right: *Crashed* by Richard Prince, 2006-10; *Green Disaster (Green Disaster Twice)* by Andy Warhol, 1963; *Explosion II*, by Roy Lichtenstein, 1965; *Hers is a Lush Situation* by Richard Hamilton, 1958; *Stadtbild* by Gerhard Richter, 1969; *Still Life, Broken Statue and Shadow* by Francis Bacon, 1984.

Center: *Elvis* by Richard Prince, 2007.

technology, and violence that the book exemplifies. More recently, the gallery Venus Over Manhattan held the 2017 group exhibition *Concrete Island*, named after another Ballard novel and featuring a selection of contemporary artists whose work references Ballardian aesthetics.



*Crash: Homage to J.G. Ballard*. Exhibition catalog. Gagosian, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, “Sex and Wheels.”



Givenchy 2013 Paris Fashion Week runway centerpiece. Designer Riccardo Tisci.



Left: 'Wolford Publicity,' Monte Carlo. Helmut Newton. 1995.



Right: Still from *Crash*, dir. David Cronenberg, 1996.

A 2013 *Dazed* article connects Givenchy's Spring/Summer Women's ready-to-wear Paris Fashion Week runway to the film, with writer Isabella Burley commenting that collection designer Riccardo Tisci has left us "fetishizing the crash."<sup>5</sup> The show was outdoors at Halle Freyssinet, with models circling a steaming tableau of wrecked black '80s and '90s sedans. The connections between *Crash* and fashion are concretized through Helmut Newton's photography, some of which is featured in the 2010 Gagosian exhibition. While Newton's images often reference the novel *Crash*, Cronenberg brings the connection full circle, allowing Newton's photos to inform the styling and composition of the film.

### *Crash* — A Queer Reading

The cultural seepage and continued relevance of *Crash* is itself enough to warrant giving it a second (or third, fourth, nth) visit. The driving force behind my own revisitation is two deeply intertwined interpretations/experiences: firstly, the queer (sub)plot and readings of the book/film that dominate the conversation around *Crash*, and secondly, my own first viewing of the film, which situated it amongst queer online communities and blogging platforms.

There are several pieces of writing that either point towards, or directly examine, *Crash* as queer media. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard proposes the idea that a kind of social subversion takes place in the novel. He writes:

"...The Accident portrayed here is no longer the haphazard bricolage that it still is in most highway accidents... [T]he Accident is everywhere as irreversible and fundamental trope, the banalizing of the anomaly of death. It is no longer on the margins; it is at the heart. It is no longer the exception to a triumphant rationality; it has become the Rule, it has devoured the Rule. It's not even any longer the "accursed part," the part conceded to fate by the system itself and calculated into its general reckoning. All is inverted. Here it is the Accident which gives life its very form; it is the Accident, the irrational, which is the sex of life... There is no possibility of dysfunction in the universe of the accident; thus no perversion either. The Accident, like death, is no longer of the order of the neurotic, of the repressed, of the residual, or of the transgressive; it is the initiator of a new manner of non-perversed pleasure..."<sup>6</sup>

This excerpt — explored in more depth in regards to the piece *Crash (2024)* in the next section — essentially amounts to an inverting of what is "on the margins" and "the Rule". Baudrillard's writing therefore gives room for reading *Crash* as, theoretically, enacting within the book a kind of queer utopia. A key component of this is the lack of moralizing in the book and film. By naming the main character after himself, J.G. Ballard refuses to allow the reader any sense of distance from the novel's contents, does not explain away the more difficult portions or re-contextualize them through a separate narrator.<sup>7</sup> This allows the actions in the book and film — the inversion of social norms enumerated here

<sup>5</sup> Burley, Isabella. "Opinion: dissecting Givenchy's car crash set." *Dazed*, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Longworth, "Crash and David Cronenberg."



— to give way for the idea of queerness, as positioned against heteronormative majority socialization and politics, to instead take center stage, to encompass and become “the Rule” in a way that would not be possible if the works had given its audience any distance.

While my reading might cast *Crash*'s queerness in an aspirational light, other writers focusing on the film highlight the ways in which *Crash* falls short of its queer potential. Media theorist Karina Longworth addresses the reception of the film by the queer community in her podcast *You Must Remember This* episode *Crash and David Cronenberg (Erotic Nineties, Part 16)*. Longworth outlines how any queer critics argued the movie didn't go far enough with its queer coupling, and reads Vaughan's negative reactions to intimacy with Ballard in both the book and film — repeatedly crashing his car into Ballard's idle one — to how a closeted teen boy might react following a sexual encounter.<sup>8</sup> Other writers expand on Longworth's analysis: film and culture critic Christine Ramsay argues that Cronenberg's film oeuvre falls in direct line with the 'dead queers' trope, and in this way, sees *Crash* and many of his other films as reactionary rather than radical.<sup>9</sup>

These writings inform the way I approach *Crash*, especially in reading the novel and film as essentially queer media: the theoretical underpinnings of the film have radical queer potential, but the way the queer sexual plot points of the film come to fruition forces it to fall short. This becomes especially noticeable since *Crash* can be understood, at its most basic form, as cruising media. The plot of both film and novel is driven by illicit car sex. At one point, characters Ballard and Vaughan are shown picking up others for this purpose, and with the primary infatuation driving the plot being between two men.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I approach *Crash*. The work in *Machines of Loving Grace* aims to take these previous interpretations of the media and filter it back through contemporary digital and queer theory, complicating the novel/film's intrinsic thematics of body and technology, and point towards new meanings. The rest of this paper will examine the actual work produced for *Machines of Loving Grace*, examining how the mediums and forms point towards a proposal for a new digital queer aesthetic framework.

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<sup>8</sup> Longworth, “Crash and David Cronenberg.”

<sup>9</sup> Ramsay, Christine. “DEAD QUEERS: One Trope of ‘Mind Over Matter’ in the Films of David Cronenberg” in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (University of Toronto Press: 1999).



*Crash* (2024). DVD interior. 2024.

# CRASH (2024)

The central piece to *Machines of Loving Grace* is *Crash (2024)*, a full-length AI generated remake of Cronenberg's *Crash*. For every cut in *Crash*, I took a screenshot of the film (over 600 of them). I then fed these screenshots individually into Runway Gen-2, an AI image-to-video generation platform. The software then re-animated the film in 4-16 second increments based on implied motion in the images, as well as optional text prompts and numeric inputs which help control speed and direction. I edited these cuts, trimming or extending them as necessary, so that each cut was the same length as it was in the original film, before restitching them together, remaking the film in its entirety.

The resulting video work follows the pacing and sequencing of the original, thereby forming an abstract facsimile of a commercial film. I connect the remaking of *Crash* to two artists, Douglas Gordon and Arthur Jafa. Gordon's 1993 installation *24 Hour Psycho* is an appropriation of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* slowed down to span 24 hours. Gordon has noted the inspiration for creating the piece was the accessibility of at-home movie viewing — the control available when watching a movie from the bedroom, using VHS controls to speed up or slow down the video — as opposed to seeing a film in the theater.<sup>10</sup> In a similar way to Gordon, the way through which I approach *Crash* is dictated by my first viewing experience of the film: at seventeen, through an illegal streaming service on my phone, watching it in bed during the wee hours of the morning as part of an obsessive James Spader-filmography-binge. Watching *Crash* was facilitated by unmediated internet access and a queer online youth culture grounded in television and media consumption. That is, the themes of rewriting the body through technology that are prevalent in the original media were translated into contemporary digital image making and viewing. When deciding to remake the film now, choosing AI as the filter through which to reimagine the film was a natural choice, as AI increasingly becomes the technological filter through which our online experience is mediated.

The actual act of remaking the film is connected to the recent work \*\*\*\*\* by Arthur Jafa, in which the artist remade the climactic scene from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) substituting all the characters originally played by white actors, except Robert De Niro and Jodi Foster, for black actors. In making this piece, Jafa "brings to the surface the racist animus long accepted as underpinning Bickle's barely contained rage."<sup>11</sup> This work falls in line with *Crash (2024)* especially when reading *Crash* as essentially queer cruising media that still falls victim to the 'kill-your-gays' trope. Using AI to remake the film is therefore an opportunity to bring to light and expand upon the queer theoretical underpinning of *Crash*.



*Crash (2024)*. Installation image: AI generated video and concrete. 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Katrina M. *DG: Douglas Gordon*. London: Tate, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> D'Souza, Aruna. "A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending," *New York Times*, 2024.

Without sound, *Crash* (2024) becomes a strictly visual experience and the warping in AI's current video generation abilities comes into focus. Surroundings and settings which at one moment appear traceable across cuts, even grouped into scenes, are transformed the next moment, pulling away from the source material. Characters and the celebrities that play them disappear, changed into someone unrecognizable, physically integrated into their surroundings, only to reappear in the following cut. It is AI's notorious mishandling of human hands amplified, drawn out across a feature length film. Here, AI's failure to render distinct and accurate bodies queers the film as the divisions between sex and gender, technology and biology collapse. Bodies and machines merge in and out of each other, the gender expressions of figures shifting in and out of recognition and specific binary assignment.

The repeated, expected dysfunction in AI's image rendering brings up Baudrillard's writing on the novel *Crash*. In *Simulation and Simulacra*, he reads *Crash* and the role of the car accident as an essential inversion of form and function within the novel's depicted universe.<sup>12</sup> For Baudrillard, the 'accident' in *Crash* is indicative not only of vehicle collisions, but of those marginalized things — secrets, perversions, the abject. As the 'accident', something unaccounted for within normative social structures, forgoes its fringe position, it supersedes expectation, it becomes the 'rule' by which everything functions. What Baudrillard articulates is an elimination of the margin, not in the sense of erasure, but rather in the very notion that positions of marginalization exist as *separate*. I connect this passage to two others. First, Georges Bataille's writing on subversion in "Abjection and Miserable Forms":

"The word subversion refers to society's division into oppressors and oppressed and, at the same time, to a topographical qualification of these two classes whose symbolic relative position is that of *high* and *low*: it designates a reversal (real or tendential) of these two opposing terms; subversively, *low* becomes *high* and *high* becomes *low*; thus subversion requires the abolition of the rules which found oppression."<sup>13</sup>

Here, when Bataille outlines that subversion refers specifically to the realm of oppressors and oppressed, the act of subversion that Baudrillard is suggesting occurs in *Crash* is given a specific social dimension. It is not only the inversion of anomaly and expectation, but all that comes with it — the inversion, or erasure, of states of marginalization. Further, I connect this to Legacy Russell's enumeration of the glitch in her manifesto *Glitch Feminism*:

"A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function. Within technoculture, a glitch is a part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong. This built-in technological anxiety of something gone wrong spills over naturally when we encounter glitches in AFK [away from keyboard/IRL] scenarios: a car engine calling it quits; getting stuck in an elevator; a city-wide blackout. Yet these are micro examples in the broader scheme of things. If we step back further, considering the larger and more complicated systems that have been used to shape the machine of society and culture, gender is immediately identifiable as a

core cog within this wheel...A body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment, is a body that refuses to perform the score. This nonperformance is a glitch. This glitch is a form of refusal."<sup>14</sup>

What Russell proposes here is to view the glitch, a moment of failure working against those things which are accounted for, as a space for radical embodiment for those people, BIPOC and queer folks, whose existence itself is not accounted for within dominant social structures. I read the visual products of AI as inline with Russell's proposal. While these bodily transformations are not glitches per se, in that they do not indicate a failure or fault on the part of AI but rather an aesthetic characteristic of the technology (as it exists in 2023-2024), when activated in *Crash* (2024) they stand in comparison with live action acting and Hollywood film, pushing against upheld visions of performed and perfected realism in a way that can be theoretically aligned with Russell's proposal of the glitch. Here, AI must be understood as a social mirror<sup>15</sup> whose datasets contain the myriad of our cultural hopes and biases, loves and hates; it is made of what we have provided it. And as these mutations serve as operative signs, as they become the way that AI is visually recognized, understood and activated, they break out of the margins — of the accident, the glitch — and instead becomes the rule. These visual mutations might, therefore, be viewed as a (fleeting) opportunity to stand within the current social register and see *something else*.<sup>16</sup>



*Crash* (2024). Still. 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*.

<sup>13</sup> Bataille, Georges. "Abjection and Miserable Forms," trans. Yvonne Shafir, in *More & Less*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer. Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism*. Verso Books, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Melenciano, Ari. "Computational Anthropology and Exploring Identity through Artificial Synthesis." *Medium*, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

Even with these mutations offering up an enticing alternate vision, there are still points in *Crash (2024)* where the dataset biases seep through, reminders of the social pool within which the work operates. These are moments that AI wouldn't generate: screenshots, or the triggered reanimations, what were tagged by Runway's community guidelines as explicit materials. While some of these refusals were explicit sexual or violent images, others only featured a bruise, a set of stitches, or something else completely innocuous. In some cases, when a screenshot would not generate, a different screenshot from half a second later in the film – the image virtually identical – would generate. Other times, a screenshot that I was *sure* would be flagged as explicit was not.

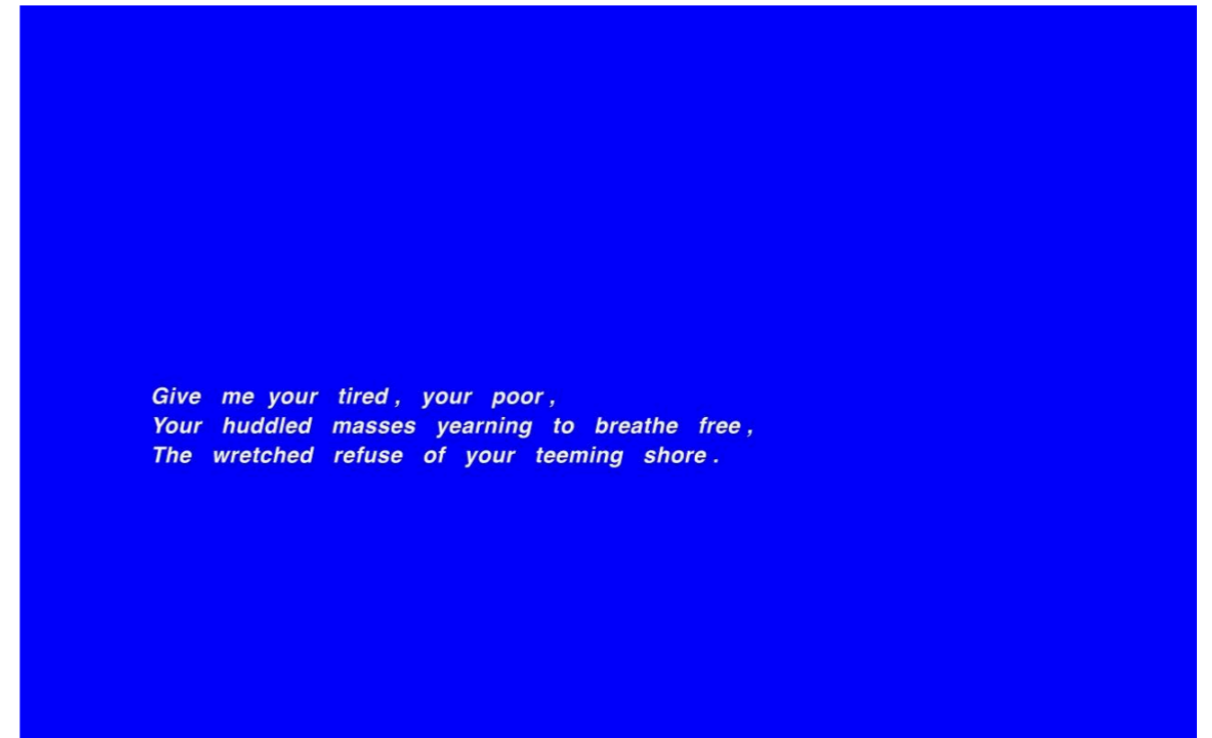
These moments of censorship often aligned with the social and political censorship of marginalized bodies. The bare shoulders of men were more often censored than the bare shoulders of women – there is an expectation toward the sexualization of women. While generating, it was easier to prompt the software to get heterosexual couples to kiss than it was queer couples.



*Crash (2024)*. Installation image. AI generated video and concrete. 2024.

Rather than omitting these cuts from the film, presenting a shorter, edited-for-television version of *Crash (2024)*, moments of generation failure are preserved within the film as cuts to dead screen blue, archiving these generation failures within AI's ever evolving and ever learning progress. The blue screen itself is the sign of a glitch or software crash — in *Crash (2024)*, it is assumed to be accidental the first time it appears. All subsequent cuts to blue, however, are recognized as an intentional part of the whole.

The placement of a blue screen becomes a purposeful choice to translate these moments of censorship into moments of refusal. In 2015, American Artist published the essay "New Glory Blue: The Blue Screen of Liberation." They write on the color dead screen blue — New Glory Blue — as an alternative hue to Old Glory Blue, the official color in the American and Confederate flags. "For a computer, the only solution to the Blue Screen of Death is restarting. The same can be said for a society that fails to acknowledge when its legislation is out of date, and it cannot fairly represent a diverse body of individuals."<sup>17</sup> As an additive color, the complete absence of red and green, "New Glory Blue never manifests itself physically. It is closer to an idea than an object."<sup>18</sup> Holding space in *Crash (2024)* with the blue screen marks a piece of the film missing, a potentiality un- — or not yet — realized. In using AI, every action is specific to that moment. I write this report three months after finishing the film, but if I were to remake it today, the placement of those blue screens may be less or different.



*The Blue Screen of Liberation*. Text from *The New Colossus*. Image by American Artist. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Artist, American. "New Blue Glory: The Blue Screen of Liberation." Medium.com, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



*Crash (2024). AI-generate video still. 2024.*



*Quarter Panel.* Powder coated steel and printed vinyl. 18" x 68" x 1.5". 2024.

# REFLECTIONS

Accompanying *Crash (2024)* in *Machines of Loving Grace* are four powder coated steel wall-mounted sculptures. The shapes of these pieces are pulled from the vehicle body of a Lincoln Continental Convertible, the car JFK was assassinated in and that Vaughan drives in *Crash (1996)*. These car parts are rendered non-usable, flattened and thrown into a scale where they reflect the body rather than contain it. Somewhere between silver automotive paint and chrome, viewers can see hazy versions of themselves in the surfaces. Chrome and silver are prominent finishes in *Crash* — along with leather, concrete and asphalt — to be marked by collisions, streaked with bodily fluid. The surfaces in *Machines of Loving Grace*, however, are left unblemished. Their translation from physical to digital and back again, from the Lincolns they reference to photographs and digital vectors files which were then cut into 1/8" steel, the pieces are rendered as floating two dimensional planes. The only reference to the dings and dents that fill *Crash* lies in vinyl adhered to *Quarter Panel*: a stock photo of a hand keying a car on an otherwise unmarked surface carries with it the tension of an unfulfilled climax.

These shapes, though directly referential to a specific car model and piece of queer media, are flattened in such a manner as to reach abstraction, placed in the realm of minimalist sculpture or modernist painting through their "blankness, monochromality, and consistency of surface"<sup>19</sup> in a way that seems to avoid overt queer readings. Rather than depicting queer culture or recognizable queer motifs, reading these works as queer finds home in Gordon Hall's "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture." In this, Hall focuses on works that have no apparent reference to gender or sexuality, exploring 'virtual bodies,' or rather, a body that "does even though it *isn't*."<sup>20</sup> Addressing Richard Artschwager's sculpture, he writes:

"Can I say that these sculptures, through their noninteractive representation of typically interactive situations, produce for me a virtual double of my body? An imaginary experience of my own body based in the experience of a material object? And why does this allow me to conceive of myself, my own gendered experience, in these terms, with this level of ambiguity between the real and the virtual? Ambiguity abounds in Artschwager's work — these "objects of non-use" as he calls them, that waver between furniture, sculpture, architecture, ornament, optical illusions, and jokes. As Jerry Saltz commented in an essay on a recent show of Artschwager's work at the Whitney Museum, this is his permanent aesthetic condition: 'The coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, both, and neither.'"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Hall, Gordon. "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture." *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (February 14, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



*Portrait II*. Richard Artschwager. Formica on wood, 1963.



Left: *Wheel Well*. Powder coated steel. 55" x 39" x 1.5". 2024.

Right: *Windshield/Fender*. Powder coated steel and vinyl. 28" x 61" x 1.5". 2024.

The steel works in *Machines of Loving Grace* are automotive bodies — quarter panels and wheel wells, windshields and fenders — and also are not. These pieces replace function with fetish, in both senses of the word. They are sexy, giving credence to the vehicular terms ‘sex on wheels’ and ‘hot rod’, while at the same time referencing the finish fetish aesthetic of 1960s Los Angeles.<sup>22</sup> In the context of *Crash*, they beg to be tarnished, and the viewer is implicated in this request as the reflective surfaces merge audience and object. To see one’s self in the surface of each work is to go through the physical-digital translation alongside the work’s automotive referents.

The perfect surfaces of these steel pieces create a stark contrast with the transitory mutations of *Crash (2024)*. Mike Kelley’s exploration of Bataille’s writing on heterogeneity as it appears in UFO aesthetics addresses these types of conflicting visuals. In UFO media, Kelley identifies the “overt design inconsistency between the form of the being and its craft”<sup>23</sup> — that is, the blob-like other worldly creatures versus the sleek high-tech ships they inhabit — as an example of Bataille’s heterogenous aesthetics. These seemingly irreconcilable forms find common ground in being equally incomprehensible, unable to be neatly fit within our limited world view, and therefore occupy a similar taboo place.

While *Machines of Loving Grace* is not UFO art, the pairing of *Crash (2024)*, its visuals marking AI as making “a spectacle of its instability,”<sup>24</sup> with the polish of the steel pieces bridges a similar distance between the abject and the heavenly. Neither the video nor the steel works contain anything overtly gestural. With the hand not present in any immediately recognizable way, the pieces speak across the gap of the reconcilable in a space not accounted for. In this gap, *Machines of Loving Grace* may be “yes and no... both, and neither.”<sup>25</sup>

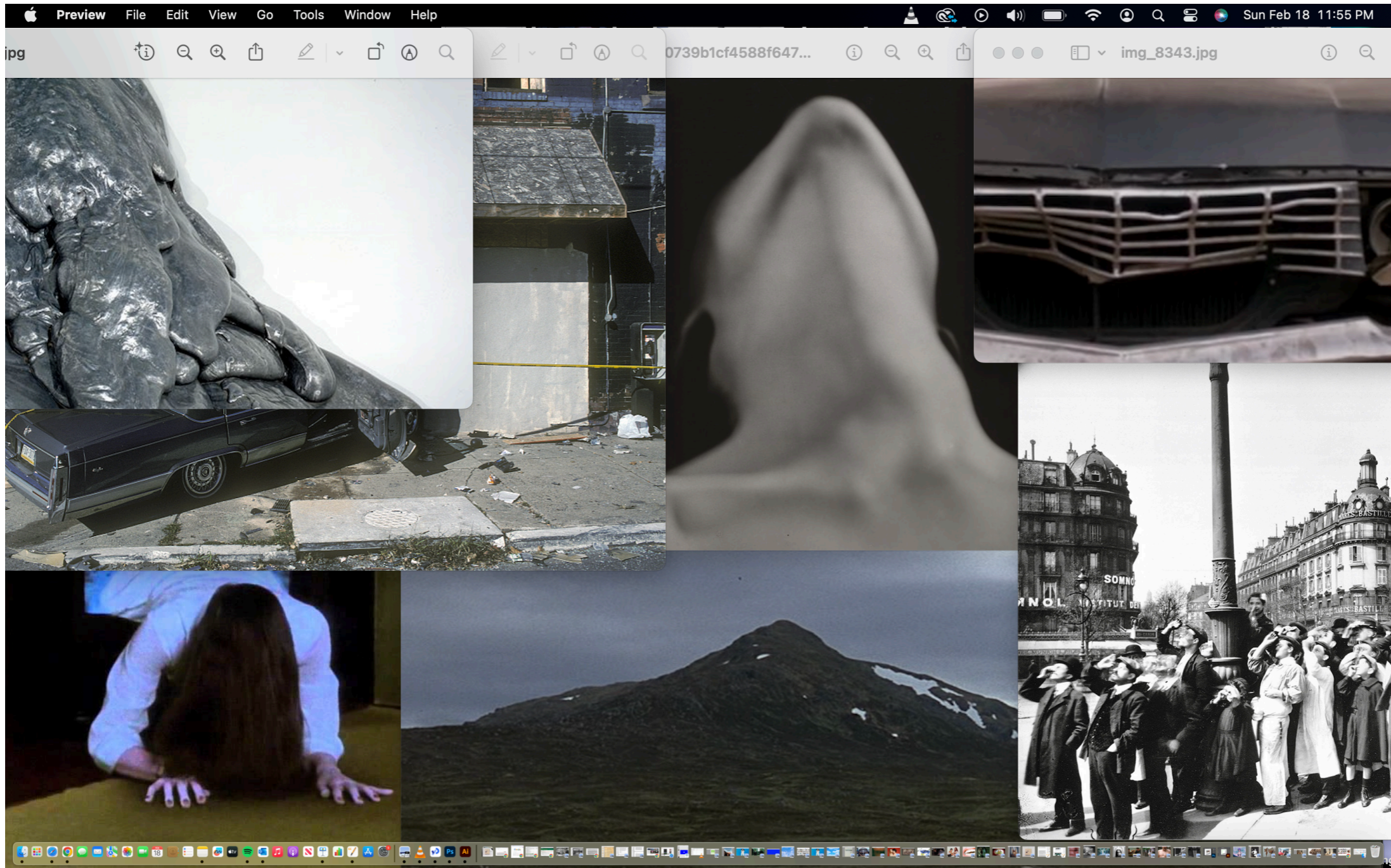
<sup>22</sup> Rivenc, Rachel, Emma Richardson, and Tom Learner. “The LA Look from Start to Finish: Materials, Processes and Conservation of Works by the Finish Fetish Artists” in *ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Conference*. January, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Kelley, Mike. “On the Aesethetics of Ufology.” *Blastitudes*, #13, August 1997, blastitude.co.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Hall, “Object Lessons”.





Atlas #3. Screenshot collage. 2024.

# AUTOCHRONICITY

The final pieces in *Machines of Loving Grace* are a series of screenshot atlases. These pieces were made by opening and arranging Preview windows so the images filled my desktop before screenshotting the composition, maintaining the loading dock along the bottom and the contextual time/date information along the top. The resulting images were then printed on vinyl and adhered to wood panels. These works are first and foremost about context — they serve as (re)contextualization points for *Crash* (2024) and the steel sculptures, and in doing so, propose a framework for digital decontextualization which might be activated towards queer aesthetics.

*Atlas #1* collages together the following images (reading clockwise starting on the left):

*Nude in Pumps*. Polaroid print. Helmut Newton, 1975.  
*David with the Head of Goliath*. Caravaggio, 1610.  
*Gentleman/MLady*. Music video still. Dorian Electra. 2021.  
*Nadja Auermann*. Helmut Newton, 1995.  
*Crash* film still. Dir. David Cronenberg. 1996.  
Photoshopped transparent PNG halloween costume meme.

On the one hand, within *Machines of Loving Grace*, these collages serve to expand on the thematics and cultural seep of the original media while simultaneously imbuing *Crash* with queer meaning in a digital context. Here, a still from the film is paired with Helmut Newton photographs, reconnecting *Crash* with a major influence on its visuals. The repeated leg motif ties the over all composition together, and when paired with *Crash*, the gay psychoanalysis of Caravaggio's paintings, the queer gender performances of Dorian Electra, and photoshopped and circulated memes becomes part of the experience of *Crash*, harkening back to my own first viewing of the film as it was positioned amongst a constant background of teenage digital detritus.

On the other hand, these pieces make a case for a new framework of seeing that takes root in digital image grouping, and which finds relatives in the atlases of Aby Warburg. Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* is addressed in the *Atlas of Anomalous AI*, a collections of writings focusing on new ways of understanding AI. The director of the Warburg institute, Bill Sherman, compares Warburg's archives to a kind of 'internet':

"This schema [*Atlas of Anomalous AI*], a three part atlas, was inspired by Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a project to map the 'afterlife of antiquity' and the way symbols re-appear in different forms throughout history and around the world. Warburg's atlas works with an associated, atemporal logic that is highly intuitive and metaphorical—it draws complex connections between a symbolic order that traverses time. This type of hyper dimensional language of representation is much like the subjective experience of AI's intelligence signature, at least as described in certain outputs of OpenAI's GPT-3 language model."<sup>26</sup>



*Atlas #1*. Printed vinyl on wood panel. 20" x 20" x 1.5". 2024.

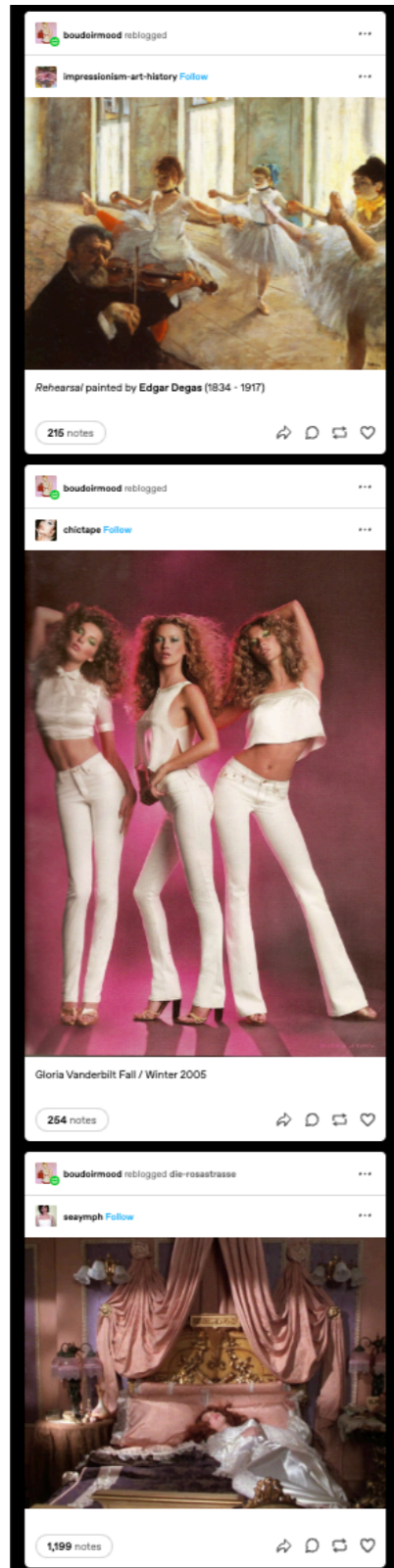
<sup>22</sup> Sherman, Bill. "Forward" in *Atlas of Anomalous AI*.



*Mnemosyne Atlas*. Aby Warburg. Re-creation of panel 41a: gelatin silver prints on burlap. 1925-1929/2020.



*Body/Building: White to Pink to Red*. Tom Burr. 2017.



Screenshot of boudoirmood's Tumblr feed.

Much like the screenshot collages, Warburg's archive is made entirely of images collecting together moments of shared visual motif regardless of time period or culture of origin; it is an "atlas of hyperdimensionality — simultaneous past, present and future."<sup>27</sup> This method of image accumulation might be compared to the deep datasets fueling AI learning models. These pieces of data are decontextualized, piled together via internet scraping, left without hierarchy or chronology. This method of image grouping might also be found on blog sites like Tumblr or Pinterest. The screenshot of Tumblr user boudoirmood's feed shows three images reblogged in succession: at the top and most recently reblogged, the late-1800s Edgar Degas painting *Rehearsal*, followed by a 2005 advertisement for Gloria Vanderbilt denim, and finally a still from the 1987 miniseries *Napoleon and Josephine: A Love Story* (dir. Richard T. Heffron). In aesthetic blogs like this, image pairing is boiled down to the harmonization of form, color, and tone. When looking at these groups of images, any held knowledge that these digital objects belong to distinctly different time periods with different historical and cultural contexts disappears, chronological divides collapsing as the images are consumed simultaneously. Furthermore, while I have provided contextual information for these images, it should be noted that in the Tumblr screenshot (and my own screenshot collages) contextual information is the exception, not the rule — several of the images are missing critical context like date or creator, and credit towards authorship is replaced by citing the blogger or re-poster. Finding this information took time, reverse image searches, and several links to 'unsafe' websites to uncover as it is not readily available within the method of image sharing.

What joins Warburg's atlases, AI's datasets, and blogosphere aesthetics — and even the algorithms sorting the order of visible posts on sites like Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest — is this decontextualization. This shared context collapse might be referred to as *autochronic*. This is opposed to the art historical use of the term *allochronic*, which describes a sense of difference and detachment despite a literally shared chronological position, not unlike the feeling of going back in time when traveling from urban to rural areas.<sup>28</sup> Within autochronicity, everything is happening *now*. Regardless of moment of origin, the digital incessant circulation of images (and video, performance, writing, etc) is continuous and ever present, bouncing off each other and vibrating together, generating new meanings and shared relationships. Here, autochronicity becomes important particularly in the sense that it names the experience of interacting with digital space, whether that space be human or algorithmically constructed.

Giving this type of digital decontextualization a name allows it to be more easily addressed and activated within artworks. In my own work, activating the autochronic is a means of proposing a queer digital aesthetic, as image grouping allows meanings to be read across each other, generating new contexts and conclusions. This methodology, as well as the aesthetics of Warburg's Atlas panels, maps well on to artist Tom Burr's bulletin boards, which broadly address performed masculinities and specialities from a queer perspective. I align the autochronic with the way José Esteban Muñoz pushes against 'straight time' in *Cruising Utopia*. As a self-naturalizing temporality, "straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction."<sup>28</sup> Muñoz's proposition for an

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

alternative to straight time is a version of futurity that learns from the past, animating it in the present while looking towards the “not-quite-conscious.” The contextual collapse of the autochronic allows for cross-temporal conversation, for the past to speak through the present towards different futures and new meanings.

I connect activating the digital autochronic towards new meanings to Hito Steyerl’s writing on free fall. Steyerl addresses the emergence of arial views and 3D imaging as the latest in a gradual move away from linear perspective that may give rise to broader social and political implications. She writes:

“This disorientation is partially due to a loss of a stable horizon. And with the loss of horizon also comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity. In falling, the lines of the horizon shatter, twirl around, and superimpose.”

Visually, the shattering, twisting, and superimposition of horizon lines can be found not only in arial and drone photography, but also in the overlapping of internet windows, the images in them cutting in front and behind each other, the horizon lines contained within them — if there are any — jump around the screen. I activate this orientational aesthetic in the screenshot collages, and in my approach to the autochronic and to free fall, the disorientation that Steyerl addresses might be better described as a queering of orientation.

In *Suicide Doors (Thelma & Louise)*, Steyerl’s approach to free fall is made literal in the process of invoking the autochronic. The embedded animation features the film’s 1966 Ford Thunderbird in perpetual free fall — with no landing (and no cut to an overly sentimental montage), is the car really falling, or rather floating? Removing the surrounding landscape and the vehicle’s inhabitants places the car in a decontextualized screen-saver-like perpetuity, giving way to a version of events where the film never ends, where the protagonists are never lost to an implied collision or the raising of the theater lights.



*Thelma & Louise* film still. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1991.

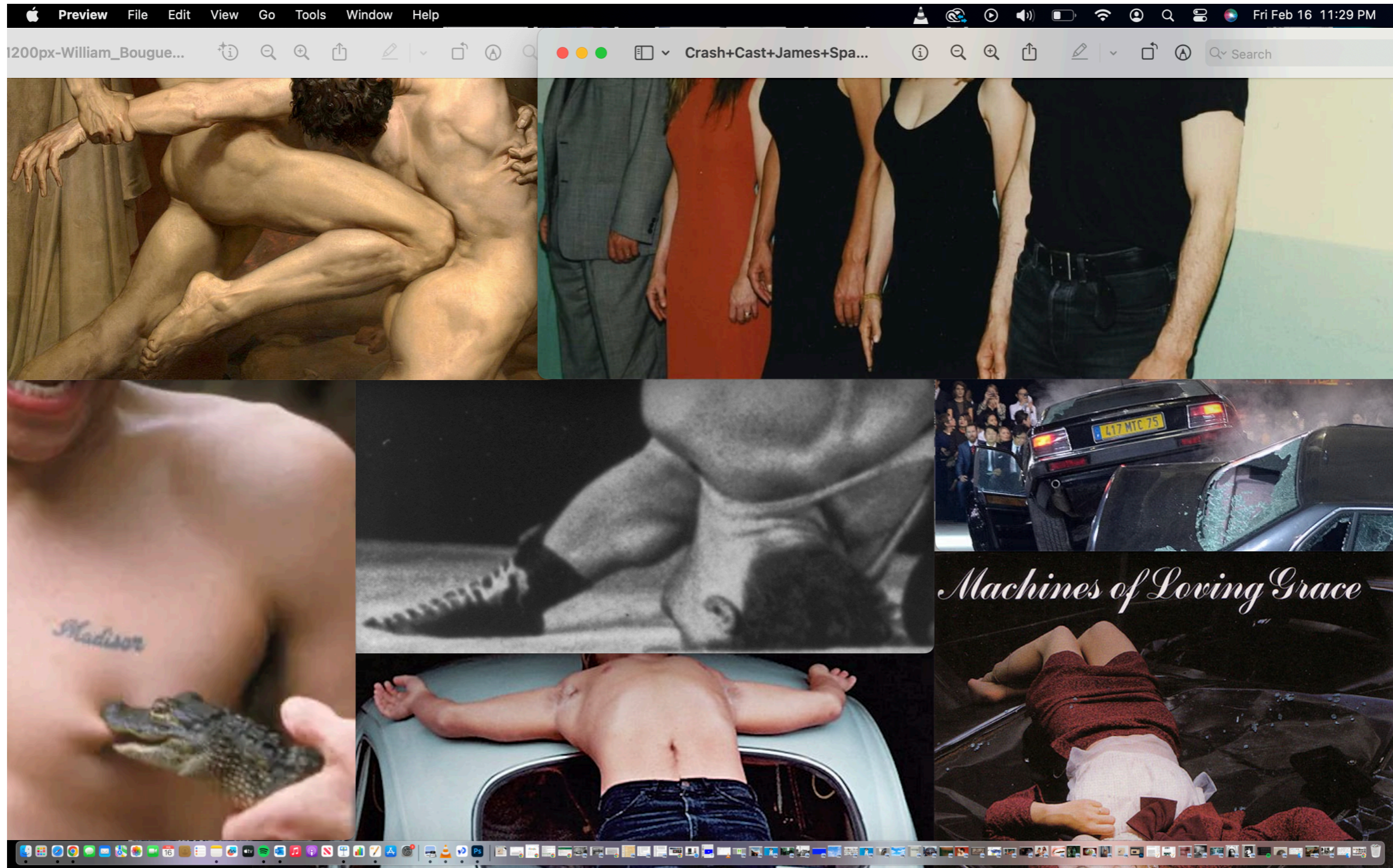


*Suicide Doors (Thelma & Louise)*. Powder coated steel, 3D animation. 66" x 24" x 1.5". 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Sherman, Bill. “Forward” in *Atlas of Anomalous AI*. Ed Ben Vickers and Kenric McDowell. London: Ignota, 2020.



*Suicide Doors (Thelma & Louise).* 3D animation detail. 2024.



Atlas #2. Screenshot collage. 2024.

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