This document is a transcript of a conversation between me and my partner, Benn van den Ende, discussing the project *Death Mask (No Alternative)*.

BvdE: So, I want to talk about your show *Death Mask (No Alternative)*.

NF: Yes!

The first thread I want to pick up is around the origin of the drawings. When did you start drawing in this style, and does it mean anything in particular to you?

I trace the works in *Death Mask* back to my time in high school. I would do these drawings in the margins of my class work of little stick figures that were committing suicide or were otherwise inflicting serious injury on themselves. Not as a gesture or expression of desperation, more as an act of rejection towards the system of petty tyranny that I think we all experience when we're in high school. Where we're forced to operate under these very human, fallible adults - I think when you're a teenager you sense quite keenly aspects of injustice present in school situations. You must obey your teacher!

I saw this act of drawing these suicidal figures as a way of rejecting this authority. It's denigrating to the system that you're participating in to say, "I would rather take my own life than participate in this any further." I see a direct link between those high school drawings and the drawings in *Death Mask*, which I arrived at much later. It felt like I was returning to that image very naturally.

How does that idea of resisting petty tyranny or rejecting a system translate into the works of *Death Mask*?

I mean, you escape the petty tyranny of high school and you enter the grand tyranny of the world. The spirit of the work to me is parallel, but the emotional scale it attempts to address is much different.

The works in *Death Mask* are about the psychological space that we're forced to enter and operate in as adults. I think we're all acutely aware of how our participation in various aspects of our society - in particular our economy, our capitalist system - we're very acutely aware of the kind of injustices that the system propagates: environmental injustices, social injustices.

I think a lot of us sense an inability to withdraw from participation in the system, but we also sense that in participating in the system, there's this inexorable movement towards our own destruction.

In some sense, the *Death Mask* drawings incorporate this same kind of rebellious spirit as my suicidal stick figures; this same impetus to think, "I could just go now and I wouldn't have to be complicit in all this." But then this is complicated by this recognition that even in the more hopeful outcome where we carry on, perhaps even to fight for change, we remain irretrievably wrapped up in a destructive system, at least to some degree.

I don't say all this to be depressive or defeatist. The *Death Mask* drawings are blackly comedic works, I think. They allow us to encounter this psychology, to recognise it, and I suppose to begin to negotiate our own views around it.

The drawings obviously feature the destruction of their figures, but it's not clear it's self-destruction. Is that an intended ambiguity?

Yeah, it is an intended ambiguity.

In fact, when I started doing the works, what I was really thinking about was people doing harm to each other. I was thinking about the tools that humans have invented to kill one another: guns, bullets, I was thinking about the atomic bomb a lot for a while. And in doing early exploratory drawings, I found the gestural moment of the destruction happening to be the most evocative.

The ambiguity in the drawings around who's causing the destruction I think parallels the ambiguity of agency that we feel in this social dilemma that we now face, that I was just discussing. It's not clear whether we're destroying ourselves, destroying each other, whether we're being forced to destroy each other by other people. What is clear is that there is destruction happening.

It's interesting to consider how contemporary Western capitalist societies place so much emphasis on the individual and their autonomy. There's a sense in which subjects understand self-destruction as wholly self-inflicted, but it's a more complex causal relationship.

Totally, and that's a part of what I was trying to get at with the works: the sense of personal, individual responsibility that we all feel - that I think we rightly feel, to a degree. I don't buy that none of us have any agency over the large-scale social systems that we participate in. We don't have total control, obviously, but each of us does have some control, and collectively as individuals we have capacity. That's not at all to dismiss criticisms of the way neoliberalism individuates responsibility.

The works are very much focussed on the individual subjective experience of having to participate in this kind of systemic destruction, and the psychological spaces that we, as individuals, have to occupy to carry on amongst it all.

I see a parallel with the way that Mandel, who popularised the term "late capitalism", identified that capitalism reaches a stage where it no longer hides its contradictions or its exploitation. It doesn't need to because the system still perpetuates itself despite these things. Do you see that as related to your work?

Yeah, again, it's a psychological thing. It's about how we're required to construct these emotional spaces where we can manage to get on, in spite of the knowledge that these injustices and these downward spirals are happening all around us.

It's interesting: if you think about the psychological space that consumers had to occupy in, say, the mid 20th century, before some of the systemic decay that capitalism entails became obvious, before there was a popular consciousness around these side effects of industrial capitalism, there was just much less emotional labour required - less doublethink, perhaps. You could buy into the promises of capitalism much more easily. There wasn't a mountain of contradicting evidence that was attacking you from every side, as it feels there is now.

I guess it's interesting to consider how it is that we, as subjects over time, have been coaxed into creating or adopting these internally contradictory systems of thought to justify what would otherwise seem unjustifiable.

Speaking of this psychological doublethink: many of the drawings which feature the destruction of the individual have a cartoonish smiling face transposed over the top of them.

Yeah, that's a very plain visual pun, really. The works are called *Death Mask*: they address the requirement to find a way to palatably "dress" death. To apply a facade or veneer over the top of death, destruction, decay in order to manage, to go on.

You've mentioned to me that you're interested in the trope of the "Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book" - can you speak to that?

The Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book is a trope that I really enjoy. It's described on the website tvtropes.com which indexes recurring cultural tropes in movies, television series, comic books, novels, so on.

I think most people are familiar with the Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book. It occurs when, for instance, a disturbed child is (sometimes unknowingly) producing reams of paper that they're decorating with nightmarish visions. Things like people killing each other, horrifically gory things, in *The Ring* there's the kid who just draws the vaguely spooky circles.

To me there's a relationship to another really popular trope in folk psychology which positions drawing as a medium between the subconscious and the conscious. There's an idea that if you allow yourself to draw, unguided, something will manifest that is somehow deeply true within you. In the canon of Western art history, this goes back to automatic drawing in the early 20th century, which the surrealists were really into, but it's also evoked in art therapy and similar practices now.

I don't really buy into this notion in any spiritual way, but I am entertained by its deployment, especially in places such as the Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book where a space of innocence produces a really horrific vision of truth. We want to think about children as being totally naive and protected, and so this idea that a kid is having deep insights into the inherent violence of humanity is obviously unsettling.

When I'm making these drawings I'm using cartooning, which is a medium associated with humour, comedy, light-heartedness, often it's associated with children's entertainment. Using the techniques of cartooning to produce darker, or more sinister, or grotesque imagery is powerful in the same way the Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book is powerful. It's encroaching on this space of innocence with a dark truth.

In a way, it mirrors the development of the everyperson's psyche as capitalism has developed: we started off with this innocence and slowly it's being encroached upon by a dark truth emerging from within.

There's a self-destructive impulse in the *Death Mask* drawings that emerges by playing on this trope of the drawing revealing the subconscious. Do you think that, for subjects living under late capitalism, this impulse is a kind of general malaise that is felt but not understood?

I think that broadly, artistically and philosophically, I'm really interested by the idea of ignorance. We're all ignorant of many things. I'm interested by the way that people construct and preserve ignorance, and the way that people employ ignorance to feel better.

Certainly I don't think that any of the figures in Death Mask, in as much as I might consider them characters, know exactly why these things are happening to them. The things just are happening to them. That was the psychological space that I was interested in: I think that most people who are subjects under late capitalism can't clearly articulate links between their sense of existential decay and the complex and chaotic machinations of a globalized society.

Returning to this idea of seeing drawings in an automatic way: you say that you don't necessarily buy into it, but can you speak to your drawing method for these works? Do you have an idea of what you're drawing or do you just sort of go...

...where the pen takes me? Yeah, I do always have some idea. I understand the subject that I will draw.

I work in a way that I sometimes think of as the Mr Squiggle method. If you're not familiar, Mr Squiggle is the titular character of a children's television show who has a pencil for a nose. He's given sheets of paper with a few incomplete line segments drawn on, and through his ingenuity he turns these line segments into coherent drawings.

I work in a similar way with much of my drawing, which I describe as semi-automatic. I put a few impulsive marks on the paper, and then I construct the subject around those. It's very unusual for me to do studies or preparatory drawings in the traditional sense - I think for the works in *Death Mask* I did one composition fully prior to approaching the final drawing. Certainly my drawing is not disciplined in the way that a traditional draftsman's work would be.

There is a similarity there - with this idea of automatic drawing revealing the subconscious. Your method feels like a sort of Rorschach; you're taking a shape and allowing it to reveal something.

It is an intriguing psychological exercise, in a way. I've been drawing long enough now that, yes, it's very intuitive, but the outcome doesn't surprise me often.

I guess my question is more whether this method is a personal process, or whether it was adopted in reference to the Nightmare Fuel Colouring Book, feeding into the idea behind the work.

For me, the method always has to match the work.

The way that I work as an artist is that I produce experimental work in an unguided way, and by exploring new territory and turning over my own thoughts I stumble upon synchronicities. There are ideas I discover where the work I produce and the method I'm using play off each other. That's the dream, I think, as an artist, is finding a place where the work, the medium, and the ideas work together and create something complete, something greater than the sum of its parts, in a way.

For the works in *Death Mask*, the process came first. This project could only have arisen from this drawing method I'd developed, and from the psychological spaces I'd associated with it.

Accompanying the drawings are two bronze death masks, which are quite different from the drawings. How do they feed into the completed project?

They're supplementary works, in a way. They are death masks in that they are casts of real people's faces - one is mine, one is yours.

As I work on any project, the ideas I'm working with coalesce. I start to turn them over and draw out all the implications. At the bottom of these ideas about psychological spaces, societal decay, I saw a question about how people relate to destruction and death.

The death mask as a cultural artefact has a very rich history. It crops up at different times in history and illustrates different kinds of cultural engagement with death: sometimes it's about acknowledging death, at other times it's about trying to deny death, or to create an illusion of life after death. To me this obviously paralleled the psychology that the drawings engaged with.

They were also a way to make the ideas of the show a bit more personal and intimate. They are images of my face and my intimate partner's face as they would appear if we died today. I guess, in a sense, they were a way to address some of the project's psychological questions to myself.

Is there a sense in which the masks are connected to the self-destruction of the drawings, the sense of decay or disrupted social order?

Less so. The masks were very much more to do with how, as individuals or as societies, we feel a need to reckon with death itself. They're less engaged with the destructive precursor to death, and more engaged with the death itself.

The bronze masks were actually a much earlier idea from a completely different experiment that had never really come to fruition. When I arrived at the name *Death Mask* for my drawings, I linked in this earlier work and the ideas worked together. They felt right to sit together under one project, so they did.

Is there any sort of significance in terms of the metal that they're made out of? Bronze?

It was important to me that they be made out of a substantial metal to reflect the nature of historical death masks. If I had unlimited means, I would love to have realised them in gold, which of course has so many links to iconography, ritual, death.

There's a very famous death mask, the Mask of Agamemnon, which is an ancient Greek mask produced in hammered gold. I've loved this mask for a long time, and it was in my mind a lot as I worked on my masks. In particular, the way the Greek mask has splayed out over time to distort the features and tear the edges influenced how I produced my masks.

To return to your question: bronze is a very ancient and enduring metal for cast sculptures, and it felt like a suitably dignified material for an object as serious as a death mask.

Death Mask **is only half the title of your show - there's a second part to the title which is** *No Alternative*.

That's right. The drawings are called *Death Mask* and the death masks are, confusingly, called *No Alternative*. Obviously there is no alternative but to die, but also the phrase "there is no alternative" was used famously by Margaret Thatcher in defending the inevitability of capitalism as a sort of foundational framework from which society must spring.

I think a lot of us see Thatcher (and Reagan) as pivotal figures in the development of earlier industrial capitalism into what we now have, which I would call "late capitalism". These are people in history who are seen as progenitors of the kind of social sickness that motivated the drawings.

So there's a link back to history, and again just a pun: there is no alternative but to die, there is no alternative but the destruction of capitalism.

This phrase "No Alternative" in the context of capitalism reminds me of Mark Fisher's book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Fisher's idea of capitalist realism suggests that people don't realise they exist under a contingent system, that people feel there is genuinely no alternative to capitalism.

Totally. I was aware of Fisher's work when I titled the works *No Alternative*. That's the tragedy, right? That people think there's no alternative when in fact there are many.

The works are about this constructed hopelessness, this kind of fatalism. This view of, "well, we've arrived at capitalism. There's nothing we can do. We've arrived at this broken system and there's no way out."

I think there's an astute observation in comparing Fisher's work. There is a critique in *Death Mask* of the hopelessness that people feel, because I think we ought not to feel hopeless. Again, as I said at the beginning, these are not messages of defeat. They are portrayals of a hopelessness so senseless and futile that we're forced to imagine another way through - an alternative.

I see a link here to your earlier discussion of your high school drawings. There's something about how high school is your entire world, when you're there; you're forced to be there, you don't have an alternative, your world view is so narrowed to the confines of the school system. There's a parallel with how people are educated, brought up in, so entrenched within a system that they become unable to imagine alternatives.

I'd say it's not just a parallel, it's a continuum. It's a process, right?

It starts in school: you're taught to relate to the world in a certain way, you're taught that there is no alternative to school, no alternative within school. Then you move out into a world where there's no alternative but another system of authority imposed upon you. I don't mean to sound too conspiratorial, here. There's just a reality about how we're indoctrinated into systems of power.

For me, there's no threshold, no clear distinction. These little suicidal stick figures, who just couldn't be less interested in a tyrannical maths teacher imposing petty authority, vary only by degrees to the *Death Mask* drawings, which address power in a much broader, global, socioeconomic context.

You mention this idea of authority and power. I see in this self-destruction, in taking one's own life, or in a more metaphorical sense destroying a particular way of thinking, there's an ultimate rebellion against authority. You're destroying the object of authority.

Yeah. It's a total reclamation of the self, in a sense. It's refusing to give any part of yourself over to a system that is producing injustice or oppression.

That said, it's also a withdrawal and a cancellation of the self. It's a removal of agency as much as it's a removal of complicity. I'm trying to advocate for active work towards a better alternative. Suicide is not a solution I'm advocating.

You also work in the medium of photography. I see a common theme in some of your photography, especially your fashion photography, in that you often obscure or "destroy" the subject of the image. Is there some link in thinking here around the idea of self-destruction, or resistance into being moulded into a particular kind of subjectivity?

I think that's an interesting comparison. You're right, my photography often fails to properly depict the thing that it's a photograph of. Even in these drawings, the figures are often overlaid and distorted, difficult to distinguish.

I think there is a common thread, yeah, in that my work all stems from my own politics. My foremost criticism is of the dangerousness and the risks that we assume in failing to critique our given systems of interpretation, of authority, of structuring thought. So almost all of my work is intentionally constructed to interrupt automatic processes of understanding. Often the subjects of my work are suggested, but obfuscated and not explicitly depicted. I require my viewers to take an active role in determining what is in the image.

As a viewer, this process of obfuscation, making me do work to retrieve an image, also opens a question of why an image is presented in a particular place or way. Is that a question you're raising intentionally?

Yes, totally. Context matters. The space around the work needs to correspond meaningfully with what's inside the work, in a way.

For a long time, I've been interested by the German playwright Brecht and his concept of the *verfremdungseffekt*, or "estrangement effect." In his theatre productions, Brecht would instruct actors to behave in unnatural ways, to break the fourth wall, such that the performance itself became conspicuous. It would force the audience to acknowledge that they were consuming a play; force them to understand the work as a construct. I think this immediately entices a viewer to think critically about what message you're being served, and why you're being served it.

There are motivations in constructing any work, any piece of media. I want to prompt people to think about the motivations, pressures, contrivances that are wrapped up in and around a work. I suppose I want my audience to understand that they play a part in constructing a work, and also in accepting or rejecting a work.

This seems to tie back into the message of the *Death Mask* drawings, in that you're holding your audience to account for their participation in a system that can be destructive.

Sure. It's meant to be compassionate work, but yes, it is meant to be work that calls you to attention on what is happening not only around you, but also through you. This is something that I put into almost all my work, in whatever medium, in whatever project: the work is a call to attention, a prompt to more critically observe the world around us, the world which creates us and which we create.

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