Preface

Modern thought brought with it a dissociation of the material and the spiritual. In the ensuing void, attempts to satiate intrinsic metaphysical desires often appear in the form of auratic devices—products of consumer culture. I have observed explicit examples of such devices in my research of Melanesian Cargo Cults and during expeditions to Guangdong Province in China, Phayao Thailand, and the secluded island of Ayoke in the Philippines. The phenomena I have documented seem to reveal that deeper forces are at play in the construction of our globalised world. To understand this, and the role consumer technology has in animist practices, I examined three instances of the performative life of technology within the context of the sacred: The first is the burning of paper gadgets at the Qingming festival in China, the second is the John Frum Movement of Vanuatu, and the third is the ritual worship of scientific instruments during Ayudha Puja portion of the Navaratri festival, India. This research extends from an initial interest in the double-life of digital technologies as both symbols and objects of desire. In this essay, I elaborate on my expanded artistic inquiry into the subversive re-use and appropriation of technological goods in animist practices. It is my hope that such explorations could lead to a new understanding of global consumerisms intersecting with art and late capitalist ethnography.

Increasingly folk cultures and shamanic practices around the world incorporate technology products into their belief systems. This curious assimilation of the man-made and the mystical can offer unique insights into global commodities through their integration into animist performance. The so-called Cargo Cults of the South Pacific, for instance, resulted in bamboo replicas of airplanes and radios to magically entice cargo from the skies. An act demonstrating the deeply performative aspects of culture and the subversive potential of mimicry strategies. In the Chinese province of Guangdong, iPhones, Rolex watches and laptops are re-made from paper and referred to as “Zhizhas” to later be burnt for the dead. An offering to ensure there is no absence of luxury items in the afterlife. In northern Thailand, Strawberry Fanta was incorporated into local folk tradition: The ruby red liquid used as an alternative blood sacrifice to appease the spirits. While at Ayudha Puja in southern India, scientific instruments, such as microscopes, and other machinery are worshipped as a vital part of human existence. Defying dualistic worldmaking, these objects of productivity are repurposed to suit universal, yet, alternate human needs; a new way of revealing the global life and after life of things.
Supermarket of the Dead

Diary, May 23 2018, VIE

“We are boarding a direct flight from Vienna to Hong Kong. The decision to visit the annual Qingming festivities in the south of China was only made three weeks ago. A matter of family. Many Chinese are heading home for the traditional ‘Grave Sweepings’ in spring, wearing T-shirts with curious slogans printed on them. Many sound like capitalist endurance mottos, others are strikingly obtuse. One says ‘A Diary—A collection of memories from the past.’ It’s as if the entries of a dictionary were printed on individual T-shirts, definition by definition. It is not the only one I see and ask myself if the slight banality of those T-shirts resemble the openness of the eastern ‘Haiku.’ My cameraman Leo has a more plausible theory. That the sentences are more likely to be associated with a western lifestyle and individual freedom. In a similar way Chinese symbols are used in Europe for their mere aura of wisdom. Is this an example of a ‘resonance phenomenon’ described by Hartmut Rosa, in which mere forms have become something else over time? Like floating signifiers and metaphors develop a life of their own. Shifting between the realms of science, art and everyday life?”

During the approximately twelve-hour flight to Hong Kong, I browse the on-board film library. Finding ‘Cast Away’ with Tom Hanks (the American adaptation, or should I say plagiarism) of the common Robinson Crusoe tale. The white man once again struggling against a hostile nature—beautifully illustrating the oppositional mythology of modernist thinking. ‘Cast Away’ without a doubt is a mediocre example of filmmaking, yet some details in this version are worth mentioning, as they already make me think about deviant constructions of the sacred. Robinsons native sidekick ‘Friday’ was swapped for a product: a volleyball, which is already one of the main sponsors of the film. WILSON. As in solitude, the man has to form a friendship with an inanimate object, a successful animist relation is formed over the course of the film. Extending often subtle product placement to the point of totemism. As the volleyball is lost at sea, the viewer too is tempted to cry for a lost ‘companion product’ as Donna Haraway might have put it. ‘Cast Away’ begins and ends with the individual’s relation towards his commodities, especially curious since we are on our way to witness the offering of cardboard speedboats and inkjet printers during the annual Qingming in China.”

The Taoist art of folding paper into dragons, flowers, and gold has been for centuries considered to be a form of contemplation and meditation on the ephemeral nature of things. The craft of paper folding was usually undertaken by Taoist monks, but as is often the case with contemporary Chinese cultural practices, contradictions are not irreconcilable. Consequently, it is not unusual for Buddhist, Taoist, folk, consumerist, and ancient traditions to coexist in the everyday culture of Guangdong. A paper replica of a laptop is therefore not antithetical to what would otherwise be considered an ancient tradition. Yet for generations, it was predominantly only paper money that was burnt during Qingming—the annual ‘grave sweeping’ that starts each spring. Over the last two decades, however, a more contemporary approach has been taken. A form of syncretism between consumer culture and ancestor worship emerged. Papercraft iPhones, iPads, Rolex Watches, and Louis Vuitton bags are now set alight to please the dead. Ensuring access to luxury items in the afterlife. These paper replicas of consumer items are known as ‘Zhizhas’ (ger. Brandopfer) and roughly translate into something along the lines of ‘Paper Art.’ Commercial products here handled (ger. gehandelt) on markets beyond the functional, not just as utilitarian objects, but as expressions of a sublime memento and prosperous afterlife.

During my own visit to the Qingming, I encountered countless logos and brands among the offerings to the dead. This led me to the suspicion that here it is believed a personal preference for a particular brand passes over with us into the afterlife. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that brands can be included in traditional worship. In such a culture, it might be considered not only pragmatic, but forward thinking, to ‘holistically’ integrate brand fandom with religious rite. According to Byung-Chul Han², consumerism is not considered within eastern thought to be something strictly profane. This is essentially because Eastern mythologies lack a conception of the corruptible “pure innerness” that pervades western cultures. There is no shame to consumerism and succumbing to the seduction of the produced other—the product. Constant consumption can be celebrated, and even extended into the afterlife.
Diary, April 4, 2018, Hong Kong

“As we visit several Zhizha (paper offering) shops around Hong Kong, it seems at first that westerners are unwelcome. Shopkeepers would not speak with us, but other shoppers would often refer to the paper replicas as ‘something for the Chinese’ and ‘things for the dead.’ Is it possible that the Chinese fear a former colonialist gaze, to be mocked by foreigners for a peculiar belief as superstition? We have more luck at a shop near Cat St. in downtown Hong Kong. After I explain myself in English to a woman, I beg her to explain to the shopkeeper that I am a researcher from Europe with the most respectful of interests. At first, the shopkeeper hesitates, but later he welcomes us, and after some friendly translations he even lets us film some of the ‘Zhizhas’. In this shop we find almost every product imaginable re-made from highly flammable paper. Electronic devices in every form compiled into sets, there is even a 90s Discman. There are also passports, credit cards, sneakers, and cars in various forms. And apart from the more common products, there is also a big paper inkjet printer. Today is the day before the ‘grave sweepings’, the day when the graves are cleaned, and tech-replicas are burned. So it is one of the busiest days of the year for the shopkeeper. The next day we hope to document the ceremonial burnings at one of the biggest cemeteries in the region, the Chiang Wai graveyard.”

April 5, 2018, Guangdong

“It is the beginning of a really hot spring day, and we are on our way to one of the biggest cemeteries around Hong Kong. A police officer at the Chiang Wai Station tells us that today it is only possible to go uphill by foot. Too many people are expected. Chinese cemeteries, as we learn later from a young manager, are generally located on hilltops facing the sea, which has traditions in the ‘Feng Shui’ principles of empty space and arrangement. On the small road, hundreds of people are on their way to pay their respects, as the sun intensifies, the first ambulances rush by to aid those suffering from heatstroke. It is not even midday. The atmosphere could be described as cheerful, only a few withhold their tears, it must be the first or second Qingming after their loss. Twenty minutes of walk and on the top of the cemetery a big Coca Cola stand welcomes the thirsty with Cokes for six Hong Kong dollars. The Coke stand is in strange contrast to the thousands of graves surrounding it as if it held some significance to the rites around it. The mere ubiquity of offered Coke cans as a present for the dead gives the corporate stand a sort of presence, that is at that point hard to grasp. Does the omnipresence of a symbol add something to the holy context of the festival, or is it the other way round? The already hot air is saturated with dense smoke and ashes, which makes it hard to breathe.”

Sacred Products

On each level of the cemetery building, there is an oven that is constantly fed with joss paper and other paper offerings. The Zhizhas are burned relentlessly. Small piles of groceries materialise in the crowded hallways. Whole piglets and soft drinks are systematically laid before the graves next to burning candles and paper. The burning of the tech replicas is always accompanied by devotional gestures—rituals of bows and nods. Gestures that in other cultures commonly indicate humbleness and respect. Next to the replicas stand flowers in Ovaltine containers and Coke cans. These vessels are hardly traditional, yet it does not seem that the branded products interfere in anyway with the holy context of the grave sweeping. On the contrary: The density of logos cannot be a coincidence, the sheer abundance of international brands is just too present. But it seems there is no real spiritual reason either. The use of brands like McDonalds, Sprite, Louis Vuitton seems more like a sort of spiritual pragmatism—as pragmata—indicating in Greek a ‘constellation of things.’ If the dead relative preferred filipino San Miguel beer while he was alive, he’d probably enjoy it in the afterlife. Along with his favourite brand of cigarettes. If he was a fan of the Big Mac there is no reason why he wouldn’t enjoy one as an offering. The very personal preference towards a brand is prolonged and extended to a concept of afterlife—quite pragmatically incorporated into animist practice. People and mass-produced products seem to touch each other. They complete each other in their individual ontological systems, free from a hierarchy where there is a „higher plane of existence“ disconnected from the ‘corrupt’ real world. Here spirits eat Big Macs.

Coca Cola stand at Qingming Gravesweepings, Hong Kong (Moosgaard, 2018)
Following Mircea Eliade on his views of the religious, modern man wanted a world of his own, and had to purify that world of any divine fallout, and strictly separate the sacred from the profane. But, as Eliade writes: "... to do so, he had to oppose the ways of his ancestors, and he feels that these ways are still capable to manifest themselves in this or another form, on the deepest grounds of his being."

If we think the global subconscious as these "unpurified grounds", brand worship and tech-appropriation are worth considering as such Eliadian manifestations: Symbols, be they religious, logos or brand products serve as signifiers, opening up something universal and curiously unifying in this context. In a society submerged in artefacts of persistent technological innovation, the use of mimicry in the burning of the mockups manifests the comforting technological object as the ultimate symbol. Ultimate in the sense of both endmost and unrivaled. A symbol of power, prosperity, and the ever-elusive, always idealised 'lifestyle.'

For the participants of the Qingming ceremonies, this symbolic potential and desire to gift it to their ancestors transcends the simple act of consumption through various practices of imitation and re-appropriation.

Technological Mockups or: The Malenesian Cargo Cults

During the second world war, Vanuatu locals of the south pacific (who had up to this point led an indigenous life) were suddenly confronted with western technologies. Airplanes, rifles, radios, headphones. US soldiers occupying the islands were supplied by air, and indigenous communities would watch in astonishment, as large flying metal objects dropped precious cargo from the sky. They too desired goods without the need for undertaking any traditional 'work' just like the US soldiers parading. According to certain anthropologists, locals started to re-enact the rituals and devices performed by the US soldiers. They marched, sat in control towers, and held up wooden radio transmitters. But mainly they waited for supplies, which soon became an integral part of this peculiar cargo mythology. "You build your plane too and wait in faith, the waiting," said Vanuatu elder Chief Isaac, "the waiting is the hardest part." The bamboo airplanes of Melanesia, wooden headphones and other ceremonial mockups were (according to elders like Isaac) crafted to entice airplanes full of cargo to ultimately bring happiness and prosperity to the people of Vanuatu. The otherness of the US military occupation was surprisingly not met with any hostility, instead, the Vanuatu formulated a hybrid mythology about goods and imperialism. The belief led to a coping strategy of 'sympathetic magic' where essentially mockups of technology should magically attract the same results. There was no clear distinction between an artistic and functional object. Surprisingly the rituals around "John Frum Day," did in the end attract more planes full of cargo. Many aircrafts with tourists and anthropologists would come to the Island to witness these performances.

The practices of the Cargo Cults should not be discarded as superstition—a judgment that would be an enactment of the true colonial gaze—but, instead, investigated as a syncretism of magical thinking and political performance. Did the US soldiers truly understand their advanced technology, the big geostrategic agenda? The cult of the cargo is our world exactly. We seem to perform meaningless routines we call work, update, exercise in hope for future „cargo“. With a technology that could navigate us to the moon, we write LMAO. It can be speculated, that the western world itself is a giant cult of imitating things that somehow work. The longing for godlike goodies on the horizon, the usage of things we don’t understand. It all sounds like a big parable of desire.
Parables of Desire

The hope for Cargo can be found in western science as well, following the studies of Peter Worsley, Kenelm Burridge (Mambu, 1960) and Peter Lawrence (Road Belong Cargo, 1964). Also, George Miller’s post-apocalyptic film Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome (1985) captures the romanticism of the Cargo very well and creates the post-technological vision of 1980s pop culture. A group of teens cut off from the outside gathers artifacts from a devastated earth civilization and turns them into relics. Fully committed to the Pandorian credo of everlasting hope, they invent a new heroic myth and believe in the messianic return of Captain Walker (Mel Gibson) who will lead them to Tomorrow-Morrow Land. The prophecy is fulfilled. In fact, this post-apocalyptic depiction of Hollywood is based on the research of Melanesian island cults in the 1960s.[7] The Cargo Cults of the South Pacific is a compelling example of a performative understanding of culture with the adaptation of western devices to local material culture. By reading the reenactments as subversive mimicry strategies, it becomes evident that the binary worldmaking of industrialised countries is limited in its capacity to grasp the social significance of the movement. Within this western frame of understanding, there is always a temptation to ask questions like: Is this an indigenous tradition or is it a performance for anthropologists? Is the enactment of colonialist gestures subversive or a divine embrace of technological wonder? What is Supercargo?

These provocative thoughts led me to my own endeavours like “Supercargo,” “Bauhaus Ayoke,” and “#Vaporfolk.” In the last decade I performed ritual appropriations and subversive imitations of technology and products of mass consumption. Under the umbrella term ‘Supercargo’ it soon became an artistic obsession: A phenomena providing a multitude of methods in which to frame the world. With this practice, the devices and symbols will provoke certain behaviours around them. As Terence McKenna claims, we became the genitals of our technology,[8] merely producing the next model. Understanding not through means of analysis, but through a method of ‘sacred enactment.’ A performative approach towards technology also demonstrates the ritualistic and performative character of culture itself. Its essentialism breaks apart what I felt was becoming an overbearing binary understanding of the world. A language of IF THEN or IF THEN ELSE that whispered discreetly from our digital devices. “Cargo” instead embraced a productive ambivalence. It simply set aside these oppositions we are ignorantly indulged in: Real or fake. Performer or spectator. Original or copy. Familiar or foreign. One or zero. It is this exact unsolvability yet eternal approachability that inspired me to pursue this topic in art. “Supercargo” as the divine product, shows an amazing approach towards the unknown, a capitalist sublime, which is neither rejected nor fully adopted. Hope. It is reformulated under the circumstances of its own belief system.

Nothing else than what art and science are doing.
The Worship of Instruments

I cannot end my exploration of sacred appropriations of technology without referring to the annual ‘worship of instruments’ that takes place every October in India. The Ayudha Puja is part of the Navratri Hindu festival of triumph. Traditionally, Ayudha Puja roughly translates to ‘worship of weapons,’ but over time it has more commonly been understood as the ‘worship of instruments’ or the ‘worship of tools.’ The foundational myth of Ayudha Puja is based on Durga, a warrior goddess who battled evil with weapons imbued with the forces of nature. As Stephen Knapp writes, “If one can make a conscious effort to see the divine in the tools and objects one uses each day, it will help one to see one’s work as an offering to God. It will also help one to maintain constant remembrance of the divine.”

During Ayudha Puja machines, tools, vehicles and other types of technology are decorated with vermilion, garlands, mango leaves, and banana sapling. It is considered by worshippers, that the energy of Durga continues to live in the tools used today. In the last few decades, there has been more of an emphasis on the worship of scientific instruments and office equipment, as it is seen as an essential part of everyday life.

The rationalised realm of the lab and the efficient environment of the accountant are thus interrupted for a day to ritually clean and adorn microscopes and smartphones alike. Ayudha Puja has also branched out to Vahana Puja, where millions of Hindus bless their cars as integral to life. The technological extensions necessary to everyday livelihood are appreciated as a divine manifestation. Even engineers usually opposed to idolatry will still take part in some form of tool worship. Sekhsaria writes that “the worship of tools is a cultural hybridisation practice because it reminds us of our dependence on the tools, the danger posed by them, and hence the concept is analogous to the fear and necessity posed by divinity.”

Be it the paper gadgets of Guangdong, Fanta Strawberry as a substitute for blood sacrifice or polished shrines for microscopes—in a holistic way all are made animist agents for sacred desires. The fetishization of tech products is not unusual, but more commonly and covertly performed under neoliberal pretenses. We often neglect that our technological devices and global products belong to alternate domains of use, one of which is the domain of myths and spirits. The hybridisation mechanisms of Asian and Pacific animist practices offer an insight into how our tools and brands operate beyond base economies and reveal a discrete yet persistent yearning for the divine. Not a proto-technological theistic divine, but ‘divine in the etymological sense of ‘to shine’, ‘sky’ and ‘clear day.’ And, as Erik Davis brilliantly explored in his early TechGnosis15 our yearning is there in our technologies and consumer products— even if masked by perceptions of progress or practicality — it is still there.
Notes

1 Dorothy K. Billings, Cargo Cult as Theater: Political Performance in the Pacific (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002)
2 Holger Jebens, Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004)
5 Byung-Chul Han, Shanzhai (Berlin: Merve, 2011)
7 http://www.schoenheitundverdauung.org/2016/10/06/vaporfolk/
9 Bauhaus Aoke, Peter Moosgaard (2016) https://mai.art/content/2017/6/6/bauhaus-ayoke
11 Pankaj Sekhsaria, Instrumental Lives: An Intimate Biography of an Indian Laboratory (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018)
13 Renny Thomas, Robert M. Geraci, Ayudha Puja as “Culture” at the Indian Institute of Science (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018)
14 Pankaj Sekhsaria, Instrumental Lives: An Intimate Biography of an Indian Laboratory (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018)