Your Cooperation is Inevitable

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Your Cooperation is Inevitable.

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Figure 2: *The Totalitarian Structure of Earthling*, Kevin Alan Swenson, 2016
My intention is to speak about a world where religion has faded from existence without the use of force by introducing an idea that turns religion into the desperate ex-lover whose every feeble attempt to win back a lost passion reads increasingly more pathetic. I present an alternative tomorrow, where religion has been devoured from the inside out by a terminal illness that seals the skeleton of theism into its deserving reliquary: history. The concept is both, minimal and obvious; simplistic in its approachability. The vast effect brought into view by this lens is the opportunity for a feasible period of exponential growth together. Thousands of years and millions of lives have been wasted on bloodshed in the name of religion -- something that is an illegitimate belief and only exists in the exasperated actions of those who hold to and claim proud ownership over its illogical mental, governmental, and societal confines. Time will fade the faithful with every day that inevitably passes, and the room left on this planet for religion diminishes with each moment.

Take the current scenario: we are the only life in the universe. Accepting that we, and all life as we know it, slowly evolved from single cells over billions of years is a premise that extends to viewing our Earth as one single cell; ironic how Earth is as insignificant as it is important. Considering the evolutionary process, and playing on the irony of our own existence, could we be the equivalent in our universe of what those ancient single cells were to us? If we are destroyed, does that put an end to, not just us, but all potential life in the universe? As of now, the answer is yes. Our annihilation, especially if we were the cause of such an event, would be one of the greatest ironic tragedies post Big Bang.
We are a measurable unit. We are documented, studied, numbered, computed, represented by graphs and pie charts, interpreted by a team of interns whose jobs are to inform government officials of their findings from which said officials try to decide what will make us happier as a whole. This is our current system. The puppets in power make their decisions with little accountability, and they do this on behalf of us, people of Earth. We are stuck in bodies we did not choose, born into places we did not choose under ruling classes we did not choose, and we are kept docile, prescribed and categorized by those we never met. I propose an underside using the systems already in place that requires little from those who choose to stand together as a global unit under but outside of our governments. This system is theirs, but this planet is not.

I have devised a totalitarian concept that redistributes power by copying the dogmatic functionality of fundamentalist religions. The premise is to introduce a subversive understanding that takes root at the universally attainable state, what I will refer to as *The Great Futility*. The movement of the concept spreads like that of conspiracy theories (information outside of government control), and will be ushered in using art as a subversive delivery method to reach the public eye visually and ideologically somewhere between consumerism and a secret society.

*The Great Futility* is the realization that we are cosmically, absolutely alone and always have been. Nothing special happens when we die. The Earth keeps spinning around the Sun; days pass, years pass, and generations pass, until billions of years from now, our Sun devours our Earth. Everything is meaningless, as is our existence. In this total meaninglessness we find ourselves in an absurd, improbable, and astonishing situation; possessing the ability/opportunity to create and define our own purpose collectively and individually. This is the contradiction and
awakening: there is no reason *why* we are, but we *are*, and we are on this planet together in the same predicament.

Our loneliness, or the delusion that this is not the case, has resulted in religion which, put simply, is the denial of our instincts, the denial of our potential, and the inability to accept our cosmic solitude. Once *TGF* is understood, managed, and put into use, the outcome functions as a renewable fuel source propelling us to move and work forward legitimately together in a sustainable fashion. Together we engage in building a mutual future that need not be anything more than our animalistic instincts for survival channeled through each other. *TGF* paired with our planet’s impending doom, or put differently, our collective fuel source paired with our common goal for survival equals progress. There is no logic in wasting this planet, nor is there logic in making it more difficult to inhabit the only known place to harbor life. This is not religion’s place to control or destroy. There is no owner of our oasis in the infinite, but we, the Earthlings, share it and must do so.

The word, “earthling” was first used by Thomas Nashe in *Christ’s Tears Over Jerusalem*, 1593. “We (of all earthlings) are God’s utmost subjects, …”¹ Nashe’s use of the word reiterates the (Old Testament’s) biblical hierarchical structure of: God above all humans, humans who are the best of, yet always only, a creation of God. (*Figure 1 is my representation of this monotheistic structure, where “e” is earthling ((earthling is repeating to show the depth of what the word entails)) under and inside ((transgender symbol altered to indicate all gender, or human)) while both are positioned together below “G”: God.*)

¹ Nashe, Thomas. *Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem: Whereunto Is Annexed a Comparative Admonition to London*
The term earthling would be used in a similar sense as Nashe’s 1593 meaning (to differentiate between heaven and earth) for centuries until it began to reappear in science fiction literature in the mid 20th century. Robert A. Heinlein was the first to find new utility in the term and reintroduced it as a means to describe an inhabitant of the planet Earth from the viewpoint of an extraterrestrial being. This shift in perspective is important for a number of reasons, but most importantly it allows us to view ourselves as a large observable singularity. We can thank the late Carl Sagan who, among many great achievements, captured this perspective on February 14th, 1990 when Voyager 1 photographed our home from four billion miles away. The image, which Sagan titled *The Pale Blue Dot of Earth*, was accompanied with this text:

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic

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doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”


1.) *The Pale Blue Dot of Earth*, 1990
Photograph taken from NASA’s Voyager 1
More recently in 2005, a nonfiction horror film against animal exploitation, directed by Shaun Monson, and narrated by Joaquin Phoenix, was released under the title, “Earthlings.” The film elaborates on the term once again, and like science fiction, finds a new use:

“In order to inhabit the Earth, we are all considered earthlings. There is no sexism, racism, or speciesism in the term ‘earthling’. It encompasses each and every one of us: warm- or cold-blooded, mammal, vertebrate or invertebrate, bird, reptile, amphibian, fish and human alike.”

-“Earthlings,” 2005

Like my predecessors, I have drawn from all previous usages of the word, and picked up where my contemporaries left off in furthering the meaning of earthling. I will now only be using the proper noun Earthling (without quotations) in reference to my specific contribution to the progression of this concept, and to distinguish my own thoughts from prior interpretations. I have chosen the proper name form as it pertains to my concept of breaking the hierarchy religion has projected upon us historically. The capitalization of Earthling occurs as the word obtains a new importance via \( TGF \) (accepting our solitude) achieved through the removal of divinity from the equation of ourselves, thus elevating the importance of the Earthling completely (fig. 2).

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Earthling encompasses the basic characteristic we all share. The term eliminates all subdivisions and categorizations of all living things (race, gender, belief, sexuality, political view, age, species, etc.). Earthling stands in place as the inescapable, all encompassing entity of life. The word is both derogatory, and the highest form of praise, especially in regard to TGF, as Earthling encapsulates our insignificance and our boundless potential. Earthling acts as a perfect surrogate for a unified ideology, a sense of knowing, and an acceptance among peers most religions claim to define or provide. The concept provides everything a fully functioning religion offers (purpose, belonging, community, guidance, etc.) while superimposing itself before all religions, thus reintroducing equality and freedom outside of all belief systems. The Earthling remains always before belief, even before consciousness, as it is a word synonymous with “life” and, therefore, is the primary condition for possessing an ability to exhibit belief.

It is vital that this concept of Earthling is not confused with, or taken as a belief. The state of being is before our constructed indoctrinations, and this is the crux of the concept. Belief introduces a whirlwind of unjustifiable ideas diverting focus away from our similarities, thus is
the source of what convolutes/complicates our ability to assess ourselves as a whole. Earthling always remains outside of faith. An absolute common ground, on which we can all agree, is provided by this term. Our next step and its direction is crucial in this time of global crisis, and we should navigate our future with a unanimous agreement in mind. Earthling is this agreement, and the opportunity for a collaborative global change.

Art is the greatest incarnation/embodiment of the Earthling concept as art reflects our vast capabilities to create, and acts as markers of our progresses through the ages. In this sense, I consider art to be an unavoidable byproduct of being (similar, yet in contrast to refuse and excrement, all of which could potentially be found in a midden). This dichotomy, similar to that of TGF, is precisely why art is the vehicle for the Earthling concept. My work presents this dogmatic totalitarian idea in a unique visual language to become an aesthetic surrogate that expresses the underlying ironies found throughout my Earthling concept. I use a variety of methods to speak to the vast complexities we have encountered through our attempts to understand ourselves, namely by directly confronting the long running traditions of worship to displace a hierarchy and bring focus back to Earthlings. Speaking to this shift in focus, I created works that use a simple gesture to introduce barely acceptable answers for insoluble questions.

With the intent of preserving a person’s image, I created a thirteen minute video loop titled, Into The Only After. Masks made from discarded photographs of the recently deceased were worn to reanimate the departed and invoke a life-after-death. This resulted in an act of digital necromancy that depicts these unknown faces engaged in a presumably timeless act of luxurious relaxation in a literal afterlife. Into The Only After gives its viewer a glimpse into the
speculated realm, many believe to be what awaits us in death, while simultaneously instating the concept as fact in an unexpected visual embodiment.

Similarly, another piece titled *Reliquary (Proud Owner of Jesus Christ of Nazareth)* recontextualizes Christ into a novelty by encapsulating the idea to farce. A star was purchased in memoriam and named “Jesus Christ of Nazareth,” giving the supposed messiah a location as a physical celestial body observable in the night sky. The documentation is ornately framed and rests on a red satin pillow resembling a corpse on display. This gesture accomplishes a number of feats in its own respect, but most importantly, it gives a twisted authenticity to the fictional story of Christ found in the New Testament. *Reliquary* aids in an alternate form of ascension as it
gives a new body to Christ, while providing a relic that remains on Earth as both proof of the event, and a connection to the body. I therefore give defective yet literal truth to the most crucial belief of the Christian doctrine and minimize its effect by subjecting it to a finite reality. The creation of Reliquary subtly introduces the notion that Earthlings created God in our image, not vice versa.

3.) Kevin Alan Swenson
Reliquary (Proud Owner of Jesus Christ of Nazareth)
Sculpture
2014

I frequently draw inspiration from historical painters of religious subjects (Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Cornelis Corneliszoon van Haarlem, Hieronymus Bosch, William Blake,
for example), and create a bastardized equivalent via digital proficiency. Ryan Trecartin is an example of a digital artist whose hybridized images/content I find wonderfully grotesque. Another artist I admire is Leigh Bowery for his cavalier and hyper-styled views regarding fashion, gender, and performance. Both Trecartin and Bowery strike me as artists whose works reveal their reasoning and yet, one has never before seen the particular perspective imaged in the works. By bringing these elements together, I aspire to be to this Earthling concept what Michelangelo is to Catholicism.

My strategy is a specific use of irony I call, *Empty Awe*, which is an attempt to create an unforgettable instance that is ultimately meaningless (emulating the dichotomy of TGF). The installations are designed to intrusively captivate a viewer with uncanny iconography, generating authentic emotional experiences through subversive deceit. An element of obscured humor allows a viewer entry into the entire work, exposing the deceit, ultimately giving the piece a new form as a post-satire where the setup, delivery, and punch line are all happening simultaneously. I achieve this by including visual prompts that lead thought processes abstractly to TGF (we are the greatest irony). To reach the uncanny, I stimulate cognitive misfires that in turn connect things that are otherwise not connectible; to associate things that have no apparent association, and to provide an environment that ushers in an elegant confusion. At the same time, the uncanny and familiar elements of the work appear to somehow make sense, creating a false understanding. This is how the works confront religion directly; by mimicking the illusions that trigger the collective hysteria (authentic emotion) that is misinterpreted as divine intervention.
In addressing worship, the object is in itself something that should be taken at face value. It acts as the embodiment of an idea it is made to represent, yet is respected as the placeholder for such an idea. In the case of worship, this counteractively gives tangible form to a concept. By shifting the divine inheritance of the object back to the Earthling, we find ourselves in a provoking situation that demands either our ego or our empathy. What is worthy of such praise? What is worthy of an offering? Why are these still questions worthy of answers in the face of superstition? With a simple shift of importance, we are capable of realizing the banality projected upon such objects to bring in a new understanding of the absurdity “tradition” hauls through time.

*Idol Study* is the other side of worship. It sheds light on the receiving perspective of such offerings. Is the real intent to appease the idol; to pay dues to an object that is said to represent something larger? Or are these “gifts” given in the hope of an equivalent return? Superstition eats us alive, but *Idol Study* shows the viewpoint of the object that inanimately accepts such gifts. The personified golden calf reaps the benefits of the scarce (literal) fruits of labor, and enjoys them to the point of a satisfied belch.
The object that is worshiped sometimes needs no deeper development than that of itself; it need not define or apprehend an Earthling form. A vague formation might be capable of the desired transcendence. The object is always the surrogate for the idea. My finest example of such a case is *Beacon*: a construct made completely out of toilet paper. This piece is the epitome of *TGF* and the Earthling concept: a commodity wasted for the sake of a meaningless monument.
5.) Kevin Alan Swenson
*Beacon*
Toilet Paper, 10’x6’x8’
2016


Image List


2.) Kevin Alan Swenson, still from *Into The Only After*, video/sculpture, 7’x12.5’x2’, 2014

3.) Kevin Alan Swenson, *Reliquary (Proud Owner of Jesus Christ of Nazareth)*, Sculpture, 2014


5.) Kevin Alan Swenson, *Beacon*, Toilet Paper, 10’x6’x8’, 2016
Kevin Alan Swenson
December 8th 2016 - January 8th, 2017
Installation View (Exterior)
Kevin Alan Swenson
December 8th 2016 - January 8th, 2017
Installation View (Entrance)
Kevin Alan Swenson
December 8th 2016 - January 8th, 2017
Installation View (Interior)