

Goldin+Senneby

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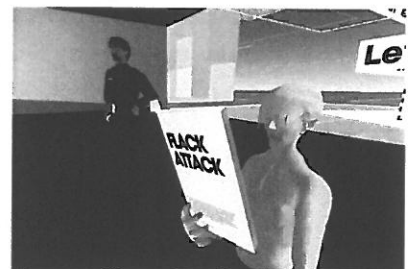
COULD THE SHADOWY WORLD of offshore banking somehow harbor an incarnation of Georges Bataille's secret society, Acéphale? This bizarre and provocative proposal is the premise of *Headless*, a project begun in 2007 by the collaborative team of Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby. Its symbol, a headless man, pays homage to Acéphale's adoption of André Masson's notorious drawing of a gruesome decapitated figure—a perverse inversion of Leonardo's enlightened Vitruvian Man—with a skull in place of his groin. The Swedish artists' examination of how financial systems relate to forms of invisibility focuses on Headless Ltd, an offshore company recently registered in the Bahamas, and has yielded an array of collaborative and aesthetically unpredictable outputs—including a quasi novel, a feature-length documentary, hush-hush presentations in the financial districts of European cities, and lectures in various venues on economic geography and Bataille's esoteric club. Spokespersons, emissaries, and ghostwriters stand in at these events for the artists, who seemingly pull the strings from an undisclosed location, enhancing the project's cloak-and-dagger appeal. If *Headless* mines the opaque epistemology of the offshore as a source of artistic inspiration, its results inevitably inspire fascination; they could not be more economically timely or politically explosive.

As such, the project participates in the recent post-Conceptual artistic trend of adopting the aesthetic of corporate administration and putting it to critical ends. Consider, for instance, the Yes Men's subversive deployment of the language of media publicity in 2004, when they publicly apologized on behalf of Dow Chemical, live on the BBC, for the deathly chemical spill in Bhopal, India; Melanie Gilligan's display of the fraught psychology of financial calamity in her four-part video drama *Crisis in the Credit System*, 2008; Carey Young's performance of the collapse of the neo-avant-garde into service industry in *I Am a Revolutionary*, 2001, for which the artist hired a personal trainer to help her convincingly say the words in the video's title; and Maria Eichhorn's construction of an artwork as a shareholder-owned business in *Aktiengesellschaft* (Public Limited Company), 2002. Sharing in this détournement of the corporate environment for artistic material, Goldin + Senneby's distinct approach involves investigating the clandestine zones of global finance and creatively appropriating those mysterious spaces of withdrawal.

The artists have collaborated since 2004, when, for their first project, *The Port*, 2004–2006, they constructed a community-driven island inside the digital world of Second Life. Open to the network's nearly two hundred thousand users and existing only in that virtual domain, the multiroom floating platform was built in collaboration with architect Tor Lindstrand to host Wiki-based projects, including the artists' own *Flack Attack*, 2005–2006, a collaboratively produced magazine whose editorial meetings were held in Second Life. With its first, freely downloadable issue appropriately dedicated to the theme of “autonomy,” the inaugural offering includes an essay by the artistic duo setting out their claims for the emancipatory potential of immaterial production, virtuality as a collective imaginative space of the becoming-political, and modes of sociability hidden from the normative visibility of everyday life. That Second Life is continuous with the real world's economy of consumerism, fashion, and sexual objectification only points to the complexity of Goldin+Senneby's investigation; acknowledging this overdetermined status, they ask what possibility for independence nevertheless exists within such governed but incompletely institutionalized spaces, even when all interaction relies on someone else's code.

In a similar speculative vein, *Headless* advances these questions in relation to the juridical anomalies of offshore financial centers. As with *The Port*, the fictional construct becomes a vehicle for collective production, albeit one that the artists choreographed in more elaborate ways over the course of time and that went further in confusing real individuals with fictional avatars. The project's cast of characters includes the freelance writer John Barlow, sent by the artists (whom he had never met) to investigate Headless Ltd in the Bahamas, where he wrote a travel blog based on his investigations (itself becoming the Goldin+Senneby work *Gone Offshore*, 2008). Barlow's activities are also selectively narrated in *Looking for Headless* (2007–), a novel by a fictional author known only as K. D., who recounts how she became suspicious of the artists while working for Sovereign Trust (Headless's management company, which apparently threatened the artists with legal action to have their employee's name—shared, coincidentally, by the work's purported writer—removed from public communications).

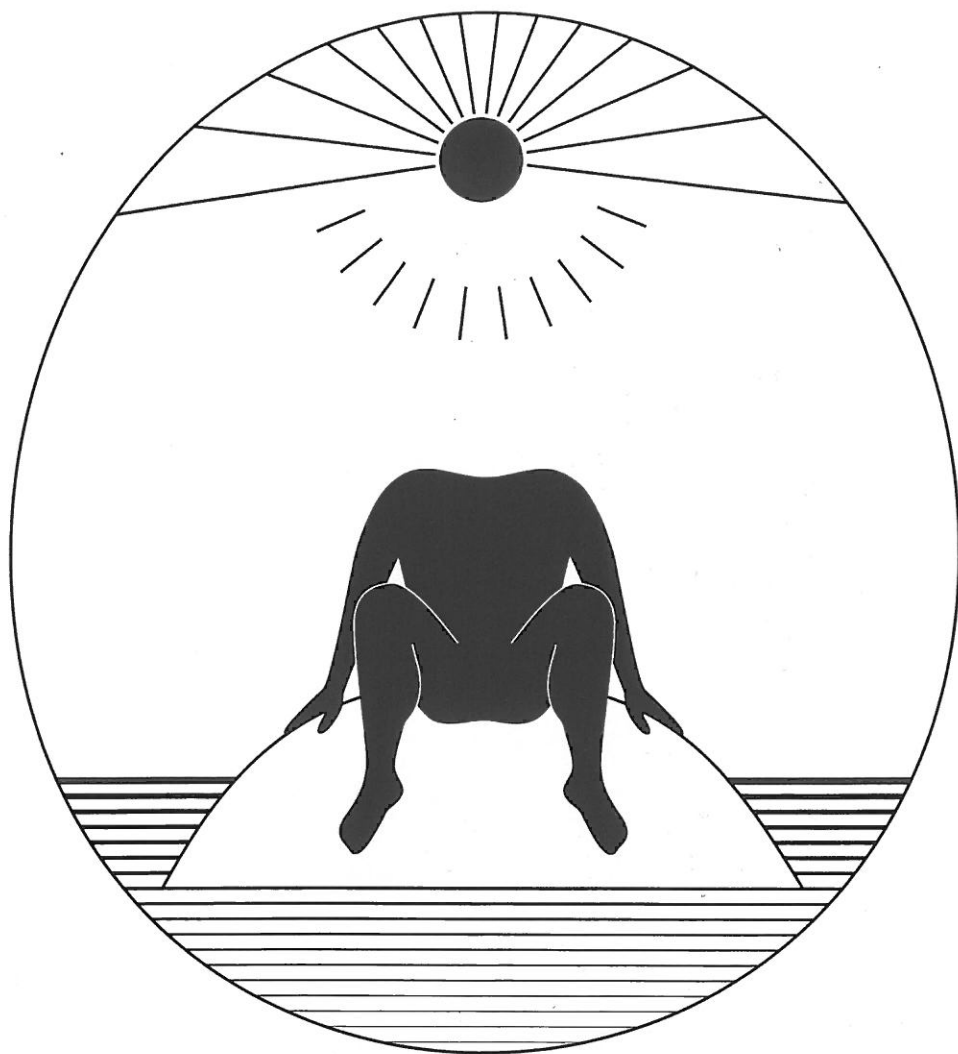
The novel is nearing completion, having been published gradually in chapters, just as the project has grown incrementally with each new show. Goldin+Senneby's exhibition openings and associated readings and screenings serve as fodder for the developing plot, which is captivating less for its literary qualities than for its cannibalistic fictionalization of the realities it both describes and steadily produces. The documentary *Looking for Headless*, 2010, by Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones, provides a useful overview of the project: They interview experts, including investigative journalist Gavin MacFadyen, about Headless Ltd, and themselves visit Sovereign Trust offices in Gibraltar and London; the work also shows footage of a 2008 São Paulo Biennial panel



Screenshot of avatar VoyeurOne Baron reading Goldin+Senneby's magazine *Flack Attack*, 2005–2006, in Second Life.

discussion led by an actor impersonating K. D. The proliferating interconnections and multiplying levels of documentary and fiction make it easy to lose one's bearings, which is part of the point.

The seriousness of the project, however, is undeniable. The academic Angus Cameron, coauthor of *The Imagined Economies of Globalization* (2004), appears in the project's book and videos and frequently gives lectures as the artists' “emissary.” His creative role reached its apogee on the occasion of “The Decapitation of Money,” the artists' exhibition last year at the Kadist Art Foundation in Paris, for which Cameron led an expedition to the Marly forest, where the Acéphale group had met during the late 1930s to carry out secret rites and celebrate the beheading of Louis XVI. While walking his audience through the woods, he lectured on select moments in the history of the offshore industry,



Goldin+Senneby, *Headless*:
From the Public Record, 2009,
 PowerPoint presentation and
 audio-recorded conversation.
 Installation view, Index, Stockholm.
 Conversation contributors: Angus
 Cameron (economic geographer),
 K. D. (fictional author), Kim
 Einarsson (curator/writer), Anna
 Heymowska (set designer), Marcus
 Lindeen (director), and Eva Rexed
 (actor). From *Headless*, 2007–.



Left: Symbol for Goldin+Senneby's project *Headless*, 2007–, designed by Johan Hjerpe, 2007. Above: Actor in the role of K. D., fictional author of *Looking for Headless*, 2007–, in conversation with literary critic Noemi Jaffe as part of Goldin+Senneby's contribution to the 28th São Paulo Bienal, Livraria Cultura bookstore auditorium, November 24, 2008. From *Headless*, 2007–. Photo: Ronaldo Aguiar.



Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones, *Looking for Headless*, 2010, stills from a color video, 28 minutes. From *Headless*, 2007–.



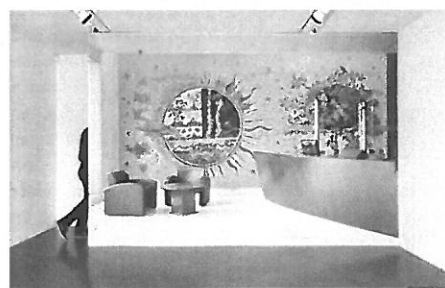
Economic geographer Angus Cameron speaking as part of Goldin+Senneby's *The Decapitation of Money*, 2010, Marly forest, Yvelines, France, May 23, 2010.

Goldin+Senneby investigate the clandestine zones of global finance and creatively appropriate those mysterious spaces of withdrawal.

including its first appearance, when England detached its currency from silver during the war with revolutionary France in 1793; the cold-war-era monetary uprooting, when Soviet and Chinese banks, intent on escaping American control of their foreign assets, created the Eurodollar market by depositing their dollar-denominated reserves in European banks (a reconstruction of the somewhat psychedelic interior design of one of these institutions was created within the exhibition); and the explosion of offshore markets in the contemporary global economy, where an estimated three to five trillion dollars circulate beyond national regulatory oversight in an increasingly fictitious—but financially very real—realm. For Cameron, that murky area beyond national sovereignty echoes the acephalous, as corporate bodies are detached from nation-state heads, even though, he confesses, Bataille would not have found in it the rebellious transgression he desired. While the economy has recently convulsed in fits of consumption

and destruction—resonating with Bataille's writings on the "general economy" in *The Accursed Share*—secretive financial bodies have only grown more powerful, leading to a neo-aristocratic age of wealth-based privilege disguised by fictitious shell companies, which could not be further from Acéphale's passionate devotion to collective union before death. (On one occasion, its members infamously wished to consummate their bonds through a real human sacrifice but could only find volunteers for the role of the executed.)

One might conclude that Goldin+Senneby's project demonstrates that economic fictions can't be exposed in reality today—in contrast with, for instance, Hans Haacke's ambitions to catalogue Harry Shapolsky's Manhattan real estate holdings in the 1970s—because financial reality has become the very site of fiction; hence Goldin+Senneby's recourse to creative mimicry. But this need not entail accepting the hermetic core of multinational capitalism. More in the Bataillean spirit, one might see in *Headless* the potential for a collective imagination that would reinvent a politics of regulatory justice (drawing out Bataille's Marxist roots), as Cameron intimated in the Marly forest. Indeed, reality volunteered a ready-made plot development during a recent demonstration in London against the conservative government's proposed cuts to education funding (while corporations such as Vodafone and



Views of "Goldin+Senneby: *The Decapitation of Money*," 2010, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris. Project contributors: Angus Cameron (economic geographer), K. D. (fictional author), Anna Heymowska (set designer), Johan Hjerpe (graphic designer), and Kerwin Rolland (sound designer). Photos: Aurélien Mole.

Topshop continue to find ways to avoid UK taxes), when protesters encountered Prince Charles and Camilla's limo and, in an unsettlingly close-to-the-bone joke, began to chant, "Off with their heads!"

In their newly inaugurated project *The Norden-skiöld Model*, 2010–, Goldin+Senneby again spin tales of virtual finance via performative strategies with subversive outcomes. The work begins with the story of August Nordenskiöld, whom the Swedish king Gustav III employed in the late eighteenth century to produce gold by alchemical means in order to boost state finances for the war against Russia. But as a Swedenborgian mystical idealist, Nordenskiöld secretly yearned to abolish the tyranny of money, a desire that eventually led him to Sierra Leone in an attempt to implement his utopian vision. Mining the account as a further point of origin for current models of financial speculation and market formation, the artists have developed a theatrical production in collaboration with British playwright Pamela Carter, in which their historical research joins elements of magic and speculation; open rehearsals recently took place at the Stockholm School of Economics and in the city's stock exchange. No doubt the volatility of the present global economy will provide yet more fuel for realizing the hidden potential of outlandish dreams of the past. □

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