



Possessions_inc.

(June 2016 – June 2019)

Richard Grayson

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STATEMENT

The overarching research focus of *Possessions_inc.* is on the transformative histories and agendas of contemporary art practices that emerged in relation to specific revolutionary, social, cultural and political movements in the early 20th century, and ways they are re-articulated and shaped by the cultural, economic and technological conditions of the early 21st century. There is a focus on ways the art object and the space of art practice operates as both site and conduit for the interactions between the spheres of subjective and personal belief, and the formation of wider cultural and social systems.

Possessions_inc. is a web-based visual art project researching the ways power, value, agency and meaning have been invested in inanimate objects in pre-digital belief structures, and paralleling and contrasting these to those formed in digital technologies and cultures.

One node of research is the "Rennes-Le-Chateau Mystery", a set of complex interrelated narratives generated over the last century around a supposed 'treasure' found in a church in Southern France. These link to history, theology and alien contact, and are supported by artefacts, codes, fictions and fakes, which many people hold as having hidden or occult truth.

This is combined with material collected from electronic media, focussing on narratives around the internet of things, A.I. robotics, simulacra, art fakes, deep-fakes, and orthodox and heterodox narratives about secrets, technology, intelligence and surveillance. The material is ventriloquised by the animated head of a statue from the Church in Rennes to map an emerging network of digital/non-digital interactions that shape our individual and collective fields of contemporary experience.

The forms of digital web-based distribution: streaming and long-duration series form, are central to the project, which tests if these allow new hybrid languages and syntaxes in moving image work. A monthly episode was posted on a dedicated website over three years, resulting in 8 hours of video. The site will be maintained into the future.

OUTPUTS

1. *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19) volumes 1 & 2

Online video series

36 Episodes

Full episode selection available on:

<https://possessions-inc.mattsgallery.org> and

<https://vimeo.com/mattsgallery>

INTRODUCTION

Possessions_inc. explores ways that objects become invested with agency and value, and how technology blurs the boundaries between inanimate and animate things.

Engaging with ideas of commodification, 'hyper-value' and 'techno-animism', and exploring the many ways abstract ideas of value can become embodied in things, ***Possessions_inc.*** maps constructions of the real. It looks at the ways we invest life and qualities in the inanimate things. The trajectory of this development is given through animated narrative and moves from the histories of divination, to clockwork automata, to the development of 'the internet of things'.

The artwork explores different ways that the digital and virtual shape our reading of material. It maps the feedback and echoes that occur as actual and virtual worlds exchange with each other.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Do belief-structures from the pre-digital world relate to and inform those emerging in the post-digital universe, with particular reference to the 'internet of things'?
- Can a contemporary fine art practice use narrative forms associated with visual digital technologies: collisions of texts and images, representations, manipulations, to reveal insights about the effects of these technologies on cultural ideas of value, agency and animation?
- What are the stages of development in the narratives associated with *The Mystery of Rennes*, from the start of the 20th century to the present day?
- How might web-based distribution shape and generate new approaches to contemporary moving image work and narrativity?

RESEARCH CONTEXT (I) – New technologies and older models

That new technologies might operate as sites of return and re-articulation of earlier models of experience has been suggested and explored by many writers, including Erik Davis (*Techgnosis*, 1999), Jeffrey Sconce (*Haunted Media*, 2000) and Mark Fisher (*Ghosts of my Life*, 2014). This has manifested in cultural/theory movements such as 'Hauntology' - deriving from Derrida and explored by Fisher and others - and used as an engine for cultural production by artists and musicians, for example, the Ghost Box record label.

Graham Harman's revisiting of concepts developed by Marshall McLuhan, around retrieval and reversal in technology, has found agency in the field of 'object-oriented ontology', and has become central to developing thought in the areas of techno-animism and pan-psychism.

The impacts of technology on memory, individuation, and ideas of production value and worth, is central to Bernard Stiegler's philosophical project, for instance *Symbolic Misery* vols. 1 and 2 (Polity Press 2016).

In the visual arts, these concerns were pioneered in Susan Hiller's influential practice and explored in later practices, such as Mark Leckey's art/curatorial project *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013). They have increasingly become the focus of curatorial projects: *Haunted Media*, Site Gallery Sheffield (2004), *Awake are only the Spirits – On Ghosts and their Media*, at HMKV Dortmund and CCA Torun (2009), and my own *Worlds In Collision* exhibition, at Adelaide Festival (2014). Lars Bang Larsen's research project *Art, Science, Counter-Culture, Perspectives on a Radical Enlightenment*. at Geneva University has been important in encouraging new exchanges between art, science, and counter-cultural and esoteric narratives.

RESEARCH CONTEXT (II) – Long-form and immersive narratives

Echoing McLuhan's concept of 'reversal', technology has also brought about a return of modes of engagement with cultural productions that both echo and build on earlier models. In particular, the 'long-form' immersive cultural artefact, as exemplified by 18th and 19th century episodic novels. The ability to replay without limit, brought about by 'box-sets', encouraged expanded structures in mainstream moving image work, such as *Doctor Who*, *Game of Thrones* and the films of the Marvel Universe. The problem-solving and de-codings required by complex narratives are also informed by video games and gamers. It is significant in this context that the Mystery of Rennes-Le-Chateau was the subject of a series of innovative 3D video games, *Gabriel Knight 1-3*, from 1993 to 1999.

Many areas of cultural activity have also seen renewed interest in long-form production. For example, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010) presented 24 hours of video, or Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* (2009-11), a series of six highly detailed autobiographical novels. New hybrid forms have emerged: blogs combine image and text in an open-ended, branching, expanded essay-form, that can be both authored and curated.

RESEARCH CONTEXT (III) – The history of the Rennes-Le-Chateau mystery

At the start of the twentieth century, the village priest, Bérenger Saunière, was reputed to have found a hidden treasure in the grounds of his church. There was considerable speculation about the origins of this new found wealth. From the late 1950s onward, the treasure became the focus of a set of fakes and fictions developed by Phillipe De Cherisey and Pierre Plantard (who had links to both the Surrealist movement and right-wing strands of Nationalism). The faked documents with codes and genealogies were smuggled into the archives of the Bibliotheque National in Paris to be discovered later, as evidence of an organisation called the Priory of Sion - a secret society operating across millennia to protect the mystery linked to the treasure. These documents were 'revealed' to the English speaking world in the BBC 'Chronicle' programmes, broadcast in the 1970s, then in *Holy Blood Holy Grail* (1983) by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, expanding the scope of the mystery, and eventually became the basis of *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003), and then a successful film.

At each stage, the exact nature of the 'mystery' shifted and expanded: from French regal history and bloodlines, to theologies, to occult geometries and geographies, to alien contacts. To this day, new ideas and theories emerge, each proposing a particular reading or resolution of the mystery – but there have been no descriptions of its wider development.

In 1980, Jean-Luc Chaumeil self-published *The Priory of Sion*, documenting his involvement in the hoax. *The Treasure of Rennes: A mystery Solved* (Putnam and Wood, 2005) was written from the position that much of the primary material is fake. Beyond this there has been little work researching the wider cultural impact and expressions of the 'Mystery', nor the identities and roles of many of those involved in its extrapolation and dissemination.

RESEARCH CONTEXT (IV) – Rennes-Le-Chateau; the statue

The Statue of the Devil at the door of the church in Rennes has a central role in these speculations. It was commissioned by Saunière from a factory producing religious statuary in Toulouse and is considered to be coded with diverse esoteric and arcane information about the nature and location of the treasure. It is identified as Asmodeus, the keeper of the treasure of the Temple of Solomon in the Talmud. The image of the sculpture in *Possessions_inc.* acts as the focus/subject/narrator of an intersection of a large number of overlapping narrative and symbolic structures associated with objects and artefacts, including:

1. **Western art history:** where representations - art objects - are invested with aesthetic charge and significance, often linked to expressing an artist's inner world or vision.
2. **Western art commodity:** where art objects are variously invested with monetary and commodity value, often linked to being made by a particular artist.
3. **Religious narratives:** where art objects/images represent and celebrate specific narratives considered to be Holy or spiritual.
4. **Iconic function:** where artefacts access some aspect of divine force and can have a redemptive (or malign) effect - spiritual and/or physical - on the viewer.
5. **Occult and esoteric:** where art objects/artefacts are believed to be coded with occluded truths and secrets that, decoded, allow access to secret realms and powers.
6. **'The mystery of Rennes-Le-Chateau':** where the statue embodies a set of clues that, properly understood, will reveal a hidden treasure. In some theories this treasure is material, gold, in others symbolic, the continuation of a royal bloodline, and in others, it can be spiritual/esoteric/religious/supernatural/extraterrestrial.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Moving image footage:

The footage is of images of the statue of a Demon at the entrance of Church of Rennes Le Chateau. The statue was documented four times over the three-year project, which tracked its changes in appearance from before and after its head and arm were vandalised and restored (see below). Other images of the sculpture were located and used, including photographs and drawings found in publications and online, and photographs of commercial souvenir statues. It was also drawn and modelled in Plasticine.

The video footage is constructed entirely of *still* images, animated using different proprietary software: 'CrazyFace' to lip-sync to audio files; and 'Motion' and 'Blender' for text and graphic elements. The statue/talking head is animated to be the agent that ventriloquises, narrates and acts out texts and stories that have been expressly written and collated, or collaged, from a variety of sources, as if possessed by or channelling an oracle.

Episode construction

Each episode choreographs animated sequences about an aspect of the histories of Rennes-Le-Chateau with other narratives, touching on ways that people read meaning and agency into objects. Subjects included: the internet of things, self driving cars, robotics, cyborgs and crypto-currencies. These were sourced from the web and from publications and journals. There are also narratives from art history and anthropology about ideas of worship, icons, moving statues, animisms, and hoaxes, fakes and tricksters. These were put into thematic strands and conjunctions, with the intention of generating new readings, associations and insights.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Web project structure:

Possessions_inc. developed a web-based form of moving digital image work that is discursive and draws on (but is not defined by) ideas of the pre-modern novel in instalments, the box-set essay, the soap-opera, the blog, the weekly comic, the serial, the radio play and the podcast.

36 monthly episodes of *Possessions_inc.* have been posted on a dedicated website, supported by Matt's Gallery, London. Each episode is 10-15 mins in duration (eight hours of footage in total) and all are downloadable. They are viewable in perpetuity at: <http://possessions-inc.mattsgallery.org/>.

Postings were announced via the Matt's Gallery mailing list (approx. 6,000). A separate *Possessions_inc.* mailing list also existed.

Two writers whose thinking had been important to the development of the project, Lars Bang Larsen and Erik Davis, were invited to write texts unpacking the project and their reading of it. These were published as hard copy and as downloadable PDFs on the project website.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Texts and narratives: the mystery of Rennes (I)

Much of the research involved tracing how the 'Mystery of Rennes-Le-Chateau' unfolded, and mapping its development and chronology. This covered different stages: the events associated with Saunière at the start of the 20th Century; the story's emergence into the wider media sphere in the late fifties; the history and actions of the authors of the original hoax; and the way this spread internationally, and the forms the 'mystery' has subsequently taken into the present day.

There is a mass of material about Rennes-Le-Chateau, from books that wittingly or unwittingly had a role in the establishment of the hoax (Gerade De Sede, *Le Tresor Maudit*, 1968; Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*, 1983), to publications hypothesising about the operations and significance of the 'secret' (Andrews and Schellenberger, *The Tomb of God*, 1996). In addition there are many small press and personal publications on esoteric and occult meanings of the site, as well as numerous online references.

The research brought together material to map the complex narratives of the mystery/hoax *as well* as its wider cultural impacts and effects, including newer speculations, and theories and fictions, such as Ben Hammott's 'Mary Magdalen tomb' (1999-2012).

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Texts and narratives: the mystery of Rennes (II)

An unexpected but significant development in the research came with the attack on the statue by a Syrian woman in 2017. This added a resonant new layer of association to the image and the research, as well as investigations into icons and iconoclasm.

It also moved film-maker and writer Richard Stanley to contact me. He and his film *Hardware* had already been represented in *Possessions_inc.* episodes

Having researched Rennes-Le-Chateau for decades, Stanley offered to make some of the material he has generated available to the project. This resulted in a number of meetings, and recordings of conversations and of his readings, from his writings and notebooks became a significant strand in the project.



The vandalised Statue

Rennes-Le-Chateau, 2017



Richard Stanley

Mont-Segur, 2017

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Texts and narratives: the internet of things

To address questions in the research about ways that belief structures from pre-digital worlds might relate to and inform structures emerging in contemporary digital and post-digital contexts, a web-based archive of examples of new technologies shaping ideas about the virtual and the real, and parallels from pre-digital contexts, was assembled. This covers a range of materials, from factual and descriptive to the fantastic and imagined, including:

- Artificial intelligence and robotics
- Automata
- Digital technologies of reproduction
- Fakes
- Hallucination
- Haunting and possession
- Icons and iconoclasm
- Inanimate objects that move
- Intelligent objects
- The internet of things
- Objects with hidden meanings and powers
- Science fiction
- Science fiction film narratives
- Simulacra
- Simulation
- Surveillance

This collection of material had its first and central expression in *Possessions_inc.*, but will form the basis of an accessible archive project currently in development.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The *Possessions_inc.* project demonstrates that the complex collisions and bricollaging of material and narratives allowed by the long-form episodic form - where the forms of digital media are used to articulate and reveal the cultures generated by digital technology - can allow new and particular understandings:



"By giving such stories equal presence, often blurring their content through pitch-shifted vocal manipulation, cacophonous repetition and layering, Possessions_inc. begins to build vertiginous diagnoses in which the interrelationship of art and technology, and specifically their utility within techniques of global finance, strategic inequity and investment, are marked by pronounced fluctuations in faith and paranoia. Grayson isn't simply asking what happens to the auratic function of art in a free-market economy (a simultaneous process of desacralisation and fetishisation), but how a post-truth milieu in which stories, images and artefacts can be digitally manipulated and reproduced, might throw all forms of cultural production and value extraction into a new age of unprecedented indeterminacy and malign interdependency."

Jamie Sutcliffe, *Possessions_inc.* feature, Art Monthly 428 (2019).

STILLS AND IMAGES



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19)
Video still

Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.

STILLS AND IMAGES



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19)

Video still

Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.

In the book, Perky Pat layouts are
used for a quite literal form of
escapism, by taking psychoactive
drugs and concentrating on your
layout, you can cause your
hallucination to take the form of



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19)
Video still

Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.

STILLS AND IMAGES



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19)
Video still

Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.

STILLS AND IMAGES



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.* (2016-19)
Video still

Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.

STILLS AND IMAGES



Richard Grayson (2016-19)
'Animation drawing'
Possessions_inc.
Watercolour and ink on paper
29.7 x 21 cm

REACH

1. **Essay** by Lars Bang Larsen, 'To Be Spoken Like a Thing Possessed' 2018, published by Matt's Gallery. ISBN 978-1-912717-00-2. Printed and online: https://possessions-inc.mattsgallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Matts_Gallery_Richard-Grayson_Possessions_inc_essay.pdf (slide 14).
2. **Essay** by Erik Davis, 'Whispers of the Demon' (2019), published by Matt's Gallery. ISBN 978-1-912717-04-0. Online: https://possessions-inc.mattsgallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Matts_Gallery_Richard_Grayson_Possessions_inc_essay-2.pdf (slide 19).
3. Each episode was distributed via the Matt's Gallery Email Newsletter to 7000 subscribers.
4. The video series has had 6,244 views (source: Vimeo).
5. Matt's Gallery **social media**: Facebook 5,842 followers; Instagram 15.6k followers; Twitter 27.5k followers.
6. Other sector organisation newsletters and sites (including Raven Row Gallery London).
7. Curator and publisher Jamie Sutcliffe **reviewed** the project for 'Art Monthly' 428, July 2019, p.34 (slides 16-17).
8. A drawing from the *Possessions_inc.* series was **exhibited** at the 'Drawing Biennial 2017', The Drawing Room, London (2 March – 6 April 2017).
9. Elements Of *Possessions_inc.* were **exhibited** as part of *HYPERactive* at the CCAC, Australia, curated by David Broker, October 2017.

REACH – Supporting press and media

<https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/richard-grayson-possession-inc-by-jamie-sutcliffe-july-august-2019>

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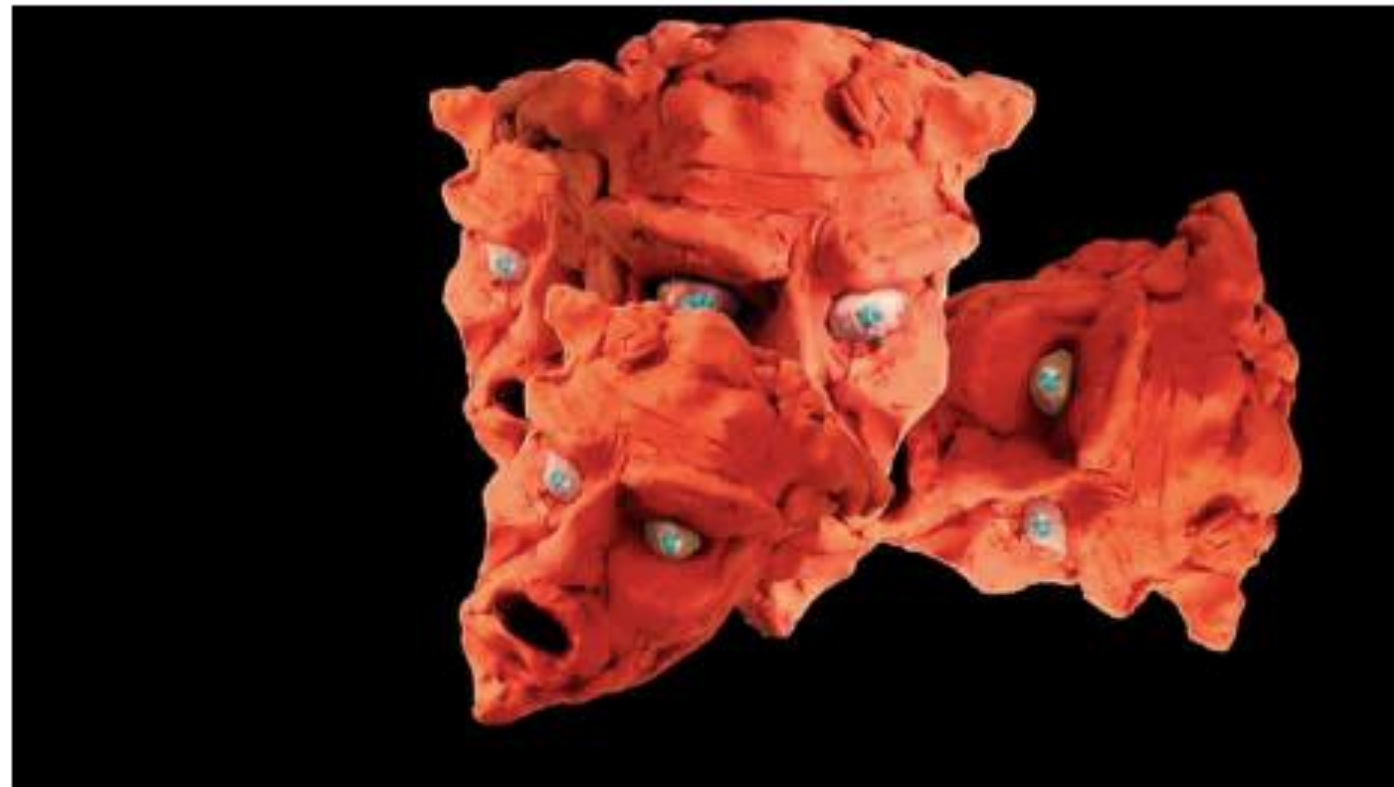
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REVIEW

Richard Grayson: Possessions_inc.

Jamie Sutcliffe navigates the vortex of superstition and techno-conspiracy in Richard Grayson's online video series



Richard Grayson, *Possessions_inc.*

REACH – Supporting press and media

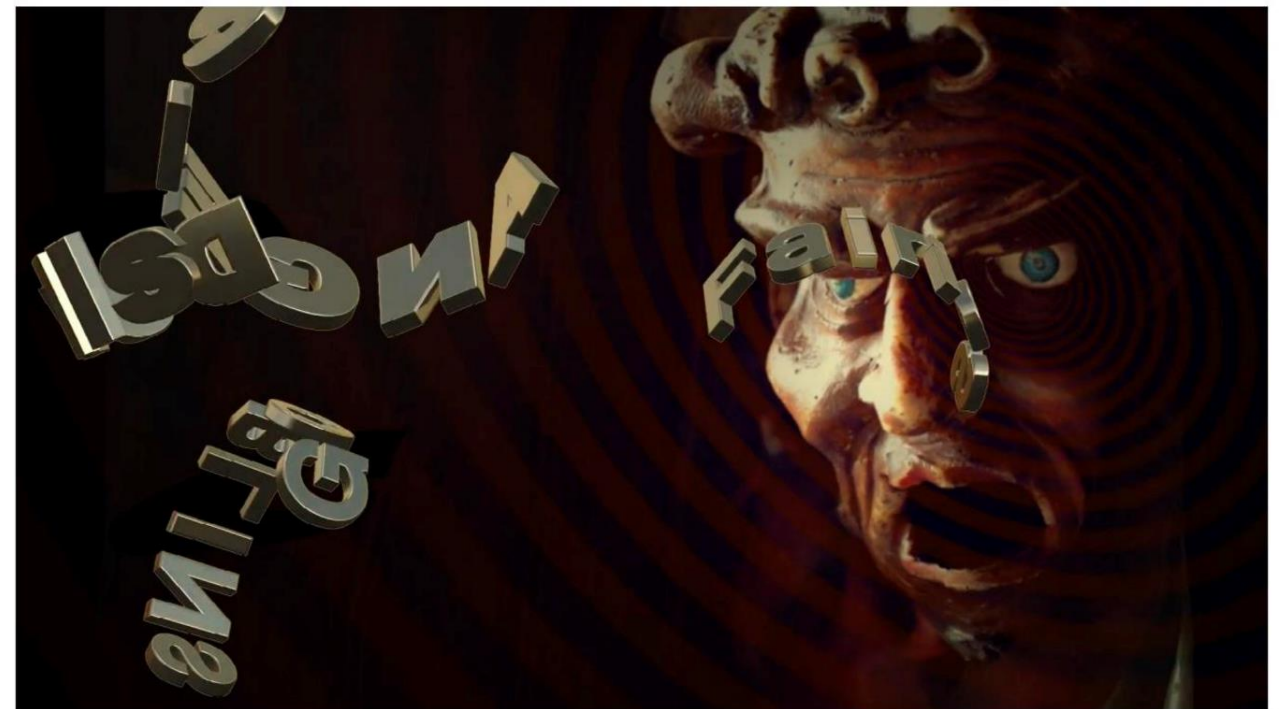
HYPERactive at the CCAC, Australia, curated by David Broker October 2017, Catalogue Essay by David Broker

On Sunday 23 April, 2017 Asmodeus, the central figure in Richard Grayson's *Possessions_inc* (2016-2017) was attacked with an axe in the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene at Rennes-le-Château in the Languedoc region of Southern France; and this was not the first time. In a story of blurred reverberations, the statue was first named Asmodeus, protector of Solomon's treasure, by Pierre Plantard, Phillipe de Chérissey and Gérard de Sède as part of a surrealist deceit associated in the 1950s with the fictitious Priory of Sion, a secret cabal created to install the descendants of Jesus, the Merovingian dynasty on the thrones of France and Europe. While books abound on the mysteries of Rennes-le-Château, this dense maze of hoax, conspiracy theory and pseudo-history made a remarkable entry into popular culture with the 1982 best seller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln) which laid the groundwork for Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). These 'fake histories' that continue to defy scepticism, make guest appearances throughout the first thirteen episodes *Possessions_inc*.

Speaking through animated images of Asmodeus, Grayson embarks on an epic series of video works to be posted online each month throughout 2016 and 2017. The project is an editorial stream of consciousness; part bulletin, t.v series, blog and essay providing an ongoing commentary that touches upon ideas of value, the agency of objects, robotics, the operations of the internet, money codes, music, the art market, secret knowledge and mytho-mania, the latter two referencing the broader context of the entire program (so far). Along with visual effects, jokes and the occasional musical interlude Grayson's dispassionate delivery mediated by the many voices of Asmodeus, examine a world increasingly unable to distinguish between fact and fiction – a phenomenon exacerbated by the Internet.

Although Grayson's twilight zone often reflects the sensational formats of 24-hour news cycle, pseudo-documentary and entertainment bulletin he avoids exposé, favouring a personal engagement with the fragments of information presented by the affable satanic spokesperson. This is news on the Internet, about the Internet and the ways it works in contemporary societies.

Addressing attention spans shortened by the media he uses, Grayson generates a vertigo inducing journey with stopovers at the Bohemian Grove, smart dildos, Objectohilia, Donald Trump's affect on the art market, haunted artworks and the ever present Priory of Sion. In Episode 8 he cites a telephone conversation between Pierre Plantard and Phillipe de Chérissey where the latter exclaims "I have written all sorts of fiction but none my dear Pierre is going to be a fiction like this This is to be a fiction that is going to spread into the real. It will spread slowly, it will be moving invisibly". *Possessions_inc* ironically legitimises the suspect work of Plantard and de Chérissey in the highly entertaining, but nonetheless incisive, context of a 21st century "post truth" age of disconnected details, click bait, hackers and trolls.



RICHARD GRAYSON *Possessions_inc* (still), 2016-17, Episodes 1-13, video and internet project; 2 hours 48 minutes