Yngve Holen and Thom Bettridge

Engines Turn, Or Passengers Swim

René Descartes (1596–1650) had a problem with animals. Or, rather, he had an animal problem. In the *Meditations*, the "father of modern philosophy" used skepticism to arrive at a radical theory of mind-body dualism. Bodies were machines. Minds were souls. But since the theological doctrines of the time stated that humans were the only animal that could have a soul, it was imperative for Descartes to prove that animals did not have minds either. The French philosopher thus responded by cutting animals open in private and writing about it in public. He penned a number of letters and texts that described animals as deceivingly complicated machines. What appeared to us as signs of their consciousness—their human-like qualities, or their screams under the knife of live dissection—were in fact spring-loaded responses to external stimuli. In the 21st century context, Descartes' "animals are robots" writings have become the most unpopular of his theories. Perhaps it is because society as a whole has grown to have more empathy towards animals. Or perhaps it is because we know more about machines. Cutting something open to check for its soul seems like lunatic behavior now. At the very least, those of us in this century would use an ultrasound machine first.

In 2011, the artist Yngve Holen ran over a chicken with a Toyota RAV4 and 3D-printed its remains. Unlike Descartes' test subjects, Holen's chicken was already dead, plucked, and de-clawed. Yet, when he crushed it open, a soul appeared:

Fig. 1 Yngve Holen, Detail, *Sensitive 3 Detergent*, 2014.

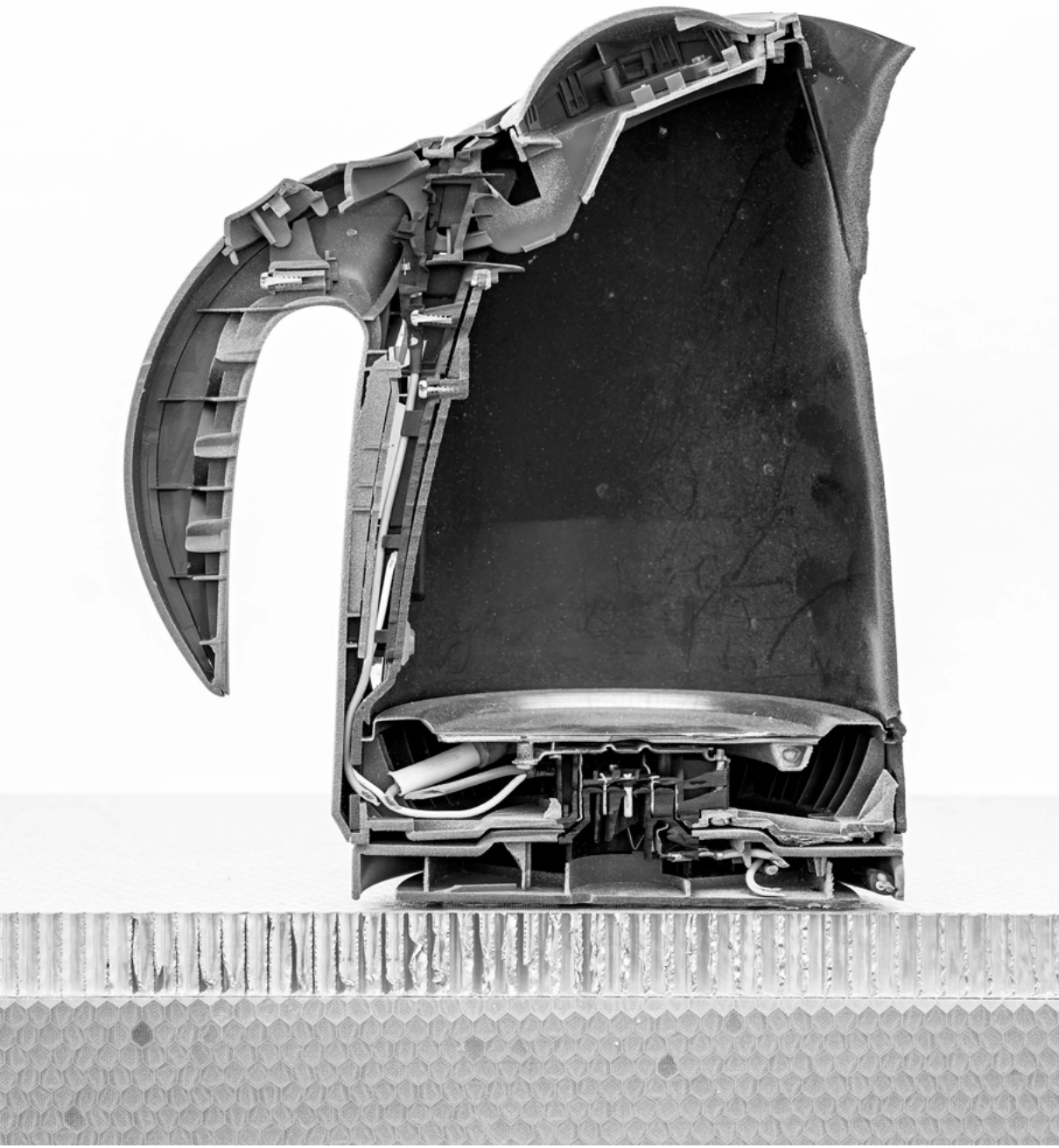

Fig. 2 Yngve Holen, Detail, *Parasagittal Brain*, 2013.

THOM BETTRIDGE I heard that you once ran over a raw chicken with a car, and then 3D-printed it.

YNGVE HOLEN Initially, I wanted to scan road kill. But it was difficult to find, and you can't laser-scan fur. So I got the idea that I'd go to the supermarket and buy a chicken, so I could run it over and scan it.

TB The meat we see in stores is almost a type of design object. For example, a chicken at a supermarket is so far from being a chicken. It's had its feathers taken out. It's cut into thighs and wings and drumsticks with lasers at some factory. It undergoes all these sculptural changes in order to transform from chicken to "poultry."

YH It's a scary industry. If you don't buy bio, chicken is cheap as hell. For an artist, it's cheaper than buying clay. Then, when you drive over it and crush those bones—when you turn it into road kill—it's suddenly this individual thing again. You give the chicken a soul by running it over. And then you extract that soul by scanning it.

TB It's a bargain.

YH That piece was for a show I did at Autocenter, which had all these washing machine drums. It was about detergent, overreactions, and itchiness. A washing machine drum also cleans itself—like an ever-turning wheel, pushing nature away. You can get all these diseases from a chicken lying in the sun, so the laser scan is a sanitary way of extracting information.

The fact that Holen's project required him to use supermarket meat points to a larger condition of displacement—to the industrial apparatuses that place consumer objects at a far remove from their latent mortality. For Holen's purposes, road kill was too close to having life. It could not be plugged into the other components of the system—the 3D-scanner, the washing machine drum, the crisp new pair of socks. Holen needed something smooth, a meat that was industrially manicured. By then running it over—by crushing its bones and turning it into something macabre—Holen allowed the chicken to once again be something that had died. A new and smooth type of roadkill. Something clean and scannable.

Similar to the 1991 photo of a sixteen-year-old Damien Hirst posing next to a decapitated head, Holen's chicken serves as a type of methodological creation story. A number of Holen's works operate through the logic of dissection—cut something open, see what's inside. The gesture is simple, but the shock comes from the mortality we witness in something that we thought was never alive. For the series Parasaggital Brain (2013), Holen cleaved a number of water-oriented appliances—an electric tea kettle, an office water cooler, etc.—in half with an industrial-grade water jet. Cutting an appliance with the very liquid it is designed to contain holds a certain tongue-in-cheek irony, but the resulting objects contain an eerie splendour. Unlike Descartes' unfortunate test subjects, the objects Holen cuts reveal themselves to be something more than a machine. Their valves, circuits, and plastic membranes appear to us as a type of sentient alien life form. These objects have no animated presence as they sit on our countertops and boil our water, but the act of dissection reveals an unknown quantity:

Fig. 3 Yngve Holen, Installation View, *Archeo*, High Line Art, New York, 2014.

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YH Forcing something in two is such a weird gesture. If the kettle is the brain, and it boils up the idea, then you're trying to find the idea. But when you cut, it's already gone. You're too late: the fluid has leaked out. So you're cutting it in order to find that the idea is gone.

It is a cruel paradox that the procedures that allow one to look inside often extinguish the very thing for which we are looking. The idea—the object of interest—vacates the premises before it can be seen, leaving behind the banality of its own flesh. For a group exhibition, Holen sliced a Gorenje Smart Refrigerator into sections, as if to inquire what made it 'smart'. The result is a grotesque pile of parts—a 'dumb' object. Holen's bisected objects are not live, but rather they reveal through absence that they had once lived. Their 'soul' is the byproduct of science's inevitable lateness.

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