

Eileen Maxson
b. 1980, Rockville Centre, NY



evian is naive spelled backwards, 2015, double-sided archival inkjet print.
Courtesy the artist and Microscope Gallery, New York. Supported by the
Mondriaan Fund and CBK Rotterdam.





evian is naive spelled backwards (detail), 2015, double-sided archival inkjet print. Courtesy the artist and Microscope Gallery, New York. Supported by the Mondriaan Fund and CBK Rotterdam.

Eileen Maxson's photographic project investigates globalization, consumerism, and anonymity through an intervention into Mechanical Turk, a website for outsourcing internet labor which is operated by Amazon. Maxson's work set out to subvert Mechanical Turk's strict policy of worker anonymity by paying them to capture self-portraits. In order to receive authentic responses from users, Maxson needed to request a portrait that would be "ungoogleable." She arrived at a memory of a scene in the American cult film *Reality Bites* (1994) in

which a character grabs a bottle of water and exclaims, “Evian is naïve spelled backwards!” Humor aside, for Maxson this moment has come to symbolize the interconnectedness of individuals, products, and labor. With that in mind, the artist asked the workers to photograph themselves outdoors with a group of friends and the words “evian” and “naive,” handpainted on a large piece of fabric or paper. The resulting fifty images are continuously printed on a 13-foot-long paper receipt, with the instructions and invoices for each user’s labor printed on the reverse side.

Eileen Maxson holds an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University (2008), a BFA from University of Houston (2002), and attended De Ateliers, Amsterdam (2008-2010). Maxson’s works have been screened and exhibited at Microscope Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2014), Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK (2014), the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY (2013), Light Industry, Brooklyn, NY (2013), Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Germany (2011), Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY (2009), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2008), and Art in General, New York, NY (2008), FotoFest, Houston, TX (2008), Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel (2007), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA (2006), Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico (2006), Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX (2003), among others. Writing on her work has appeared in Artforum, The Village Voice, Art Papers, ArtReview, The Houston Chronicle, PopMatters, The Houston Press and Metropolis M. Maxson has been awarded residencies at International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), Brooklyn, NY (2013-2014), Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), New York, NY (2013), and Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany (2012-2013). Grants and awards include Mondriaan Foundation, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Artadia: The Fund for Art & Dialogue, New York, NY; The Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; and Centrum Beeldende Kunst, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Maxson is the first recipient of the Arthouse Texas Prize (2005).

MAPS, DNA, AND SPAM

Amanda Ryan

I.

A semordnilap is a word, phrase, or sentence that, when spelled backwards, conveys a new meaning, formed from the inversion of its more symmetrical linguistic cousin, the palindrome. Palindromes read the same forwards and backwards, forming an endless loop. Semordnilap similarly doubles back on itself, demonstrating its own definition. Read right to left and “lived” becomes “devil”; to record the passage of “time” is to “emit.” There is subversive delight in the duplicity of a semordnilap that, when paired with its mirror image in a palindromic phrase,¹ produces unexpected new synapses. Play a record backwards and you might hear satanic verses. Even our DNA contains palindromic sequences: Two strands form a mirror image that can be read in either direction.

II.

The title of Eileen Maxson’s work *evian is naive spelled backwards* (2015) refers to a quote from the cult classic film *Reality Bites* (1994), which depicts a group of recent college grads muddling their way through jobs and relationships. Lelaina, the protagonist, is a filmmaker who struggles between making art that is true to her ideals and giving in to crass commercialization and a comfortable living.

Too broke to buy food, the group of friends goes on a junk food shopping spree at a gas station using Lelaina’s gas card (paid for by her dad). As they’re about to pay, Lelaina’s friend Vickie shares her realization about the expensive water’s name. They buy it anyway and dance. The minimum-wage clerk looks on with a mixture of contempt and embarrassment.

III.

For *evian is naive spelled backwards*, Maxson commissioned a series of group portraits on Amazon’s crowdsourced microtasking marketplace, Mechanical Turk (aka MTurk). Maxson asked participants to paint the semordnilap EVIAN/NAIVE on either side of a large cloth, taking one photo displaying the word “EVIAN” and a second with the word “NAIVE.”

MTurk is an open marketplace where employers can post jobs for independent contractors, often with durations of less than twenty minutes for pay in the range of \$2-\$3 an hour. All parties remain

strictly anonymous throughout the transaction, each identified by a random string of letters and numbers. Touted as the future of work, MTurk provides a model for an unrestricted global labor market that allows employers to find workers at any time, in any place, for any amount of pay, and for any amount of time, no matter how small, which some say effectively eliminates worker protections.²

IV.

evian is naive spelled backwards subverts this sacrosanct rule of anonymity on MTurk, compelling the workers to take a photo specifically for this project as proof of their veracity. However, a sizable percentage of the submissions are random—an arrangement of spoons, a Ferrari in a desert, a tube of toothpaste, a jellyfish, and a blurred photo of Barbara Walters posing with the cast of Jersey Shore (an attempt at something resembling the requested group photo). The images are the epitome of crassly commercial imagery, not chosen for any particular reason but submitted in hopes of gaming the system (on the off-chance that their work will not be reviewed by a human). Rather than exposing their individual identities, subjecting their bodies to vulnerability, they opt instead to send spam in a cynical bid for financial gain in an exploitative marketplace.

The work hinges on Maxson's struggle to reconcile the film's *evian/naive* scene—is it possible to exist and create art according to one's principles in an indifferent market, or should we just give up and buy the water? Are the spammers right to be cynical? Is it naive for workers to expose their bodies to the violence of the marketplace? This produces an unresolvable tension in the work, that of striving to make a work that transcends the dictates of a particular market, while still participating in that market to produce said work. The work sticks on this contradiction, cycling between the poles of idealism and cynicism, folding back in on itself like a palindrome.

1. Placed side by side, a semordnilap and its inverse will always form a palindromic phrase, "lived devil"

2. For more background on MTurk, also see Moshe Z. Marvit, "How Crowdworkers Became the Ghosts in the Digital Machine," *The Nation*, February 5, 2014, accessed June 12, 2016, <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-crowdworkers-became-ghosts-digital-machine>; and Glenn Fleischman, "Turks of the World, Unite!" *The Economist*, May 24, 2011, accessed June 12, 2016, http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2011/05/repetitive_tasks.

Amanda Ryan is a Brooklyn-based writer and curator. She received her MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from Columbia University and a BA in Political Science from New York University.

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