

# Miles Rufelds: Salvage Archives



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# Miles Rufelds: Salvage Archives

8 February to 25 May 2025

*Salvage Archives* continues Rufelds' research into cultural and subcultural expressions of late capitalist alienation, and the forms of collective storytelling that take shape under the shadows of unjust material systems.

Told in a hybrid narrative style, mixing elements of essay film, social realism, and neo-noir, *Salvage Archives* oscillates between two narrative threads, counterposing a lonely online conspiracy theorist and a disembodied historian of agriculture. The two figures recount their stories in alternating chapters, perversely mirroring each other as they wade into the knotted abstractions of capitalist productive systems, logistics networks, patterns of accumulation, and systemic waste.

As both narrators' grandiose overtures slowly narrow, contort, or fizzle out, the film meditates on the failures of narrativity, synthesizing themes of digital loneliness, class alienation, capitalist paranoia, and the tragic arc of histories constrained by these forces.

Curated by Darryn Doull

# Unreliable Narrating, or, The truth is far more frightening

by Angel Callander



*If I call you a ‘conspiracy theorist,’ it matters little whether you have actually claimed that a conspiracy exists or whether you have simply raised an issue that I would rather avoid. . . . By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur.*

— Ginna Husting and Martin Orr, “Dangerous Machinery: ‘Conspiracy Theorist’ as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion”<sup>1</sup>

Roko’s basilisk. MK-ULTRA. Stone age space travel. Stephen King killed Lennon. The HAARP weather machine. Solar plexus clown gliders. Starseeds. Operation CHAOS. Bunkers on Mars. The 9/11 Satan smoke face. COINTELPRO.

On one hand, esoteric conspiracies are a proxy for subcultures of people (mostly online) who attempt to bear out a narrative for complex arrangements of power they can’t quite grasp. On the other hand, these theories represent a very real erosion of trust in institutions over the past several decades. The key difference between them is that some are documented as being true. And with that basic principle in mind, the cultural deployment of conspiracy theory as a pejorative, a domain reserved only for the veritably unwell, begins to fray at the seams.

Politics, in controlling the faucet that metes out discipline and mercy, succeeds greatly in abstracting human life. This is to say that, increasingly, decisions made have little to do with the material impacts they will have on real people. Discourse, by extension, plays within the same arenas of indifference, symbolism, and the invocation of one-dimensional, supposedly universal figures. In the work of Miles Ruffelds, there is a principled endeavour to recuperate actual human experience from beneath the dispassionate muck. My aim in this text is to do the same.

Ruffelds’ thoroughly researched approach to storytelling

locates patterns of heightened contradictions, when the rational and irrational collide with each other, that can be traced through long historical arcs. *Salvage Archives* invokes the ways in which incredibly complex webs of power, propaganda, technology, media, and political economy commingle and metastasize—and act upon individuals in turn.



**The character of “C” gives us a familiar account of the conspiracy theorist: socially and economically isolated, desperately if subconsciously searching for an answer as to why. His disaffection boils down to the struggle to find some semblance of purpose and make sense of a superstructure—the ineffable forces of aloof governance that nonetheless give shape to human life.**

For “C,” internet message boards step in as the basis of this personal purpose. Supposedly social and connective while remaining untethered from official channels of disseminating information (which are easily compromised), message boards seem to provide the perfect space for uncovering the truth.

The internet now has its own culture, and online spaces have

a tendency to launder antisocial behaviour. They segment discourse among many splintered groups, a phenomenon which does have its pros and cons. Within a particular media model, namely the one laid out in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (which I will get to shortly), dissenting opinions are not just discouraged but actively vetoed. In very simple terms, this rejecting apparatus constitutes a propaganda model that online discourse seeks to react against. Thus, countervailing explanations for elite intrigue have a two-fold effect of being potentially liberatory, or alienatingly extremist.

Between our glimpses into “C”’s downward spiral, the character of “H” comes in as an authoritative but fallible historian. Her historical accounts of agriculture and industrial farming attempt a decisive narration of the ways in which food, as well as its surpluses and distribution patterns, have evolved in tandem with property, power, and finance. Delving into ancient symbolism and medieval literature to shape the argument, she is rather convincing, yet equivocal. In her bid to explain the systems at work behind “C”’s abandoned shipping containers, I would dare to say she is not entirely wrong, but much is missing.

Between both of the unreliable narrators in *Salvage Archives* is the common premise of waning faith in social institutions—namely, science and medicine, politics and government, media, and economics. There is a certain importance to this faith, since fear of social dissolution

sometimes spawns new religions and death cults to fill the void (think of the 1960s and '70s). These periods of “great awakening” occur when consensus reality begins to undeniably break down and people collectively sense that things feel off.

The cascading effect of rampant skepticism is a proliferation of “doing your own research.” Conspiracy is seductive, even just superficially as a challenge to a dominant narrative. Simply by allowing a non-normative discourse to take place, the conspiracy theory pacifies an unending, unnameable paranoia about what people see happening around them.

Within Manufacturing Consent’s sober critique of American mass media as a vehicle for political propaganda is also the suggestion that consensus reality is somewhat synthetic. By focusing squarely on facts and financial figures of corporate media takeovers and how governments feed outlets with the material they need for news, Herman and Chomsky lay out what might look like a conspiracy of elites shaping reality as we know it, but which really amounts to a very legal apparatus of narrative selection and exclusion under the political philosophy of the “consent of the governed.”

The book followed the breaking of the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986, when it was discovered that the Reagan administration had been secretly and illegally selling arms to Iran for five years, hoping to use the profits to fund the anti-socialist Contra rebels in Nicaragua and facilitate a coup of the Sandinista

argument about the propaganda model of communication, Herman and Chomsky note that, amidst the campaign to justify US support in Nicaragua, “the media do not stop to ponder the bias that is inherent in the priority assigned to government-supplied raw material, or the possibility that the government might be manipulating the news, imposing its own agenda, and deliberately diverting attention from other material.”<sup>2</sup> Iran-Contra is largely accepted to be what we might call a proven conspiracy, as something that was done in secret, controverting prohibitions and embargos, in the name of furthering US political interests in Latin America. There are many such cases.

Scholars have repeatedly attempted succinct definitions of “conspiracy theory” as manifestations of fear, beliefs in omnipotent malevolence, efforts to explain elite machinations, and proposals about abuses of power. In *Conspiracy Theory in America*, scholar Lance deHaven-Smith draws possibly the clearest



and most generous delineations of how the “conspiracy theorist” label has been naturalized as a certifiable pejorative. Rather than attributing the proliferation of conspiracy theory to a fundamental flaw in modern American character or culture, his argument identifies a long process of politics sowing very real distrust. Importantly, the term entered a popular lexicon following a documented CIA propaganda campaign in 1967 targeting journalists and media outlets to deflect criticism of the Warren Commission’s report on the JFK assassination.<sup>3</sup> With the publication of books questioning and debunking the report at the time, a majority of Americans actually were suspicious of the investigation’s conclusions.

As deHaven-Smith notes, “most of the criticism directed at conspiracy beliefs is based on sentimentality about . . . political leaders and institutions.”<sup>4</sup>



In the 1940s, philosophers Karl Popper and Leo Strauss developed theories about European totalitarianism. The former leaned heavily on ancient superstition and 19th-century social prejudices and paranoia, while the latter insisted that philosophy and science were responsible for discrediting a society’s origin stories and the value of its institutions, causing ruling elites to abuse their power by losing respect for the law.<sup>5</sup> Both largely agreed that conspiracies in high office do occur, but with differing opinions on whether this was a good thing.

History, in a simplistic sense, consists of a series of hinge points in which discrete decisions would have effected completely different

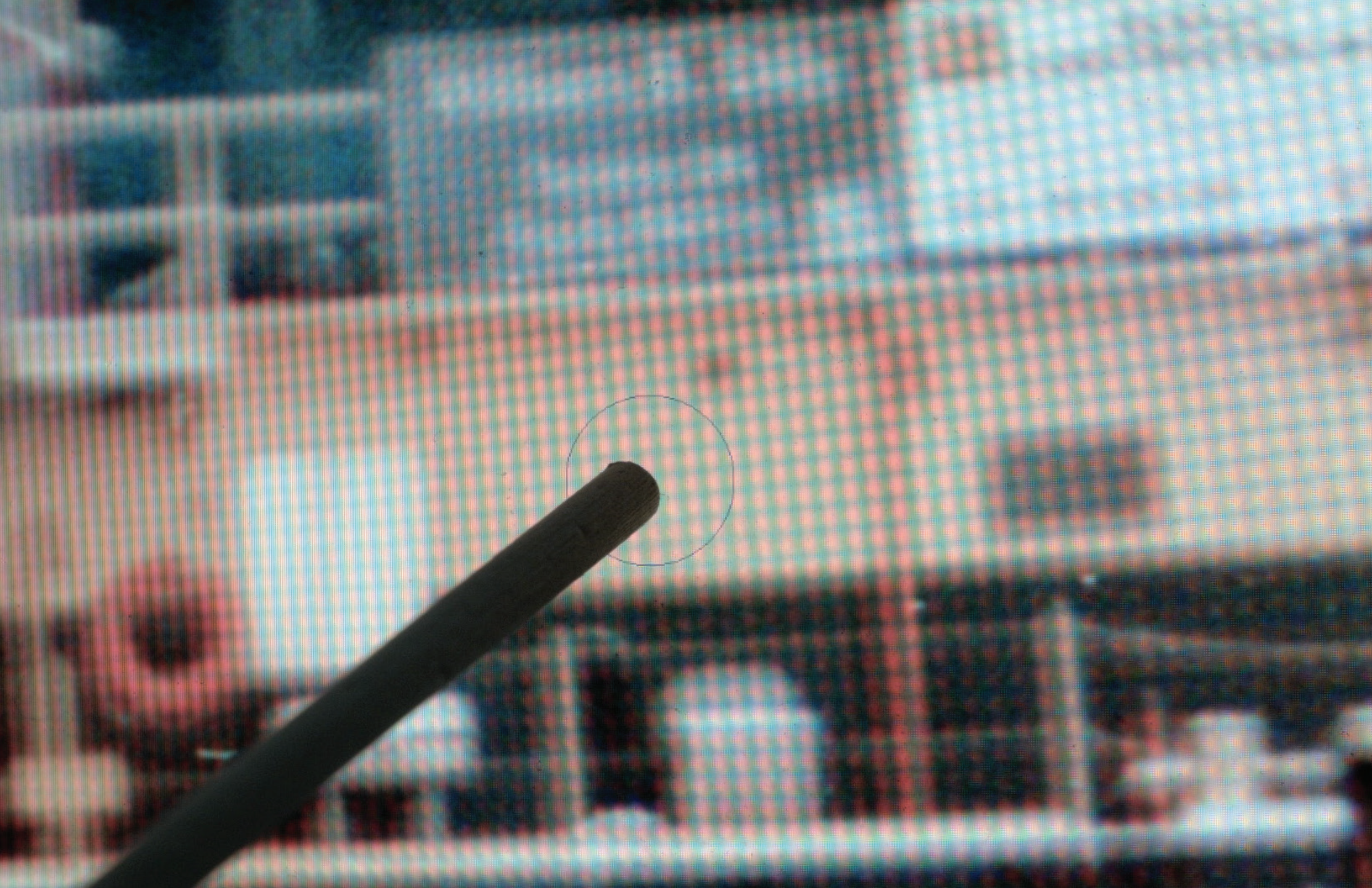
outcomes, and we would be living in a vastly different world as a result. A number of these points are found in the period during and after WWII. DeHaven-Smith attributes this proliferation of era-shifting events to “an age of weapons of mass destruction and ruthless enemies,”<sup>6</sup> when social panic justified the expansion of the security state, the military-industrial complex, and the intelligence apparatus that conducted human experiments under intense secrecy.

The mere fact of the existence of a program like MK-ULTRA would be enough to drive anyone out of their mind; considering the project’s methods, that would seem to be the point. Running for 20 years between 1953 and 1973, and directed by

CIA chemist Sidney Gottlieb, MK-ULTRA conducted research into hallucinogenic drugs, hypnosis, ESP and telekinesis, magic, mind control, early AI and brain-computer interfaces, psychological torture, and UFOs. Following a series of videos during the Korean War of American POWs confessing to war crimes using biological and chemical weapons on Korean civilians, the US government resolved that the Koreans, backed by the Chinese, must have been brainwashing their captives. If it were the case that brainwashing capability existed—and the CIA believed it did—then America was behind in the race of cognitive warfare.<sup>7</sup>

The objective was to discover how to manipulate the human mind





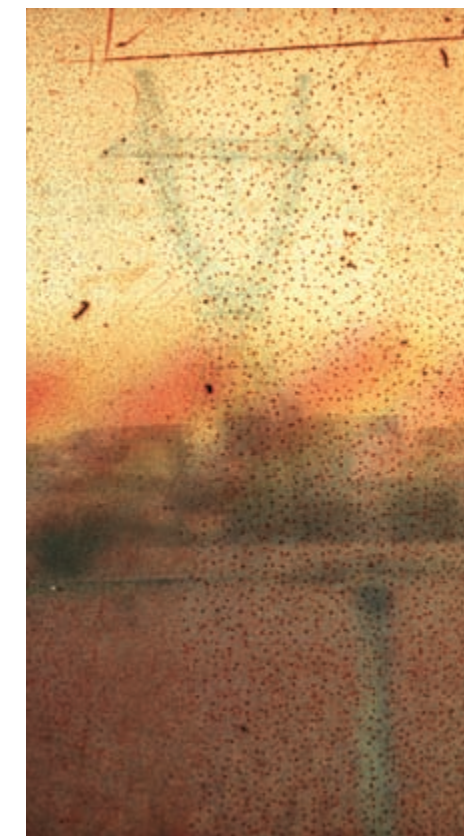
**What they don't realize is that they have only discovered the systemic waste of contemporary capitalism, operating under its normal conditions. Their misery continues. Perpetual silos. Secrecy agreements. Government denies knowledge. We investigated ourselves and found nothing.**

to more effectively interrogate enemies, and for their own operatives to be able to resist interrogation from those enemies. To learn about how to use perception gaps for mental insertion attacks, MK-ULTRA psychologists recruited the magician John Mulholland. Mulholland had previously written texts debunking spiritualists, mediums, and UFOs, and his oeuvre as an illusionist insisted that the human mind selectively interprets, throws away, or acts upon sensory information “based on our preconscious and/or memetic priors,” wherein we make sense of the world around us via perpetual pattern recognition.<sup>8</sup> Under the program, Mulholland developed weapons, communication strategies, and espionage techniques that amounted to hiding in plain sight.

There is also the story of Richard Doty, former special agent with the US Air Force Office of Special Investigations in the 1970s. His job was to hide military technology projects, a problem he solved by creating disinformation about UFOs to feed to amateur investigative groups. He forged official documents, invited targets to the base to see fake evidence, even staged abductions and “alien” break-ins at people’s houses. Some of his targets tipped over into hard-line esoteric conspiracy circles, were committed to institutions, and in one case, took their own life.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s Doty pivoted to whistleblower and began posting in online forums on the real truth about the existence of extraterrestrials.

The plot of The X-Files is based on Doty’s story, straddling the line of fact and fiction about UFOs within a government conspiracy to keep something hidden, and the impossibility of determining which is which. Is Doty’s whistleblowing an extension of the program? To what extent was any of it sanctioned, then and now?

It is markedly difficult to hold even a single piece of this knowledge and not question one’s grip on reality. There is a lot of rage floating around out there, and I venture to say much of it is justified. In this sense I sympathize with the conspiracy theorist, attempting to hunt down the Wizard of Oz.



It has always been acceptable for a government to speculate on the conspiracies of its enemies to justify wars and programs like MK-ULTRA that affect regular citizens in untold

ways, forever. It has been equally unacceptable for citizens to suspect any conspiracy on the part of the governing apparatus.

The figure of the conspiracy theorist re-emerges understandably amidst this apparent breakdown of consensus reality and moral ecologies. Metamorphic sums of money move on a whim; politics behaves increasingly as a magical belief system; scientific research ethics butt up against capital. The rational thing to do might be to behave irrationally for survival.

Importantly, “C” and his research compatriots assume a byzantine conspiracy for these very reasons, attempting a way out of their immiseration by getting to the bottom of how a supposedly rational economic system could be so pitiless and irrational. To them, the excess abandonment and destruction of goods makes no sense, and someone must be behind it. What they don’t realize is that they have only discovered the systemic waste of contemporary capitalism, operating under its normal conditions. Their misery continues. Perpetual silos. Secrecy agreements. Government denies knowledge. We investigated ourselves and found nothing. Something about being well-adjusted in a sick society. Cui bono?<sup>10</sup>

Rufelds uses the unreliable narrator as a figure for the restless endeavour to understand. And under this aegis, perhaps I am an unreliable narrator, too.





## NOTES

1. Ginna Husting and Martin Orr, "Dangerous Machinery: 'Conspiracy Theorist' as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion," *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 3 (2007): 127.
2. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008): 97.
3. Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (University of Texas Press, 2013), 20-21; 106-131.
4. Ibid., 15.
5. Ibid., 76-105.
6. Ibid., 24.
7. Trevor Paglen, "Society of the Psyop, Part 2: AI, Mind Control, and Magic," *e-flux* 148 (October 2024): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/148/631017/society-of-the-psyop-part-2-ai-mind-control-and-magic/>.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Who benefits? Normally the first, fundamental question to ask in crime investigations.

## About the Artist

Miles Rufelds is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher based in Toronto. He holds a Master of Visual Studies in studio art from the University of Toronto, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Ottawa.

Rufelds' research-based practice mixes archival investigation with strategies of speculative- and para-fiction, considering how forms of narrativity mediate the operations of systemic power and exploitation. His projects often focus on stories where histories of science, industry, labour, and war intersect with artistic, political, or esoteric subcultures.

Rufelds has participated in exhibitions and screenings nationally and internationally, including the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, the Blackwood Gallery, PAVED Arts, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Karsh-Masson Gallery, ArtworxTO, and the SIM Gallery. Rufelds is also a co-founder and co-director of Toronto gallery 'the plumb'.



## About the Author

Angel Callander is a writer and editor in Toronto. Currently she is a PhD candidate in art history and visual culture at York University. She holds a BA in art history from the University of Guelph and an MA in art history and visual culture from the Humboldt University of Berlin. Her work takes a historical materialist approach to subjects such as technology, feminism, structures of power, labour, and cultural production. Her writing can be found in publications such as CBC Arts, C Magazine, Canadian Art, Esse arts + opinions, and BlackFlash among others, as well as in *Imagining Futures of Experimental Media* (Pleasure Dome, NIMAC & OddSite Arts, 2023), *Architecture and the Smart City* (Routledge, 2020), and *Interface Critique* (Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016).



# Featured Programming

## Opening and Artist In Conversation with Angel Callander Saturday, 8 February, 2:00 p.m.

Join us for an insightful afternoon as Miles Rufelds discusses his latest work, *Salvage Archives*, in conversation with author Angel Callander.

This dialogue will explore Rufelds' ongoing research into cultural and subcultural expressions of late capitalist alienation and the ways collective storytelling emerges within the shadows of unjust material systems.

The event will delve into the themes and concepts behind *Salvage Archives*, a project that continues to push the boundaries of how art can address the complexities of our socio-economic landscape.

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## Exhibition Acknowledgements

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<b>Curatorial Assistant</b>	Soroush Dabiri
<b>Communications</b>	Áine Belton
<b>Graphic Design</b>	Lisa Narduzzi
<b>Essay Editor</b>	Alison Kenzie

### Special Thanks

We express our sincere thanks to the following individuals who were indispensable in helping us to source the materials required for the installation, especially the collection of over 200 shipping pallets: Chris Reitzel at Reitzel Heating and Air Conditioning and Terrina Reitzel; Carla Johanns and Rick Stoltz at Simpson Print Group.

We also recognize the contributions of KWAG staff at all levels of the organization. Every employee, volunteer and friend of the Gallery has an important role in the success of our programming. A full staff listing is available at [kwag.ca](http://kwag.ca).

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