



# critical bastards

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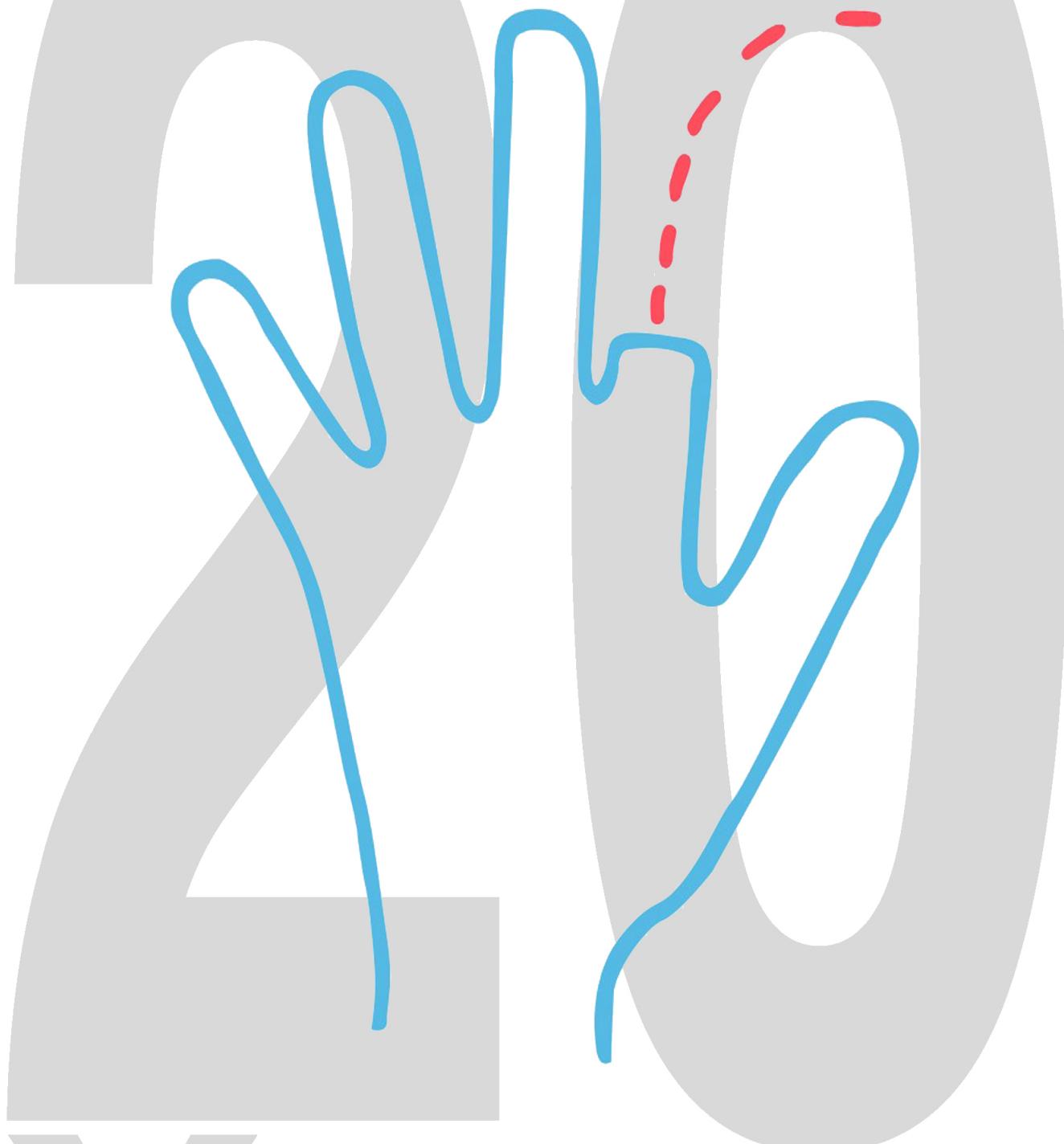
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Artist Book 'Mark Twain in Japan' by Simon Fujiwara (2010). Courtesy of the artist.



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## *(Un)Objectionable Aesthetics, Ben Woodard*

To oversimplify: Human beings are objects produced by Nature. We in turn produce objects living and not. We produce objects at rates and scales which seemingly outdo anything else. Yet, if the earth itself is an object, to say nothing of the solar system or cosmos, then we do not have a privilege on production. The rub, as usual, is self-awareness. We are aware (to some degree) of what we are and of our seemingly endless capacity for not only producing objects, but producing mental objects: ideas, emotions, schemes, escape routes. It is this capacity by which human beings have inflated their importance: only what is thinkable matters and anything that could matter must be thinkable. We find ourselves lords of a cosmos of inflated mind.

Quentin Meillassoux's solution is to twist this inflation on itself. If we would like to escape this narcissism, as some

recent speculative philosophies have attempted, what is the proper trajectory? Restricting the scope of the inquiry to just the aesthetic or, to keep things in the above terms, the production of art objects, what is a speculative approach to art?

Object-oriented approaches have dominated the aesthetic and artistic reception of Speculative Realism. The reasons seem obvious. Object-oriented philosophies, in their various forms, center on the irreducibility of the object as a singularity that is removed from the physicality of the world to some degree. Whether the object withdraws ontologically (Harman), is vacuum-sealed (Morton) or because it is encased in protocols (Bogost), art objects under these approaches transform 'art for art's sake' into a materialist dictum insofar as the object is auto-appreciated in its object-hood. But if

all of reality is objects beside objects, then what happens to the production with which we began? Phenomenological description reigns and subsequently diffuses into ontological fabric. Production becomes an injustice to objects and is cast out.

What are the possible alternatives? The tempting one is to embrace pure production either in itself or in terms of the artist (to thereby embrace a radical subjectivism). The obvious fall back, to avoid these extremes, is to examine the mediation between the artist and her materials in way that does not merely fall into the aforementioned tendencies nor into the gaping maw of relational aesthetics. This mediation need not be a frozen caricature of Kantian schematism, but should begin not on, or with, the purpose of seeking out ontological or metaphysical ramifications, but to craft a form of

navigation. There is a plane or continuum on which actual entities rest, but describing it as flat obliterates the process by which that flatness is described. What is required is a form of aesthetic navigation that melts

the castle wall between the limits of the thinker and the invariants in the world without siding with the thinker. Production is simultaneously of things and thoughts but cast into a world contingency-cracked.

Where an aesthetics of objects cuts through the human orgy of relational aesthetics, it can say nothing about the production in which we are immersed and must navigate in, with, and through.

***Or Tears, Of Course*, Rebecca O'Dwyer (Review of *Or Tears, Of Course*, Ed Atkins, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin)**

Ed Atkins' *Or tears, of course*, which just concluded its restless run at Temple Bar Gallery, is indeed a confounding exhibition to write about. Where to start with a body of work that never seems satisfied or appeased; that never ceases to evolve and mutate: its overall sense was that of an existential malignance, of an unpredictable excess given body and form. Atkins, too, doesn't appear too sure where to start, each refrain of 'O let me' a cry to reorganise the structuring device of the piece, to rephrase and to start, as it were, anew.

The work itself consisted of a performance piece, which was filmed and edited to create a video work, coupled alongside some 2D works and another, more finalised computer-generated animation, in the main gallery space. On subsequent visits, it remained as so, with the final

manifestation comprising the 2D works and a more resolved union of the filmed performance piece and the other animated work, in the adjoining main space. Both filmic works adhered to the same script, the one performed by the artist at the opening, with the narrative flitting between each screen. The final edit unpredictably moved from one screen to the next, at times silently, and at others, accompanied by a loud burst of melody, the opening bars to Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams* rendered disquieting and weird.

For me, the 2D works acted primarily as accompaniments to the main work, which comprised in this interplay between the performance and the prior given digital rendering. In both works, the head – either erased or disembodied, floating in a digital wash of pinkish primordial soup – is central.

This appears to be a recurrent motif in Atkin's work, quite often the back of the head: as with here, it speaks of blankness, containing little in the way of personality. I cannot but think here of Beckett: Nagg and Nell, their heads peeking out from their respective dustbins; and Winnie, for some unknown reason buried up to her head in sand. As with Beckett, Atkins' text speaks of a kind of desperate attempt to counter the knowledge of our contingency, to engage in 'a dramatic rebuttal of those external influences and focus, again, on the gravitational seductions of our guts.'

There is a difference in tone or vehemence between the two manifestations of these scripts, however: the animated one calm and conversational in tone; the performed one more vitriolic, appearing like some

form of desperate catharsis. The overall sense is one of incredulity: both towards the situation we find ourselves in – the realisation of no grand narrative to cling on to – and towards the idea that some part still hangs on to the suggestion that things might be otherwise.

Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere, just enough to keep alight this little yellow flame feebly darting from side to side, panting, as if straining to tear itself from its wick, it should never have been lit, or it should never have been fed, or it should have been put out, put out, it should have been let go out<sup>1</sup>.

There is the sense, too, that the protagonist would prefer to keep

talking, or is perhaps afraid to stop. He would prefer to stay speaking to the addressee, a lover perhaps: ‘so determined to stay here with you, lying together on the sheet of corrugated iron before dinner.’ There’s a familiarity that he clings onto and yet simultaneously abhors; a charade that he knows to be false and plays along with all the same. He appears to want to bring cease the anthropocentric gesture and cease talking, but cannot. There is always someone to talk *to*, and perhaps this person he cannot reduce or flatten, as he would himself.

**Black Holes, Hugh McCabe (Weaponising Speculation conference - Dublin Unit of Speculative Thought)**

Images by Hugh McCabe

The morning after Weaponising Speculation, New Zealand based writer and curator Jon Bywater gave a short talk at NCAD. He told us that a colleague of his has a theory that we could do away with the whole apparatus of art education altogether if we could just get students to understand what black holes are: the idea being that an understanding of how space itself can be destroyed, how it can effectively cease to be, is both a necessary and, perhaps more importantly, a sufficient condition for artistic thinking and practice. If we understand that anything can be destroyed then we also understand that anything can be created. There seems to be something of relevance here to the vexed question of how philosophy finds a role in the thinking of, writing of, and making of art: a

question that many speakers at Weaponising were grappling with, and a question that many of the off-line conversations seemed to revolve around also. A somewhat pat answer to this question would be to see philosophy as a form of exercise for the brain, a training in difficult conceptual thinking that can equip artists with the necessary compass to venture forth into the confusing terrain of statements, debates and catalogue essays. But I would prefer to see it as having a very different role: a role not as a tool for navigating an existing terrain, but rather a tool that can punch holes in that terrain, unhinging it and disturbing it, and then potentially allowing a new one to settle in its place.

The exciting thing about philosophy, and in particular its metaphysical variant,

lies in the fact that it constantly questions the conditions of existence, the fundamentals of being in the world. It demands of us that we question what a thing is, why a thing is, and even what it means to suggest that something is in the first place.

Speculative Realism's insistence on confronting these core questions of metaphysics, and its refusal to confine this confrontation within the constraints of human experience, opens up multiple black holes in our thinking. These black holes can collapse and destroy anything - nothing is safe from their gravitational pull. Established notions, ideas and concepts can simply cease to be. Of course the science of the black hole also insists that at some point in the future everything will cease to be. Simone Weil recounts how Socrates, while awaiting the

execution of his death sentence, started learning to play the lyre[1]. This serves to remind us that a looming end, an imminent cessation of creation, is no reason to cease to create. Somehow ideas seem to be

more resilient than matter anyway. They might not be able to escape but, in keeping with the way we fantasise about the black hole as a portal to another world, they can emerge out the other side. They might be

damaged and mutated, but nevertheless they can still form a new terrain, taking on new forms as they do so, and thus opening up new possibilities for thinking, for practicing, and even for being.

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[1] Simone Weil Gravity and Grace p. 153





### ***The Ephemerality of the Sublime Experience, Louise Younger***

(Review of *In time's furrows*, Katie Belcher, Queen Street Studios, Belfast)

Subjectively, the theory of the “Sublime” is the affection of an ambiguous awe – an overwhelming wave of beautiful magnificence and sensitive comprehension, but which lacks any true definition.

...

Canadian artist, Katie Belcher’s most recent exhibition in Queen Street Studios, *In Time’s Furrows*, concerns the ideas of architectural spaces, cultural memory and lost knowledge. The stunning, large scale, charcoal drawing vastly sweeps around two of the walls within the space – whose corner is a point of perspective,

drawing the viewer into this windy, wispy world of liquid landscape.

The artist has said that the gesture of erasing is equally as vital as drawing itself; it being a process of adding and then taking away. Belcher creates a poetic balance of positive and negative spaces; areas of intense darkness combined with areas of untouched white wall or small strokes evidently erased from the surface, creating wonderful tonal depth. For every memory you accumulate, another is further blurred.

A black band of charcoal debris runs

around the edges of the gallery - almost like a border between us, the viewer, standing on the wooden paneled floor, and this vast romantic realm we are staring into. It’s almost a separation between dimensions or a division between our minds and our bodies. What we know, what we imagine and what we remember are all isolated and brought to the surface.

What is so palpably sublime about this work is its touch - its modest sense of presence for its size. The piece compels the audience to decipher puzzles, lines, marks, forms, lightness, and

darkness, to create some sort of cohesive order, making sense of the world in which we presently stand. It begs the question of existence – of us ourselves within spaces and places, or

of spaces and places themselves. Everyone and everywhere is and always will be changing, evolving, re-evaluating themselves – so therefore, what is finite and what is

graphite?

*"In thirty days, the walls will be painted. I feel strange, sad and liberated"* Katie Belcher



## **Weaponising Speculation, Michelle Doyle (Review of *Weaponising Speculation* conference, Dublin Unit of Speculative Thought)**

Images by Michelle Doyle

‘Weaponising Speculation’ was a two day conference and exhibition, organised recently by the Dublin Unit for Speculative Thought (D.U.S.T.). Covering a range of topics, such as object based ontology, nature and network systems, the conference brought philosophers and artists into one peculiar room to explore out how these theories could be realised, whether through art, writing or other means. Objects have had an existence running parallel with and even beyond human understanding. The subjects of nature and information systems, discussed in some presentations, can also be seen as autonomous in some approaches and as a construction in others.

Speculative Realism is of considerable interest to the art world currently, and its allure was identified and critiqued in Rebecca O’Dwyer’s paper, ‘A Seductive Union’.

The act of “weaponizing” indicates that these theories can become an apparatus, one for viewing artworks and also defending them. Or perhaps it’s a theory which is a silent threat; missiles spotted from above, a theory not to question but to be slightly afraid of, despite not knowing if what it proposes is *true*. This is of course, speculatively speaking.

What was a thoroughly refreshing approach, was how some contributors in the conference questioned the medium of the presentation itself. The medium of the group lecture was subverted consistently throughout the day, with Samuel Joseph Keogh creating an aural wall of monologue which considered the items contained in Oscar The Grouch’s Dustbin - these punctuated streams of information all meticulously learned

off by heart. Memorisation is idealised within childhood; poems and songs are a cultural commodity, the content of which does not seem to interest the adults, as much as the end product of time spent learning. Likewise Keogh takes to a pulpit in front of peers to display a product of labour; one which illustrates objects with the voice. Keogh’s monologue was formed by a combination of algorithms sourced from the internet, books and his own memory; by reconfiguring existing material, he becomes a mechanised object himself.

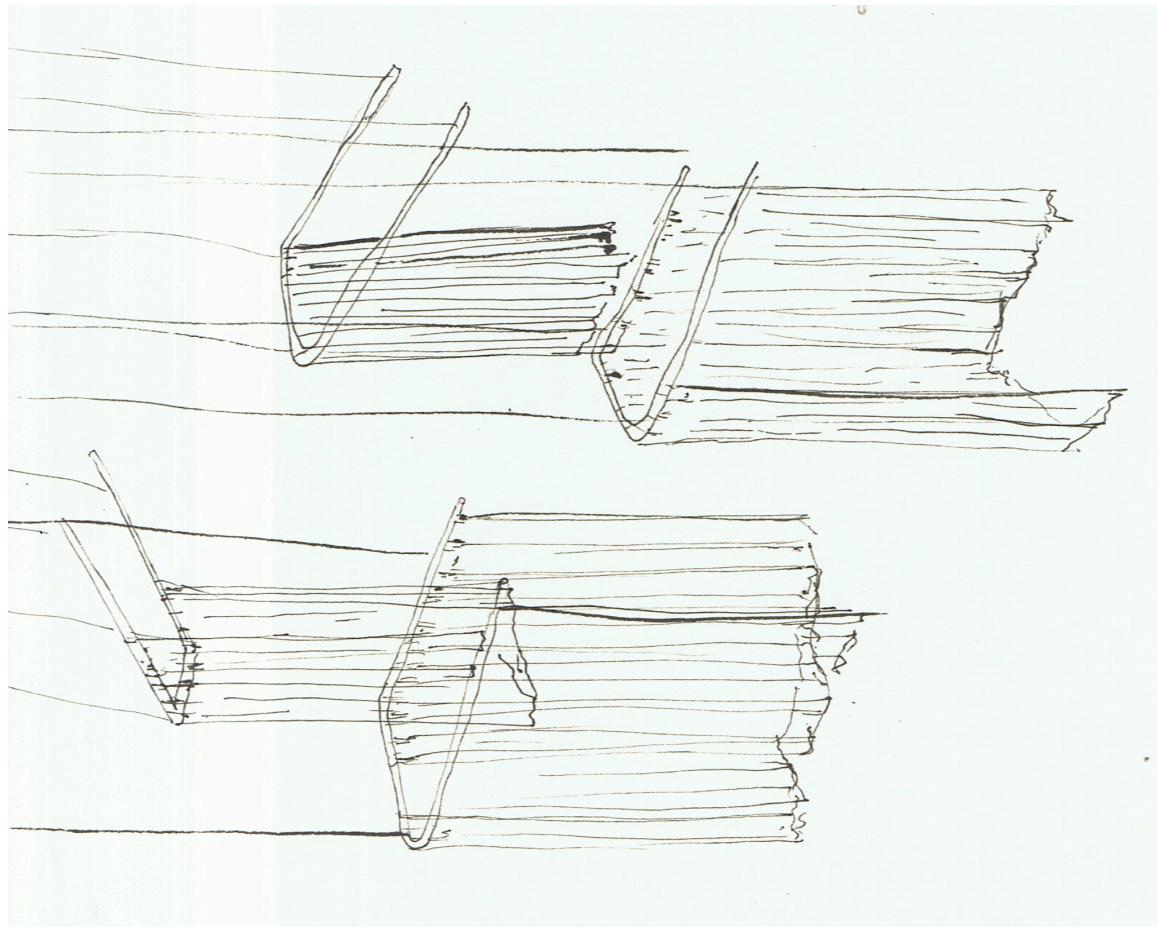
The body as an object was echoed in Isabel Nolan’s eerie account of a clinical trial. Her talk was of personal significance to me, as I believed we had a shared experience.

A brief spell in a hospital sees the subject becoming commodified, and

placed on a bed to sleep unnaturally long hours in order to test out a method of lucid dreaming. Nolan's account is both banal and terrifying. She is trapped in a series of repeated processes which mark the time spent waiting around, or dreaming in a state which is both semi-conscious and out of control. The utter loss of the ownership of the mind and body is so complete that she concludes the in between-existence as "a shit Truman Show".

In the years following on from my own experience, I've found myself becoming more surprised that I had ever even been in a trial. I emailed the company looking for my medical details, which were sold to a pharmaceutical company. If I go in person to the hospital they can give me various accounts, a configuration of my own body broken down into statistics, ECTs and Blood Pressure Rates.

Unlike Nolan though, I wasn't asleep; I was wide awake and testing out a diuretic. And all these monologues are information, yet could ultimately be considered a diuretic. They promote a production of waste, they are an aid for cleansing, using theories to act not as weapons, but as expungers of current systems. That is speculatively speaking, of course



***Rotator*, Suzanne Walsh (Review of *Rotator*, Ruth Clinton & Niamh Moriarty, Pallas Projects, Dublin)**

Images by Kathy Tynan

To rotate is to spin, swivel, pivot, turn around, all in circular fashion, all around an axis which forms an anchoring centre, heart, hub. In *Rotator* a large black hole-like circle sits in the semi-darkness of the gallery, only with depths that are not substantial as it's not really a hole, but a whole, a whole circle, made of felt. Hovering on the wall behind is an elliptical projection which could also be described as hole-like, looking into, spying on a small urban lake. Or it would have been spying when this lake was still largely a secret, but in the course of this exhibition, wild and watery weather has caused winter to return again; cycles becoming confused, season's rotation grown uncertain, so that cold tundra winds are blowing on the daffodils.

But getting back to the secret lake, and I'm not giving it away

because it's next door to the gallery and not a secret anymore, I saw it myself, it was a dark night and there it was - hoardings peeled back, glistening, black-flecked under the rain and wind by the old brick school that now houses Pallas Arts. I think they, the artists, would prefer it to remain secret, the lake I mean, to hoard it, although they did provide a pipe to spy into it, now temporarily redundant. But in the end the lake chose to reveal itself, perhaps being under so much scrutiny it stirred itself, or the winds in some kind of conspiracy, stripped it of its covers.

If you are going to spy on, gaze at, study the surfaces of water, it becomes like scrying, although here it's of the surface kind. Lines and reflections on the skin of water float across, nothing revealed of future thoughts or otherworlds; moreso

the artists' inner worlds and obsessions. Here is the pleasure of looking and recording - a ball floats by, a black mysterious burden is laboriously hoisted, dripping, while outside the gallery a green siren light silently turns, spelling out, I'm told, the name of the show in morse code. There are more holes, turn the page and you will find them even here, but there is also, within the gallery walls, a video of a circular brick hole in a wall, like moongates in the walls of Chinese ornamental gardens, and in the screen facing it, a film moving slowly intimately tracks the inner scrapings of that hole.

You could speculate on this, holes (of the Real and whatnot), and lakes shaking off their hoardings, and what lies under ground (theoretically speaking), you could say a lot here, but in

fact, it's not the time,  
for I recently listened  
to their own  
speakings and  
theorising on the

night of "Tour of  
Rotator", which  
revealed quite  
enough of those  
things good enough

without my own  
meddling, or going  
around in further  
circles I will, in fact,  
stop here

