

THAD HIGA *Flood the Zone*

OCTOBER 17 - DECEMBER 31, 2024
Opening Reception: OCTOBER 17, 6 - 9 pm

SAN FRANCISCO—"The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." Steve Bannon reportedly uttered this sentiment in 2018, when he was still one of Donald Trump's closest allies. Encouraging his followers to spread disinformation, Bannon wanted to suppress the emergence of a single coherent narrative in the political sphere for people to mobilize around. Instead, he fostered competing, conflicting accounts of events to destabilize a sense of a shared reality. A tactic manufactured by authoritarians like Vladimir Putin, the thinking goes that a "strong leader" becomes the only reasonable option in confusing, uncertain times. Since about 2016, the zone has remained flooded—a media system deluged with garbage information that makes it impossible and exhausting to understand the reality of events unfolding around us.

Artist Thad Higa calls attention to this deceitful and controlling technique as the primary characteristic of the media system we operate within today. His installation *Flood the Zone* highlights how little freedom of choice we have when navigating political narratives online. The work imagines the desktop of a fictional character as anonymous and questionable forces fight for their attention, distracting and seducing them, giving them twisted half-truths after promising factual information. Throughout it all, these shadowy characters are surveilling the user, selling them garbage they don't need, pandering to their most childish and egotistical attributes—click here, and what you deserve will be yours; give us your data, and you can create your own reality. Pop-up ads prey on Higa's user's insecurities. Fearful, ignorant, and hateful, the user is particularly susceptible to these persuasive, flashy forces that promise a community of other angry, like-minded individuals ready to affirm their fears without shame or repercussion.

Underlying Higa's work is a diluted and distorted concept of freedom—a loaded term that speaks to quintessential understandings of who we are as individuals in a supposedly democratic society. "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free," sang Nina Simone. For Simone and many others, "freedom" signals personal autonomy—freedom of movement, of one's body, to express one's thoughts and opinions, to be free of oppression. "Freedom is the process," Avery F. Gordon echoes, "by which you develop a practice for being unavailable for servitude." And yet, in today's American political system, it is a word weaponized by both the left and the right. It was one of Kamala Harris's most used words at the Democratic National Convention; it is what Trump promises his followers. The alt-right's "freedom" implies operating outside of conventional media systems—freedom from fact-checking, from

institutional politics, from societal norms. No longer about personal autonomy, “freedom” in the flooded zone darkly implies freedom from everything, including truth and reality.

The freedom advertised in *Flood the Zone* feels slippery, shady, loaded, dangerous. It is exclusionist and it is defended violently. But Higa does not tell us that; he illustrates it by layering wheat-pasted graphics and texts with vinyl decals and standalone posters that gradually become more frenetic as the installation progresses. “FREEDOM,” Higa’s star-shaped stickers proclaim, mimicking the visual language of online pop-up ads and stickers advertising a new, improved product, “FROM THE TYRANNY OF HISTORY,” “FROM THE LABOR OF HELPING OTHERS,” “FROM THE BLACK HOLE INSIDE ME,” “TO SHOP UNTIL I DROP,” “FROM SELF REFLECTION,” “FROM THE CHAINS OF HOPE.” Satirically red-white-and-blue, Higa’s bold graphics and overstimulating images appropriate the aesthetics of far-right activists in their quest to claim freedom for some at the expense of others.

Recognizing that it is futile to write objectively about a question of semantics, Higa writes something akin to poems. The artist highlights how empirical knowledge systems such as statistics and language are used to spread false information. “Keep clicking until the words break open into gibberish,” one of Thad’s pop-ups implores. In this dystopian world, freedom is just another word utilized in a supposedly objective system contorted into nonsense; another cog in a machine that is not to be trusted. Writing in disconnected phrases and poetic language, Higa deconstructs the white supremacist hate simmering beneath the surface of so-called freedom in America. “Home of my free, not yours,” he writes.

Through these open-ended poetics, Higa poses pointed questions about true freedom: who is free to live and who is free to drop dead; who is free to oppress others, and who is free to lick the boot? And, if we can reach true freedom, is it a state where we are released from the debt or decency we owe other living beings? Inside freedom is also a question of what—or who—our chains are made from. When those chains are made of information, do we still have the “freedom” to choose “truth” in this mega-echo chamber of mass media flooded with shit? Furthermore, how do we define truth in a system that makes it nearly impossible to know fact from fiction, which makes the quest for truth ever more laughable and delusional by the day?

Regardless of partisanship, many Americans genuinely believe they are seeking the truth that the mainstream media withholds. Some see themselves as freedom fighters, uncovering the widespread corruption that runs all the way to the top. And there is truth to that: we all know we are operating in a system that has failed, that those on the top want us to eat this shit. Under loads of stinking media crap, there is still truth to be uncovered.

Through Higa’s visually and narratively contradictory minefield of political media and truth, the artist highlights the failure of institutions to provide adequate support systems and the resulting anger from those who were failed. These are the most real, undeniable aspects of this entire shitstorm. Whatever the crusade for “truth” uncovers, in whatever way we end up “free,” the fact of institutional negligence rises above everything. And no matter whose truth grows louder, whose freedoms “win,” if we don’t agree across the divide that millions of people continue to be disenfranchised so a few others can get rich, these failures will prevail as the single lasting truth that hovers above the shit-flooded zone.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

Thad Higa is a Korean-Okinawan American language worker. He works with artists' books, concrete poetry, printmaking, collage, typography, graphic design and living rooms. He investigates the intersections of language, technology, capitalism, white supremacy, and their roles in controlling perceptions of reality, value and legibility.

Off Hours is a nomadic curatorial project led by Katherine Jemima Hamilton, Shaelyn Hanes, and Ebt. Together, they present artist-driven exhibitions that result from dialogue developed during studio visits, ongoing conversation, and collaborative writing practices. Off Hours supports and spotlights emerging Bay Area artists through thoughtful curation, programming, and writing.