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## The Owl Of Minerva

Noam Chomsky

It is not pleasant to contemplate the thoughts that must be passing through the mind of the Owl of Minerva as the dusk falls and she undertakes the task of interpreting the era of human civilization, which may now be approaching its inglorious end.

The era opened almost 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, stretching from the lands of the Tigris and Euphrates, through Phoenicia on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean to the Nile Valley, and from there to Greece and beyond. What is happening in this region provides painful lessons on the depths to which the species can descend.

The land of the Tigris and Euphrates has been the scene of unspeakable horrors in recent years. The George W. Bush-Tony Blair aggression in 2003, which many Iraqis compared to the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, was yet another lethal blow. It destroyed much of what survived the Bill Clinton-driven U.N. sanctions on Iraq, condemned as "genocidal" by the distinguished diplomats Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, who administered them before resigning in protest. Halliday and von Sponeck's devastating reports received the usual treatment accorded to unwanted facts.

One dreadful consequence of the U.S.-U.K. invasion is depicted in a *New York Times* "visual guide to the crisis in Iraq and Syria": the radical change of Baghdad from mixed neighborhoods in 2003 to today's sectarian enclaves trapped in bitter hatred. The conflicts ignited by the invasion have spread beyond and are now tearing the entire region to shreds.

Much of the Tigris-Euphrates area is in the hands of ISIS and its self-proclaimed Islamic State, a grim caricature of the extremist form of radical Islam that has its home in Saudi Arabia. Patrick Cockburn, a Middle East correspondent for *The Independent* and one of the best-informed analysts of ISIS, describes it as "a very horrible, in many ways fascist organization, very sectarian, kills anybody who doesn't believe in their particular rigorous brand of Islam."

Cockburn also points out the contradiction in the Western reaction to the emergence of ISIS: efforts to stem its advance in Iraq along with others to undermine the group's major opponent in Syria, the brutal Bashar Assad regime. Meanwhile a major barrier to the spread of the ISIS plague to Lebanon is Hezbollah, a hated enemy

of the U.S. and its Israeli ally. And to complicate the situation further, the U.S. and Iran now share a justified concern about the rise of the Islamic State, as do others in this highly conflicted region.

Egypt has plunged into some of its darkest days under a military dictatorship that continues to receive U.S. support. Egypt's fate was not written in the stars. For centuries, alternative paths have been quite feasible, and not infrequently, a heavy imperial hand has barred the way.

After the renewed horrors of the past few weeks it should be unnecessary to comment on what emanates from Jerusalem, in remote history considered a moral center.

Eighty years ago, Martin Heidegger extolled Nazi Germany as providing the best hope for rescuing the glorious civilization of the Greeks from the barbarians of the East and West. Today, German bankers are crushing Greece under an economic regime designed to maintain their wealth and power.

The likely end of the era of civilization is foreshadowed in a new draft report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the generally conservative monitor of what is happening to the physical world.

The report concludes that increasing greenhouse gas emissions risk "severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" over the coming decades. The world is nearing the temperature when loss of the vast ice sheet over Greenland will be unstoppable. Along with melting Antarctic ice, that could raise sea levels to inundate major cities as well as coastal plains.

The era of civilization coincides closely with the geological epoch of the Holocene, beginning over 11,000 years ago. The previous Pleistocene epoch lasted 2.5 million years. Scientists now suggest that a new epoch began about 250 years ago, the Anthropocene, the period when human activity has had a dramatic impact on the physical world. The rate of change of geological epochs is hard to ignore.

One index of human impact is the extinction of species, now estimated to be at about the same rate as it was 65 million years ago when an asteroid hit the Earth. That is the presumed cause for the

ending of the age of the dinosaurs, which opened the way for small mammals to proliferate, and ultimately modern humans. Today, it is humans who are the asteroid, condemning much of life to extinction. The IPCC report reaffirms that the "vast majority" of known fuel reserves must be left in the ground to avert intolerable risks to future generations. Meanwhile the major energy corporations make no secret of their goal of exploiting these reserves and discovering new ones.

A day before its summary of the IPCC conclusions, the *New York Times* reported that huge Midwestern grain stocks are rotting so that the products of the North Dakota oil boom can be shipped by rail to Asia and Europe.

One of the most feared consequences of anthropogenic global warming is the thawing of permafrost regions. A study in *Science* magazine warns that "even slightly warmer temperatures [less than anticipated in coming years] could start melting permafrost, which in turn threatens to trigger the release of huge amounts of greenhouse gases trapped in ice," with possible "fatal consequences" for the global climate.

Arundhati Roy suggests that the "most appropriate metaphor for the insanity of our times" is the Siachen Glacier, where Indian and Pakistani soldiers have killed each other on the highest battlefield in the world. The glacier is now melting and revealing "thousands of empty artillery shells, empty fuel drums, ice axes, old boots, tents and every other kind of waste that thousands of warring human beings generate" in meaningless conflict. And as the glaciers melt, India and Pakistan face indescribable disaster.

Sad species. Poor Owl.



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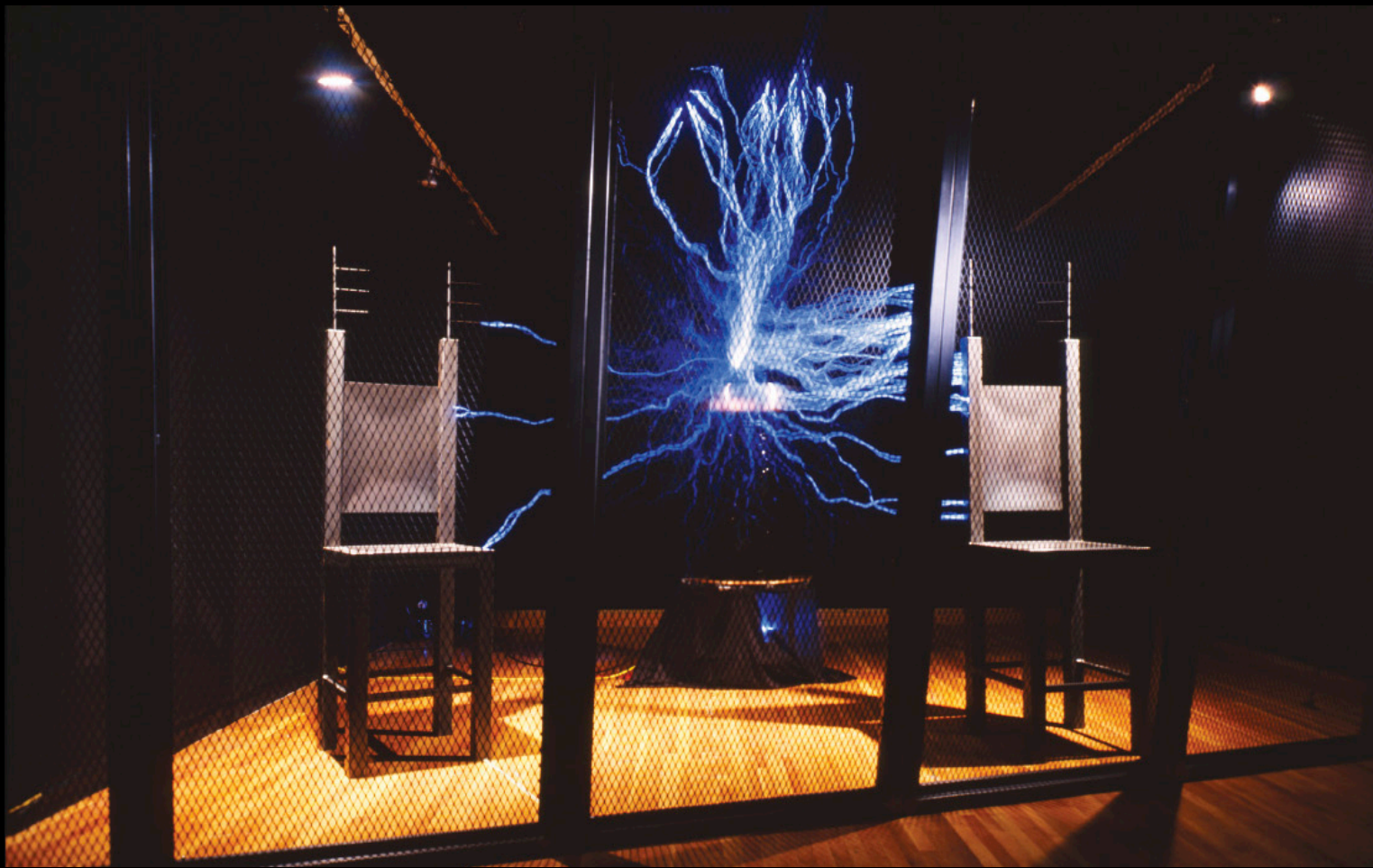
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Doug Hall, *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* is jointly organized by San Francisco Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Generous support is provided by Linda and Jon Gruber.

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Noam Chomsky  
*The Owl Of Minerva*  
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# A Proposed Framework For Considering Network Critique Media

Ben Valentine

Much of Internet culture uncritically frolics in an ecology greatly affected by the unique opportunities and affordances of the Internet and the web while ignoring the boundaries and limitations that come with it. Many artists and users adopt exciting emergent traits with little consideration of negative or unseen consequences. Artists and technologists seeking to understand and engage with the specific qualities of networked media—be it on the Internet, a Local Area Network, or a meshnet—open up a much needed dialogue about our agency as viewers and users within these spheres, the technical and aesthetic limitations and opportunities, and the embedded politics of these spaces.

If the artists using these networks do so uncritically, they are in fact relinquishing aesthetic and conceptual control over their work to private companies, proprietary hardware and software, and governmental agencies. In this way much of net art, or art using the Internet as its primary means of dissemination, or the more nebulous post-Internet art, are responding to the widespread adoption and influence of networked society and can be critiqued for the degree of control they demand or give away to the network and all of the intersecting influences therein.

Deciphering and confronting these networked spheres of influence is necessary, and some of the most critically and conceptually exciting works today are doing just that. There are already two important and growing conversations around these issues: The first is Stacktivism, from the likes of Benjamin Bratton and Keller Easterling, a movement attempting to confront the interlaced infrastructures and systems—both natural and manmade—that are constantly in dialogue with one another. The other is Critical Engineering, a term coined by Julian Oliver, Gordana Savičić, and Danja Vasiliev to differentiate between new media art that uses technology and makes aesthetic commentary on society, and new media art that directly and critically engages society through tools, interventions, and products, rather than through art.

I'd like to propose another critical framework that I will call Network Critical Media (NCM)—media that critically, experientially, and authentically confronts the network on which it relies. NCM understands that networked communication contains exciting and unique opportunities as well as dangerous risks, and both should be thoroughly researched, explored, and exposed. To understand NCM, we first have to understand the site-specificity of the network, which is vastly complex. NCM continues in the lineage of Critical Engineering and Stacktivism, but also of institutional critique, stemming from the 1960s with the likes of Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser as a way to critique the embedded politics of arts institutions where the works existed. NCM, like institutional critique and Critical Engineering, contains a realistic optimism; that through more critical engagement we can make the tools and institutions affecting our lives serve us better than they do now.

In evaluating an NCM work, we must ask to what degree the work is in conscious and meaningful dialogue with the complexities of the network it's reliant on for its creation, dissemination, and experience. This of course requires an understanding that the work has a multiplicity of realities, as the network's effects move unevenly throughout the connected audience. When taken off the network, the NCM work becomes a hollow artifact, merely a representation of the complexities it was once inextricably linked with. For clarity, I believe that all networked media is affected by at least these five traits, of which NCM must be aware and in dialogue with:

1. The physical infrastructure of the network (Internet, mesh networks, LAN) the work utilizes and is accessed through.
2. The institutions (Google, NSA, Facebook, Comcast) facilitating and simultaneously affecting (through software, law, policy) the aesthetic, experiential, and power relationships between the work and its viewers.
3. The software through which we connect that is the user interface between infrastructure, institutions, technology, and us. Software is full of affordances and biases, largely in service to the institutions implementing it.



Trevor Paglen, *Circles*, 2015. Video. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Metro Pictures, New York; Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne.

4. The hardware (iPhone, MacBook Pro, dumb phone) with which the viewer connects to the work.
5. The audience as a community that becomes connected to each other and the work, all of whom are affected by #1–3 to varying degrees based on access, education, race, sex, local laws, language, et cetera.
6. You, as the viewer, and your experience of #1–4 as instigated by the work.

Critically engaging with many or hopefully all of these traits is what makes an NCM. So while stunning net art like *Cloaque* by Carlos Sáez and Claudia Maté uses the unique qualities of the network and platform, it does so uncritically of the network (the Internet) or platform (Tumblr) on which it relies. Furthermore, Ingrid Burrington's work on exposing networked infrastructure, which will be featured in her forthcoming book, *Networks of New York: An Internet Infrastructure Field Guide*, has been instrumental to my thinking about networks and is an inspiration for this piece, but does not directly use the networks as commentary. Both of these works are wonderful and important when talking about the Internet or about net art, but neither are examples of NCM, nor did they try to be.

### Examples of NCM:

Nick Briz's, *Apple Computers*, (2013) and "How to / Why Leave Facebook," (2014) are perfect examples of NCM in that he directly engages with the technology, the users, the hardware, and the company involved in his art practice. Briz unearths the embedded politics of Apple's designs and Facebook's algorithms, and places his community as well as the viewer at an impasse; we want to use these products, but also expect and deserve the freedom to create whatever we wish with those products.

The genius of *Apple Computers* as an NCM work is how Briz places the finite product (an Apple computer) as being not a static tool but rather in constant dialogue with Apple through the network. Therefore, while the machine one purchases may be ideal, you remain subject to a shifting politics of Apple; through the network your computer never becomes your own.

Just as many institutional critique artworks were made within the institutions they sought to critique, NCM artists are reaching beyond the art world to be in dialogue with the actors of the network. This is why Trevor Paglen and Creative Time Reports released his NSA photographs under a Creative Commons copyright license and with *The Intercept*—to help bring the critique of the media beyond the white walls, into the public sphere, and thus in more direct engagement with the institutions the work was critiquing.

Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev's *PRISM: The Beacon Frame* (2013) also uses the network, the hardware, the viewer, the physical site, the people connected, the laws, and the powerful institutions on these networks with us as integral to the piece. Through interactive sculpture, *PRISM: The Beacon Frame* sought to provide a physical manifestation of the growing discussion around surveillance in a post-Snowden world. Using surveillance tactics now known to be commonly deployed by the likes of the U.K. and U.S., *PRISM: The Beacon Frame* places the viewer squarely inside the issue by implicating them in only the tip of this surveillance millions are subjected to without warrant.

Interestingly, this piece became a more effective NCM work due to the unforeseen actions of Transmediale staff removing the work from display and threatening to report the artists to the German Federal Police. The extreme irony that artists were unable to exhibit a work not nearly as invasive as the tools in daily use against millions of citizens in democratic nations only pushed the importance of the debate further.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik is a very exciting group for more directly engaging with institutions of networked power. Recently, the group created *Random Darknet Shopper* (2014), which is an automated bot that, with a weekly bitcoin budget of \$100, randomly purchases goods from darknet marketplace Agora. Shown at Kunst Halle St. Gallen, the bot ordered the random items purchased to be delivered to the gallery, which then were displayed.

The day after the three months of the exhibition, the local police seized the entire exhibition due to the purchase of several ecstasy pills. The following litigation resulted in the return of the bot and all other purchases to the artists with no charges issued, deeming the artwork as a protected form of speech. As debates about anonymity software, the growing role of algorithms in our daily lives, and issues of culpability in networked spheres continue, the *Random Darknet Shopper* is by no means a purely aesthetic or hollow gesture.

As the tools for life's production increasingly come online, they should fall within the purview of the artist as well. As media increasingly connects us together, maybe artists are finally positioned to meaningfully and critically engage in the production of daily life. They should not shirk away from trying, continually relegating themselves to the sterile white cubes of the art world's galleries. While artists are adopting new technologies and making visually stunning works, the lack of criticality when adopting new tools is worrisome—these networked spaces matter and the best artists will use them and treat them with critical and serious care.



Trevor Paglen, *NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK*, 2014. Pigment print. 36 x 48 inches. Edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Metro Pictures, New York; Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne.



Objects Not To Scale:  
Contemporary Mappa Mundi  
Of The Surveillance State

Ingrid Burrington

When NSA documents released by Edward Snowden first went public, one extremely pointed and particular angle of outrage came not from privacy activists but from designers. Horrified more by the seemingly arbitrary typography choices and clashing colors than dragnet surveillance, some designers took it upon themselves to re-design the slides.<sup>1</sup> These criticisms were mostly cheap shots—the PRISM slide deck was never a document designed for public consumption, let alone design critique. I sometimes imagine the people responsible for those slide decks, painstakingly arranging text on top of shapes in Powerpoint and grabbing tech company logos from Google image searches. These weren't slide decks made by or for designers—they were made by people who, while within incredibly powerful government agencies, still worked in an office environment and probably thought of themselves as office workers.

This idea is disappointing because we expect more of the surveillance state than office software aesthetics. We've been trained to expect something flashier, something that conveys the gravity of the situation at hand. We expect giant screens, blue filters, replicas of the *Starship Enterprise* bridge. We don't expect *actual normal people* who are as bad at using Powerpoint as we are. We don't expect the surveillance state to appreciate memes or to use badly Photoshopped stock images or really to do anything as artlessly as mere mortals.

But to totally dismiss the visual vernacular of the surveillance state as merely bad or arbitrary design is to miss its tropes and motifs, which merit unraveling. After all, it's not just PRISM. The aesthetics employed in the Snowden-released Five Eyes slide decks appear in the graphics and network diagrams of other defense agencies, as well as the contractors that serve them. Much of this aesthetic is inherited from the pragmatic designs of computer networking diagrams, which makes the grim ethical and political implications grafted onto these graphics all the more unnerving. But it also at times invokes a kind of broken socialist realism; images that take place in a weird pastiche of the real world. It's this convergence of the fully functional diagram and the fully rhetorical landscape that gives the military slide presentation its fascinating character.

In a way, the diagrams and maps of military slide presentations and PDFs perform the same role that maps have always historically played for nation-states. In searching for a parallel, I found myself spending a lot of time looking at medieval maps. The pre-Renaissance *mappa mundi* are at times misunderstood as an indication that historians, monks, and philosophers of the time didn't grasp the true shape of the world. But the way-finding map (at that time known as a *portolan* map, developed mainly for maritime navigation) and the explicitly political or philosophical map had not yet merged to become the political cartography we know today. And while these mapmakers probably didn't have precise spatial data, literal way-finding *wasn't the point*. What's perceived as naïveté or a lack of skill in medieval *mappa mundi* is actually a matter of priorities. As described by cartography historian David Woodward, the medieval form of *mappa mundi* "not only represents static geography but is also an aggregation of historical information the mapmaker considered important with regard to his audience, with no attempt being made to separate or identify the two types of information."<sup>2</sup>

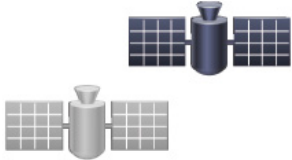
Maps are and always have been more instantiations than reflections of the world, and for the most part what's determined to be the canonical vision of the world-as-it-is comes down to which mapmaker holds the most power. In a time where we are constantly reminded that the existential threats facing the Western world are diffuse, networked, and operating more in an ideological than a geographic landscape, it makes sense that the state's visuals of how to combat those threats similarly deem borders, topography, and at times even three-dimensional space irrelevant. The graphics and diagrams associated with military surveillance infrastructure are a kind of contemporary *mappa mundi*—more a projection of power against and onto the physical landscape than a representation of that landscape's particular qualities.

Within the trove of Snowden documents, few images refer back to physical geography. Many of the documents visualize various spying programs through network diagrams and flow charts. The iconography of the diagrams is, for the most part, typical of a technical flow chart—cylindrical pancake-stacked databases, desktop computers, arrows and diamonds. Searching for the history of these icons online doesn't go very far. Databases are shaped like cylinders because that was what they looked like a long time ago, and nobody has bothered to change it; to question the network topology icon is akin to questioning the design of the alphabet. The flow chart as used in computing goes as far back as 1949, but apparently wasn't formally codified until around the 1960s (as seen in this IBM docu-

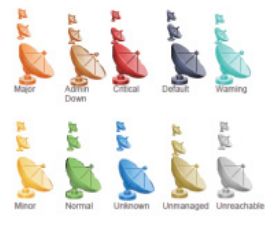
Server Farms



Satellite



Satellite Dish



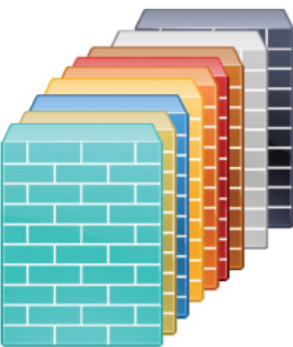
Wireless Router



Laptop



Firewall



CISCO Systems icon library. Courtesy of the Internet.

ment on creating flow charts from 1969<sup>3</sup>). The NSA diagrams also at times reference or use the Cisco network typology icons,<sup>4</sup> a collection of images ubiquitous in part because they're free. There is something vaguely comforting about the fact that in a period where networked technology seems to mostly fuel an anxiety to move fast and break things, the language for mapping out the network remains static.

These diagrams tend to exist in a floating negative space, with few corporeal dimensions. Icons depicting human beings tend to portray human actors as bad actors (one slide from a Special Collections Service presentation illustrates "hackers," "terrorists," and "criminal groups" simply by tinting stock images of humans a sinister shade of red). The images are overwhelming but impersonal—while they demonstrate the ease with which defense agencies can collect personal data, the person tied to that data is a cipher subsumed within its framework. It is hard to imagine oneself as a data point in that framework.

At times there are geographic maps in the Snowden documents, although they are more often decorative than informative (such as the borrowed submarine cable map in the PRISM slides that's mostly obscured by reminders that given the choice between using data from the Upstream collection program gathering data from those submarine cables and PRISM's collection program gathering data directly from the servers of sites like Facebook and Skype, *you should use both!*). More often, the landscapes and maps gesture toward the real world, but exist in weird composite landscapes. In documents (more often from the Army or Navy than the Snowden archive) explicating or promoting other total information awareness frameworks, a recurring *mappa mundi* form is a snow globe-like projection of a fully networked battlespace. Actors on the ground, in the sky, and beyond the atmosphere connect across this contained landscape. Scale is not really a factor in these landscapes: reaper drones, mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles (MRAPs), and satellites are all roughly of the same size, equivalent nodes in a single network operating simultaneously and tirelessly to create a perfect ecosystem of constantly flowing information. (The fact that these maps portray a flat world presumably needs no further analysis.)

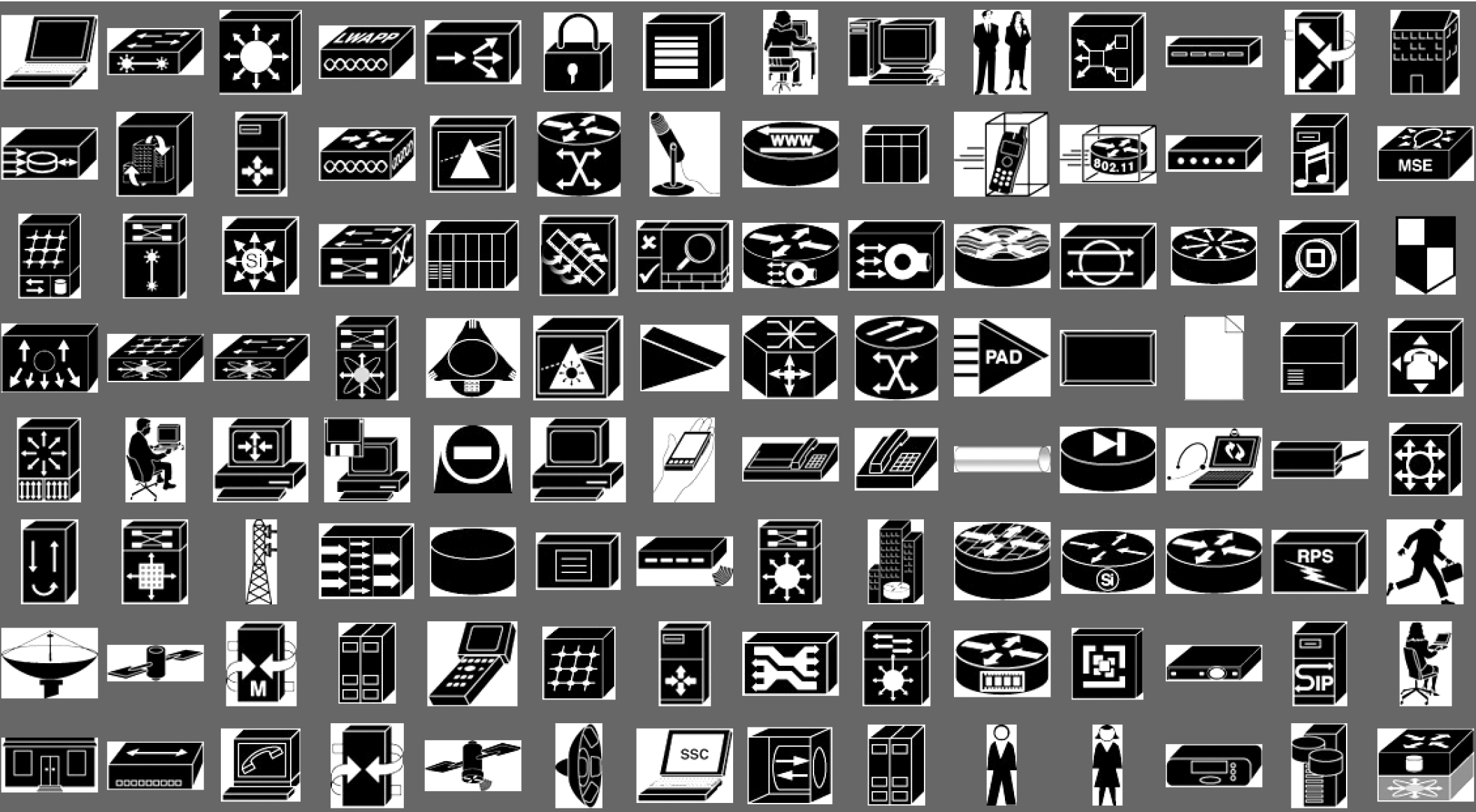
The irony of using these diagrams and illustrations to explain the reach and capacity of mass surveillance networks is that the entire reason these systems exist is to be able to better visualize and grasp vast quantities of information across vast geographic expanses. Despite allegedly having the capacity to conjure up millions of satellite images and surveillance drone feeds and locations of networked devices in simultaneous real-time, we see clumsy abstractions of that capacity.

There are probably valid technical and practical reasons for choosing diagrams over demonstrations, but it hints at an awkward truth about the fallibility of global surveillance systems. The real world in real-time is always imperfect and uncertain, and operating at the scale of spy agencies means taking in those imperfections and uncertainties at an overwhelming scale and transforming them into actionable facts—whether the facts are there or not (a feat perhaps most famously performed by Colin Powell in his 2003 testimony to the United Nations arguing for an invasion of Iraq, using satellite imagery to prove the existence of imaginary nuclear weapons). It is far easier to believe that the mission is critical, the ethics are sound, and the system *works* when looking at a schematic of it working than when faced with the fallibility and fragility of these systems, not to mention the actual humans subjected to their harms. The *mappa mundi* of surveillance state slide decks illustrate a cosmology as much as they illustrate technical systems. Within that cosmology, real countries become composite any-places, real people become threat icons, and hard ethical decisions become office work.

For the outside viewer, this cosmology remains incomplete—journalists working with the Snowden documents are by necessity selective in what they do and don't publish. The slides that get published are, one assumes, the visuals they hope best distill a single point, but they also obscure the full context of these images and the weird theatrics of the slide deck, fragmenting their narratives by releasing excerpts asynchronously and out of order. Full slides found in obscure directories on .mil websites have, presumably, been fastidiously reviewed to ensure that nothing the public sees falls out of bounds, but are similarly devoid of context.

Faced with this absence of context and of intent, I think back to that NSA employee designing the PRISM slide deck and wonder (admittedly, more facetiously than not) whether bad design could be itself a kind of subterfuge, a passive-aggressive gesture of resistance intended only for internal critique. While it's probably an unlikely narrative, it remains at least plausible. The clumsiness and poor design of these graphics makes us uneasy for the same reason that it might allow for a weird kind of hope: it shows that the people behind these systems are as imperfect, fallible, and human as systems themselves, which means perhaps they remain capable of dissent and will perhaps be inspired by their former colleague Snowden and take action.

1) <http://gizmodo.com/the-best-and-worst-redesigns-of-prisms-atrocious-powerp-512669884>  
2) Woodward, David. "Medieval Mappamundi" in The History of Cartography Vol. 1, eds. J.B. Harley and David Woodward. Online at [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/HOC/HOC\\_V1/HOC\\_VOLUME1\\_chapter18.pdf](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/HOC/HOC_V1/HOC_VOLUME1_chapter18.pdf)  
3) <http://www.eah-jena.de/~kleine/history/software/IBM-FlowchartingTechniques-GC20-8152-1.pdf>  
4) <http://www.cisco.com/web/about/ac50/ac47/2.html>



CISCO Systems icon library. Courtesy of the Internet.



# Pippi, Joni, And Virginia: Too Busy Being Free

Jessica Hoffmann

## White Ladies of the Canyon

In February, Joni Mitchell told *New York Magazine* that she has an affinity for black men. In fact, she went on, she really understands what it's like to be a black man because she wore blackface a few times in the '70s, including on one of her record covers. It was a revelation of gross racism I'd have rather not heard.

Joni Mitchell means a lot to me. I first heard *Ladies of the Canyon* on a dubbed cassette in my friend Lucia's bedroom in high school in the mid-'90s. Sunlight was streaming into her room at a sharp diagonal, and Joni Mitchell's voice was streaming in multidirectional curves, like ribbons that were at once totally substantial and floating on air. I wanted to crawl into the mood of that music and stay a while.

I've needed to surround myself in Joni Mitchell moods many times over the years since. Sometimes it's the bright-scrubbed joy of "Chelsea Morning" when I'm making breakfast or putting flowers on my table early on a Sunday, and lots of times it's when I'm emotionally overwhelmed. Afraid or grasping or hurt in a way that I'm starting to tighten, or shrink, I'll put on *Blue* or *Court and Spark* or *Clouds* and sing with her for an hour and something will shift. Instead of tight or small, I'll start to feel open, fluid. Brave instead of afraid. In awe of uncertainty like I'm in love with it. (How beautiful, suddenly and again, that *we really don't know life at all*.) Mostly, I'll feel no longer insecure about being but thoroughly grateful to be a woman with a lot of feelings. And some nights in that particular mood it has seemed to me that anyone who doesn't appreciate Joni Mitchell's music is a misogynist, anti-emotion and especially anti the ways women express it.

Joni Mitchell has never been someone I look to for tight feminist theory — my love of her work has always been more emotional than political — so I wouldn't be surprised to hear her say some weird essentialist stuff about men and women, and wouldn't expect her to give *New York* a considered statement about racial justice or anti-capitalism. But damn, blackface?

## Grrrl Punk Colonizer: Never Violence?

I'm studying German, and my current reading level in that language is children's books. So, among other things, I decided to revisit *Pippi Longstocking* — a childhood favorite I've already revisited once, as a riot-grrrl-ish teenager who loved not only Pippi's mismatched thigh-highs but all of her unapologetic weirdness, embrace of her own nonconventional beauty, and total disregard for the established orders of her world. I've loved the playfulness of her subversion.

But a few pages into my recent re-reading, I encountered Pippi's fantasy that her lost-at-sea pirate father had shipwrecked on a South Seas island and, whoa, was now ruling over the indigenous population. This is presented as a light, and even inevitable, childish fantasy of a missing papa's well-being.

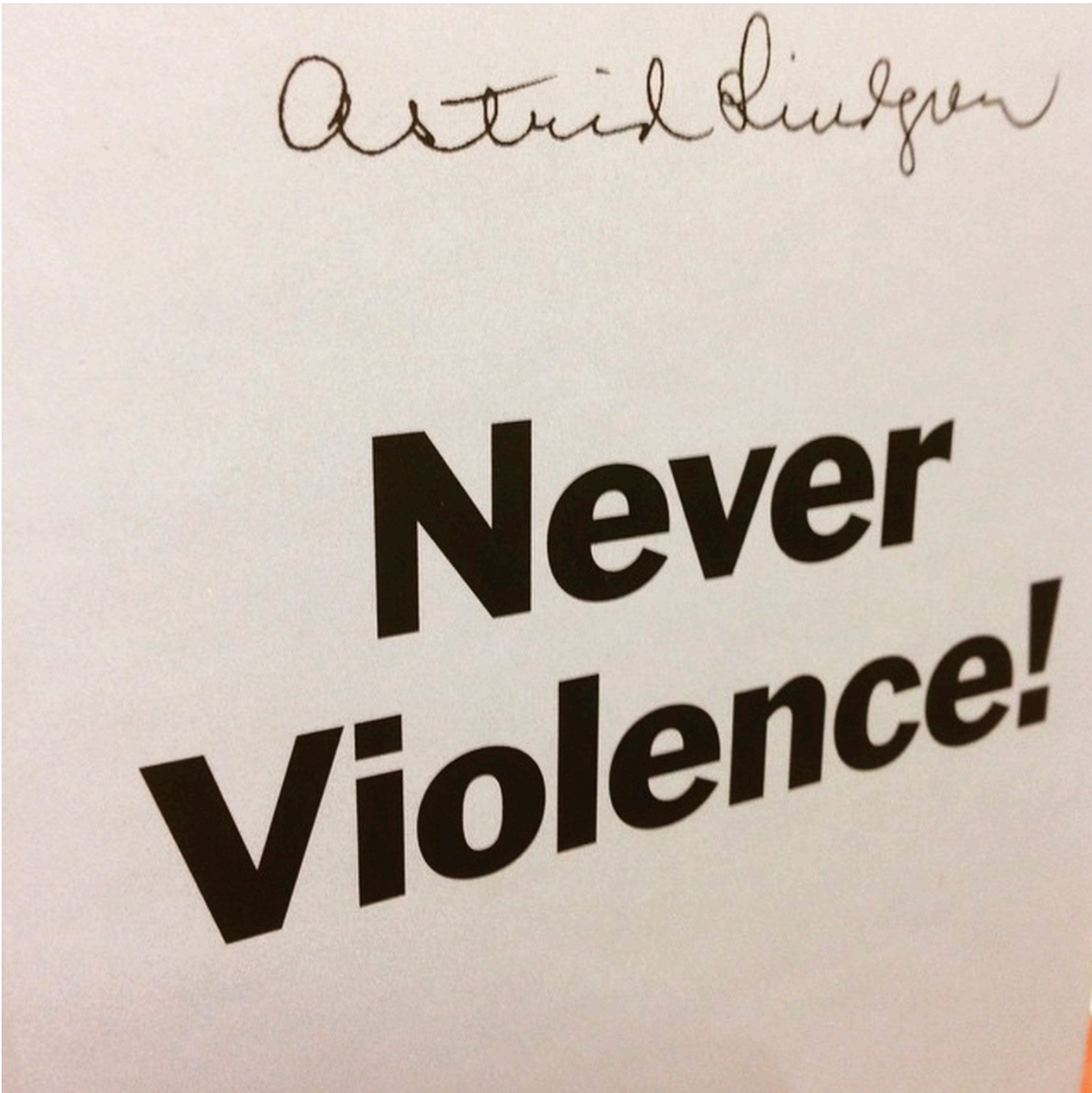
The day after I read this, *The New York Review of Books* posted an image on their Instagram feed in which the words "Never Violence!" are signed by Pippi's creator, Astrid Lindgren. I commented with the question that had been in my mind since the night before: does the "subplot of [Pippi's] papa as a South Seas king ruling over indigenous people on an island he is washed up on . . . ever get anti-colonial?" @nyrbooks responded by posting a link to a blog entry in which Astrid Lindgren's daughter insists that the Pippi books reflect the colonial racist stereotypes of their time but are meant as critiques, rather than endorsements, of them. I don't know.

I do know that I, a white American, read the Pippi books as a child and as a teenager and managed to not really notice the "South Seas king" bit. It seems hard to imagine that a Pacific Islander child reader would have had the same experience.

## The Limits of Woolf's Oceans

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is my favorite book. Short but vast, it reveals the inner lives of an array of characters from childhood into old age. Their lives unfold parallel to the sun's rise and set and the tide's ebb and flow in one day on one sliver of beach, and are as staggeringly ordinary and amazing as those cycles. Woolf's sentences are long and winding and yet perfectly constructed, representing the layered, refracted, shifting interiors of her characters' minds. She articulates human perception and feeling intimately, individually, *and* as these individual streams intersect and bleed into one another, the language flows and interweaves like lives do. While radically expanding the boundaries of the novel with stream of consciousness, shifting points of view, and attention to language and perception over plot, in this book Woolf also radically expanded our capacity to perceive and describe human consciousness.

Woolf's mind was not small. She was one of the key shapers of modernism in English literature. Part of her innovation was novels told from multiple points of view — and not only multiple, but quite different: she was capable of imagining and writing the depths of characters of different genders, ages, and personality types. She was bisexual, and believed that some degree of duality around sexuality was necessary for a writer to imagine, or inhabit, characters of different genders.



Never Violence! via @nyrbooks on Instagram. Courtesy of the Internet.

And yet her perspective was grossly limited in relation to race and class. Woolf was a wealthy white British woman in a time shaped by colonialism. While she was horrified by the injustices of war and patriarchy, and pushed against false borders of gender and sexuality, she understood "independence" largely in terms of control of wealth, and her novels are marred by occasional descriptions of "gipsies" and "natives" that uncritically reiterate racist colonial stereotypes.

As someone who has struggled with intense moods and a sense of alienation (like Woolf did), who thinks and feels in words, who experiences life mostly at the level of the subtle internal perception — quiet on the surface but churning underneath — I find in Woolf's work a resonance, a way of reckoning with reality that seems more true and more relatable than much of what is found in "the canon."

Woolf's mind was capacious and complicated, critical and creative in a million directions. She pushed against the canon, irrevocably illuminating in *A Room of One's Own* not only that and how women had been shut out of it, but also the huge unknown corridors of human experience women writers might have lit. Woolf cracked open space for women and experimentalists that changed literature and our understandings of life itself.

And yet in novels that were on most levels extremely carefully considered, she simplistically, thoughtlessly, and harmfully repeated stupid racist stereotypes.

## So What?

It's the basic concept of intersectionality, a term coined by black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989: all systems of oppression are interconnected, and some people's lived experiences involve multiple and inextricable identity positions in relation to those systems. A black lesbian cannot separate her blackness from her womanhood, or her lesbianness from her blackness, and so forth. And just because someone experiences one form of oppression does not mean she is not oppressing other people in other ways. The idea that white women or white gay men are non-oppressive, or "get it," because one aspect of their identity (gender, sexual orientation) is subject to systematic oppression or marginalization is, well . . . there's a whole (continuing) history of white feminist racism, and a present of white-gay-male colonialism, giving evidence to the lie of all that.

It's not surprising that individual white people's minds — no matter how broad, beautiful, or creative some aspects of those minds — have internalized racism. The whole social context feeds it to us, surrounds us in it, helps us not question it. That individual artists I happen to love are vulnerable to that is not surprising in the least. And though a revelation like Joni Mitchell's racism is always disappointing and makes my love of the art she makes a lot more complicated, it doesn't stop me from loving it altogether.

Over the last several decades, a yarn has been spun by a few loud, big-gun white-dude artists (Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, and co.) that feminism and post-colonial critique is "political correctness" that aims to deny artists their right to honestly represent "reality." Contrary to all their wounded-misogynist whining, critique is not censorship. But it *can* be a force of expansion. Yearnings for justice and freedom are not what limits art. What is limiting is violent power relations. What narrows an artist's creative possibilities a lot more than the specter of "PC" is the warping logic and narratives that uphold social hierarchies.

Privileged people internalize these logics and narratives, and our lived experiences rarely provoke us to question them. And so we rarely do question them because to do so is to be morally annihilated until you crawl through that muck and learn some new ways to see and to live. The more privileged the gaze, the more fitted to norms, the less expansive the view. Let's not censor but simply undo the colonial cowboy story. It's not the conqueror who gets to the plateau and really takes in the whole landscape. He's too focused on his own rapacious agenda, and too new to the place to catch most of what's going on. It's the people who know the land and each other and also are having to keep an eye on the movements of this threatening character that can really see the landscape, from wherever they're looking, even or perhaps especially if their vantage is on the periphery.

It feels not that interesting or useful to ask whether we should or shouldn't still like or enjoy or otherwise appreciate work by artists whose worldviews are polluted by the violent social systems that shape our world. I don't care if you like *Annie Hall*, and I don't think it's very helpful to wring our hands about what it means to like *Annie Hall* even while believing Woody Allen is a child abuser and gaslighter. Though I do think our respective experiences with different forms of violence affect how easily we are able to overlook signs and representations of them in order to appreciate other aspects of a work of art, and conversely how hard it is to see anything else in a piece of art that reflects the worldview that has done our own person harm.

Whether one likes a thing is not that interesting or important. It matters a lot more to think about how art is informed by and perpetuates a worldview that does violence.

And if we are going to get anxious about what antiracist or feminist or other justice-minded critique might do to art, worrying that this kind of critique might censor or otherwise limit artistic imagination or the creative process, I'd ask: How are artists' and viewers'/listeners'/readers' imaginations and creative potential limited by internalization of oppressive narratives and norms? Where is the real constriction and distortion coming from? How does this affect the work? How does it affect the possibility of art to alter or expand our perceptions and understandings of basic realities of human existence? What if artists' imaginations were unhindered by the massive distortions of white supremacy and colonialism? And what would looking at art look like if all our gazes were free?



A still of Tilda Swinton in the film *Orlando*, directed by Sally Potter (1992). Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics. Courtesy of the Internet.



# That Domino Effect: The Hidden Story In The U.S. Immigration Debate

(Part Three)

## Anthony Choice-Diaz

Following World War II, the Red Menace mentality held a death grip over U.S. foreign policy. In the 1950s it fomented U.S.-backed clandestine coups, by the '60s covert and not-so-covert interventionism, and by the '80s it had become full-blown state policy. This posture was predicated upon something called the domino theory. The domino theory argued that if one nation or people came under the influence of communism that the surrounding countries or people would succumb as in a toppling domino effect—that the cancer of socialism, that “enemy of democracy and freedom” would spread. Today this alarmist tendency has transcended rhetoric to become a logic in and of itself. It has gone beyond the limits of the Cold War and been applied to undocumented immigrants, Muslims targeted as part of the War on Terror, the spread of crime and the rise in criminality, gangs, and drug use. But here's the kicker: the domino theory isn't wrong and it's the global im/migration crisis that proves it.

If it isn't Africans flooding the streets of Italy, Spain, and France, it's Eastern Europeans and former Soviets flooding into Germany and the U.K. In Asia and the Persian Gulf, it's mass populations flooding one nation or another stemming from Bangladesh, China, Pakistan, or India. In the Americas, Haitians move into the Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Tobago, and the Bahamas; Guyanese move into Brazil and Venezuela; Central Americans enter Mexico and the U.S. In every continent of the world, there is a looming fear of the “foreign horde” overburdening and taxing the system to the breaking point. In most of these cases, these are seen as narrow problems to be handled by the individuated state. They don't see these population movements as bound to a global phenomenon intimately tied to neoliberal economics, environmental crises, imperialist wars, and the related capital/resource exploitation. In many cases these diasporas are deeply rooted in class and racialized populations encounter an antipathy of the migrant that has descended into outright and brutal xenophobic violence. This interethnic and intra-national predation is used as a mechanism to further strengthen the narrative of these dangerous, uncivilized hordes—a way of reminiscing—that all too easily throws itself back to ancient Roman citizens pleading about the barbarians at the gates!

In 2000, North African protestors living in the Spanish region of Almeria clashed with police who had been systematically harassing and brutalizing them, while politicians and collaborators called for the largely Moroccan masses in dissent “to behave like civilized people, containing your rage and ire.” In 2002, as Brazil's economic future began to turn, the porous border between Guyana and Brazil inverted from the “illegal immigration” of Brazilians going into Guyana in the '90s to Guyanese moving into Brazil and Venezuela, a trend that continues today, resulting in the socially conscious leftist governments of Venezuela and Brazil militarizing their own borders as a preventative measure to the development of yet another oppressed underclass with no options or mobility. In 2005, residents of the North African ghettos in Paris and Marseille, to name but two cities, rioted in the streets in response to decades of state-sanctioned marginalization and oppression. Similar riots emerged the same year in Australia, in waves of racialized anti-immigrant violence targeting largely identifiably Muslim and Arab populations in Cronulla; counter-violence ensued resulting in mass arrests and brutality. In 2010, Africans in Rosarno, Italy rose up in response to ongoing harassment and violence at the hands of the Italian police, and a racist Calabrese infrastructure that wants cheap labor but has kept them

living in tent cities and dormitories. In 2011, in reaction to rioting and mass protests in response to the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis and austerity measures, some Greeks began shifting their rioting and physical violence onto Pakistani and Afghani immigrants, sparking counter-riots against a state that failed to act, or many times seemed to condone such violence. In 2012, Ethiopians in Hatikva, Israel fell under attack in successive waves of race rioting and violence by Israelis of European or Ashkenazi origin.

In 2013, in a spat of staggering self-denial and internalized racism in line with their tradition of *Antihaitianismo*, the high court of the Dominican Republic issued an order that began a project that continues today of mass deportation of Haitians, with many Dominicans justifying their support of the states policy through their age old-slogan “I'm not Black, I'm Dominican.” Many of those deported, however, were Dominicans of Haitian origin—in other words they were monolingual Spanish speakers who didn't understand Creole or French, making them culturally disabled newcomers upon deportation to a country they'd never known.

Manmade and natural disasters have made Haitians into refugees across the hemisphere, arriving at each nation's doorstep in such numbers that specialized policies and community hostility have now become the new nativist norm. Similar to the situation faced by Palestinians in the Middle East, Haitians have become the underemployed, bottom rung underclass worker that is viewed as a burden on the societies that they had no decision of joining. Last year, in Trinidad and Tobago, popular anti-immigrant violence gave way to a new policy in which the state openly blamed immigrants for all the violent crime and gang activity on the islands, and began a registration and deportation process targeting Haitian and Jamaican immigrants. A similar policy was enacted in the Bahamas that targeted the same two groups with the addition of Cuban immigrants added to the deportation lists, concluding in the same result as the Dominican Republic—the deportation and incarceration of legal residents and citizens of external origin. In February of this year, 10,000 people took to the streets of Port-au-Prince in protest against the ongoing mistreatment of their countrymen still in the Dominican Republic. This was a direct response to the lynching of Haitian Henry Claude Jean, whose body was found hanging in the town square of the Dominican Republic's second largest city, Santiago de los Caballeros, only to then have the investigators very quickly turn around and claim that “he was killed by other Haitians.” This protest, like so many others, was symptomatic of the growing discontent in Haiti and of similar protests worldwide in which pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant forces clashed over a situation in which both sides are the victims of economic policies that have impoverished everyone.

Though these waves of violence have simultaneously been referred to as hate crimes, race riots, and anti-immigrant violence/counter-violence, uprisings, etc., the conflation, confusion, and failure of terms to correctly describe what is going on is in direct relationship with the inability of an evermore interlocking globalized world to contend with the very domino effects of its own creation. The growth of incendiary and xenophobic anti-immigrant tendencies have reached such a fever pitch and become so ubiquitous that it has even birthed a resurgent fascism and hard rightward shifts in places like Germany, France, Greece, and even Northern and Eastern Europe—places that were traditionally antifascist leftist strongholds, which have become enclaves of contemporary fascism. Global anti-immigrant hysteria and economic necessity has fostered the creation of permanently mobile migrant populations (or “problems”) trapped in an intercontinental cycle of immigration musical chairs.

Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras have descended into states of instability of such gross proportions that the last close approximation is each country's respective periods of civil war. Honduras, the original Banana Republic, has converted into a nation of easily exploitable labor and natural resources and has played a full-fledged role in proxy wars as a client-state to the U.S., and, what in the '80s was then called the “USS Honduras,” has become a nation-state-sized drug mule made out of terra firma, beholden to U.S. interests while utterly indifferent to the needs of the Honduran domestic pop-

ulation. This trickle up scenario has created a flood of economic and social refugees. While numerous “south of the border” countries have begun the anti-black policy of deporting Haitians back into a country whose infrastructure was reduced to ruin, the “Central American problem” emerges at the U.S. border in the form of passing the buck.

In May of 2014, the reality of catch-and-release detention centers in the southwest U.S. came into vivid detail on television as hundreds of “illegal immigrants” were dropped off at a Greyhound bus station in Phoenix, Arizona after being processed and released from overwhelmed detention centers in Texas. The state of Texas and various regional administrations of ICE and Homeland Security tagged and released the recently detained with a court order in hand mandating they report to Immigration and Naturalization in 15 days. Abandoned in cities they had no connection to or contacts in, families consisting primarily of single mothers and small children found themselves bused to Reno, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Tucson, Los Angeles, and San Diego and simply expelled into the streets. The numbers were so large that what had previously been an undercover practice of deportation became public scandal—but scandal would imply it was or is dealt with, when it hasn't been at all. The practice still continues. Previously, various detention centers would offload their human excess on another state, county, or facility, making it “their problem,” with anonymity and complete impunity. Christian charities and organizations provided for the immediate needs of people abandoned to a system that sees them as a statistical nuisance. Within hours waves of donated money, translation, transportation, communications, and legal services, food, clothing, temporary shelter, toiletries, and children's care products found their way into the hands of church volunteers, many of whom worked without sleep for nearly a week just trying to get hold over the crisis.

Suddenly the faces of half-starved, parentless children, young women, and single mothers, all of whom were the victims of some kind of sexual or physical violence en route to the U.S., began to appear in the news cycle. Children sleeping like caged animals, piled one upon the other in detention centers, filthy and huddled together under space blankets. The scary part is that it's unclear what's better: to be temporarily housed in a detention and processing center modeled after a penitentiary that at least has regular meals and some semblance of stability; or to sleep on cots laid out in community centers and churches, dropped in an utterly alien city that is radically different from the intended destination of immigration. They left their homes for the possibility of something safer only to be passed off as human refuse in a never-ending cycle.

But the U.S. wasn't alone. The global immigration system had become a human warehousing operation camouflaged by a distracting shell game. Places like Gibraltar passed on surplus migrants to Portugal, Spain, Italy, and France. Similarly, construction laborers, predominantly from places like Bangladesh, Yemen, and Somalia, would be deported just before it was time to pay them for the work they had provided, or with their special work dispensations and visas expired, then cast into the streets of the Middle East, totally ignored as if they hadn't been contracted by companies in Egypt or Gulf states to rebuild cityscapes.

This is the domino effect. The *real* crisis is manmade and it is about humans. These are the ones that have been abandoned by the effects of capitalism. They are the orphans of a history that ignores them. They are the victims of a system that denies them but upon whose backs it has been made. One is left to wonder the question never asked: why immigrate in the first place?

“Correction: Part two of “The Hidden Story in the U.S. Immigration Debate” was left without subtitle in issue 19 of SFAQ. The subtitle of part two is: “Journeys from and to a Destination Nation.”



Riot in France, 2005. Courtesy of the Internet.



Immigration from Libya to Italy. Courtesy of the Internet.



Children in the Malta Detention Center. Courtesy of the Internet.



Cronulla Riot, Australia, 2005. Courtesy of the Internet.



# Art As Asset: Financialization And The Art Market

John Zarobell

In February, the artist Sarah Meyohas invented her own currency called “BitchCoin,” which she presented in collaboration with Where Gallery in Brooklyn, as part of their current exhibition *Where 6: Prediction*. The currency is used to trade the artistic production of Meyohas herself, so it is something of a closed circuit. The idea is that each BitchCoin, currently worth \$100, would purchase a 25 square-inch segment of one of the artist’s current or future prints. It costs 25 BitchCoins to purchase a print. The artist is backing BitchCoins with photographic prints sealed in a vault, harkening back to the gold standard established in the wake of World War II. The parallel between contemporary photographs and gold bricks in a Federal Reserve vault is provocative, and current, now that art is perceived by many as an asset class. In fact, Meyohas means to offer BitchCoin on a currency-trading site when her exhibition concludes. The artist explains: “I would like to see an art market that allows collectors to invest in an artist as a value producer, rather than investing in a single piece. Artists and collectors are linked in a more symbiotic way.”<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to read this as a publicity stunt, but there is a deeper problem that Meyohas alludes to regarding the relationship of artists to the contemporary market. BitchCoin is symptomatic of current transformations in contemporary finance that have an impact on the art market despite its miniscule size in relation to global asset trading. If Meyohas can invent an art-backed currency in order to link artists and collectors “in a more symbiotic way,” the terms of this linkage are derived from novel trading instruments. Why would an aspiring artist want to facilitate speculation on the value of her future production? On her website, she explains: “An artist’s work might fluctuate wildly on the market, changing hands between collectors several times without any permission of, or compensation to, the artist. BitchCoin gives Sarah Meyohas a stake in the supply, demand, and price of her own work.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the artist created BitchCoin in order to gain access to—and perhaps to create—speculation on her own work. This may seem crass at first glance but, upon further reflection, it is a transformative gesture that reclaims the financial mechanisms of the art market to the artist herself. Previous artists may have wanted to distance themselves from market forces but Meyohas justly seeks to have a stake in the market for her own art.

Everyone in the art world knows that it is a rare phenomenon to be able to live by virtue of one’s artistic production and those artists who succeed, do so because they are fiercely promoted by art world agents, be they dealers, collectors, or curators. In many cases, the artist is the primary force for their own self-promotion, but artists traditionally allow representatives to manage these affairs so that they can focus on their work. Or at least they used to. The problem with this model is not that marketing has become a necessary part of artistic life—it always has been and always will be—but the context of art collecting and artistic production have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Broad changes have occurred in the world of finance and the sale and purchase of assets of all kinds, including works of art. This trend has been called “securitization” or “financialization,” and while the implications of the terms are slightly distinct, they both address a wholesale shift in the nature of exchange.

According to John Lanchester, “Securitization is the process of turning something—and, in the world of finance, this could be pretty much anything—into a security, a financial instrument that can be traded as an asset.”<sup>3</sup> His two examples are the “Bowie Bond” of

1997 and the Greek government’s effort to sell revenue from future ticket sales to the Acropolis in 2010. The Bowie Bond refers to David Bowie’s successful sale of ten years of future revenues due to him for the sum of \$55 million. What both of these examples lay bare is that any potential future value can be turned into a security and sold to investors. As Bowie and Meyohas demonstrate in different ways, artistic production and the potential value generated thereby can be transformed into an asset that can be cashed out now.

Of course, a Bowie Bond or a BitchCoin can be exchanged any number of times as a security whose value fluctuates and is determined by the market more than whatever value one would have initially attached to the good or service it represents. Even though a work of art represents a one-of-a-kind commodity that cannot be easily exchanged like a stock or bond, by securitizing its potential future value, one is able to detach the particularity of the work from the risk or benefit it potentially carries and to exchange that potential in a market of other potential profits and losses. In this process, which amounts to trading derivatives, the work of art and the labor of the artist becomes commoditized in a way that even Marx could never have predicted.

This process is what Olav Velthuis and Erica Coslor have described as financialization, in which the art market becomes enmeshed in a series of financial instruments that are increasingly affected by the motives of actors operating in a variety of trading operations.<sup>4</sup> In their article on the financialization of art, they conclude that the process is far from complete due to fundamental limitations in the art market such as a lack of liquidity among assets (artworks), the absence of continuous trading, and the lack of stable shared standards of value that would anchor the market. Despite these shortcomings, the authors conclude: “Failures can be seen as a natural step in the process of experimenting to find the correct instruments to simplify, standardize, and homogenize art, stripping each individual work of its distinctiveness and grouping categories of art together in order to make them comparable and commensurable.”<sup>5</sup>

Has art been financialized? Not quite yet, but soon. Velthuis and Coslor cite economists Rachel Campbell and Christian Wiehenkamp who put forward a proposal in 2010 for how to use credit default swaps—financial instruments that allow banks to sell potential profits to investors—to securitize art risk, but it is unclear whether such instruments are now in use or whether any art index can reliably serve as a guide to investing in art. However, there are investment schemes currently active in which funds are pooled to invest in the upper reaches of the art auction market and dealers could not participate in the resale market unless they could raise funds by leveraging their own art assets. In other words, art has not yet reached the point that it can be traded like stocks and any derivative trading on the art market may well be in a nascent phase. While artworks, particularly those in the postwar and contemporary markets, have increased in value considerably since the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the way these works are valued remains a mystery to most on-lookers. The increasing values attract the attention of speculators and economists, but art funds—the most common art investment schemes—have very rarely succeeded at capitalizing on the record prices so often reported on the art auction market.

Following this line of thought, BitchCoin and the Bowie Bond are the exceptions proving that the art market remains a rarefied domain, and further that artistic labor cannot be commoditized. While this logic is compelling, there are reasons to doubt it. The most obvious one is that if the art market is a subset of the overall service economy, the exchange of artworks means engaging in contemporary finance, with all of the norms that apply to that domain. The art market does not exist in a vacuum and therefore derivatives trading will be part of any effort to finance the purchase of a work of art, as well as to insure it. Further, the fact that there is an uneven distribution of information about the art market means that a handful of agents are in a strong position of profiteering. The central players in the art



BitchCoin, a digital currency developed by Sarah Meyohas. Courtesy of the artist.

market are themselves speculators or facilitators, which is why vice presidents of Christie’s and Sotheby’s are so often dropping out and going into business for themselves. Their asymmetrical advantage in the market does not prevent speculation as some economists claim, but encourages and facilitates it. Finally, most analyses of the art market investigate the consumer side—particularly the auction market—but the question of the relation of artistic production to finance has been underexplored.

Artistic production as a whole has shifted as a result of the market for contemporary art and it is clear that only certain forms of artistic labor produce value because only a handful of artworks are attractive to investors, compared to the number of works produced. This means that artists, even art students, begin their own derivative trading on the value of their own labor. By taking on loans to receive an education, art students have already entered the world of financialization because those loans are sold by banks as assets. If students then begin to think of how they may manipulate the market in order to succeed as an artist financially, they are themselves speculators attempting to determine which investment of their time will likely have the greatest value for them in the long run. They are trading on risk. If artists begin to imagine that pursuing a particular path of artistic production, like making paintings, yields greater returns than another, they are employing asymmetrical information to capitalize on the market’s inefficiencies. If an artist is lucky enough to succeed at making a living solely through artistic production, she had better have an eye on managing the value of her work should it go through the roof and crash like a speculative bubble.

Capitalism has changed and both the consumers and the producers of the art market must change with it. The story of securitization of art or the financialization of art markets is not exclusive to banks, investors, and collectors, but concerns artists as well. Though artists may not employ algorithms to determine coefficients, they are no less calculating when it comes to economic risk.

Visual artists have long served the needs of the wealthy and the powerful, but, in the art world, one believes that the contribution an artist makes to society is beyond valuation. This conception has been validated in a variety of forms, from the creation of the Louvre to the implementation of the WPA. When this ineffable contribution acquires a real valuation—when artistic work can be seen as more or less profitable—it is not simply that our views have become crassly materialistic, but that our metrics have changed and it is by value, not time, that we measure our progress whether as artists or as thinkers. If the simple gesture of creating an equivalence between a photograph and 25 BitchCoins strikes us as outlandish, it is because we have not fully accepted the implications of art as an asset under current economic conditions. Making a living from art is not like peddling credit default swaps, but, on some level, the same rules apply.



Sarah Meyohas, *Speculation (prints stored inside a safety deposit box)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Where Gallery, Brooklyn.

## On Point 2.06 Remembering Richard Berger

Mark Van Proyen

By the time any of you are reading this, I will have already given my eulogy for Richard Berger, and only time will tell if it accorded with what I am writing here. Richard passed away on March 3 of this year, after a long battle with several different types of cancer. He was 70 years too young at that time, although not so young as Susan O’Malley or Rex Ray, two other lights of the Bay Area art scene who died at much younger ages, a week and a month prior, respectively. Now was he as old as legendary gallerist Paule Anglim, who passed away at the age of ageless on April 2. There are many others who knew Susan, Rex, and Paule far better than I, so it will be they who will speak the right memorializing words at the right time about those passings. There are far fewer people in the northern California art world who knew Richard better than I, although several people not of that community (including his brother Paul and sister Kathryn) knew him much better. Suffice to say here that we have lost too many too quickly, and these losses are deeply and widely felt.

I have known Richard for four full decades, having met him for the first time in the spring of 1975. At that time, I was a first-semester transfer student at SFAI, and when the spring weather permitted, I would have my lunch outside of the school’s café, where many of us would sit in close proximity to where Richard would trade barbs with another longtime faculty member named Sam Tchakalian (who died in 2004). Their lunchtime repartee was executed in high-speed hilarity with no holds barred, and the range of subjects that they covered was vast and frequently more than a little bit ribald. In some ways, the contrast between them was extreme: Sam was old school old school, a barking, snarling, and fowl-mouthed relic of the time when abstract expressionism ruled the world. Even though Sam was of small stature, nothing interfered with the largeness and loudness of his personality, or its impact on students. In contrast, Richard was loquaciously prolix, meaning among other things that he was a gifted storyteller who knew how to spice his elaborations with layers

of wicked irony that were every bit the equal of anything penned by Ambrose Bierce. Richard also had a rare gift couching his remarks in perfectly chosen words that were always made even better by his ability to juxtapose those words in perfectly uncanny arrangements. With minimal verbal effort, he could capture the essence of any object or situation, and his sense of humor was nothing short of astounding. I would not hesitate to say that Richard was the funniest person that I have ever met.

He was also six and a half feet tall, and next to Sam, he looked even taller. And so their repartee would go something like this: Richard would spin a yarn about some less-then-prescient character that he knew from his outlaw biker past, and then Sam would embellish upon it with foul adjectives, to which Richard would then initiate a game of one-upmanship, the moves of which were designed to smoke out those in the audience who were sharp enough to see the multiple levels of humor that were brought into play. Sam was equally eager to show that he was not interested in being left behind by these embellishments, so he in turn would turn up the temperature of his own contributions, looking for moments when abrupt changes of topic could garner the maximum amounts of shock and surprise. And on and on it went, rematch after rematch. I can happily confess here that the mental notes that I kept of these verbal duels have on multiple occasions been repurposed into my own writing, for good or for ill.

At that time, Sam was 46 years old and Richard was 30. He had been already been teaching at SFAI for five years. Prior to that, he had a colorful past in the Sacramento and Davis area, having attended what was then called Sacramento State College before it was renamed California State University at Sacramento in 1972. While he was in school, he was socially connected to some of the teachers and students who were active in the art department at UC Davis, including Robert Arneson and Bruce Nauman. He had cheated death twice, but not without serious permanent injury. The first of these cheatings was when he was a 13 years old living with his family in the San Fernando Valley. Two airplanes collided and exploded in the air above the athletic field of Pacoima Jr. High, showering him (and others) with burning wreckage and leaving much of Richard’s body covered with third-degree burns. Seven of his classmates were killed in the incident, while dozens of others were seriously injured. The second time was in 1969, in a severe motorcycle accident that forced the amputation of his left leg below the knee.

This incident and its aftermath of prolonged rehabilitation exerted a deep effect on Richard’s artistic practice. Long before three-dimensional modeling software allowed for the use of Cartesian geometry for precise plotting of virtual forms in virtual space, Richard had worked out his own wireframe modeling process using materials like aluminum mesh and monofilament. He devised a system of establishing visual form by plotting sequences of anchor points along arcs that would describe the sectionalized layers of the object’s surface. When dozens of these would be aligned in calibrated order, the anchor points would approximate the topography of the object that had otherwise disappeared.

The most well known example is his 1975–1976 piece titled *My Couch*, in which the topography of the eponymous object was described with lead fishing weights dangling at precise increments. Aside from the stunning way that this work captured the light of the room that enclosed it, it also registered as an uncanny visualization of how the mass of an object could be removed from its volume—an early prophesy of what Arthur Kroker would later call “the will to virtuality.” Like many of the works that would follow, *My Couch* was an exercise in phantom-object syndrome (read: phantom-reality syndrome) that was born of Richard’s own intimate experience with phantom-limb syndrome—that being the sensation of still “feeling” a limb even though it has been lost. By using this sensation as a point of departure, Richard’s work extrapolated whole worlds of objects designed to contain the ghosts of their own previous states of having been fully embodied.

Richard’s most recent work was a precisely scaled model of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sun Temple at Konark located near Jagannath in the Indian province of Orissa. Richard had visited the temple twice between 2004 and 2008. He had also conducted a thorough study of its history, as well as its physical and symbolic structure. He called this work *The Prosthetic Temple* (2008–2010), and it was exhibited twice in recent years, once at the Meridian Gallery in 2011 and again at the Canessa Gallery in 2012. Several years in the making, *The Prosthetic Temple* was not only the culmination point of his work but also the most complete material embodiment of his theory of the purpose and definition of art. In his own words, “I propose that one attribute of the production of those makers we call artists, historically and culturally, constitutes a kind of prosthetic activity to address an unforgettable and irreconcilable absence. To forget would be to

1) Becca Rothfeld, “‘BitchCoin’ Currency Challenges the Way We Buy Art”, *Hyperallergic* (March 2, 2015). Accessed at: <http://hyperallergic.com/185410/bitchcoin-currency-challenges-the-way-we-buy-art/>  
2) <http://www.bitchcoin.biz/about.html>  
3) John Lanchester, “Money Talks: Learning the Language of Finance”, *New Yorker* (August 14, 2014). Accessed at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/04/money-talks-6>  
4) Olav Velthuis and Erica Coslor, “The Financialization of Art” in Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Finance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 471-487.  
5) *Ibid.*, p. 483.



A Curatorial Contact High

John Held, Jr.

In early February 2015, I met with UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive adjunct curator Constance Lewallen and assistant curator Stephanie Cannizzo in the now-closed galleries (BAM/PFA is preparing for its move to its new building in downtown Berkeley, slated to open in early 2016). They were opening and examining the contents of Steven Leiber’s conceptual art collection, recently acquired from the estate of the late art collector and dealer. It was the beginning of a yearlong process, which will culminate in an exhibition and catalog to celebrate BAM/PFA’s conceptual art holdings in 2016. The Leiber Collection is just one of the many crown jewels of the institution’s holdings of this nature (Tom Marioni’s Museum of Conceptual Art archive and the Ant Farm papers among them), but this is a significant addition, one that boosts BAM/PFA to the forefront of conceptual art research.

Larry Rinder, director of BAM/PFA, will curate the inaugural exhibition, which will occupy the entirety of the new space. Following that, there will be a series of shows relating to the collection, including one dedicated to conceptual art. The new museum is planned to open in July 2016.

Before that happens, boxes await unpacking, the contents accounted for with a checklist—each examined, mulled over, judged as to whether the items fit into the loose framework of the project, and decisions on whether an item merits immediate separation for photography. Witnessing the two legendary curators undergo the throes of discovery during the initial examination of the new acquisition imparted a curatorial contact high.

Adjunct curator Lewallen explains the process: “What we’re trying to do is figure out a way to make a wonderful show that will include a lot of Leiber material, but not exclusively, and put it together in some way that makes sense, gives it some kind of coherent whole. You can only do that by looking, thinking, and making notes. There will be a publication. Our immediate task is to figure out what we need to have photographed, before we even know what the show is. We have a deadline by the end of the month for that, so we have a lot of pressure on us. We’re not even sure how much space we have. We know we have one particular gallery, but there are some other possible spaces that haven’t been assigned. For instance, we’re hoping to get a room where we can show the ephemeral material—mail art and things like that—but we don’t know for sure yet.”

The nomenclature of Leiber’s still-functioning website, [stevenleiberbasement.com](http://stevenleiberbasement.com), is an apt depiction of the collection’s habitat during Leiber’s lifetime. He lived for many years with his grandmother in San Francisco’s Marina district, the collection residing in an inviting, yet dungeon-like, garage and basement. It was, in short, a wonderland for the admirer and collector of challenging and mostly unheralded art. It was certainly the finest repository of conceptual and performative art practice in the hands of a private art dealer in the United States. His strong suit was material from the sixties and seventies, when the artistic currents of conceptualism, performance, video, sound, installation, land art, et al., were first gaining momentum. Leiber’s sources for this material were legion, legend, and far flung.

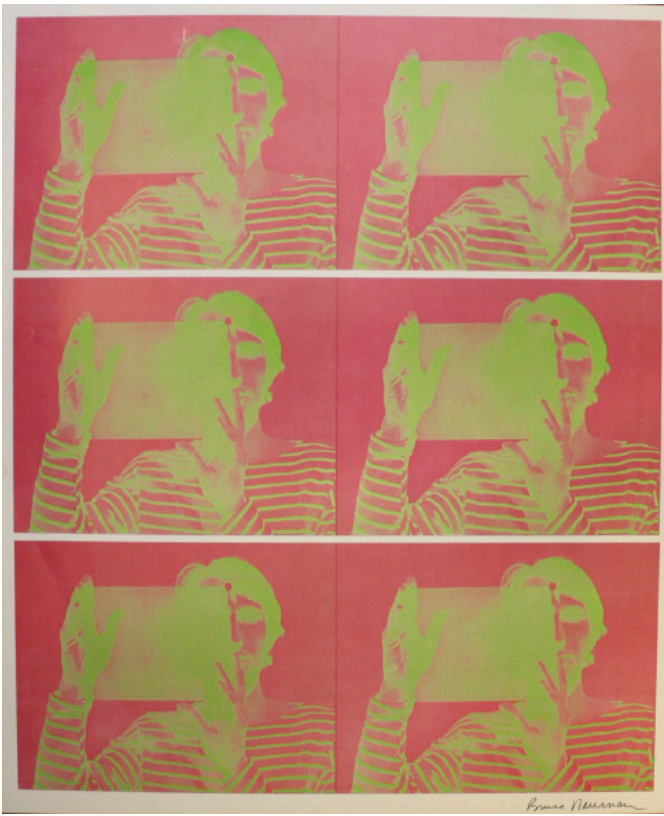


Bas Jan Ader, *Untitled (In Search of the Miraculous)*, 1975. Vintage gelatin silver print. 5 x 8 inches. Purchase made possible through a gift from Robin Wright and a partial gift of the Steven Leiber Trust. Courtesy of BAM/PFA.

surrender to incompleteness, an untenable and intolerable state. This production, the work of the artist, is intended to, however imperfectly, reestablish completeness. This leads to the consideration of cultural, psychic, intellectual, and/or spiritual categories of the prosthetic construct.”

Even though Richard was generous to a fault with his students, he never suffered fools gladly—a fact that was never lost on his colleagues at SFAI. Indeed, he could be outright salty when the occasion called for being so, and the wasting of time for no good reason was especially irksome to him. One example of this kind of saltiness that I remember took place in the late 1980s. He and I were drinking coffee inside the SFAI café waiting for the start of our afternoon classes during the first week of a spring semester. A shy student walked up to him and said, “Professor Berger, excuse me, but I think you gave me the wrong grade for the class last fall.” Richard looked up at the student and calmly said, “Yes, I probably did give you the wrong grade, but an F is the lowest grade the school would let me give.” As it turned out the petitioning student had failed to attend most of the meetings of the class in question, and Richard’s cutting short of that rather feeble attempt at emotional blackmail was only natural. Up until about 2001, he refused to attend the openings of his own exhibitions, on the grounds that he found it exasperating to “be the straight man at everybody else’s cruise scene.” During those years, when called upon to do slide lectures about his own work, he would often sit with his back to the audience and remark directly to the projected images, letting the audience eavesdrop on his internal monolog.

Add to all of this the fact that he was an amateur art historian of the highest order who taught an annual class in the history of sculpture for most of his 45 years at SFAI. That class is now the stuff of legend for the students who took it, and that reminds us that the term “amateur” literally means one who does something out of the sheer love of it. This encapsulates the way that Richard conducted his classes, his artistic practice, his many hobbies, and all of the many other aspects of his rich and adventurous life.

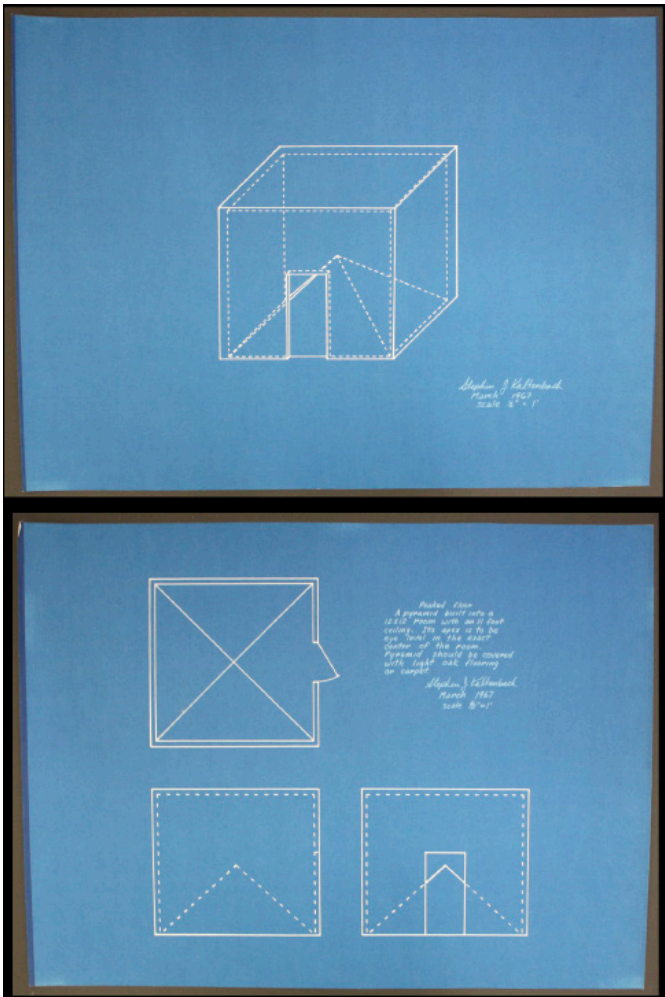


Bruce Nauman, *Untitled*, 1969. Offset printing in pink and green ink on paper. 24 x 20 inches. © Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of BAM/PFA.

Witnessing the collection’s relocation to BAM/PFA closed a long circle of history between myself and Leiber, who I had been visiting since the late eighties. He was the only dealer in the United States interested in my field of Mail Art. He was an active collector of Ray Johnson’s when he was “the most famous unknown artist in New York.” In regard to Fluxus, Leiber was an early champion of the once scorned movement in the marketplace, assembling a model collection that gave increased recognition to George Maciunas and company when it was sold to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where it morphed into *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, the first major museum exhibition in the United States of Fluxus. The attendant reviews and excellent catalog distributed widespread information on the previously obscure art activity.

Leiber bought from all the Mail Artists in the Bay Area that had been active in international networking circles in the seventies. He was fair in his dealings in a field that had a laughingly small emerging market. He had an eye for a work’s presence in an international context, and he was able to price it in relation to his wide knowledge of associated works. He was not dealing as much with the completed artwork as with the ephemerality associated with it—exhibition posters, catalogs, artist books, multiples, correspondence, periodicals, postcards, exhibition announcements, advertisements. His exhibition and accompanying book *Extra Art: A Survey of Artists’ Ephemera, 1960-1999* brought this aspect of creative marginality to the fore.

Although Leiber made his name in the field of artistic ephemera, he was not limited by it. Leiber’s conceptual art collection includes original works of art and ephemera by an international who’s who



Stephen Kaltenbach, *Peaked Floor*, 1967. Blueprints for a room construction. 18 x 24.25 inches each. Courtesy of BAM/PFA.

of conceptual art including Eleanor Antin, Arman, John Baldessari, Alighiero Boetti, Marcel Broodthaers, Stanley Brouwn, Daniel Buren, James Lee Byars, Hanne Darboven, Christo, Jan Dibbets, Walter De Maria, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Gilbert and George, Donald Graham, Jenny Holzer, Stephen Kaltenbach, Joseph Kosuth, Allan Kaprow, Sol LeWitt, Les Levine, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler, Dieter Roth, Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner.

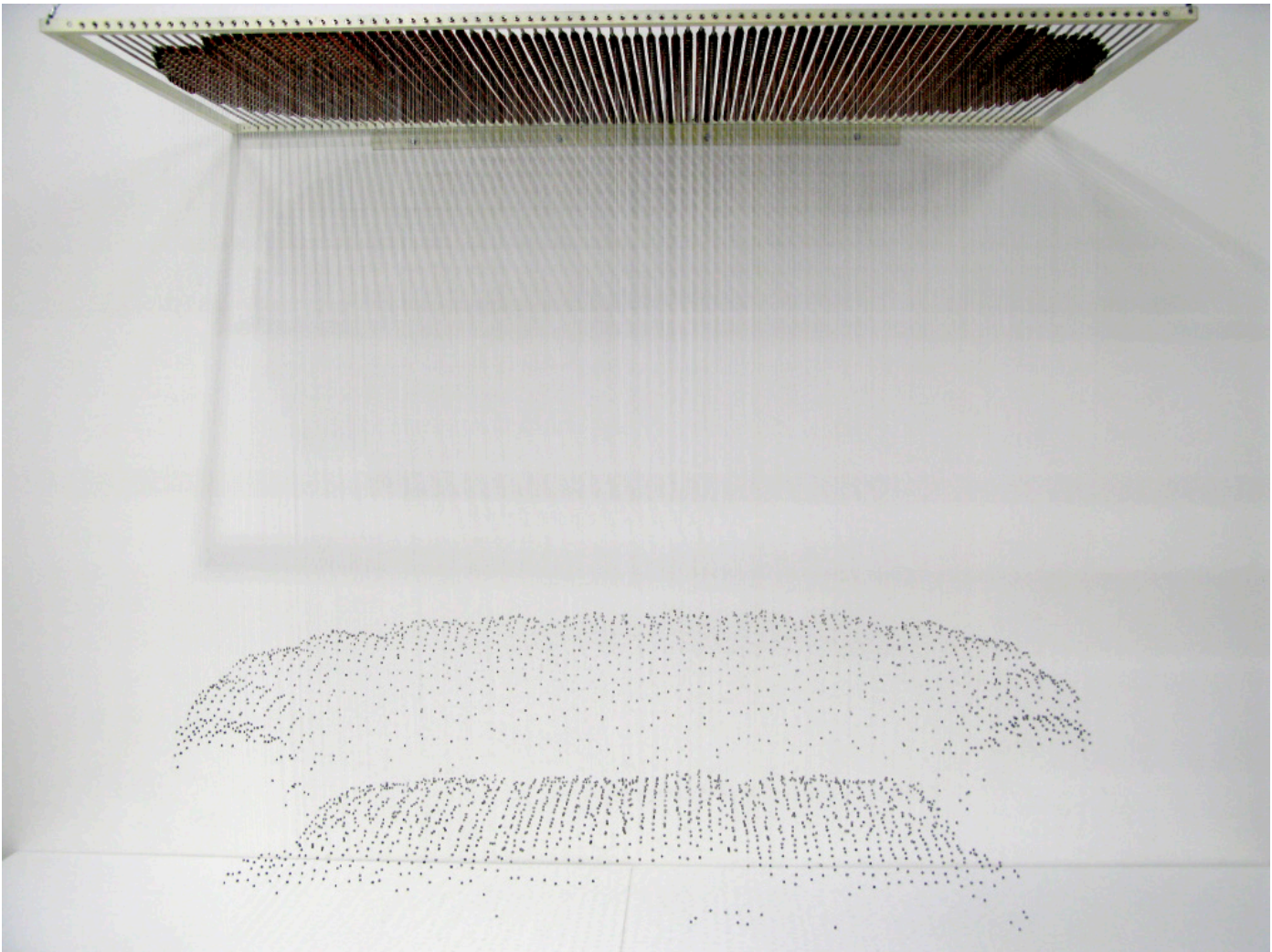
Included in the acquisition are some 1,000 reference works devoted to the field. They will be housed in the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, which, as Cannizzo explains, “will be part of a larger center called the Works on Paper Study Center, what we now call in this building, Print Storage, which has prints, drawings, and photographs. It also has the conceptual art archives, and it will also have historical Asian works on paper. There are three distinct collections in this building, and in the new building it will all be part of the space.”

Leiber’s legacy does not end there. His holdings of difficult, often unacknowledged art were vast, and the BAM/PFA acquisition represents only one facet of a very deep pocket of scarce materials, the disposition of which is being determined by his trust.

Outlining the scope of the collection, Leigh Markopoulos, Leiber’s wife and member of the trust, states that, “Steve never thought of what he had as a coherent collection. He thought of it as different strands of activity. Fluxus is a self-contained unit. The conceptual collection, which Berkeley has, is another self-contained unit. When we looked at what was there . . . there were eight or nine sub-collections. The first to go were the artist’s LPs, which went to MoMA [New York], together with what we are calling the Ephemera Collection, which is everything Steve lent in the *Extra Art* exhibition.” Other collections are composed of Mail Art, visual poetry, and artist’s multiples.

On top of her rigorous academic schedule, Markopoulos oversees the ongoing online enterprise [stevenleiberbasement.com](http://stevenleiberbasement.com), which Leiber established and operated with his long-time assistant, artist Elisheva Biernoff. It remains one of the few sources for the type of unique materials that Leiber accrued. In addition to the museum collections that are being formulated and dispersed, Markopoulos envisions adding to and upgrading the online site.

The Bay Area has a rich history in conceptual art. The Steven Leiber Conceptual art collection places our local heritage into an international context for the benefit of scholars and artists alike. In his role as an adjunct professor in the curatorial studies program at California Colleges of the Arts, Leiber inspired a new generation of curators, many of whom are still locally active and influencing the course of our cultural climate. The collection will be of equal importance when it becomes available for examination. His was a prescient psyche formed by intellectual rigor, tenacious energy, and a closeted artistic disposition. The Bay Area has its share of storied collectors—the Andersons, the Fishers. Add Leiber to the list.



Richard Berger, *My Couch*, 1976.



# Dave Hickey

(Part Two)

## In Conversation With Jarrett Earnest

**One of the things that surprises me to no end, and this is an operation of power, is that people feel unable to just go do something else. My ever-ready “plan B” is to move to the beach with some hot guy—it’s always on the table so I never feel trapped into playing this game I don’t want to play. We’ll see how long that lasts.**

That is what I did when I left New York the first time: I went to Nashville. I wrote songs, played in bands, and it wasn’t bad. People today are defining the role of the artist as anyone who wants to be an artist—and that won’t cut it. The idea that even a thousandth of MFAs are artists is laughable, and that makes it impossible for the people who are regular artists. If you’re just a regular artist, whose work don’t come with a social excuse, or a letter from a doctor, you’re kinda fucked.

**I thought the essay you wrote on art schools and MFAs was completely correct.**

And what happens when you write something like that? *Nothing!*

**Do you normally hear back from people when you publish stuff?**

No, I’ve never had a major review and I’ve never had a good review. I met someone at a party in Dublin who claimed to have read my Gober essay. In short, I just sail texts down into the shredder.

**Instead, you get profiles and interviews because “you” are the story?**

I get profiles and interviews of my boring life. I sell books to kids, although the kids who bought *Invisible Dragon* are now tenured professors and they’re not my friends anymore. That’s perfectly natural, I guess.

**There is a huge distance between the popular perception of what you are about and actually reading your writing. That is why I was interested in the music celebrity thing, where you are thinking about people who have consciously separated things. Your little essay on Flaubert’s A Simple Heart (1877) is so beautiful . . .**

Thank you, and no I’m not consciously strategizing. For me, being banished to Nashville was kind of special because Waylon Jennings, Billy Joe Shaver, Roger Miller, and Kinky Friedman were my contemporaries. I felt perfectly at home with them. It wasn’t like “oh you can’t sit here?” Or “did I knock the Wedgwood dish off the table?” Or “did I puke in your hat?” I was comfortable there and I had a wonderful woman named Marshall Chapman who would get me in fights but then she’d fight too. So we cut a swath. Marshall and I were the only two people of our kind in Nashville, except for Waylon and he was much sweeter than we were.

**There is an off-hand comment in one of the early sections of Pirates and Farmers that being perceived as high on drugs let other people feel you had an excuse so you could get away with the outrageous things you did.**

This sounds terribly condescending but it’s true. Now I miss *genteel*. I miss Leo Steinberg. I never had much style, but I miss it in the world. For a while we had a good group: Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and me and Chris Knight and Peter Schjeldahl and David Pagel and Elaine Scarry—we would be on panels and argue until our faces turned blue but then go out to dinner. People don’t do that anymore.

**It is a curious thing, in your writing, that you are very self destructive but not angry.**

Right. What could change? I don’t have an IQ syringe. I hate universities because they are pissing on what I love and that is good a reason to hate something. Mostly, I just point out the blemishes on the dying patient.

**You don’t often write negatively about art.**

I wrote a snarky piece on Clemente but I did say the watercolors are lovely. I wrote a negative piece on Christopher Wool that was not nearly as negative as it should have been. He’s a fucking poser.

**For someone who laments the loss of a certain kind of edge why do you not write negative reviews?**

What am I going to do, take on Eric Fischl? Why would I take on Marina Abramovic—she’s a first rate idiot. I would have taken on Susan Sontag but she died so I took her on in *Harper’s*. Oscar said we’re judged by the quality of our enemies.

**It seems like your anger toward Sontag is due to the fact that she was really important to you intellectually.**

Correct, and that was before she repudiated everything good she had ever written! *Against Interpretation* (1966) was an important book for me when I was young, but she’s become a role-model goody two-shoes princess.

**Auden said something about negative criticism, which is that it mainly serves as an exhibition of the intelligence of the critic and doesn’t tell you much about the art.**

Right. I do think its possible to write neutrally about the art and negatively about its mise-en-scène. To be honest when I started writing criticism it was all about the market, and still is to a certain extent—this stuff costs too much, so I’m going to knock the price down. This stuff doesn’t cost enough, I’m going to bring the price up. I came out of the dealer world and that is still how I think.

**It seems like part of your persona that annoys people is that you are popular and write accessibly. The way you talk about beauty and vernacular is about being in the world, where no one has a more powerful claim on their perception of beauty than anyone else.**

I like Christopher Knight’s statement: the best thing about democracy is that anyone can be an elitist. I am an elitist. I don’t let no shit float by. I had a meeting with the people at the *NYT* when Michael Kimmelman was going to quit, which he did and continues to do. We just sat down to talk about me taking on a job and it was clear, this is not going to happen.

**Why, I don’t understand?**

Because they said they couldn’t trust me with *NYT* liturgy.

**There is a problem right now with a lack of any major critical voice that anyone respects. I guess the closest thing is Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith—**

Jerry is a good-hearted village explainer. Roberta has no meta. She writes very well, but you never feel the shape of a metacritical stance from her. She is observant. Michael Fried is an observant man, with whom I disagree 180 degrees, but *Absorption and Theatricality* is brilliantly observed—he *saw that!*—he’s wrong, but he saw it. The critics that are out there now? I probably like Richard Schiff the best for being steady and clear. Christopher Knight is good because he is not afraid—he nearly took the *Getty* down with facts and figures and e-mails. Peter Schjeldahl is a good critic as a poet but when he took *The New Yorker* job I told him, “*The New Yorker* is a narrative magazine. Your first line should be something like: ‘The woman standing next to me looking at the Anselm Kiefer blew her nose.’” Peter has never gotten a hook like that past his better self. I do think there are generations that come up feeling entitled. I certainly did—Plagens did and Schjeldahl did, so there are people who never think about compromising. I used to work on the newspaper. They would tell me, “You don’t have to work this hard. We can do second best in a daily newspaper.” I’d say I couldn’t do second best until I figured out first best.

**What’s your writing process like?**

Fast and then slow. I try to write as fast as I can to let the gremlins in. Then I go back and work on it. I write as fast as I can until I finally get to the beginning.

**I really liked what you wrote about On the Road.**

Well, as I said, it confirmed that people were living the kind of life I was living at that time. It was a fairly special book. Also Kerouac could write soppy but he didn’t write badly. He just had so much kindness. I think *On the Road* it is the first great American gay love story.

**Are there works of art that you felt that way about? Like that it wasn’t showing you something new but it was confirming your way of being?**

Ad Reinhardt’s black show. I like rhetorical art, but a few years of abstract expressionists shouting at you is really too much. When I saw Ad Reinhardt’s black show, I exhaled. It was exactly where I wanted to go, into the darkness of exotic rigor. I saw a show that Henry Geldzahler did of plus-size Ellsworth Kellys at the Met. I was stunned. It the first art that didn’t look like art that I knew was art.

**One of the people I’ve heard you talk about with respect is Marcia Tucker. How did you meet her?**

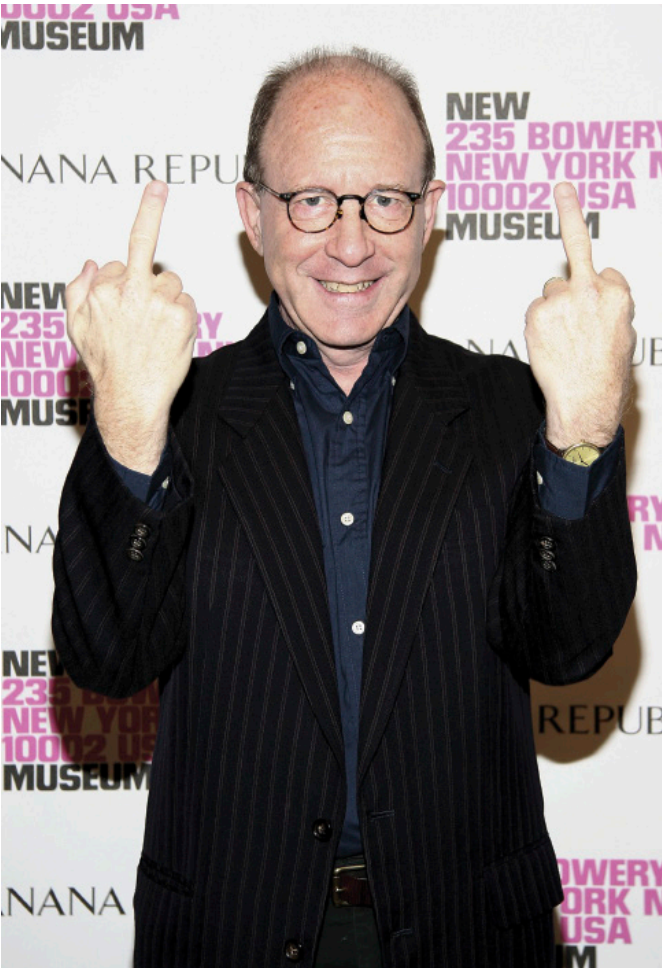
Marcia could look at your art and tell how big your dick was but not always if it was good art—she had great instincts about people and no eye. Marcia was just who you wanted to know: she was funny, she was a trollop, she was fearless, she was great. When I had my gallery in Texas I just called her up and made an appointment with her. We had lunch. I liked her a whole lot. She was a whole person. She did everything wrong: she did not have taste. She was a comedian who wasn’t funny—but what a heart! In the early ’70s we would go to twenty studios per day and look at a minimum of 20 works per studio. For weeks.

**The rhetorical move you made in writing about Mapplethorpe during the Culture Wars was to say essentially the right-wingers looked at this stuff and knew exactly what it was; they were not misunderstanding it.**

The essay was heart-felt. If artists can’t do dangerous, why bother? As Robert said, “It’s pornography.” Patti Smith says something to that effect in her little book *Just Kids*. I liked Robert Mapplethorpe. He took me to the Spike one night to watch fist-fucking. He thought he was going to shock me, but I wasn’t shockable. I was terrified, but not shocked. Robert liked to maneuver straight people in very uncomfortable gay situations, and I just figured it was my night in the barrel, and it was so cool to have these bikers think that I was “with” Robert. Those are the people you don’t want to lose. Those were important people, as people. When I came into the dealer side of the art world I was in a tiny minority as a straight guy. I was really there at the tolerance of Johnny Meyers, Henry Geldzahler, Klaus Kertess, Andy, and all those gay guys—I hope they could tell that I was damaged even if I wasn’t gay. And where was all the homophobia? In the university. That is why all these gay people were in the commercial art world. I was talking to someone the other night about the catastrophe of AIDS, and what I remember was the battlefield aspect: the gauze and blood, the lesions, bandages, and drip tubes. Those sunken eyes. I had a friend named Steve Reichart who spent five years trying to come out. First time he goes to bed with a man, he gets AIDS and dies in six months. And Steve was a good guy. I literally couldn’t believe it. I think the imperial coda of minimalism and the death of all those people changed everything profoundly.

**In that context, how did you see the significance of moving toward “beauty” in that moment, for Mapplethorpe?**

When I first saw the X photographs, I probably hadn’t seen more than three thousand pictures of people fist-fucking, you know. I wasn’t shocked but Robert was better at it. Pretty obviously beauty



Jerry Saltz. Courtesy of the Internet.

set him free—it wasn’t just something out of *Screw* magazine. Robert did the whole thing with butt-sucking farts, undeniable, and Robert just made ’em eat it.

**You wrote about so many gay artists and women artists with such complexity and sensitivity, so what makes you say, “Identity-politics art ruined the art world”?**

I don’t really mean that. What I mean is that segregation is bad. I joined the underground to hang out with guys, gals, homos, fashionistas, and bisexual prep school boys. We made a great team of people who hated the American mainstream. Then, suddenly, there were five tribes of identity artists and we were at one another’s throats and not at Nixon’s. If you were in Max’s those days you would suddenly look up and all your gay friends were slipping into town cars to go have consciousness raising meetings with gay dentists. *What the fuck!* And all the girls are going after Djuna Barnes to admit she was gay and she never would. She did have a great quote—a bunch of local lesbians went over to visit her on Thompson Street, to get her out with the lesbians, and she said, “I am not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma Wood.” I love to teach her *Nightwood* (1936)—so weird. Maybe it’s not even such a good book. Maybe it’s just the energy of repression that makes it so jazzy.

**SECOND MORNING:  
Walking into a pool of crème de menthe.**

*The next morning I’m writing in Rauschenberg’s main studio, freshly made cup of coffee in hand, when my phone rings: “Jarrett—it’s Dave. I have some more thoughts about Foucault and personal pronouns I want to tell you. Come over this morning when you can.”*

What I was saying, and I’ve never fully resolved this with myself, but there needs to be some kind of resolution of demonstratives, with “this” “then” “there” “I” “you” and “one,” indicating the level of abstraction. I must have worked for six months trying to determine a level of abstraction for “of,” so you could go from the “king of England” to the “heart of the heart”—how do you get there? That is a little easier in French because they use those faire forms. It began to seem to me that if there is an “ur” form of expression, it is: “I say (this) to you” so all the sentence goes in the parentheses at the “this”—somehow the depth of that structure matters. The further removed you get from the “I say this to you,” from the palpable world, the weirder it gets to read. It’s like scholars who say “one would imagine”—what the fuck does that mean! Or “one might imagine,” or “tomorrow one might have been imagining.” I think I would go with Derrida and say that the text comes first insofar as the way the language is put together, but in an everyday way speech has come to overwhelm the text. I think the weird thing about writing is that unless you are writing second-source scholarly prose there is no way to do without “me” and “I”—I have never figured out how to do without them. People have accused me of using “I” and “me” as exercises of narcissism. I regard it as an exercise in modesty, saying, “Hey, it’s just *me*—don’t associate this with the Pew Research Center—it’s just Dave out here in the desert.” If you treat “I” and “you” as demonstrative gestures, then that makes “I/you” sentences basically performative. I think there is a performative cloak around most written prose. I’ve always really loved Foucault’s thing in which he says that before you can start talking about difference, you must start talking about similitude—that the discourse of differences is based on similitudes that are harder to express since we gave away rhyme. Foucault draws that line in the early-17<sup>th</sup> century, where the discourse rises beyond what’s like what.

**When did you decide to not write fiction anymore?**

Pretty early on. I had been educated by very good people; I had wonderful professors. I had Jorge Luis Borges, Tom Wolfe, Nathalie Sarraute, and John Graves, who was a great nature writer—these people were beacons of insight. I had a classicist named Bill Aero-smith, who was a bit of a showoff, and John Silber, who was an erudite monster. I think that the problem of fiction is that you don’t know the “I.” You spend a lot of time defining the “I”—the speaking voice or the writing voice, or, as in Henry James, when he does “indirect discourse,” where he is writing in the third person as if it were the first person, which I also like to do. So you add to fiction the necessity of establishing the “I.” There’s one thing that Hemingway always did that I respect a lot: he misuses “which” so as not to use “that,” flattening the subordination—all the “thats” subordinate while the “whichs” just set aside. There is a great section where he does that in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932).

**Is that about creating speed?**

It creates speed, but I think it’s about keeping everything at the same level of topographical generalization. I’ll give you a simple example: I have the newspaper report that he wrote during the war and it says, “There are cows and calves gathered in the canyon.” The next draft said, “There are cows gathered in the canyon”—the calves are gone because they are self-evident. Next change: “There are cattle in the canyon”—*getting everything up to this one level of generalization*. Then you apply random specificity to nail it in the world, in the same sense that a vogue sweater has a dropped stitch—almost exactly that way. You might say: “The beach was long and white, and beyond the beach were the breakers frosted blue, and beyond the breakers there were elephant clouds, and there is this little Prince Albert tobacco tin laying in the sand.” Now the tin of tobacco organizes all this vast, vague generalization. This is an awfully good technique but it’s incredibly artificial. Basically Hemingway paints cubism: this to this to this to this to this—it’s all prepositional. However, I always wanted to write like a writer I’ve never figured out, E. M. Forster. I think *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) is about the cleanest fucking prose I’ve ever read.



Susan Sontag photographed by Sophie Bassouls. Courtesy of the Internet.



***I read it recently! Funny enough I read it because a painter friend of mine was saying it related to her ideas about painting.***

I think he got right down to it. One of the reasons I stopped writing fiction was that book, because the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel as Forster describes it is a kind of social pornography—you know, what is in everybody's heads. You know Elizabeth Bennett's sisters better than you know your own sisters.

***That possibility is one of the things that he says defines the novel as a form. One of the things that Forster does at the beginning of Aspects of the Novel—he says he's supposed to give lectures on English literature since Chaucer and he takes that as meaning everything written in English or translated into English: Dostoyevsky, Melville, Proust, etc. Everything gets put on this flat topographical plane. I'm interested in moves like that, like the opening of Kubler's The Shape of Time (1962).***

What *Aspects of the Novel* does best for artists is make clear it's not "you." Painting is not you. The novel is not you. I had these assignments I gave to my first year graduate students—first I gave them an assignment to paint a painting in a completely different gender identity than they had. Everyone fucked this up. For the other one, I said, "Graduate students have one problem, you know what you hate but you don't know what you like. Paint me a painting of what you hate." And what they painted was always good! They were good because their pissy little personalities were not engaged—they all came out great and I could never get them to go back to the good stuff that they hated. I think a lot of artists, like Artschwager, really address the issue of not doing what they like.

***I still want to understand your transition from fiction—***

I found that the longer I wrote fiction the more insistent and flashy my voice became, and I couldn't just turn it down and that makes fiction really hard—you know what I mean. My friend McMurtry says I'm afraid to be boring, and he's right. I can do fairy tales and cowboy songs, rondeaux redoublés and villanelles. What plagues me is exactly the point of ordinary language, which is that the ordinary

language just gives you everything, and I want it. It want "percolate," "pissy," and "prestidigitation." I am one with David Foster Wallace in this.

***How do you think of the structure of writing art reviews? Is it narrative?***

I write reviews like a Wildean dream: "Were we ever to dream of a world in which David Salle was a major artist, it would perhaps look like this." What I mean is just the fact that I choose to write it means that I like it somehow. The construction of the essays is then all theory: "What is the theoretical constitution of a world in which these are good paintings?" This always kept a lot of German painting out of my writing—I just don't have the temperament for it.

***When I read your writing it feels so loose and free, the way you are pulled along. While I'm reading it I can't see the structure of where we're going but you know you're being taken somewhere. How did you get to that?***

The structure is in the phono text. My rules: Think of the last line first, hook the first, and "keep your promises"—that is a lot of my rewriting. If it sounds just pretty good then I need to go back and play the dominant seventh up there somewhere so the cadence has some sense of fulfillment. You're writing backwards sort of, unless you hit the right word on the first try. Sometimes, though, the easiest things to write about are "difficult art"—conceptual art especially, because conceptual art is *not* intellectual art, and you can just lay it out in words.

***I noticed when I was in graduate school the scholars who worked on social practice and conceptual art, it seemed, were largely unable to talk about other art or aesthetic issues.***

Conceptual art is as easy to write about as a peach. Also, there is this vast illusion that is perpetuated in academia that "theory is hard." Continental theory is four ideas at best. Some of 'em, as in Deleuze, are kind of hard ideas, but at the same time you don't have to be a genius to say that "all mimsy were the borogoves" is pure phono-text. A lot of Texas writers insist in making their language sound like "lit-

erature"—like Cormac McCarthy, where I feel like I'm walking into a stock pond of crème de menthe—I try to avoid that by just resting the prose in the prose. I don't take it up. It just has to bubble and flow. The difference between fine and decorative art is that you can break down decorative art for the parts—you can take off the pearls and diamonds and sell them. When Marxists came to town all of a sudden, work became intrinsic value, so to do any labor on your picture became a bad thing because it was indicative of a bourgeois predilection. That was driven to the bottom of the lake until Damien Hirst had the sense to do his diamond skull—I don't want to look at it, but it makes a statement. Shameless and articulate. I've known artists that I was so sure were going to do good and they didn't. A lot of that has to do with bad timing. Bad timing, bad decisions, too much hero-in, married to a beautician—there are a lot of reasons for a failed art career, and fine materials and handicraft are two of them.

***I once wrote something about Ad Reinhardt's interest in The Shape of Time; one of the reasons I think artists really like that book is it explains that a lot depends on your entrance into a cycle. It seems sadly irrelevant how good someone's work is relative to its being taken up by these forces.***

Back in California we would say, "You missed the exit," or, "You dropped into the wrong wave"—you've got to drop into the right wave to become famous. There is an eerie collaboration between you and the wicked sea and I think that is the same thing you are talking about. What I do not sense in young artists is any group larger than five who feel some affinity for each other—because that is how you win. If you have a group of artists with whom you feel an affinity, if one does well, eventually the rest will do well; a rising tide will raise all boats. If you don't, your neighbor can become Julian Schnabel and it wouldn't make any difference to you. From my point of view, New York is not a very nice place to work on art anymore. The thing I like best about Josiah McElheny is that when I met him he wanted to talk about Venetian glass. It was almost as if he could fulfill his desires when looking away from art, and right now I think that's maybe the case.

*Continued in issue two of AQ (September 2015)*

## A Theory Of Possible Futures: Sharjah Biennial 12

### Arie Amaya-Akkermans

At first sight, the city is nowhere as inebriating as the neighboring Dubai, with its maximalist now-iconic skyline, particularly sugarcoated for the Art Week and concomitant Art Dubai, the city's glamorous fair with branded Maseratis and global ambitions. Sharjah, some twenty kilometers north of Dubai, belongs to a different species. An ancient port and early human settlement, Sharjah is rather non-descript in nature, and at times it feels as if it was left unfinished, but it is often punctuated by the strange monumentality of skyscrapers. Yet, unlike most of Dubai, there is a topography at the ground level: people, movement, and more people.

A small absolute monarchy that is part of this rather new federation known as the United Arab Emirates, Sharjah is fundamentally conservative, but beset with global ambitions and less deep-pocketed than its neighbors. Sharjah's enlightened royal family has been on a decades-long mission to become the Arab world's contemporary art hub. Home to the Sharjah Art Foundation, one of the Arab world's most distinguished art institutions, the city-emirate is itself a myriad of contradictions and question marks that highlight not only the highly complex role that contemporary art plays in global geo-politics but also in the dynamics of capital and globalization.

With the Sharjah Art Foundation at the forefront, headed by a member of the royal family, the city hosts the now-renowned, albeit polemic, biennial and a number of museums and institutions mostly built from scratch around small collections, which simultaneously reflect limited resources, long-term interests, and a grassroots approach; at the polar opposite of Abu Dhabi's frenzied international art collection and exhibition and Dubai's share of the region's art market.

Reputed to be the federation's most conservative emirate, the question arises in Sharjah about the freedom necessary to produce relevant artwork and discuss broader issues affecting artistic practices in a turbulent region. The question is not in vain; back in 2011, the artistic director of the biennial was sacked over an artwork on public display that was considered offensive.



Rayyane Tabet, *Steel Rings*, 2013. Rolled engraved steel. 31 x 4 x .25 inches (each). Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg, and the artist.



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents (Parts 1-3)*, 2012-2015. Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of Carroll/Fletcher, London.

And where does this conversation even start? Clearly, the discussion about art in the Gulf is fraught with difficulties. Many of the Gulf defenders are public relations specialists whose goals and opinions are even less clear than the ones of those hiring them. On the other hand, those who denounce the growth of a local artistic scene and proclaim it to be illegitimate—however well meaning they may be—are openly ignorant about the region and badly misinformed about the horrible travesty of the industry that art has become since the 1990s, of which certain trends in the Gulf region are a standardized global response and not necessarily born of a local structure.

The atrocious architectures of inequality, the shameless corporatism involved in transnational migrant labor, and the prevalent weak models of citizenship, among others, were by no means invented in the Gulf and belong to the degenerate dynamics of modern crony capitalism. If new states were to be formed tomorrow anywhere in the world, this is exactly what they would look like because the current economic model simply doesn't allow for a body politic independent of free markets. But this is not to say that there is no need for a direct engagement with the Gulf countries, in particular the U.A.E., regarding the future of these phenomena in the social realm and what they can possibly mean for art and artists.

Something of the sort takes place in *The Past, the Present, the Possible*, the title and theme of the 12<sup>th</sup> Sharjah Biennial proposed by curator Eungie Joo, but always in oblique, indirect, accidental, and ultimately inconclusive manners. The assumption today is that biennials offer only two possible models: a closed and specific research question that is deployed in order to produce an aesthetically controlled and coherent show, or a very broad theme where risks are to be taken and the results are not always as exciting as one would expect.

Eungie Joo, consistent with other curators at the margins of the big art world (São Paulo, Istanbul, Gwangju), has fortunately chosen to take the risk of a very broad theme at the expense of uncertainty and confusion. The exaggerated degree of overspecialization in the art world has led to a situation in which none of the big questions of art matter anymore, so that art is excluded from the expanded field of politics and the social. Not unlike the academic disciplines to which art is related—philosophy, anthropology, literary criticism—the current focus of the contemporary is on the production of meta-art, or the art world's equivalent of secondary literature: post-conceptual, post-Internet, post-relational, etc. The problem (and a particularly interesting one) with a broad theme is that it clashes immediately with the Eurocentric, exhibition focused model of the biennial once it is removed from the safe confines of Western academic art and the deep pockets of the state.

Maybe it's also true that biennials are obsolete now. First there is the upbeat game of art fairs with their commissions and programs catering to both young audiences and professionals, and then there are the collector-centric mechanisms and the political whitewashing, from Istanbul to Bogotá to Kochi. And then there is the big money.

At the heart of Joo's concept, beyond the very egocentric problems of meta-art, is a skilled renegotiation and profound articulation of today's most wide-ranging cultural problem: what happened to the imagination of the future?

"As the emirate's future history is written through urban development, heritage site-restoration, interdependent transnational economies, and a diverse everyday culture, *Sharjah Biennial 12: The Past, the Present, the Possible*, has invited fifty-one artists and groups to help us imagine and reflect upon its ambitions, possibilities, and being," writes Joo in her statement. This is a rather porous and very vague description of the monumental enterprise of mapping the contour of a future that is being written as we speak. These young polities, born out of colonialism but without a nation-state to speak of that can amalgamate them, are a strange and loose combination of diverging fragments. It is but the solidification of these fragments into an imagined common past that stabilizes the future as a common project, yet the alarming discontent with the present has altered the grammar of this process.

The difficulty with this model of temporality is that it permanently delays the future in order to prevent all risks and uncertainties. As the predictability of risk recedes more and more into the wasteland of complexity systems and the entropy of mass media and big data, the political self becomes further obscured and a project of writing the future through the past becomes questionable as it is always anchored in notions of history and heritage, potentially embedded in the reactionary psychology of caution. These new histories emerge as obstacles for the political production of the same globalization fantasies that claim to enable the rewriting of the future as an open and dynamic structure.

Impossible to conceive of this biennial as an exhibition or as an academic exercise, Sharjah 12 is a galaxy of dispersions and uncertainties, that while conveying the condition of our time and of "times" in general, it is experienced as a sequence of imbalances or gaps; it is difficult to stand on any specific place, to adopt a point of view, to cross from one point to another, without stumbling. This isn't necessarily a metaphor: the navigation between the different spaces of the Sharjah Art Foundation is akin to entering a labyrinth of invisibilities superimposed one atop another, without clear direction, in the confusion between constructed and derelict sites, staged venues, and real places, all of them operating as an abstract space.

Is Sharjah the biennial or is it just the site thereof? In a place where the concept of the public domain is so theoretical and largely limited to commerce, moving between temporalities requires more immersion and concentration than expected from a large show. One of the biennial's iconic pieces, Danh Võ's *We The People* (2010), is a full-scale reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, fabricated in China replicating the original technique, out of which only thirteen pieces (the original number is about two hundred and fifty) are assembled here. Võ provides extensive commentary on the processes of function, value, and transformation that are part and parcel of the delusion of globalization and relies on the semantic ubiquity of symbolic narratives that are nowadays articulated by commerce. Can freedom



be assembled into boxes piecemeal and transported to the post-colonial world? Of course it can—this is modernity as a take-away service.

Rayyane Tabet’s signature work *Steel Rings* (2013) is also an all-time popular piece that strongly echoes in the region. In 1946, the Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company established a long pipeline to transport oil by land from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon at the height of its republican golden age, and is represented here as an intersection between politics, design, and history. It was later abandoned in 1983 when the company was dissolved during the Lebanese Civil War and the different armed conflicts that engulfed the region, leaving the infrastructure behind and intact. The steel rings representing the first sixty kilometers of the pipeline from its point of origin in Saudi Arabia, manufactured to the same dimensions of the original pipeline, are engraved with the distance from the pipeline’s source and geographical coordinates.

These works, albeit magnificent, demonstrate the difficult open-endedness of a concept such as Joo’s, an attempt to tackle something so deformed and contentious as our relationship to future modes of temporality; for what is embodied here is more movement than time. Is this movement a time orientation? The beginning and end of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline coincides with the birth and death of Arab nationalism and the disenchantment with the modern project, to the same degree that Vö’s (and this work is absolutely central to the conception of the biennial) embodies the twisted realities of foreign policies dictated by corporatism.

Brazilian artists Cinthia Marcelle and Jac Leirner, whose sensibilities are very much in tune with those of the U.A.E., are here charged with a legacy of social realism and political contestation. Each excavates the quotients of the global puzzle that defines emerging markets: labor and money. Cynthia Marcelle’s installation *At the Risk of the Real* (2015), produced onsite, engages with processes of labor and industrial production with a relational aspect. Conceived as a construction site (the most iconic feature of the U.A.E.), the post-and-beam structure highlights the conditions of workers in the region through a system of sieves that sporadically obstruct the vision field. While very popular among critics, and certainly well accomplished, perhaps she could have focused less on the specific conditions of the Gulf as there is a need to spread the obvious: structural conditions associated with labor practices must be investigated as a part of a global mechanism that is not solely associated with piles of sand and construction sites in the Gulf. The poetic ready-mades of Leirner, including *Todos Os Cem* (1998), incorporate devaluated Brazilian bank notes from the 1980s and 1990s—an inflationary period that witnessed the collapse of currency before the generation of BRICS. Perhaps a repetitive sign of the times? Possibilities for a more balanced financial ecosystem become shakier and shakier until they potentially disappear into a mathematical operation or a gesture.

The three rooms in the Beit Al Serkal building, occupied with the work of Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, seem to have the concept of the biennial tailored around them, rather than the other way around. *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012–2015), an installation in three parts across audio, video, archival material, and text, is using some political markers as metaphors and cultural platforms to qualitatively investigate the future. How can a future start from different beginnings? How do multiple futures coalesce and what do they say about our here-and-now? Exploring the radical disillusionment with the modern project at the heart of two centuries of Arab history, the artists propose to examine the traces of those histories as monads that can ignite time and begin something again, but for the first time. A mesmerizing visual study of possibilities and reality-belief, *The Incidental Insurgents* is the most significant work present in Sharjah 12.

A very important part of this show, because of its engagement with modes of temporality, was a rare display of art from the modern period (or, actually, from overlapping periods). Modern art is for us, in a certain way, the last moment in cultural history that had a radical imagination of the future, either utopian or dystopian, that was driven by either the historicist belief in progress or the eschatological impetus, both of which imply a specific direction in time that is completely different from our current cul-de-sac. On the one hand, Saloua Raouda Choucair’s sculptures and Hasan Sharif’s conceptual works, both of them (in different generations) pioneering figures in abstract and conceptual art in the Arab world, present a set of preoccupations that seem absolutely relevant here: a constructivist and almost mathematical conception of art, a re-definition of the architectural, and a certain rigid formalism that distinguishes them altogether from the decorative arts. Choucair and Sharif, though radically different, do represent in their own time and place an incision into different possibilities of the not-yet-present.

For an interesting contrast, there is the first large-scale presentation of Korean art in the region, which is also representative of a transitional period between modern and contemporary art. Of particular interest were the works of Chung Chang-Sup from the 1970s–1990s—part of the Korean monochrome movement known as Dansaekhwa—which take traditional construction materials into abstraction and either accelerate or slow down points of contact between painting, material, surface, and representation. The reasons for the pieces being there (alongside Byron Kim and Beom Kim) are not particularly clear, but in the end it works out well and a number of different readings are possible.

These works, among others, stand out as having a particularly interesting connection to the proposal, either directly or casually, and though they never come together, there is a perpendicular thread that oscillates like a pendulum, undulating often towards one pole and leaving open gaps as traces behind. As in any presentation of this kind, there is a lot of exhibition pollution, namely work that is largely unrelated or occupying shelf space because of certain institutional connections that demand it for a variety of reasons, and in that respect Sharjah is not different from any of its more academic or experimental counterparts in the West.

But to study the possible futures—to lay them out, to propose a theory, to test them, or even to say anything about them—means to live without the safety net of a remote past where only myth is capable of engendering the real. In this strange urban space of Sharjah, both ancient and new, at the crossroads of different worlds no longer defined by geography and culture but by economy and class, one is constantly exposed to the threat of a depleted future that will throw us back into the past. Are we walking into the best of all possible futures or the worst of all possible pasts? This past, however promising and eternal it might be, is pregnant with precariousness. It has already been inflected by our own man-made world; an empty universe that is not a space of solace and redemption, but only that—empty space.

The promise of restoration has been broken, for as the cultural destruction in the broader Middle East at the hands of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has greatly demonstrated, the restoration will not lead us to wherever we were before Copernicus launched us into space. No, instead we will be right here again, in a world dominated by technological barbarism, violence, and profit, not much unlike the planet in which most people live nowadays, outside of our islands of privilege. Not unlike, but much worse. For this reason a theory of the possible futures, as long as it doesn’t lead to a glorious past, is the ethical and political imperative of our lived times. This is why Sharjah is something worth looking at.



Danh Võ, *We The People* (detail), 2011-14. Copper, wood, metal. Variable dimensions. Photograph by Arie Amaya-Akkermans.



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents* (Parts 1-3), 2012-2015. Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of Carroll/Fletcher, London.



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents* (Parts 1-3), 2012-2015. Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of Carroll/Fletcher, London.



# The Design Isn't Firm; Or, Why Do Curators Talk Like That?

John Rapko

To encounter ambitious contemporary art, you must also encounter the world of the international curator, the most prominent member of the global art world. He's there at the gala preview, she's up at the lectern laying out her concept for the biennial, they're there when you flip through the exhibition catalog. She's interviewing, or being interviewed; he's profiled in *Artforum* or a fashion magazine. What are they saying? It begins, and perhaps ends, with a kind of utterance that reliably ushers you into their world: (a) "The very idea of a 'work of art' is a particular invention of our culture" (Jean-Hubert Martin); (b) "It's clear that the museum as an institution in the West represents a love of the image, of the picture, on which the objectivity of gaze [sic] confers cultural value to the image" (Okwui Enwezor); (c) "We are living in the society of the spectacle. In spite of its alienating effects on our life and social relationships, it is one of the very fundamental conditions of our existence" (Hou Hanru).<sup>1</sup> What are such sentences saying? And perhaps more importantly, what are such sentences doing?

Such sentences are undeniably a part of the most authoritative framework for understanding contemporary art. For the past two decades, the most typical characterization of recent visual art and its cultural settings is that, whether the art of our era is best thought of as postmodern, post-conceptual, or post-colonial, we live in the Era of the Curator. In one influential statement, Michael Brenson remarked after listening to three days of curators' talks at the Bellagio Center in Italy in 1997, "It was clear to me that the era of the curator has begun."<sup>2</sup> The curator in this sense is not just any curator, but is the type of internationally prominent curator of the world's biennials and triennials. Of the authors of the sentences quoted above, Martin was the curator of the exhibition that seemed to open this age, *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth) of 1989, and Hou and particularly Enwezor are among the most prominent recent exemplars of the type. A recent *Wall Street Journal* profile of Enwezor suggests that we should ignore the verbiage that accompanies his exhibitions and just look at the show. This suggestion may well simply ratify existing practices; anecdotal evidence suggests that few visitors to a biennial concern themselves with the exhibition statements, and a notable feature of the reception of such language is the difficulty of finding any extended consideration of it. Might the most authoritative framework for contemporary art carry little authority?

Certainly the sentences themselves neither invite nor reward critical scrutiny. Consider just the gross features: (a') Martin's scare quotes around "work of art" intimate that there is something problematic about this conception, but what? Does he mean to suggest that the concept of an artwork has no legitimate trans-historical or cross-cultural usages? What does "particular" mean in this context? On one charitable reading, Martin's sentence *might* be taken as the beginning of an investigation into the ways in which a particular conception of an artwork rises around 1800 and attains dominance in the arts; the classic essay *The Modern System of the Arts* by Paul Oskar Kristeller lays out the emergence around that time of the conception of "fine" art, and more recently scholars such as Lydia Goehr, M. H. Abrams, and Larry Shiner have explored the concomitant shifts in conception in particular artistic media, respectively music, poetry, and the visual arts. No such investigation follows.<sup>3</sup> (b') Contrary to the opening "It's clear," in fact nothing is clear. Enwezor then puts "of the picture" as a qualifying apposition of "of the image," but of course pictures are not simply images, and art museums "in the West" typically include a few sculptures along with their pictures. And Heaven knows what Enwezor means by "the objectivity of the gaze"; is this a subjective or an objective genitive construction? That is, is the gaze supposed to be something exhibiting a kind of objectivity, or is it that the activity of the gaze creates objectivity? And if the grammatical construction were clarified, would it *then* mean anything determinate? What is "cultural value," and is it something that can simply be conferred by "the objectivity of the gaze"? (c') What does "its" refer to in Hou's second sentence—society? The spectacle? Are we supposed to think that society, conceived in abstraction from the spectacle, is something un-alienated? Hou fails to provide any explication of how he interprets or means to apply Guy Debord's term and thought. And it (whatever "it" is) is "one of the very fundamental conditions of our existence." What are some equally fundamental other conditions? What's the difference between a fundamental condition and a *very* fundamental condition?

Although never explaining what the particular idea of a "work of art" was, in the catalog for *Magiciens*, Martin does at least offer what he thinks the replacement conception adequate to contemporary art should be.<sup>4</sup> What all the works (Martin calls them *objets* [objects]) in the exhibition share is an "aura" and a purpose: they are made to "act in the mental realm and on the ideas of which they themselves are the result." Further, Martin claims that they all communicate some meaning by virtue of the fact that they bear "metaphysical values." Supposedly we call the way in which art exercises its "living and inexplicable influence" a kind of "magic," and because many of the world's cultures "are not familiar with the concept of art," the people who make these works are not rightly called "artists," but rather "magicians." Well, that's something, but as with Enwezor's talk fifteen years later of cultural values, Martin's invocation of metaphysical values never explicates how objects gain the relevant sorts of values, nor what distinguishes this kind of magic from the familiar kind of seemingly sawing people in half.

One common explanation of the prevalence and prestige associated with such talk is that it is not meant to be understood; it functions, with great reliability, to police the social distinction between art world insiders and outsiders. Insiders are those who produce such talk, or who nod or grunt affirmatively every few minutes as it unfolds. Outsiders are those who look bewildered or bored or outraged when they hear the talk. Of course such explanations have also been offered in earlier episodes of peculiar art talk, such as the theory-speak of the 1980s and 1990s, but such an explanation is silent as to why the curator and her speech have become such a prominent aspect of contemporary art, and what effects such speech have.

One possible route to a further explanation might be to consider the very need for a person fulfilling the role of the international curator. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has urged the point that to understand a moral philosophy we must set it within the social context that is its home and which provides it with its aim. In some cases this task will involve constructing a "character," an ideal type of a social role that embodies the representative aspirations and moral aims of a culture.<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre offers sketches of three prominent characters of late modernity: the Rich Aesthete, the Manager, and the Therapist. The Rich Aesthete is someone who pursues "the interesting" as a way of warding off the worst of life's states, boredom. What is "interesting" is generating and fulfilling ever-new wishes and desires. For the aesthete, other human beings are occasions for entertainment. The Manager is part of an organization's bureaucracy, wherein the aims of organization are determined by its attempts to maintain and expand its position within a competitive struggle for resources and prestige. The Manager aims above all at "effectiveness"—the most efficient use of "resources" (human and otherwise) towards realizing the relevant institutional goals. Similarly, the Therapist treats the aim ("adjustment" or "mental health") as given, and uses whatever techniques required to turn "maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones." A negatively definitive mark of these characters is their inability *qua* characters to engage in moral debate about their aims; in each case the aim is set prior to any individual's making herself into



[above] Amy Ellingson, *Variation No. 49*, 2010. Gouache on paper. 12 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist.  
[below] Cate White, *Untitled (Small Amounts)*, 2013. Ink and ball point pen on paper. 6 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

that character. The social setting that is common to these characters is positively marked by "emotivism," wherein judgments of moral or aesthetic evaluation are grasped as nothing more or other than personal preferences, and where the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative human relations is lost. Is the Curator a character in this sense?

An often noted feature of the Curator is her need to communicate with very different audiences and clients: the national and international interests who finance the exhibition; the artists included, who in many cases have been set specific tasks or commissions by the curator; the various local audiences, whether or not savvy to the latest trends in art; the jet-setting art world of the scene-makers, the mile-high bourgeoisie, critics, fellow curators, and art pilgrims. Something of this need to, if not communicate, at least resonate with these diverse audiences may account for the un-eliminable indeterminacy of the curator's talk. Terms are used ("society of the spectacle"; "multitude"; "center and periphery"; etc.) that have their home in theoretical constructions of some complexity. In using those words the Curator signals to those in the know, but the use must also allow each of the other audiences to project something into the language, and to think itself finding something of significance there. The un-eliminable vagueness of the Curator's speech may not in every case be maligned. After all, obscurity and indeterminacy are not always negative features of a linguistic style; it is part of the greatness of Rilke, Vallejo, Celan and a vast array of other modern poets that their work cultivates such qualities.

Like MacIntyre's characters, the Curator, and the art world generally, are surely at home in the emotivism and moral anarchy of the present. One badge of seriousness in this world is to denounce the purist version of normative formalism advocated by the critic Clement Greenberg after World War II. Such denunciations slide easily into a general rejection of allegedly 'objective' criteria of taste and quality as crypto-authoritarian attempts to constrict the possibilities of contemporary art. However, the international Curator does display a kind of freedom denied at least to the Manager and the Therapist, in that she is bound only the very general aim of making the most interesting exhibition she can. Part of the shaping of the aim of any particular exhibition involves a diagnosis of the present, and this diagnosis is given in part in what are on the face of it concepts at home in ethical reflection, such as justice, responsibility, fairness, or obligation. By contrast, again, the Manager and the Therapist must accept the more determinate ends of efficiency and adjustment in taking on those very roles.

One part of the problem of the Curator's speech remains superficial, albeit pervasive: its clumsy and over-heated quality. A good rule of thumb is that the more ambitious the Curator, the worse the style. The problem is familiar to every college teacher of composition: when the author has little to say, but feels the pressure of making a Big Statement, the reader is confronted with abstract nouns doing and having done to them all sorts of thinly characterized actions, with a high percentage of passive constructions, dangling clauses, and modifiers that modify nothing. Perhaps the fabled awfulness of Enwezor's prose is in part due to his pitched ambitions. Accordingly, the common objections to the Curator's talk—its hollowness, pseudo-intellectualism, vapidity—strike me as almost invariably accurate. But perhaps these objections are not definitive if qualified by the sense of the strenuousness of the Curator's ambitions.

The problem is deeper. The most serious objection to such talk, to my mind, is the characteristic way in which it blocks self-reflection or even the beginnings of self-clarification. Michael Baxandall once noted that even the most puzzling, obscure, or even tautological statement in art talk may come to have a meaning, and even offer illumination, in the presence of a work.<sup>6</sup> Adapting Baxandall's example, imagine someone saying "the design is firm because the design is firm" in the presence of a simple gouache. If we can make anything of this, two conditions at least must be in place: First, we must import something of a background sense of what graphics as an art consists in. Part of this will necessarily involve some conception of the

artistic process, wherein an artist engages in an activity governed by some conception of what she wishes to create, and monitors and sustains a feedback process involving an enormously complex set of actions and reactions. The process may go awry in countless ways, but if it succeeds, as it must do with some regularity if it sustains a living practice of art, something results which exhibits some kind of inner organization. Second, the sentence must in some sense be juxtaposed with the work. As we consider the sentence and gaze at the work, something of the sentence is clarified: the first part ("the design is firm") refers to the inner organization of the work; the second part ("because the design is firm") refers to the artistic process. What gives rise to further thought is the "because": in what ways does causality operate here?

So one way of seeing what misfires so badly in the Curator's talk is to note that it typically occurs in the absence of the works. The Curator imagines that she addresses the sense of historical necessity and possibility, but the talk latches onto nothing. But surely the Curator would respond by noting that in her exhibition previews and talks she *does* show and discuss various works. The problem, though, is that the Curator lacks a viable conception of the artistic process. One sign of this in the quotations from both Martin and Enwezor is the indication that in some way values are embodied by works of art, but neither author offers the slightest indication of how this occurs. It is part of the force of Baxandall's example to show how damaging the lack of some sense of the ways in which the work process of the artist charges materials with meaning. And just how damaging is that?

To be continued . . .



1) The quotations are taken semi-randomly from the following: Jean-Hubert Martin's proposal for the *Magiciens* exhibition, in *Making Art Global (Part 2)*, 2013; Okwui Enwezor interviewed by Karen Raney in *Art in Question*, edited by Raney, 2003; Hou Hanru, catalog essay for the 10th Lyon Biennial, in *le spectacle du quotidien/le spectacle of the everyday*, 2009, p. 25  
2) Michael Brenson, *Acts of Engagement*, 2004, p. 117  
3) Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts", 1951-2, now in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, 1980, pp. 163-227; Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992, revised 2007); M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, 1989, pp. 135-187; Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 2001  
4) Jean-Hubert Martin, in Martin and Mark Francis, *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989, p. 9  
5) Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981, pp. 26-28  
6) Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 1985, p. 12



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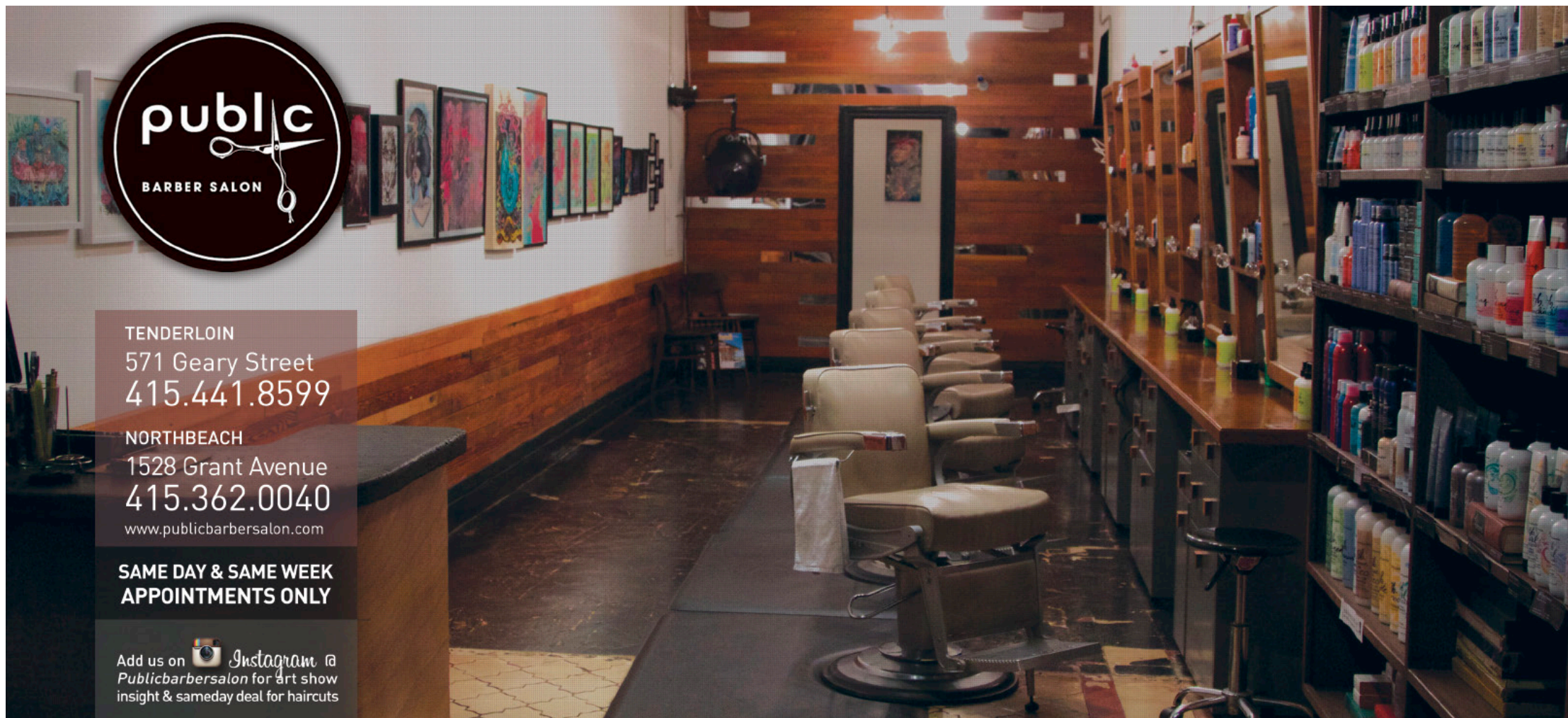
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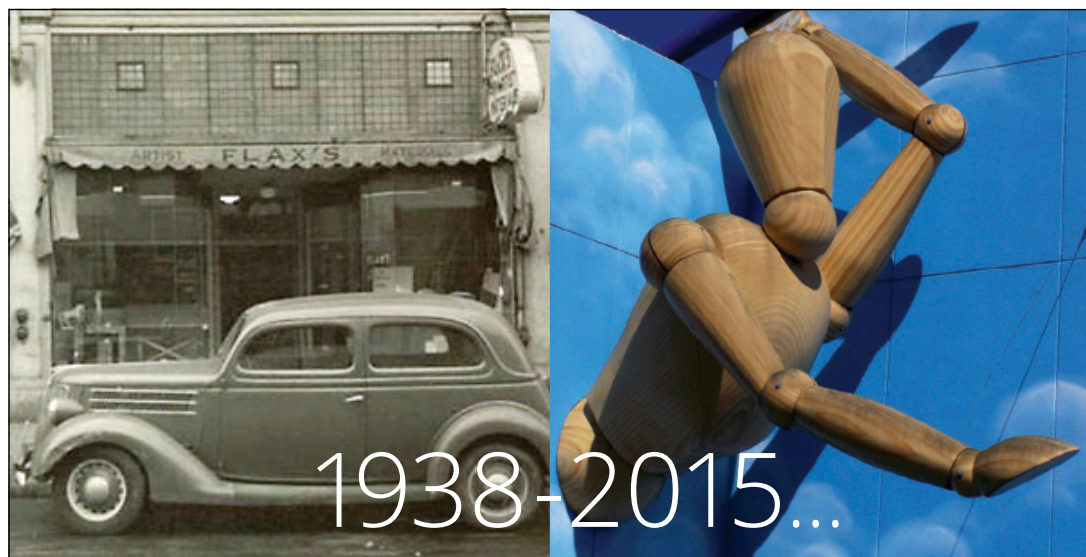


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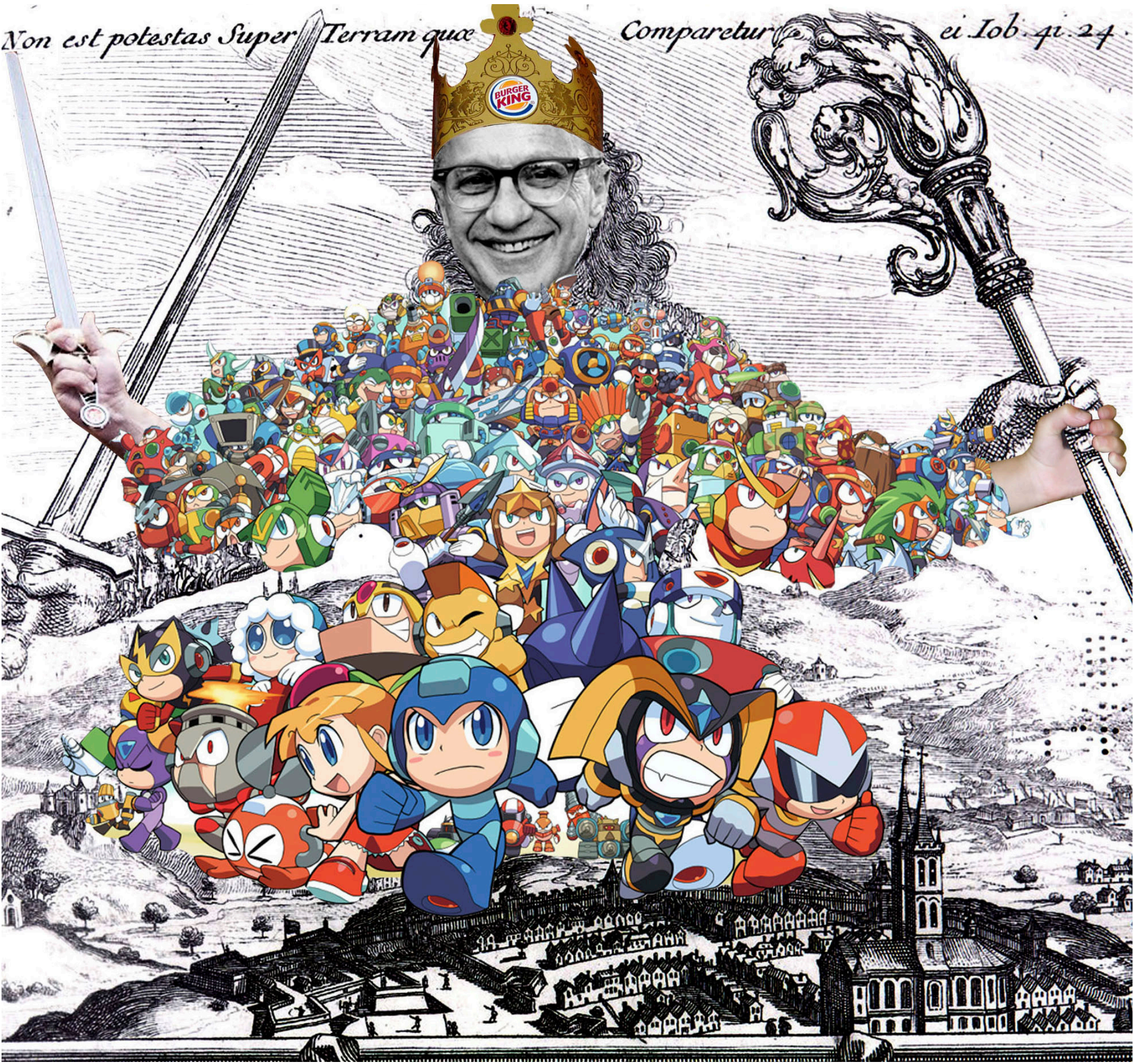


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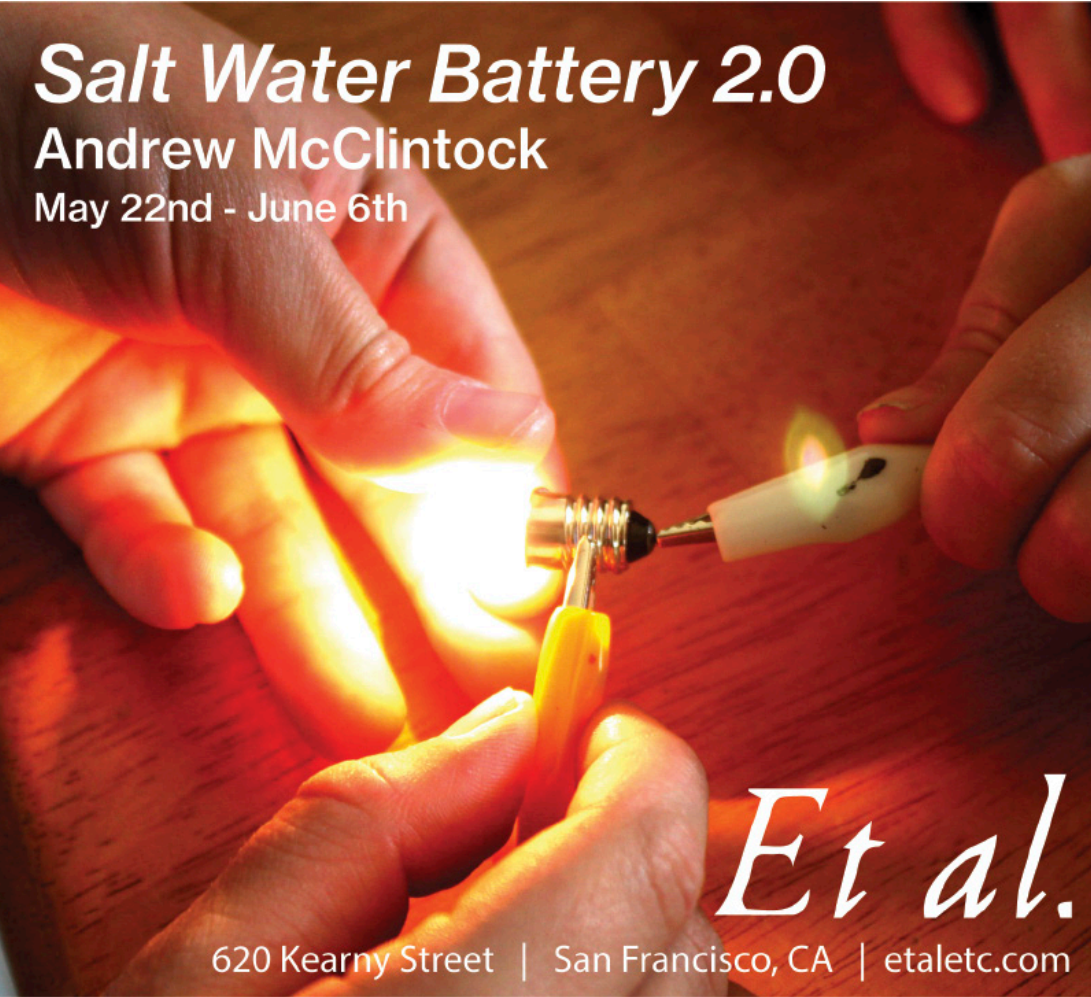
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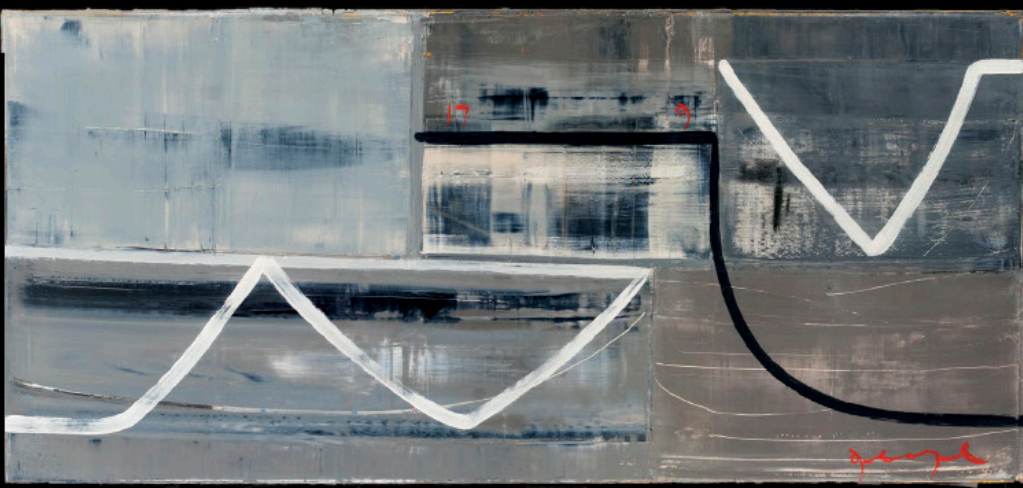
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