

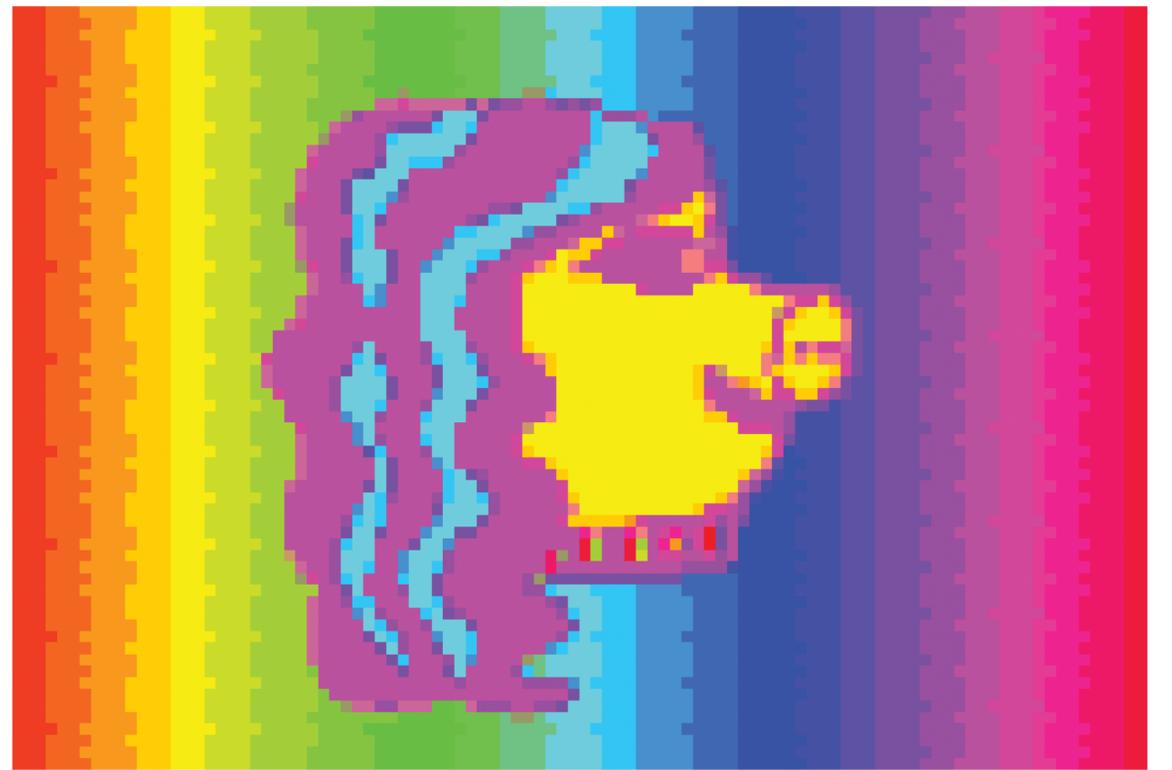
# NMQ

Issue 1 // Free

Tauba Auerbach  
Mike Osterhout  
Janice Guy  
Jemima Kirke  
Petra Collins

# Art | Basel

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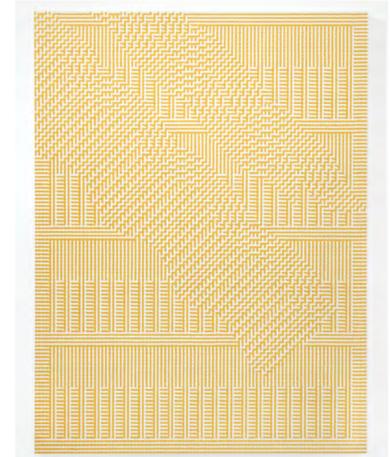
**Jordan Stein** is an independent curator and cofounder of the para-curatorial project Will Brown. *Night (1947-2015)*, his slowly unfolding exhibition at Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, CT, closes this winter after presenting the work of Ken Price, Tauba Auerbach, Jason Dodge, Vincent Fecteau, Lutz Bacher, Kevin Beasley, and Isa Genzken. A forthcoming exhibition, *Let Us Celebrate While Youth Lingers and Ideas Flow*, opens at the Renaissance Society in Chicago this November. Will Brown's most recent exhibition, *MATRIX 259*, was on display at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives through mid-September.

**Carlo McCormick** is a senior editor at *Paper Magazine* and a critic and curator based in New York City.

**Constance Lewallen** was born and raised in New York City. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College and her MA from California State University, San Diego. She is currently adjunct curator at the University of California, Berkeley, Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. In 1996 she curated *Jay DeFoe: Selected Works 1952-1989* for Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, which traveled to the UC Berkeley Art Museum. As senior curator at BAM she curated many major exhibitions including, most recently, *A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s*, all of which were accompanied by catalogs and toured nationally and internationally. Her most recent exhibition, *State of Mind: New California Art circa 1970*, co-curated with Karen Moss, premiered and traveled internationally in 2011. Her book on David Ireland's house, published by UC Press, will be released when the house reopens.

**Paul J. Karlstrom**, former west coast regional director of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, is the editor of *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900-1950* (UC Press), and a co-editor of *Asian American Art: A History, 1860-1970*. He is coauthor of *Turning the Tide: Early Los Angeles Modernists, 1920-1956* and author of *Raymond's Staircase: Art of Tranquility and Turbulence*. Most recently Karlstrom wrote *Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art* (UC Press).

**Petra Collins** is an artist/curator living in NYC. Shooting from the age of 15, her images are fueled by self-discovery and femininity that explore the complex intersection of life as a young woman online and off. Collins's images offer an unflinching honesty, exploring the privacies and publicities of growing up as a woman at a moment when female bodies are ubiquitous—hyper-mediated by Photoshop and social media. Collins has curated a handful of shows: *Gynelandscape & Pussy Pat* in NYC, *Strange Magic* in LA, *Literally Bye* in Miami for Art Basel, and *Comforter* in San Francisco for SFAQ. She has also given lectures at educational and art institutions such as York University and The Art Gallery of Ontario. Her work can be seen in publications such as I.D., Dazed & Confused, NY Mag, Purple, Interview, Vice, and more. This year she released a short film series called *Making Space* about teen dancers, and has a curated book called *Babe* published by Random House out now.



Tauba Auerbach  
 Shadow Weave - Comb/Wave I, 2013  
 Woven canvas on wooden stretcher  
 72 x 54 inches  
 Courtesy of Standard (Oslo)  
 Photograph by Vegard Kleven

**Notes From The Underground**

*The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.*  
 - Albert Einstein

*The revolution has always been in the hands of the young. The young always inherit the revolution.*  
 - Huey Newton

*All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.*  
 - Marcel Duchamp

*I force myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.*  
 - Marcel Duchamp

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# Tauba Auerbach

## In Conversation With Jordan Stein

**I see you, in my mind's eye, moving along a diagonal axis. You said something to this effect in an interview a few years ago, no?**

Yes, at the beginning of 2013, I set out to have a year of diagonal thinking. Maybe this makes me sound like a lunatic or a child, but I picture different modes of thought having different shapes or gestures.

**Are you a synesthete or is this an intellectual picturing?**

It's just an imagining. I'm not a synesthete. I think most people who claim to be are lying.

**You wanted to take some time off and switch directions. Hold on, let me find it . . . "I've decided to take roughly a year for myself and—the way I'm articulating this in my mind, I've been moving in a straight line, and now I just want to be able to move diagonally."**

This is all true, but I hate how I said it.

**Why?**

"For myself?" What do I mean there? That, until then, time had been for someone else? I think that's silly, but maybe it's indicative of how I was feeling at the time—at the mercy of others or something.

**Well, it stuck with me initially because it was lucid and interesting, and later because Diagonal Press was born shortly thereafter.**

Only nine months later! It gestated just like a human baby!

**A diagonal baby! Let's start with a few points on the line and explore the latest with the press, especially as this interview coincides with the New York Art Book Fair. Are you still moving along a diagonal axis?**

Yeah, I mean hopefully! Like I said in that interview, going into this venture I felt like I'd been moving in sort of a straight line. And that over time, ironically, that had led me a little astray.

**Too formulaic or calculated?**

Maybe just naive. I started having exhibitions and selling artwork when I was pretty young—24 (now I'm 34). And initially I was trying to proceed in a rather predictable way: to make a living doing what I loved, to make better and better art, to have better shows at increasingly interesting places. You know, "progress." I've never cared about money, but suddenly there was a lot of it being traded for my paintings on the secondary market. That aspect of things took on a life of its own in the last five years, at times a very ugly life. One of the worst features of this is that I used to give a lot of art away to benefits, but it came back to bite me so many times with people flipping things at auctions that I basically can't anymore. And I resent that because I feel like, what's the message here? Don't be generous? That's so upsetting. Now I mostly just want to give to animal rights organizations anyway, and they don't usually have art auctions so that works out fine. But this is all to say that all this money part of things that I had no control over seemed to undermine real conversations I was trying to have. In interviews people would ask me about auction prices rather than about actual artwork. I hated it being such a dominant part of the discussion, so I kept finding myself evading the topic—sidestepping it—which might be considered a lateral motion.

So, at the beginning of 2013, I found myself very unhappy with all of this. Like my position in the business of art didn't represent my values on things like income inequality, capitalism, and greed—that this had somehow come about without my consent—and I was being a coward by not addressing it. Neither direction of motion felt right to me anymore, so this was the beginning of me asking myself to think diagonally—just trying to come up with a new way of moving through all of this that isn't just about moving ahead, but also isn't avoidant.

One thing I was sure of was that I didn't want to quit making and showing art, which has been the solution for some people with similar feelings. And I didn't want to act cranky or generically antagonistic. To me that's just too simple and uncreative. I wanted to put my ideas into a form that could be afforded by a lot of people, not just the wealthiest in the world, and I wanted for people to exchange their money for this work *only* if it actually interested them and offered them something psychically rather than monetarily.

**So the press was the answer.**

It's just me taking a hearty stab at an answer. One of many necessary answers, and I'm not going to stop trying to think of others. One of the beautiful things about printing is that you can make as many as you want! I can't make more than one of the same painting because of the way I paint, so they will always be unique. And I think there is value to unique work that human hands have touched for hours, transmitting something energetic from person to person. This is not a dismissal of that by any means. There is real magic in there. But there's no need to only work that way.

**What was your first public appearance like as the press and not necessarily as Tauba Auerbach?**

At the first Printed Matter fair I just kind of just jumped in. I made 14 specimen posters for fonts I'd designed, three symbolic pins that corresponded to them, and three books. I went into it wanting to structure the monetary aspect of it in a way that forced the type of exchange I was just talking about—a genuine and substantive one that's not about resale. So I thought that doing everything in open editions and not being signed or numbered might be a way to enact that. Maybe it would build a secondary market out of the equation because people could come to the press for the original price. It was interesting being at the table the first year, because several people walked away when I told them the editions were open and that nothing would be signed or made distinct from other copies in any other way. It was both insulting and deeply affirming at the same time.

**How has your approach to the fair and press changed since then?**

This is the third year I'll be doing the NYABF, and my objectives are the same, but some things are going to be different. I've always been someone who can't help but leave stylistic fingerprints all over everything I make, even in different media, which I consider a strength at times and a weakness at others. In this instance, I think it's something I need to work against. It's not that I want to totally efface my natural aesthetic, but I want to keep this whole thing constantly shifting a little bit, so I really don't want it to be branded. Everything seems so branded these days. So for example, there's a diagonal wiggly line that I've been using from the beginning as something like a logo—that's going to slowly disappear, and other line treatments will constantly be developed and put in its place. For the fair I'm making flags from some of these, a few of which are 2D drawings of 4D linear ornaments I've been working on for some paintings.

**Will you author those treatments?**

Yeah, these lines are something I'm kind of always working on, like the fonts. In fact, some of them are in the fonts. Others show up in sculptures.



Gnomon/Wave Fulgurite III, 2013. Sand, garnet, shell, glass and resin, cast at Factice. Glass and spray-lacquered wooden plinth, 26 x 11 x 2 inches. Courtesy of Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.

**Is there space for diagonal collaborators?**

Possibly! I'm open and don't want to be rigid. One epiphany I had while developing this project was that to conflate integrity and rigidity is wrong-headed. For now the press is an outlet for ideas I've had over the last few years but haven't known how to present, and for "exhibition catalogs," which in my case will continue to be artist books with no text or photos. . . . Just other pieces of artwork in book form that offer an ancillary perspective on the works in the show. I currently only have one plan for a book by another author, but details of that project shall remain secret for now.

**Which people and projects populate your trajectory and serve as sustained inspiration in the diagonal department?**

Charlotte Posenenske  
Moondog

**I can see why Moondog would make your (very short) list—those wild time signatures, homespun instruments, incredible cloaks, and music written in Braille.**

Moondog is my man. I listen to his music on my bike almost every day.

**I'd like to know more about Reciprocal Score, your recent exhibition with Posenenske in Rome. Although she's no longer living, was arranging her metal and cardboard sculptures alongside your weave paintings a collaborative process?**

This show was *such* a positive experience. First of all, it brought me to Rome a handful of times, and after New York, Rome is my favorite city. The show was not easy, though, because I was collaborating with a dead person, and a person I respect very much, so I wanted to do her proud. I worked extremely hard to inhabit Posenenske's thinking as much as my own the whole way through. That's why it's called *Reciprocal Score*, where neither and both are the initiators of the dialog. It's like those canons Bach wrote for two people to play sitting opposite each other reading the same sheet music laying on the table between them. Table canons, I think they're called. Oh, wait! This actually all connects, because I learned about table canons in a conversation with my friend Pat Higgins. He, his bandmate Sam Hillmer, and I have been having this rolling conversation about collaborating, in which I first uttered the phrase "reciprocal score" as a description of how we were trying work together. When I realized that this was how the Posenenske show was also functioning, I asked them if I could poach the phrase from our conversation for the title.

I really did go back and forth with Posenenske. I talked out loud to her a little bit when I was particularly uncertain. And when it was all done, I crawled into one of the tubes and left a little note to her on the inside. That's something that Will Brown would probably zero in on, huh?

**That's fantastic. Will Brown is considerably less sweet than you, but you're right that we're interested in where the artist, artwork, and archive meet, especially when collaboration and materiality are involved.**

I meant that you guys would probably dig this fact up, years later or something, and then locate that exact tube and install it somewhere clever. You guys nailed it with that car outside the Berkeley Art Museum.

**Oh! Well, that's nice of you to say. And yes, I wouldn't be surprised if that tube ended up in a car outside a museum somewhere in Rome circa 2035. . . . Did you see her Artists Space show a few years ago? Was that your introduction?**

Yes, that was the first time I saw her work in person. I went twice.

**Posenske was interested in systems and series, selling her artwork at its production value, and existing as firmly as possible outside commercial art world processes. Was she an explicit inspiration for the press?**

I actually didn't know this about her when I started Diagonal Press, so when I discovered that I was over the moon! It made me feel kindred with her, but I also saw along the way how we differed. She stopped making art and I don't think I could ever do that, even though I respect her so much for devoting herself to research and social justice.

**Yes, to impact measurable change via employment studies and union organizing. Given that you work in painting, weaving, sculpture, sets, costumes, books, musical instrument building, typeface development, calendars, clocks, mathematical symbols, jewelry, and photography, it's hard to imagine you dropping out—where to? But is it always "art" that you're making?**

No, not always. But most of the time I feel that I'm doing those things as an artist. I don't know if that makes any sense.

**We've worked together at the Exploratorium in San Francisco and Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, CT, two American institutions not only outside the commercial art world but also primarily in a business other than the display of contemporary artworks and exhibition making—one a humanist project founded by a physicist and the other essentially a house museum. Are these particularly comfortable or exciting settings for you? And with so many interests outside the white cube, how do you evaluate taking on a project?**

I really like working in settings outside of traditional art spaces. Like Indipendenza in Rome, which used to be the owner's grandparents apartment. There are terrazzo floors and wallpaper in some rooms and the wear and tear of a time spent in there. I loved it. And The Glass House was a truly great prompt to make a sculpture specific to its setting. I liked that assignment, and the sand sculptures that came out of it went beyond that one show. That said, I sometimes like the white cube, too. It's practical for me—some ideas are better tested in a clinical environment, and others aren't.

**When is your next solo gallery exhibition?**

My next show is in January 2016 at Paula Cooper in NY.

**The last one was 2012?**

Yes, so long ago. I've postponed this show twice.



Installation view, *Tetrachromat* at Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, 2012. Courtesy of Malmö Konsthall. Photograph by Helene Toreddotter.



*The New Ambidextrous Universe I* (detail), 2013. Plywood, 48 x 96 x .75 inches, reconfigured. Courtesy of Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.



Installation view, *Night (1947-2015)* at the Phillip Johnson Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 2013. Courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photograph by Andy Romer.

**How's the break been?**

To be clear, it wasn't a break from working, just a break from exhibiting. It was wonderful and necessary.

**Of course. What are you thinking about for January?**

The helix. I think everything is a helix. Everything is spinning, and almost everything is moving in relation to everything else. So every path is helical. It's also not, not a big deal that DNA is helical. I made the first two helix sculptures for my ICA show last year.

**This magazine is now moving east, just like you did seven years ago. What does California, and San Francisco in particular, mean to you now? I know you very recently spent some time back home and it was . . . different.**

San Francisco is a weird place for me now. I feel very lucky to have grown up there. I still feel like it's my home, and I probably always will, but now it's a combination of deeply familiar and totally unrecognizable. The mood has been radically transformed by all the tech stuff and somehow it's simultaneously so stuck in the past. I don't know how this is possible, but I think most people who really know the city would agree.

So I suppose San Francisco will always have my heart, but it lost my head a long time ago. My mind just turns to mush when I'm out there, which is very relaxing, but I don't like it as a sustained state of being. I do better in a more hectic place, honestly. Dense, lots of different people, a little difficult.

**As a young artist in the Bay Area, however, your mind wasn't a hash sandwich. Your early shows at Jack Hanley were knockouts, super sharp and sophisticated. But a little groovy, too, now that I think about it. For one opening you installed a "trade table" at the front of the gallery where visitors could leave an object in exchange for a book that you made—the first 50/50 book, in fact. Visitors could leave whatever they thought was fair. That's when Jack's openings were 95% friend based. Although I can clearly see the parallels between the table and the press, does that endeavor now feel naive, or on target, or both?**

The trade table was a good experience and I would maybe even do it again. I think I would retain the right to refuse things next time, though, which I think is fair because the other person is not being asked to consent regardless of what's offered. It would just be symmetrical that way. I sure received a lot of crap, but I also walked away with some amazing and thoughtful trades that I treasure, like a Penrose tiling mosaic from an old schoolmate, Brett Lockspeiser, and a drawing I did when I was five or six from an old art teacher. But material things aside, I just enjoyed the experiment. I wonder if the vibe would be different around the same kind of thing here. I noticed that at the 8-Ball Zine Fair in New York this year there were two publishers who were using a pay-what-you-wish system, which seems to be of a similar spirit.

**I wonder about the line between rational and irrational in your work, the knowable and unknowable. What does belief have to do with what you're up to? It's not possible to**



Installation view, *The New Ambidextrous Universe* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2014. Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photograph by Paul Knight.



Installation view, *Reciprocal Score* (Tauba Auerbach and Charlotte Posenenske) at Indipendenza Roma, Rome, 2015. Courtesy of Indipendenza Roma and Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.

**visualize various concepts you're interested in, so what are you aiming at with your work that ultimately manifests visually?**

Right now I think about trying to make art that is entheogenic. Entheogens are molecular compounds that induce altered states of consciousness, which are said to bring the user into contact with "the divine." For me the divine is everywhere, the goddamn amazing-ness of the universe: its complexity, order, and mysteriousness. I'm talking about everything from the amazing architecture of something like a shell, to things like dark matter, the bending of space-time, and whatever consciousness is. These are the things I think about, read about, and live in utter awe of. That, and my gratitude for being here and able to take it all in. So if I could have one goal for right now it would be to make something—an object, an image, a sound, anything—that acted entheogenically, bringing a person into greater contact with whatever might be divine for them.

Related to that, I've recently been meditating on the idea that my 3D self is entirely in contact with my 4D self. Every bit of it, even the deepest interior bit. I sit and focus the contact. Maybe that sounds silly, but it brings me into an interesting state. I'm thinking of publishing a little booklet of this meditation's rationale for the book fair.

**Firstly, you should make that booklet. Secondly, it's awesome and inspiring that your entheogenic explanation could just as easily have come from Barnett Newman. And not that this interview should appear in Modern Physics, but it sounds like you see what's out there as fundamentally ordered.**

It seems to have rhythm and pattern, so yes, order of some kind.



[top row] *Reciprocal Score*, 2015. 10 lb plotter cut bristol paper, hand stamped with custom rubber stamps, cotton twill tie binding. 11.5 x 8.625 inches. Courtesy of Diagonal Press. Photograph by Ada Potter.



Photograph by Tauba Auerbach.



Photograph by Tauba Auerbach.



*Z Helix* (detail), 2014. Book: Indigo print on 4 mm transparency film, bound with two 16 mm spiral binding coils. Box: E-PLUS Heritage corrugated. Book: 11 x 9.5 x .63 inches, Box: 12 x 10.25 x 1 inches. Courtesy of Diagonal Press. Photograph by Chelsea Deklotz.



Installation view, *Reciprocal Score* (Tauba Auerbach and Charlotte Posenenske) at Indipendenza Roma, Rome, 2015. Courtesy of Indipendenza Roma and Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.



*Slice/Wave Fulgurite III*, 2013. Sand, granite, glass, resin, opal and garnet, cast at Factice. Glass and spray-lacquered wooden plinth. 2.375 x 42 x 9.75 inches. Courtesy of Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.



Installation view, *Reciprocal Score* (Tauba Auerbach and Charlotte Posenenske) at Indipendenza Roma, Rome, 2015. Courtesy of Indipendenza Roma and Standard (Oslo). Photograph by Vegard Kleven.

**This makes me wonder about art that can be proven or is itself a proof or solution. Someone once called Calder's work "perfect solutions." How does that sound to you? Exciting? Limiting? I'm not only thinking about your work with mathematicians that aids in the service of solving, but also your ability to transform your ideas into form with such precision—like the press, for example.**

Such a good question. A perfect solution sounds like a bit of a cul-de-sac to me. I don't think I want that. I like the idea of proving little things, and incorporating those discoveries into bigger, open questions. But maybe art is better as a speculation or proposal than a proof.

**How is your work like a proposal?**

In my case, a proposal is like a noodle I throw against the wall to see if it sticks. Actually, the art is the throw, not the noodle. I make all kinds of wild speculations about hyperspace, for example, and I don't do that because I think they are going to be "proven" and used by scientists, but because these ideas have become metaphorical for how I want to think, not just what I want to think about. That said, I really do believe that the great questions in science today all boil down to topology.

**Topology? Shapes rotating, spinning, or stacking but fundamentally unchanging?**

The "architecture of connectivity" is how I would describe it.

**What's the relationship between a diagonal line and 3D space?**

I've been looking at a lot of space-filling curves this week, so my head is all aflutter with lines that approach being planes. I found this wonderful tool on Mathematica for mutating them. So I guess the line can exist in 1-, 2-, or 3D space, and, in my opinion, 4D space.

At first I saw all of this—the type of thinking I wanted to do, and the type of motion I wanted to make—as flat: a diagonal line drawn between perpendicular X- and Y-axes. But now I've come to see it as a representation of the Z-axis, like the diagonal lines in the drawing of a cube. So for me the diagonal line on a plane is a projection drawing of the dimension that comes off the plane.

**Tell me more about your 4D self.**

I think that consciousness is a 4D material. I should put "material" in quotes. To be clear, the fourth dimension in this case is *not* time. I mean a fourth dimension of space that runs perpendicular to the three that we know. If a sphere were to pass through a 2D universe, the planar beings would experience that 3D object as a series of circular cross-sections only . . . a dot that appeared as if from nowhere, expanded, contracted, and then disappeared. This is how a 2D being experiences something of a higher dimension passing through its world. All I'm saying is that consciousness seems to present the same way here—appearing as if from nowhere, expanding, contracting, then seeming to disappear. This might sound bonkers, but believe me, I have a book by a bunch of physicists speculating on what consciousness is, and there are much nuttier notions out there. So just like the circular cross-section of that sphere, we are 3D cross-sections of our 4D selves. Just passing through . . .

**That's a really interesting noodle, Tauba, and one more resonant with math and science than philosophy or new-age beliefs. Do you borrow at all from those disciplines?**

I enjoy reading about math, learning about the history of science, and things like that. Some New Age thinking is legit, but I'm pretty allergic to the aesthetics.

**Interdisciplinarity can feel a bit like creative political correctness and it can be hard keeping up with the latest pre-hyphen preposition: trans-, poly-, inter-, multi-, non-disciplinary. Broadly speaking, what do you think of disciplines? Does the personal and professional nature of disciplinarity inspire you or get in the way? How often, I wonder, do you write to folks in completely different fields with a query?**

I don't think much about disciplines and I find that a lot of people are working on the same interests but in totally different fields. I have been known to cold email topologists or write fan mail to mathematicians. Don't laugh. Or do! They have mostly been very responsive and generous.

**What's the latest on your MIT residency and project with the incredible father/son duo?**

Actually, Marty and Erik—who I'm collaborating with at MIT—are two of the people I sent fan-mail to. They don't remember this and it wasn't part of us becoming collaborators. I only revealed it to them recently once I felt I had proved I wasn't a hack. We are having fun, making a font out of various ways to slice the surface and unfold a cube, and also a video of a 4D shape that I've been wanting to visualize but which remains elusive to me.

**You told me you were interested in non-orientable surfaces so I looked up a definition, which has kept me baked for days: "A surface is non-orientable if and only if you can find a Möbius band inside of it, like we did in the Klein bottle and the projective plane. A surface is orientable if it's not non-orientable: you can't get reflected by walking around in it." Care to comment?**

That last bit is utterly confounding. Are you allowed to define something by saying its not it's opposite? That's ridiculous.

The Möbius strip is non-orientable, true, and understanding it does give insight into all non-orientable surfaces. But now I realize that I don't have a good alternative definition! I should think about that. I have a number of glass Klein bottles in my studio and those are also non-orientable, like a 3D equivalent of a Möbius strip. They are bottles that pass through themselves in 3D, but wouldn't in 4D, and have no inside or outside. They are also minimal surfaces, which means they have a mean curvature of zero.

**How about architectural ornaments, something else I know you've been interested in lately.**

Oh, I've been obsessing over architectural ornaments! There are a few motifs that come up in almost every culture, in every part of the world. And I can't help but think that these shapes, which are essentially different types of waves and helices, have stuck with us or we have stuck with them for a reason more powerful than convention. Maybe they resonate because they bear some resemblance to the fundamental structure of matter and space. So, like that classic Greek meander fret pattern, it's just a bunch of little twists. And like I said before, I think everything is a helix, so in my opinion that pattern resonates with a deep visceral connection we have to rotation combined with translation. It's like a drawing of something microscopic and macroscopic at the same time, and we exist between these two scales where this motif arises. Look at the convection patterns on Jupiter. They are the same structure as the Greek "meander" or "key" frets. Now I'm looking at a lot of swastika books.

**Although I'm aware of its harmonious roots, I still haven't managed to live with the swastika paperweight I picked up in India several years ago.**

I guarantee that if you begin to research the glyph its benevolent associations will begin to outnumber the evil one. You might even be able to enjoy that paperweight. Is it a swastika or a sauvastika anyway? I think the same way about the swastika as I do about that architectural ornament—that it has been a resonant symbol because it taps into something deep and fundamental—the rotation of all things. I now also see it as the end or cross-section of a helix.

**Sauvastika?**

Where the arms go the other way. The mirror image of the swastika.

**Did you ever learn to drive stick with your dad (who races cars in addition to practicing theatre design, architectural lighting, and audio-visual consulting)?**

So far I'm not very good and I haven't tried in a long time. Trying to learn stick was one of the most frustrating experiences of my adult life. I think of myself as mechanically minded and well coordinated, but I just really sucked at it. But maybe that's because I hate driving. I let my license expire almost three years ago and I don't miss it at all. I'm all bike all the time right now . . .

**Do you ever reach out and propose ideas to people/places?**

I just did it today! I don't know how well it went over, but it was worth a shot. In general it's not something I do very often.

**Did you get where you needed to go with sand?**

I think those particular sculptures are done, yes, but I have a new idea with sand that I want to test out. I got to one of the stops on the route, but there might be a few more.

**Where are you at with randomness?**

Over it. Under it. Not even interested anymore.

**Do you like to swim?**

Yes. I like being upside down underwater. It makes me uneasy and scared in a good way.

**Sculpture! Sculpture?**

Both exclamation and question. Indeed.

**A search?**

A search, a wander, a dream, a delusion, a trip, a death.

**What sort of question is best answered as an image?**

A sound.

**What sort of question is best answered as a final question?**

This one.



*Fret / Slice I*, 2015  
Woven canvas on wooden stretcher  
72 x 54 inches  
Courtesy of Standard (Oslo)  
Photograph by Vegard Kleven



*Chiral Fret / Slice*, 2014  
Woven canvas on wooden stretcher  
72 x 54 inches  
Courtesy of Standard (Oslo)  
Photograph by Vegard Kleven

# Mike Osterhout

## In Conversation With Carlo McCormick

*It's never a good look to admit to partiality. It belies the pretense of objectivity upon which criticism rests its dubious authority and inevitably fesses up to all those aspects of personality—of affiliations, animosities, and myriad other vested interests—that make culture something far less of a fair playing field and rather more like a social blood sport. Mike Osterhout brings this to mind not simply because he had the temerity years ago to curate a show called Nepotism making the machinations of friendship and community so explicit that it was, at the time, the only exhibition ever at the August old alternative space that put it on to be denied all funding, but because, well, for whatever reasons I can barely fathom, he is among my very favorite artists.*

*For the decades now that I have closely followed his art and done my useless best to tell others about it, I've taken an unhealthy pleasure in his misery, enjoying his cult-like status among far-flung generations of musicians and artists who appreciate his weirdness and respect his uncompromising purity, as well as feeling my epic faith in his genius somehow ratified by the fact it has been so consistently overlooked. As many we know and support have gone on to be art stars, and many more have folded up their tents and reinvented themselves in fields where creativity does not entail dealing with the art world, Osterhout's perseverance has been nothing less than astounding, responding to the ongoing ignominy of being ignored by producing evermore work and pushing it all so much further. Perhaps it is because he reminds me of what we thought all those years ago when we were young, that success, fame, and fortune were indeed signifiers of something truly lame and compromised, or maybe it is because I understand his failures to be very much my own. If only I could have explained his work better to people surely they would have gotten it. That, alas, would have entailed me actually understanding his work as much as I appreciate it, and while every little bit of it is fully intelligible, the real grace of his practice is that in its entirety it is quite inexplicable. I'll never give up on believing in Mike Osterhout as an artist, but at least here and now I'll let him explain himself for a change.*

*So you're in Sullivan County, back where you first started as a kid, but there's a lifetime in between—you kind of had to have your early life fall apart and fall away first before becoming a conceptual artist in San Francisco, and then a tenure as part of the East Village scene in New York, before coming back up here. How did that work out?*

Well, it's still working out. I think all artists have a tendency to step away from early influences, only to come back and reassess them later in one's career. I grew up very small town, detached from the intellectual world, and completely oblivious to what art was, or could be. Music was a big influence. I went to Woodstock as a 16-year-old kid. But I knew very little about visual art, and absolutely nothing of conceptualism. San Francisco introduced me to that and New York introduced me to the "art world." And now, some 40 years later, I'm back in the sticks trying to make sense of all the steps and missteps.

*As unlikely as it would seem for a connection to exist between the Bay area conceptualism of the late-seventies, the market-based social economies of the New York art world, and now this rural incarnation of your art over the past 20 years, these different bodies of work you produced fit pretty well together. I think of all your projects as being cut from the same cloth, such as creating a warehouse or buying a cow and branding it with your art in San Francisco, then setting up both a conceptual art gallery and a migratory performance art church in New York, to now owning and operating the oldest church in your county and repurposing an old synagogue as your studio.*

I guess that's part of my unconscious methodology. Threads run through all that work. The thread of the institution is an important one. I've always liked to fuck with religious, academic, and even business institutions. The first church I did in San Francisco was a one-night performance with a hired Black minister who had had himself crucified in a park in Oakland. A year later, I did a one-night brothel at the same location. MO David Gallery started in San Francisco then moved to New York, only to close in 1986 and re-open as MO David North in 2010. These themes can take twists and turns, so that going to seminary seems as legit as running a brothel or singing in a rock band. I want the work to reflect an honesty, knowing that I can stop at any time and move on to something completely new I never would've considered previously.

*I like how you describe your path as a series of "steps and missteps." It's not like that old canard about how great art always has the inherent chance of failure, which is certainly true, but kind of how all your genius is also very much a total folly. I'm pretty sure not any of the three incarnations of your gallery made what could be called a profit, and quite sure that you would be the only cat who ever lost money doing a warehouse, so it's like all your schemes manifest themselves as art through their incapacity as business. The same way you make your congregation each burn a dollar bill to enter your church, rather than levying a more practical tithe, it seems equally appropriate that your master plan to bottle water out of a local spring and market it as "holy water" from your church is brilliant precisely because it didn't really work.*

*Do you think then, in your address of institutions, that your work needs modesty or even a degree of ridiculousness to subvert the authority we otherwise too easily invest in churches, galleries, and the enterprise of business?*

Yes, most definitely. The failure that occurs, whether purposefully intended or not, subverts the project in a way that, I'm sorry to say, elevates it as art. Who cares about another successful business? When I begin any of these works, like the holy water or the gallery, my hope is to make money. The problem is I'm way better at making art than succeeding in business on almost any level. Slowly I'm realizing this. It's taken years. My father was a stockbroker, and quite a good businessman. I used to think I had inherited a little of his business savvy. Finally I'm admitting that I have none.

On the other hand, the Church of the Little Green Man was set up to burn dollar bills from day one. The subversion was inherent in the project from the beginning. It's the glue that has kept us together for 30 years. We are a congregation of modest means. If we had ever charged to get in the door, we would have imploded in petty in-fighting greed over \$20, years ago. That burning dollar bill keeps us going. I'm not immune to "market envy," but for now I've promised myself not to come up with anymore crackpot "business ideas."

*Maybe you didn't inherit your father's financial savvy, but you did inherit some perverse interest in terms of business. Lots of artists today think of their job as a business, but I rather prefer how your ideas on business*



CRUCISELFIE, 2014. Photo collage on board, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

*are more like conceptual art. As far as parental legacies, however, there might be something to be said for the abject ineptitude of your dad's passion as a handyman. You may have real high-end skills in carpentry that would not compare with your father's less accomplished and utterly stubborn efforts in that regard, but I like to think your insane and often hilarious sculptural combines share something of this visionary streak with the DIY hobbyist.*

One of the classic stories of my old man was of him taking back a brand new drill he bought at the local hardware store. He'd tried for an hour to drill a hole to no avail. He took it back, pissed. "This thing's no good," he barked at the counter boy. The kid looked at the drill and clicked the button behind the trigger. My father had had the drill in reverse the whole time. Some days that's just how I feel—like the fucking drill is in reverse. I blow the engine on the car and then fill it with concrete. My old man is turning over in his grave.

*That's a great one and it kind of reminds me of the first piece you see going to your synagogue/studio: a cylindrical metal tube protruding from a hole in the front door that reveals itself once you open the door to be the front of a shotgun barrel.*

*Of course what made it all so funny with your dad and the broken drill was the blustery confidence he brought to these things. The way you approach your projects—the demented ambitions you dream for them all—has a bit of that as well, but it seems the wisdom in your art always comes about from maintaining a contrary position of not knowing.*

I think one of the greatest perks of being an artist is admitting just how little you know. It gives you such freedom in a world that wants everyone to be a goddamn expert. I've never much known what I was doing. Even when I professed to be a so-called expert, it was pure bullshit. I went to seminary knowing nothing of religion, yet it gives me a certain cred to say I studied theology. It's all smoke and mirrors. That's why I loved punk rock—it embraced the non-talented. Attitude was everything. Modesty comes from admitting just how limited you are. Artists are basically impotent. The ones who think they are really making a difference in the world at large are delusional and usually not very interesting.

*So true, but your befuddlement is truly unique. So much of art depends on a pretense that is utterly arrogant. To hear Koons describe his art as if his interrogation of the mundane is in direct communication with God and the sublime and then to think about how you transform the mundane through the sheer whimsy of an uncanny oddity is to appreciate the very real difference between your not-knowing and the mighty unknown that has been a kind of Manifest Destiny in American art since abstract expressionism.*

*To recognize how punk's rank amateurism has been a major impetus for much of your oeuvre is spot on. So what your work may lack in arrogance we can say it more than makes up for in attitude. As you've become less of a performance artist than one who makes stuff, the punk attitude remains. Where before you would give out cocaine on a spoon as a sacrament or burn flags*



KILLED SHIRLEY, 2015. Concrete in '02 Chrysler Sebring. Courtesy of the artist.

*as a sacrifice in your church, it seems that destroying a perfectly good car and then filling it with concrete instead of properly junking it for parts and scrap, pointing a shotgun out the door of your studio, or installing a stripper pole in your church are equally thorny gestures, what we would have to call irascible objects.*

I think what you mean to say is that my fucked up performances seemed to have transformed into fucked up objects. I'll cop to that. It's still all about relationship. I didn't start out wanting to do a car piece. I KILLED SHIRLEY is the very unintentional and rather stupid blowing of my car's engine by not checking the oil. The car is a 2002 Chrysler Sebring convertible. I named her "Shirley." I loved her. It made no sense financially to put a new engine in this car, so instead of scrapping her I entombed her in concrete, turning her into an object. A lot of my work deals with death, or simply endings. I bought and branded a cow, only to have her get out on the road and get hit by a truck. I then turned the steaks into objects. The fake German painter Kristan Kohl, who I still use to do canvas work, was purposefully "killed off" in 1984, only to have her continue working.

Nowadays I'm being influenced by the rather depressive, and at times aggressively anti-aesthetic environment of Hasidic/hillbilly Sullivan County. Works like WHEEL BARRROW HENGE (a circle of broken wheel barrows around the church) reflect the landscape all around me. The only thing that sets this apart from my scrappy neighbor's yards is the formalized circle and sheer number of broken, rusted objects. I love to walk that edge, not by hoarding or fueling some advanced case of horror vacui, but by setting forth a specific work of retired workman's tools, or a hay wagon turned lion cage. Most times they don't even read as art. And that's fine with me.

*Hasidic and hillbilly, as you must rightly call it—your province is also more commonly known as the Borscht Belt, the historical seat of lowbrow Jewish American entertainments that fundamentally changed our popular culture. Probably its biggest and most enduring impact has been in terms of humor, what we think of as funny, and the way we tell those kinds of jokes, which in Catskills parlance would be called shtick.*

*A monumental TOTEM OF BRUCE made of stacked mannequins, your LION OF JUDAH CAGE, a billboard that says only FOR SALE, or any of a seemingly vast inventory of assemblage-like combines that exist somewhere between a Duchampian wink and a comedy club groan—they have the whimsy of Bay Area conceptual art, but also a remarkable lack of embarrassment when it comes to playing for laughs. I see you have recently retired your very popular crucified Jesus selfie from the front of your church property. Is it all a matter of aesthetic decisions for you or do you have to take some measure to make sure things are never too smart or too silly?*

I remember Tom Marioni, a Bay Area artist you wouldn't normally associate with humor, stating, "I take my jokes seriously." That kind of sums up my approach to absurdity in my work. The conceptualism of Howard Fried, Chris Burden, and even Linda Montano employed humor with a light touch. Devouring their work in the late-'70s, as I was just beginning to mature as an artist, gave me permission to laugh at how ridiculous the entire process of being an artist really was. Then, when I moved to New York, the artists seemed a little too serious and full of themselves. Of course there were exceptions like Robin Winters and Les Levine, but on the whole, humor in art, as in music, tends to get relegated to the novelty bin.

In the Catskills it's a completely different story. There is no art world, but like you said, there is an incredible history of shtick. At first I kept a low profile with my work, but after years of producing and not showing I decided to pepper my churchyard with increasingly large constructions. It was a little like doing street art, but since I owned the property no one could make me remove anything. Initially, it had a bit of a roadside attraction aspect that I exploited. GOD LOVES FAGS (and GOD LOVES DYKES) was echoed in Hebrew on large billboards next to a large steel SORRY sculpture. CRUCIFY THY SELFIE was patterned after those hokey tourist facades where you stick your head in the hole on top of a pilgrim or Indian and take a picture. But space is limited, so I rotate the crops in the sculpture garden, making room for new work. I have to admit CRUCIFY THY SELFIE, although a hit with the public, was a bit too carnivalesque and "silly" for my taste. So into storage it went. I don't know about work being "too smart." I can't say that's ever happened.

*Your great remove from the city, to be honest, is less than a hundred miles away, so this critical distance is perhaps just as perceptual as it is physical. You take the isolation into your work, but you do so with a great deal of social engagement that relies deeply on an extended community of fellow New York dropouts around you. How does distance and proximity work for you? You*



WHEELBARRROW HENGE, 2014–present. Broken wheelbarrows circling the Church of the Little Green Man. Courtesy of the artist.

*have all these hipster urban kids and successful artists who are into what you're doing, but you also do things like create art out of your deer and turkey hunting, even including animal parts in your pieces, that just don't fit in with the culture and politics of the art world.*

I stepped away from the art world long before I left the city. Forming the rock band Purple Geezus and the Church of Little Green Man almost simultaneously, while still living in the East Village, had a big effect on me as an artist. I considered these activities sculptural, but never really felt the need to contextualize them within the gallery environment. It was just pure fun to be a lead singer in a rock band and a "minister" in a crackpot church. So what if the art world didn't recognize it as such.



POINT BLANK, 2014. 12 gauge shotgun installed in shut door. Courtesy of the artist.



RIBS, 2012. Deer blood on rice paper. Courtesy of the artist.

I tend to think there's nothing more boring than being really good at something. In a perverse way my lack of show career has kept me hungry and willing and able to fuck with the system, unconcerned with the consequences. I have nothing to lose.

*The hunting art has been pretty off-putting for many people, but I'd say with somewhat queasy discomfort that some of Beuys's fat and felt pieces might induce more than the visceral revulsion we're likely to get with Viennese Actionism. Another outré artist material you use involves blood, and not just the blood prints from the steaks of your cow, but also the human blood prints you pull from your tattoos when they're still fresh. Again, yours is not nearly as gnarly as a lot of other blood and guts art out there, but it's such an arch decision to choose stuff like this for your art materials.*

Before I moved to the west coast I started out as a printmaker. I loved the physicality of stone lithography in particular. But what I didn't take to was the anal approach to editions. One print seemed plenty. So when I got my first tattoo in San Francisco and removed the bandage discovering the bloody image on the paper towel I knew I had my technique. This was the late-'70s, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. There was an extreme phobia surrounding blood. As an art material it seemed perfect. My first tattoo series was to find 12 people (six men and six women) who had no tattoos, and have them agree to have one of my designs tattooed on their person, pulling prints from each. The tattoo icon Lyle Tuttle did the work and I ended up showing the monoprints at his "tattoo museum" in San Francisco. Over the years I've had more print work done on myself than others. If it is a name or a word I have it tattooed backwards in order to get the print to read correctly. The print is more important than reading it on my arm.

As far as the hunting pieces are concerned, I also use deer blood in various ways. My grandfather was a butcher. I knew how to butcher a deer long before I knew how to hunt one. There's no sensationalism implied in this material. You mentioned Beuys. I've always had an affinity for the elegance of his work, no matter what material he chose. Pulling prints from a cow's nose, a memorial tattoo, or the rib cage of a deer I shot and butchered is a little like pressing flowers in a book: a kind of ongoing journal, far from the shock of the Viennese.

*That's right, it would be hard find a conceptual artist of your generation who did not have some deep affinity for the work of Beuys—he was such a game changer that way. You even bought an old schoolhouse near your church and ran a summer intensive program in cahoots with the San Francisco Art Institute, and you adopted Beuys concept of "social sculpture" as the primary pedagogy. I can see how you would take to his guiding belief that artists should put their art out into the world as a transformative act, but Beuys's social sculpture was of course so utopian. It's not that your art lacks optimism in any way—perhaps it's almost foolishly hopeful—but it doesn't go about these things with that same kind of radical certainty and confidence, like it's too idiosyncratic, frail, and flawed to really try to change the world as Beuys claimed he was doing. I see your art very much as social sculpture, but it does beg the question of what it is really doing out there in our world.*

While I was still an undergrad at SFIA, Howard Fried assigned me three artists to do a classroom lecture on: Beuys, Terry Fox, and Les Levine. I knew Terry's work a little and Beuys hardly at all. The deeper I dug into Beuys the more impressed I was. He was the big voice of that generation of conceptualists, almost a megalomaniac in the way he presented his theories, as well as objects. The confidence was intoxicating. But what was lacking with Beuys and Fox was humor. Les Levine had that in spades. Les and I became friends when I moved MO David to New York in the early-'80s and I even showed him. Les didn't lack confidence either, but he had a way of fucking with the system I really liked. He could be smart as well as funny.

*THE OLD SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL SCULPTURE* took Beuys's lofty ideals and put them into literal practice. With the help of Tony Labat (an artist I owe a lot to), we established a graduate school program in a one-room schoolhouse. Instead of concentrating on the studio, I brought in a faculty that would discuss strategies for making art. They each took up residence over a 24-hour period, eating, drinking, and hanging out with the students. It was a big hit. The "world," as you put it, can be as simple as your front yard, a blog, or a magazine interview. The word "artist" has become so associated with market and "art world," that it seems to have less and less to do with what I do. Nonetheless, it remains one of the last refuges for all of us admittedly uncertain, flawed fools. I have no intention of changing the world. Utopia never interested me.

# Janice Guy

## In Conversation With Constance Lewallen

Janice Guy and Margaret Murray opened Murray Guy Gallery in 1998 on 17th Street near 10th Avenue in Chelsea. The gallery, highly regarded for its intellectual rigor, represents an international roster of artists who work primarily in photography, video, film, and text, although a recent show featured paintings for the first time. I interviewed Guy last April in her gallery.

**I know you received a BA at Sunderland Polytechnic in the northeast of England, and then enrolled at the Düsseldorf Academy in Germany. That's a story in and of itself. What made you decide to study in Germany?**  
It's actually very simple. What people don't realize is in the 1970s the art scene was quite small in England. There were very few private galleries. This changed dramatically at the end of the 1980s with the Young British Artists. If you went to art school it meant that you would likely end up teaching art in high school or that you would become a commercial artist.

I grew up in a village in Leicestershire, in the Midlands, and went to art school in a depressed industrial town in the northeast. I had to leave. I applied for various scholarships to study abroad. I don't remember knowing much about art in Germany. I knew of Joseph Beuys of course and I had read a fascinating, three-part article in *Studio International* about Sigmar Polke, and I think I was aware of Gerhard Richter. I was awarded the German Academic Exchange Grant (DAAD) grant—they even sent me on an intensive course in German!

**That must have been a surprise.**

I don't think anyone else was applying at the time [laughter]. I wasn't attracted to the idea of Düsseldorf; Hamburg or Berlin sounded far more romantic, but Düsseldorf at the time had an exciting and international art scene. Apart from all the artists who lived there permanently or periodically—Palermo, Spoerri, Broodthaers—there was Kraftwerk, the club Creamcheese, and great museums in all the surrounding towns—Cologne, Krefeld, Bochum, Mönchengladbach, Essen. And there was Konrad Fischer's gallery. I was lucky to be there right at that time.

**Joseph Beuys had left by then?**

He had officially been dismissed from his professorship but still had a studio and students at the school. It wasn't possible to push him aside; he was already a very public figure.

**Did you get to know him?**

Not really. He was often around, but I had arrived after his influence at the school had waned somewhat. I worked part-time in a gallery near his house and would make pick-ups or deliveries to his studio—occasionally he would open the door. I think that was the closest I ever got to him.

**How long were you there?**

I had a scholarship for one year but I stayed five. I was able to continue as a student of the Academy. I had come from a provincial art school in England and here the teachers were Bernd and Hilla Becher and Gerhard Richter. At first, my professor was Klaus Rinke, a sculptor. I had made sculpture in England, figurative stuff, and had just started taking photographs—as sketches for the sculpture. In fact my portfolio submission for the DAAD grant was only these photographs.

**Tell me about Klaus Rinke.**

Klaus is a sculptor. At the time he did performances, often involving his sculpture, and made performance-based photographs, which very much interested me.

**I remember that he was in Los Angeles.**

Yes, he lived in LA for a while, but I had little contact with him after my time in Germany. Rinke favored his male students. In any case, there were only three or four of us women. Later I became a student of Bernd and Hilla Becher. I also worked with Nam June Paik on some of his projects, including a performance in homage to George Maciunas.

**Were there any other foreign students?**

Few, though in our class there was an exchange student from Sudan, and Japanese students, some who had come from Japan to study with Rinke, others from Düsseldorf's Japanese community, at the time the biggest in Europe.

**Who were some of your fellow students?**

Thomas Schütte, Thomas Struth, Reinhard Mucha. Katarina Fritsch was there then, as was Isa Genzken. I was also friends with Lothar Baumgarten. Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen spent a lot of time in Düsseldorf. That was before the art market became strong and many artists decamped to Cologne in the 1980s.

We spent a lot of time at Konrad Fischer's gallery. In fact, Fischer was one of my biggest influences in Düsseldorf. He showed Carl Andre, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, Gilbert & George, Richard Long, as well as On Kawara, Mario Merz, and Giuseppe Penone. Konrad was incredibly generous and would invite us to his house after his openings, where we hung out with these artists.



Janice Guy, *Untitled*, 1979. Hand-tinted gelatin silver print, 7 x 8.5 inches. Courtesy of Janice Guy.

**Fischer was responsible for getting American artists shown in Europe.**

He was responsible for the careers of a lot of American conceptual artists, who were showing more in Europe than in the United States.

**Yes, there was a network of galleries in Europe such as Sonnabend, Sperone, Toselli . . .**

And curators like Kasper Koenig.

**And Harald Szeemann.**

Exactly. It was a good time to be in Germany.

**Did you have shows then? This was when women were beginning to be shown more.**

In fact my work was in a large survey show in Berlin titled *International Women Artists, 1877 to 1977*, which travelled to Frankfurt and Munich. It was a big, big show. I had work in some group shows and then I had my first solo gallery show at Rolf Ricke in Cologne in 1979.

**Were you aware of other women who were working in a similar vein?**

The European artists I was looking at included Katharina Sieverding, Rebecca Horn, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold, Valie Export, Gina Pane, Ketty La Rocca. It was great to see the work of some of these artists again in Connie Butler's 2007 show *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. The Americans I was reading about were Hannah Wilke, Joan Jonas, and Yvonne Rainer. In Düsseldorf I saw a performance by Marina Abramović and Ulay. Klaus Rinke was a friend of Marina's and invited them to perform in our studio. They built a wall in the middle of the studio and threw themselves against it. It made an enormous impression on me.

**They did that often—it was physically punishing.**

I think it was her strongest work.

**Recently you showed your early photographic work in Cleopatra's, a gallery in Brooklyn. Martha Schwendener, in her review, related your work to that of Francesca Woodman, Cindy Sherman, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Hannah Wilke . . .**

All of them were working with their bodies. I was very flattered to be mentioned in the context of these artists.

**Didn't I read that Thomas Struth stored your work for many years?**

Yes, for some thirty years. You can't imagine what it was like for me to find all of my prints and negatives intact. A very good friend! I had left it all with him when I went to live in Italy.

**I didn't know that!**

After five years in Germany I was unsure whether I wanted to stay longer or return to the UK. So I decided to go to Italy for one year and I ended up staying twelve.

**What city did you live in?**

First I lived in Rome—I had a travel grant from the Düsseldorf Academy—then Naples.

**What date was this?**

1980.

**What did you do in Italy?**

Things changed a lot when I went to Italy—it was a different life altogether. It was relatively inexpensive to live in Rome, and I did translations for magazines and catalogues and other texts. It was the time of the Transavanguardia . . .

**Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, and Enzo Cucchi, so named and promoted by Achille Bonito Oliva.**

That work didn't interest me much.

**How long were you in Rome?**

I was in Rome for five years. During that time I stopped making my own work—I didn't have a studio or a darkroom; I no longer had my peer group. But I did frequent the galleries—Sperone and also Pieroni, Mario Diacono, Maria Colao of Primo Piano—and I got to know some of Rome's particularly interesting artists—Luigi Ontani, Emilio Prini, Gino De Dominicis.

**What took you to Naples?**

I was offered a job with Lia Rumma, together with Lucio Amelio one of the great Italian gallerists . . . both in Naples! This was in 1984 just a few years after the devastating earthquake of 1980. Repairs to the city were only makeshift, often ineffectual, and most of the rebuilding funds had vanished into the businesses of the Camorra. I lived in a 17th-century palazzo with wooden planks buttressing the stairwell. When I was moving in and unable to get my furniture past the wood, the doorman lent me a saw! Naples was damaged, anarchic, and in the grip of organized crime. It was dangerous and very exciting.

**What artists were in the gallery?**

Lia Rumma had a close personal connection to *arte povera* and a collection of extraordinary works of Pistoletto, Kounellis, and Pascoli. She was showing Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler, and Don Judd. When I worked for her, we showed Michelangelo Pistoletto, Enrico Castellani, and Aldo Rossi. We showed Gino de Dominicis, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Günther Förg, Reinhard Mucha, Dan Graham, and Haim Steinbach. We helped organize a remarkable group exhibition, *Rooted Rhetoric*, of contemporary American conceptual artists at Castel dell'Ovo, the Norman fortress that sits out on the bay.

It was an extraordinary time engaging with these artists with the backdrop of Vesuvius, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, Capri and Amalfi, and the baroque Naples of the seicento. Naples has remained a very important place and time for me.

**Why did you leave?**

Though I was traveling a lot for Lia, Naples was beginning to feel too constricting. Then in 1989, Barbara Gladstone hired me to direct a gallery in Rome that she was going to open. She had already rented a beautiful space in Trastevere near the botanical gardens, when she was suddenly proposed a partnership in New York with Galleria Christian Stein from Turin, at which point she postponed opening the Rome gallery. Together with the art advisor Thea Westreich she set up a residency project in the Trastevere space, which I ran. We invited artists to stay for two months at a time. On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner, Franz West, Christopher Wool, and Richard Prince were among the artists invited.

**Sounds like this was a great job.**

It was. Cindy Sherman worked on her history photographs. Thom Struth made his Pantheon and Vatican Museum photographs. I was a facilitator, studio assistant, translator, and guide. The Rome Studio operated for two years. Then, in 1991, I came to New York to be the director of SteinGladstone, which, like many of the partnerships at that time, did not survive the recession.

**What came next?**

After a couple of years I started doing shows in my apartment on King Street, a school building that had been converted into condos.

**Who did you show?**

A lot of women. Katy Schimert had her first solo show there. There was a three-person show with Cecily Brown, Anna Gaskell, and Bonnie Collura, a film and light installation by Lisa Roberts, a solo with Beat Streuli. I also did a show of Matt Mullican's early drawings, pinned to the wall, floor to ceiling, and a beautiful exhibition of drawings by Thomas Schütte.

**When did you meet Margaret Murray?**

In 1995 we met casually at a dinner. Both English, we naturally started to talk, and it turned out that Margaret was also doing shows—renting spaces short term for exhibitions, which today would be called pop-up galleries. After a few years of this activity we both realized we couldn't continue operating without a permanent location open not only by appointment, and decided to start a gallery together. Margaret curated one of the last shows I had in King Street, which included Francis Cape, whom we have represented since.

**You must share a sensibility.**

Also a similar kind of spirit about how we wanted to do it. It was good for me to work with someone from England again after having been away so long.

**Murray Guy opened in 1998?**

Yes, on 17th Street in Chelsea where we still are.



Installation view, *The Meal of the Lion*, Leidy Churchman at Murray Guy, New York, 2015. Courtesy of Murray Guy.



Installation view, *Dear Mr. Armstrong*, Katy Schimert at Janice Guy, New York, 1995. Courtesy of Murray Guy.



Installation view, *Pied Piper Part II: Ringing Rocks*, Sergei Tcherepnin for Art Basel: Art Statements, Basel, 2013. Courtesy of Murray Guy.

**Do you feel there are two contemporary art worlds—the conceptual world in its broadest sense, which you see in biennials, and the one that dominates the art fairs, i.e., salable works, mostly paintings.**

I wouldn't necessarily see these two worlds as being so far apart these days. Recently, we took a break from art fairs to see how it would feel, and to concentrate on the gallery exhibitions.

**But can you afford not to participate in fairs?**

For the visibility of the gallery, not really. Financially it is always hit and miss. Now it's a matter of choosing which one or two fairs to participate in the future. We wouldn't want to do more. With such high costs, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to make it financially worth our while.

**Have you participated in the satellite fairs like NADA?**

That's the way we started.

**I want to end by asking you about your own work. How did the show of your early photographic work at Cleopatra's come about?**

It really all began back in 2007 when Matthew Higgs (who is an artist of the gallery) asked to see what I had done as an art student. He then included some of my photographs in a group show he co-curated with Marilyn Minter and Fabienne Stephan at White Columns—*Early Work*—with gallerists who had once been artists. Gavin Brown, Maureen Paley, Jeffrey Deitch, Pat Hearn, and Konrad Lueg (aka Fischer).

**And that led to?**

Then he gave me a White Room solo show at White Columns. The Metropolitan Museum acquired a photograph and showed it in the exhibition *Photography on Photography*, which inaugurated the new contemporary photography gallery in 2008. Over the years the work has been shown at The Apartment in Vancouver and in group shows. When Cleopatra's called to ask if I would like to have a solo show there, I was delighted! It's been such a great experience working with these young women who are running such a smart curatorial program as well as working full-time in other galleries; in Bridget Donahue's case in her own gallery. Cleopatra's is in Greenpoint where many young artists live. It was fun to show in such a lively young context.

**And it was a big success. Do you plan to continue showing your early work or to commence taking photographs again?**

I recently printed photographs from old negs of mine I had never printed before. There are still some works from that time I would like to revisit (The Apartment, a gallery in Vancouver, showed some of the work at NADA, New York). I do want to pick up the camera again.



Barbara Probst, *Exposure #94: NYC, Washington & Watts Streets, 10:18:11, 1:02 p.m.*, 2011. Ultrachrome ink on cotton paper, 3 parts, 61 x 44 inches each. Courtesy of Murray Guy.



# Jemima Kirke

## In Conversation With

Paul J. Karlstrom

The following conversation took place at Paul Karlstrom's San Francisco home on March 22, 2014, the day after the opening of Brooklyn-based Jemima Kirke's first solo exhibition at Fouladi Projects, also in San Francisco. The main subject was her experience at the Rhode Island School of Design. She admits that she did not take art school seriously and now regrets that. She "made things" but did little serious painting until, a few years later in Delray Beach, Florida, she was "rescued" by a paintbrush. The following excerpts, edited for publication, tell Jemima's story in her often-colorful words. Subsequently, she has divided her time between acting and spending hours in the studio, continuing to paint portraits of friends and family. The critical question in terms of what her future as an artist might hold is to what extent she will move to a broader range of subjects and claim them as her own, thereby separating herself from her various admired sources, notably Alice Neel. The prospect of observing that evolution is intriguing.

**Today is the day after a very special one in your life as a young artist. And mine, too, because we met at your opening. I believe it was your first solo gallery show. I understand from Hope [Bryson] and Holly [Fouladi] at Fouladi Projects that you almost sold out.**

Everything?

**Two things left. That's almost . . .**

No, I was saying "everything" thinking that maybe those last two sold, which would surprise me.

**I'm interested to know how you feel about that. Was that expected, almost selling everything opening night? This generally happens only for much more established artists.**

It wasn't expected, and I woke up this morning thoroughly depressed.

**Really?**

I did. I woke up at 5:00 and I couldn't go back to sleep. And I don't know exactly why. But I thought with any sort of great change there's always that feeling of remorse. I just felt at that point that my obligations to myself and my work had changed. And I suddenly felt the pressure. It no longer became this exciting endeavor—or—this possibility of going into the studio and it may or may not work.

**And escaping?**

Yes, to escape. It may not work, let's just paint and see what happens. I might not feel the pressure, but I'm anticipating that I will. And also how many of the paintings sold because of the show and [how many] because they're really good. I have no control over that—why people like it. But you can't help but think of the least-wanted reason—just because I've made a name for myself on *Girls*.

**That sounds like a very mature response to what happened. Because it's very unusual for new artists, for younger artists—by the way, are you 28 or 29?**

28, 29 in a month, so you can say I'm 29. I feel 36. It's the same shit, isn't it?

**Yes, well, it is. It's just a matter of—of your youth—how young. And you've enjoyed—I can't say unprecedented success, but unusual.**

For me it is.

**And there may be a little bit of anxiety, as you say, tied to that because of the expectations. Is that right?**

Yeah. Well, when I saw them hung on the walls so beautifully and people—especially you—taking them so seriously, I was humiliated. I really was. Oh, my God, if I had known this is how professional the presentation would be, I would have done so many things differently. Or, God, now does this mean that people are watching me closely? Watching my work closely—what I obviously always wanted.



Self Portrait, 2014. Oil on canvas, 18 x 22 inches. Courtesy of Fouladi Projects.

**Well, it's like you've been deprived of a more leisurely ascent.**

Yes. I always said when I was depressed about my work . . . I'll never compete and all that. My husband would remind me of my favorite artists and be like, "Go look at their biographies again and look at when they got their breaks or when their work was the best." That was comfort to me, that it's okay that this set of paintings is not what will be my best work. They don't have to be. I'm not as smart as I will be in 20 years.

**And not as practiced.**

As experienced and practiced, yeah. There are some paintings I look back on from 10 years ago, and I'm like, wow, those are great. And I'll never make those again because they came from a specific time and set of circumstances. Those were accidents in a way—a lot of my good paintings I find are accidents, and I hope that one day those accidents will be more frequent.

**Well, I expect they will be. It's interesting and becoming, this modesty.**

It's not modesty, though. It's insecurity.

**But one thing that you'll run up against—and I just want to talk a bit about what I dealt with straight on in the essay [in the gallery brochure]—is the celebrity factor. You are a celebrity, thanks to your buddy Lena Dunham.**

Yeah.

**And to *Girls*. In my essay I wrote: "Thanks to the popularity of *Girls*, Jemima is far better known than most of her contemporaries making art. It's extremely difficult for anybody to establish a reputation in the art world. In visibility, at least, Kirke has a foot up."**

Yes, I do. I agree. But a couple years ago, in 2010, when Lena and I went into this show together, I was terrified and very defensive about anyone approaching me about my paintings.



Cadence, 2014. Oil on canvas, 26 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Fouladi Projects.

**Like Jessa [Johansson, her character in *Girls*]?**

Yeah, like Jessa. Except back then I imagined myself as an old, gay artist—like a writer, Truman Capote—you know, someone who could say these things and get away with it. Because they were so crazy that no one would question them.

**What do you feel that you missed at RISD? In other words, you recognized it was there, but you chose for whatever reason not . . .**

I think it was the work ethic. Art school is such a luxurious time because all you have to do, you only have to do your assignments and be in the studio. You don't have children, you don't have bills to pay—well, some people do. I don't want to sound insensitive. I didn't take the opportunities to meet with the teachers and take their advice seriously. I guess I was a narcissist.

**From your experience and then from your own thinking about art school, what would you say is the actual value of going there? One view has it that you just do your work, so why waste time going to school? What do you feel was valuable there that other people were taking advantage of? It must have to do with the teachers . . .**

Yes, it's the teachers. And for the students, it's the isolation, I think, of being in a place where your sole purpose is to make stuff and that's it. I mean, when you get out into your life, a large percent of your time is doing other things that you have to get done and you try and find windows of time to work, to paint—whatever it is you do.

**Right.**

But I also think it's the other students. You're in a room with these sectioned-off little cubicles that they call studios with 20 other kids, working around the clock. And everyone's making shit, and sometimes we make good stuff.

**But it's so exciting.**

It's so exciting and you are not yet—you don't have to call yourself an artist yet. Like, you don't have the pressure of that being your career, your vocation. It's just something you're studying.

**Didn't you have somebody among the professors with whom you made a connection?**

Yeah, I loved him so much.

**You had a crush?**

No, I did not have a crush on him. I wanted to be him. His name was Alfred De Credico. I was his TA [teacher's assistant] for three years in a row. I think he was a little bit Charles Manson-y in that way. Like, he could collect these admirers. People really, really did fall for him. People followed him because he was one of those people who had such strong opinions . . . who expressed with such conviction and passion. There were some things he taught me and other things he encouraged in me that no other teachers did. But for a long time I couldn't paint without him in my head. So I was a little trapped by him.

**So you were a TA and yet you weren't going to your classes or anything. How . . .**

I sometimes didn't go to his classes to be the TA. He fired me one time. Fired me, but I was still his friend.

**You were a good student in that De Credico world?**

For him. I was one of his students, and he had a few of—I don't know—these followers. It was like the Manson cult. The first year I took his class he hated everything I made. He was a drawing teacher, and he would call out my drawings as examples of what not to do. Even at the end, he used to take people's drawings. His son was there every day. I don't know why he needed a TA.

**He wanted followers.**

He did, yeah. He was a total narcissist. He had a laser pointer, and he would point to something and then his son would go up and take them and keep them. But mine he would take because he said they were so bad he had to use them as examples for future classes. My very last year at RISD I brought him a huge suitcase of drawings and I just dumped them on his desk. He stopped the class. It was the most gratifying experience when he said, "You have really gotten good." And I loved it. He's like, "No, some of these drawings. I want some of these drawings." I said, "Well, you can't have them. Because now that you've said they're good, I want them."

My husband bought me a painting of his for my birthday last year after he died. It was pretty cool. [But] I had to kill him—in my head at least—because I couldn't work without him. So I know it sounds like I was a kook, and I was, but essentially I really started taking art—and myself—seriously years later.

**So, what did you get from AI?**

He explained to me, and I finally understood, that art is bigger than me. And what I make is bigger than myself, that I'm not the controller of what I make. I am not dictating this process, we're working together. It's more of a happening, something happens . . .

**It's collaboration.**

It's a collaboration basically between me and the . . . the stuff, the marks I'm putting on paper. He also said—and this is not novel now, but it was for me at the time—at the first class he picked up a cell phone and he put it on the table, and he said, "This is a cell phone and I can see what this looks like, and I know exactly what a cell phone looks like, I don't need you to show me exactly what a cell phone looks like." And kids in art school need to know that. But I didn't realize how to get away from that [technique]. I'm very good at rendering something exactly. I know anatomy. But he was saying, "If I wanted to see this, I'd take a picture of it—show me something else."

**That's well said and true. And this brings us right up to the modernist expressive stylization and simplification—seen in your work—that for many years contributed to a fierce, conservative resistance to abstraction.**

Right.

**You got your BFA in 2008. So you're out of art school. What happened? How did you become a responsible, productive artist coming from the space where you were? And I can't resist this—maybe the rebellion and misbehavior at RISD is the very experience that helped create Jessa, your character on *Girls*.**

Yes. Well, Lena took a lot of my experience for *Girls*.



Sasha, 2014. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches. Courtesy of Fouladi Projects.

**That's what I wanted to know because I think—and I don't want to get us off track—but I do think that, as much as I tried to avoid references to *Girls* and tried to say, okay, that's a thing that she does—there has to be something to your relationship . . .**

Yes, there has to be because I'm not an actor. I went into this with no training whatsoever, and every day it's scary for me because I really didn't know what I was doing. Lena had to write me as me. She had to write something I could do. I'm a performer. I know how to put on a show, and I used to do it very often, so Lena knew I could do it. She's like, "If I give you someone who's easily accessible, a character that's easily accessible I know you can pull off these lines." And that's what I did.

**You described yourself to me as "directionless" at the time. How did you get back on—or just on—course as a committed artist, the real thing?**

Well after various misadventures I ended up living in Florida for a year. I worked in an art supply shop in Delray Beach. And this man used to come in and buy his paints. I found him a little bit creepy because the first time he met me he said that I could come and paint in his studio. And right away I was like, you know, my radar. I'm not going to paint in your studio, I don't know you. But then by the third time he came in and asked, I was desperate. I was desperate to work, to make something. And that was the moment where I knew that was something that I needed or I would die.

**That's who you were—or are.**

So I gave it a shot and I went to his studio. Turns out this Jeff Whyman was a fucking angel. He literally gave me a wall with a piece of sheetrock, gave me his old paint and a bunch of old canvases—rolled-up canvas that he said I could cut up and paint over—and he left me alone. He left me alone.

**Why did you choose to paint representationally?**

Because I felt like I didn't have anything else. I was desperate. I was so used to my little cozy nook that I had made for myself in my studio in school, which was where I had my collection—I collected junk, you know, all kinds of magazines and paper but also mixed materials. I didn't have any of that stuff. I was in this nice studio in Delray, and so I just had to start from there. And it also, I think, took the pressure off to paint because I really didn't know—I thought I didn't know how to do it really.

**But you didn't have any preconceived notions of what art had to be, even for you? It was just . . .**

I think I did, but maybe. . . Listen, I've done a lot. I was in art school and I am a good—I can draw. I did study the skeleton and I studied the muscles. But I hadn't done it in so long that the pressure was off; I'd forgotten everything. But it started to come back.

**And so did you start getting better?**

Yeah, I did. I got better. So then my sister Lola came to visit me and . . . I painted her.

**Rather quickly, we're bringing you to the point where you're beginning to create what we saw in the gallery last night.**

Well, I do love portraiture, but I do feel like there's more for me to paint. There are still lifes and landscapes.

**Haven't you done some already?**

Yeah.

**And even done some portraits of men.**

Yes, occasionally. I would rather paint younger boys . . .

**They're sort of like *girls* anyway.**

Exactly, they really are. And so I've painted younger boys—but I would like to paint other things. I really am going to paint things other than portraiture. But how could you want to paint anything other than portraits? I do love portraiture.

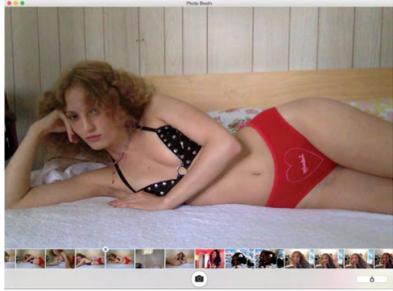
**Because you're doing individual people. But somehow you came to the point where—and I wish we could carry this on, we can't this evening—you recognize a worthy subject.**

Yeah.

**And then the art moved beyond being all about you. I think I see that as part of your progression.**

I think that was demonstrated by bringing in another person. You know, it used to be me sitting at 3:00 in the morning cross-legged on the floor in some delirium, like, pasting things together. It was almost like dreaming. Whereas with another person there's someone else who's involved in this creative process. There's actual life in it. Yes, bringing in the other person—as a subject to paint. It's interesting because the process used to be for me so narcissistic. There almost always has to be another person involved to remind me that to be worthwhile my art must be about something other than myself. This is something that I didn't really appreciate until well after RISD.

chat sessions with petra collins & madelyne beckles -  
two bffs who like in two different countries



illustrations by grace miceli



**Petra:** hiii  
are we good

**Madelyne:** Hiiii!  
Ya, So  
How have you been feeling this summer overall?

**P:** lol like shit  
L.A really bums me out  
I've had to be there for so much of it  
like literally no one ever goes outside  
and it's so lonely  
wbu.

**M:** Yeah I feel u  
I was really depressed  
But when I changed my surroundings and like took charge  
of the situation I've felt way better  
I think that's the thing about being older is like recognizing when  
u aren't  
happy and changing it

**P:** totally  
I know where and when i'm happy  
and if and when I need to get out  
its also easier to create art when i'm sad or angry though  
haha  
its a crazy thing  
anger is like my main driving force I feel

**M:** Yeah seriously I've done so much for myself in that way when  
I feel isolated  
Which is kinda fucked up but I guess a positive can come out of a  
negative lol  
Whats been ur summer sad song?

**P:** i'm going through my spotify  
i've been obsessed with What's Up by 4NonBlondes  
which is lol  
but it makes me angry and sad and happy at the same time  
and I always sing along to it  
real loud

**M:** Yeah I love that  
Also Joey by Concrete Blonde  
So good sad and empowering

**P:** omg ya joey!!!  
I think i've made a big realization in my life about my past aka  
certain toxic relationship and i've created a lot of work out of it

**M:** That's really good!  
What have you done to change it  
or yourself?

**P:** I dunno it literally took so long  
but cheesy as it sounds i've made art  
because as much as I want to speak to this person and tell them  
how they've hurt me i just said fuck it and made some stuff.  
I feel like we both went through that  
its hard too because I feel like the "art world" especially in nyc is  
the same shit like that of a bad abusive relationship.  
dudes who just rape and fuck you over and want you to get the  
fuck out of their scene.  
)  
its crazy how sexism classism and racism still exist heavily

**M:** Wow I know it makes me so sad  
I mean the times I feel most depressed are inherently because  
dudes  
Which makes me so mad  
and it sucks that as a women and women artists we can't really  
escape the patriarchy  
and for me white supremacy  
I've thought a lot about that this summer actually and have done  
a lot of reading to help cope  
Like bell hooks obviously, her book 'the will to change' really  
shifted my perception of the world this summer  
And how systems of oppression fuck EVERYONE over not just  
me

**P:** wait explain bell hooks <3  
ya totally!

**M:** its about men masculinity and love  
it just kind of explains how patriarchy fucks over men by having  
them try so hard to be unemotional and in turn they break our  
hearts  
but also I think that as we grow more comfortable with ourselves  
the less we will have to rely on other people for our wholeness  
and happiness  
but maybe lets switch gears - what was your best moment this  
summer as a happy way to end off?

**P:** ah  
hmm  
yes  
best part was visiting my family in budapest, Anna hadn't been  
back in 8 years which is crazy

**M:** So grounding  
Whoa!

**P:** ya it was really good to see my grandma and my aunt and my  
sister all in one place  
all generations of women  
because each one has gone through so much and is so strong  
it was really inspiring

**M:** thats really beautiful

**P:** wbu

**M:** I feel the same way, going away to London with my mom and  
grandma was really special  
I dont think we have ever traveled just the three of us and I dont  
know when it will happen again  
so I feel lucky to have had that oppurtunity  
We are all so alike though lol our voices, our style, I can imagine  
anyone else in our family would've been like so annoyed. Baha

**P:** HAHA omg i know  
its so crazy with you guys

**M:** lolol  
well im excited to see you next week  
we can be happy lol  
or sad together hahaha  
love u

**P:** love u too!



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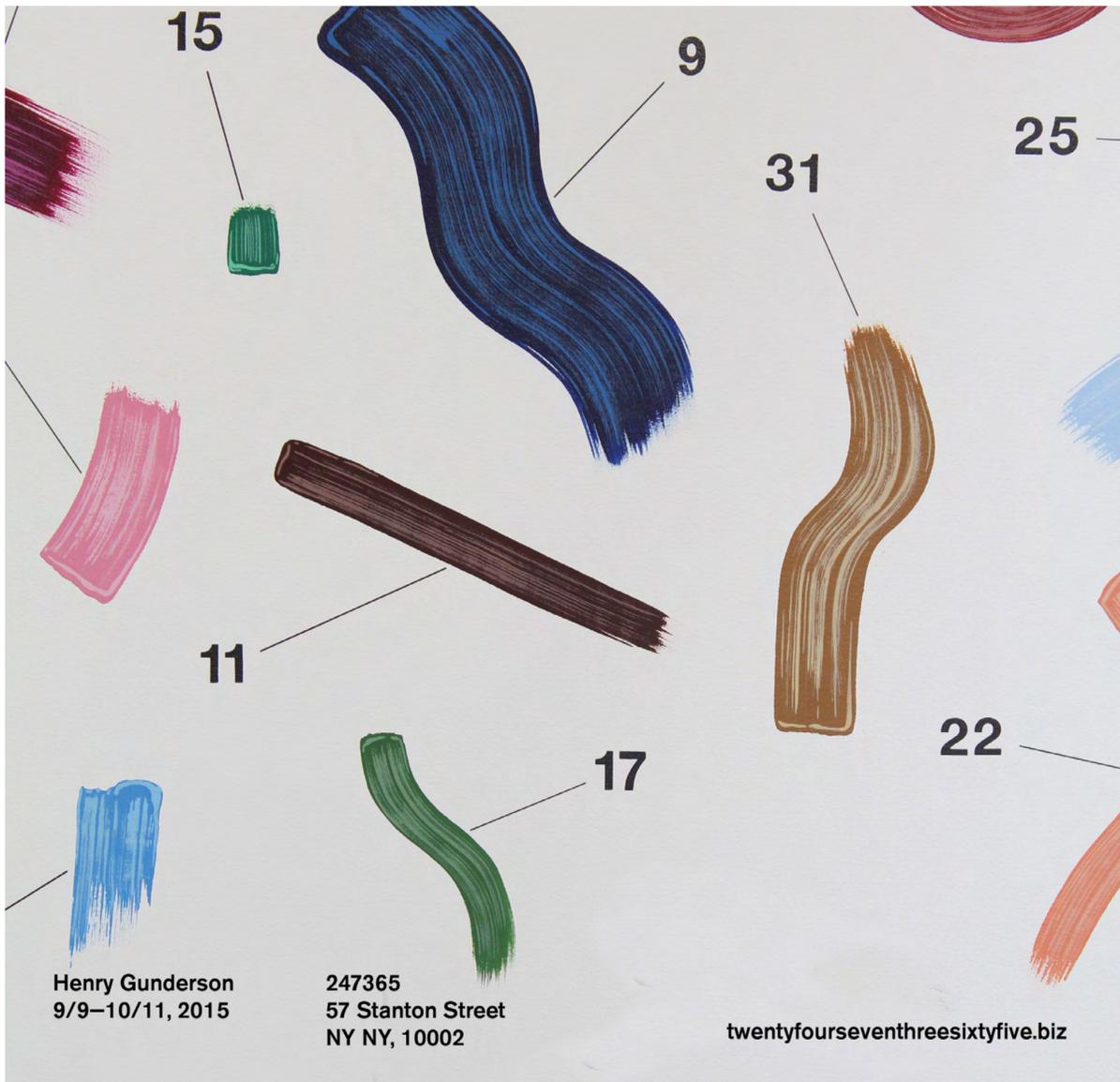
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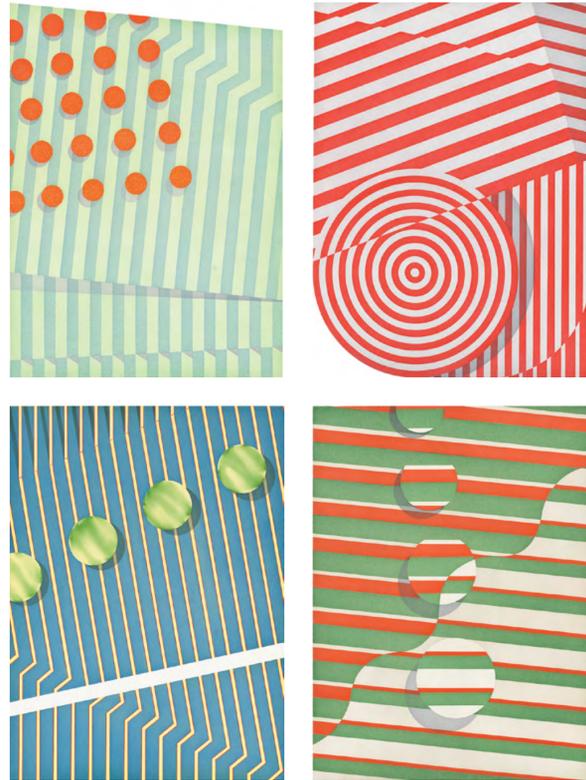
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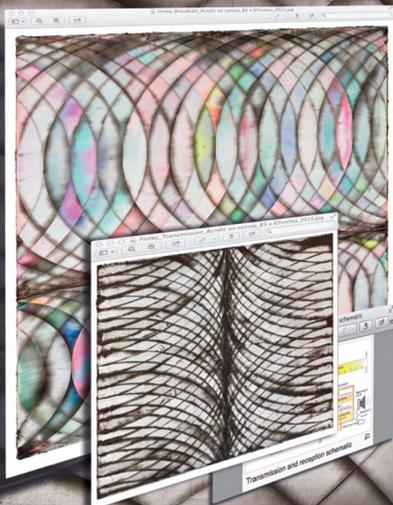
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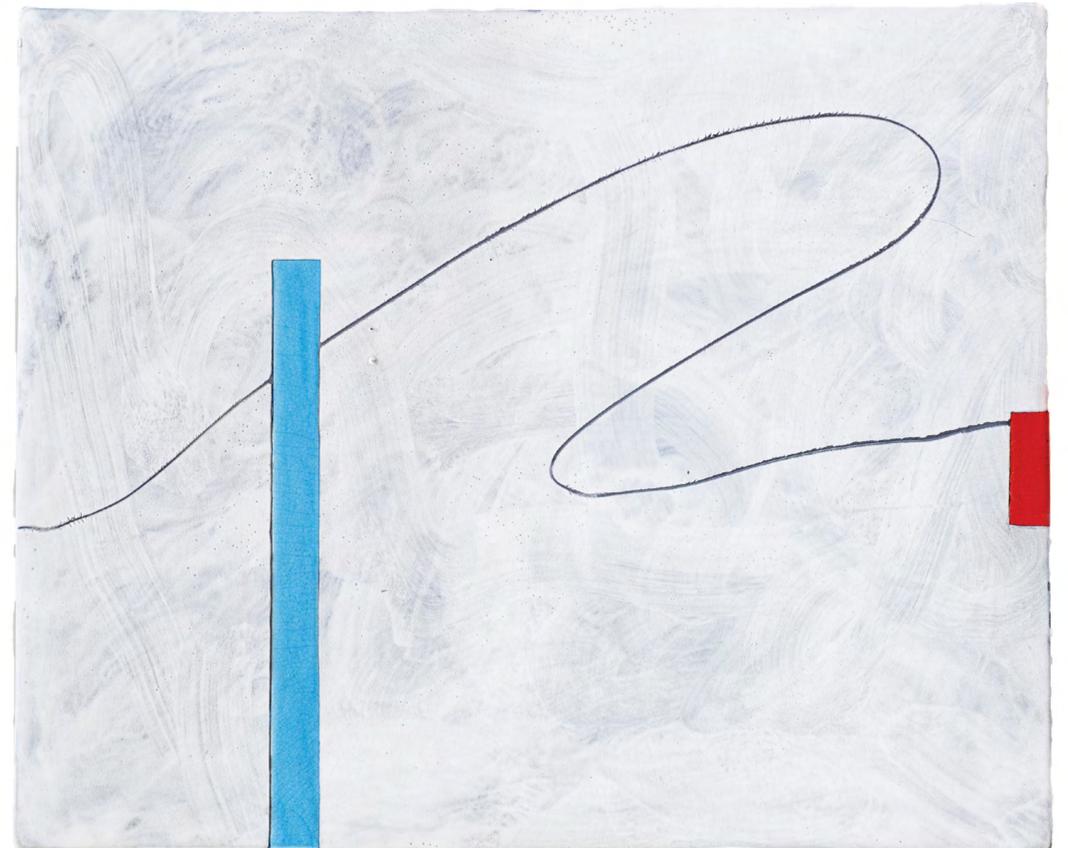


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**Terri Cohn** is a writer, curator, art historian, and fine art consultant. As a writer, her focus includes reviews, features, editorials, and interviews of artists working across the spectrum of modern and contemporary art forms. She regularly contributes to various publications including *SFAQ*, *Art Practical*, *Public Art Review*, *Art in America*, and *caa.reviews*. As a freelance consultant, she advises artists at all career stages, including curating exhibitions, writing about their art, and researching valuation and potential markets for their work. She also teaches core and interdisciplinary art history courses, exhibition and museum studies courses, and career and portfolio development courses for the San Francisco Art Institute and the University of California, Berkeley's Art and Design Extension program.

**Marta Gnyp** is a Dutch art advisor, art journalist, and art collector based in Berlin who recently finished her PhD research on contemporary collectors. Her book *The Shift: Art and the Rise to Power of Contemporary Collectors* was released in August. You can find more info on her book at [www.martagnyp.com](http://www.martagnyp.com)

**Jocko Weyland** is the author of *The Answer is Never—A Skateboarder's History of the World* (Grove Press, 2002), *The Powder*, and *Danny's Lot* (Dashwood Books, 2011 and 2015), and has written for *The New York Times*, *Apartmento*, *Vice*, *Cabinet*, *Thrasher*, and other publications. He is represented by Kerry Schuss Gallery in New York and lives in Tucson, Arizona, where he is curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson.

**Courtney Malick** is a writer and curator whose work focuses on video, sculpture, performance, and installation. She received her MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in 2011. She has curated exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Upcoming exhibitions include a two-part project, the first of which will take place at Martos Gallery in Los Angeles in October 2015, titled *In the Flesh: Subliminal Substances*, and the second part, titled *In the Flesh: Reimagined Corporeality*, which will take place at Gallery Diet in Miami in January 2016. Malick is also a regular contributor to *SFAQ*, *Art Papers*, *Flash Art*, and is a founding contributor of *DIS Magazine*.



Petra Cortright  
[detail] *2big teensbig*, 2014  
Digital painting on aluminum  
48 x 91.5 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### Notes From The Underground

*The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.*  
- Albert Einstein

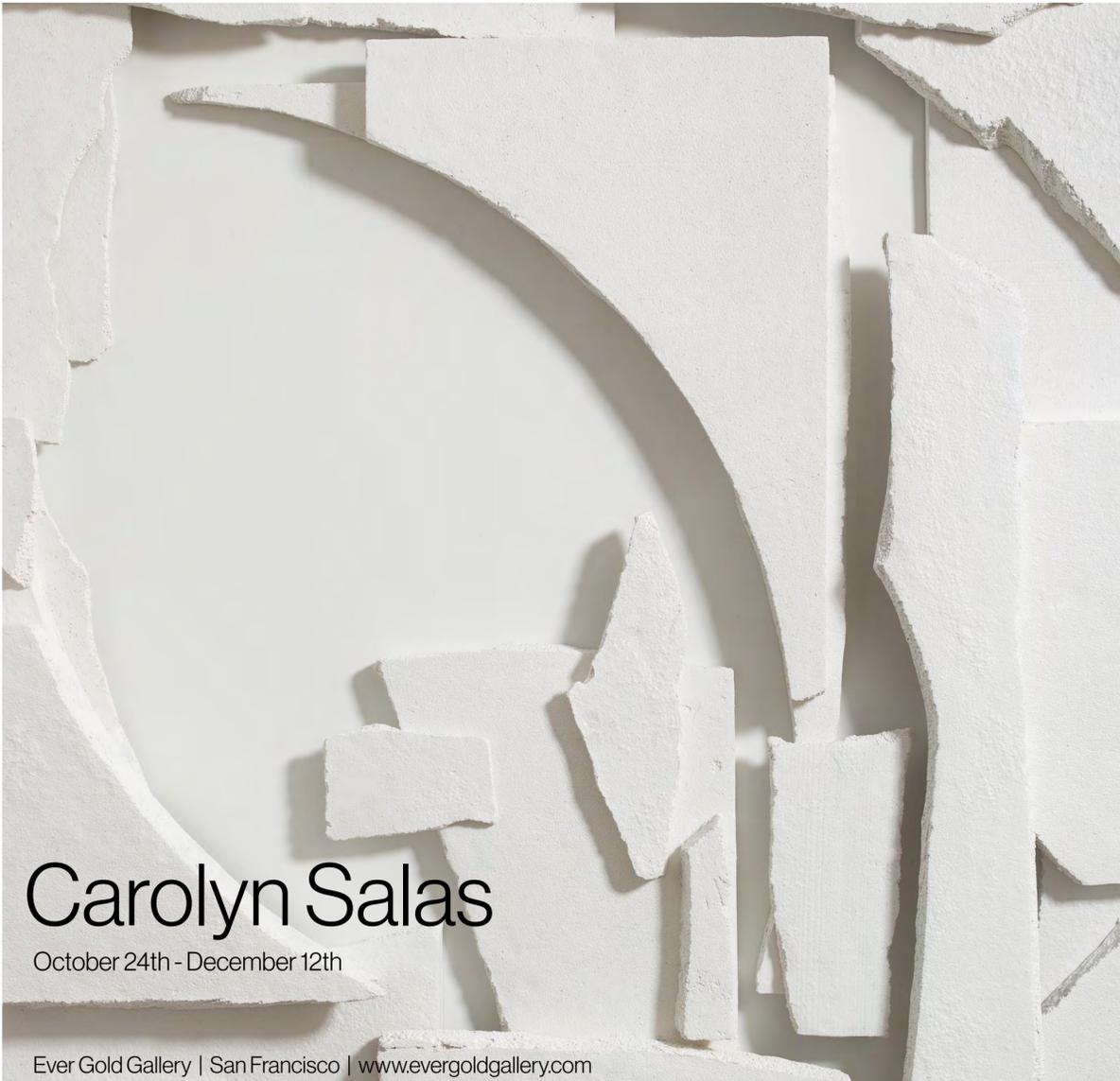
*The revolution has always been in the hands of the young. The young always inherit the revolution.*  
- Huey Newton

*All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.*  
- Marcel Duchamp

*I force myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.*  
- Marcel Duchamp

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# Terry Fox

## In Conversation With

### Terri Cohn

*Born in Seattle in 1943, Terry Fox came to San Francisco in the 1960s, and lived and worked between the Bay Area and Europe until he moved permanently to Europe in the early 1970s. Fox was part of the performance, video, sound, and conceptual art movement that defined the period. He created a number of memorable works in public places, as well as at the Berkeley Art Museum and at Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art, as well as Reese Palley Gallery and the Richmond Art Center. In 1972, Fox's video work was accepted into a show in Düsseldorf, Germany, which also included the iconic artist Joseph Beuys. With the help of an NEA grant Fox was awarded, he went to Düsseldorf and performed with Beuys, an experience that he said "changed my interest in the kinds of spaces I wanted to work with."*

*This interview was done via phone between San Francisco and Cologne, Belgium, on January 9, 2002. Terry Fox and I edited and completed it with assistance from Marita Loosen-Fox in 2003. Fox passed away in 2008, and Ms. Loosen-Fox agreed to the publication of this interview in 2015. It is with much gratitude for her input and support that it appears here in its original form.*

**Terry Fox:** I have a problem with the word “conceptual.”

**Terri Cohn:** *That’s a good place to start, because my first question is, when did you become a conceptual artist, and why did you become one?*

I didn’t even hear the word “conceptual” until much later. It may have been when Tom Marioni opened the Museum of Conceptual Art.

**So how did you identify yourself? As a sculptor?**

Yes. But I was a painter first. I started seriously painting in 1962. I lived in Rome then. I went there to go to the painting school, but they went on strike and closed so I couldn’t. But I stayed there for a year and painted.

**From there, did you come back here to the west coast?**

Yes. I met my future wife in line at American Express in Rome in 1962. I lived and painted there until 1967. She became a really popular designer—she was designing for Alvin Duskin. She got a job and we had a chance to leave the country, so we moved, first to Amsterdam, and then I spent all of 1968 alone in Paris. That was a really wild time.

**Were you doing street performance then?**

That’s when I started. Everybody was doing it, and it was strange for me. I did my last drawings in Paris, and they were the only things I brought back with me that was like visual art. Now the Berkeley Art Museum owns two of them, and The Oakland Museum owns two of them. They’re called *The Paris Wall Drawings*. Those were done in 1968.

**Can you tell me a little bit more about them? If that’s the only thing you brought back from Paris, they must have had great meaning to you.**

I was trying to represent how the walls looked at that time in Paris. Now everything is cleaned up, but they were very beautiful at that time. I had been doing figurative painting, and I was trying to move away from that, to do something more abstract. Also, something that would cost less money.

**Do you mean less money for materials?**

Yes.

**Being a painter is very expensive.**

Yes. And paper was extremely cheap then. So I just bought ink and paper and started making drawings. From my painting experience, which was very conventional, I needed a subject, so I tried to reproduce the Paris walls.

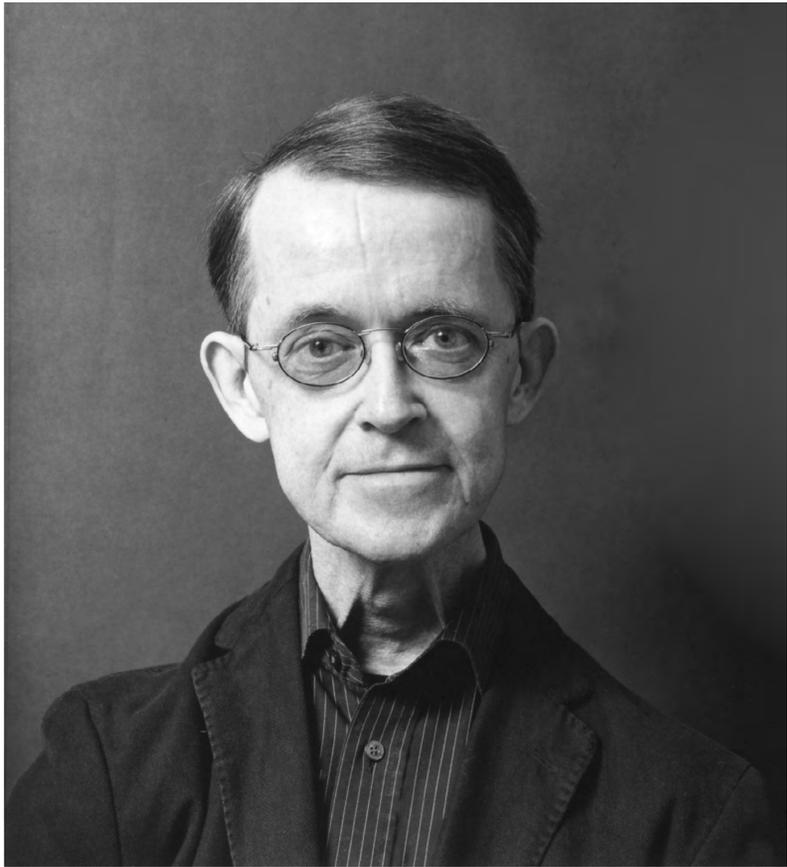
**That sounds really interesting. What happened at that point? It’s 1968 and you were in San Francisco again. What did you start doing?**

That was actually the last of my visual work. In 1968, the last paintings I was doing were on Plexiglas sheets. They were painted black, totally spray painted black on the back. Then I scratched different colors into the paint with a hypodermic needle. They almost couldn’t be seen. You had to get down on your hands and knees and really follow them. I think that was the beginning, for me, of a performance sort of idea. At the same time, I had gone to New York, and I found the whole collection of Fluxus books, so I knew all about Fluxus and their activities. When I went to Reese Palley Gallery and talked to Carol Lindsley who ran the gallery then, I told her all about Fluxus, and I think that’s why she accepted me!

**A number of artists in your group have talked about Carol Lindsley.**

She was really wonderful.

**Can you talk about that a bit more, how you saw and felt that connection between doing those drawings and performance?**



Terry Fox photographed by Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, 2007. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc.

Yes. I came from a very small town in Washington, so I didn’t know much about how to draw, and I really didn’t know much about art history. I mean, the only artist whose book I had was Michelangelo. For me, he was a great artist. I wasn’t into contemporary art. I wasn’t reading *Artforum* or anything like that.

**There’s something very pure about the fact that you came to contemporary art yourself, rather than through another artist or set of influences.**

Yes, it was like that. So, I moved to San Francisco, and I went through the whole hippie thing, which was also very creative. I lived right across from the Fillmore, and so I went every weekend to the concerts and to the light shows. There was a thing called “The Life-Raft Earth” that was sponsored by Stewart Brand, who made the *Whole Earth Catalogue*. He made a chain-link fence in a parking lot in Oakland, and people were invited in, and could bring a tent. We had to stay there for seven days without eating anything.

**How come?**

It was sort of a prediction about the future. The idea that if things kept going the way they were, that’s how it would end up. It was really funny. People would throw food over the side and we would throw it back. Anyway, Robert Frank, the filmmaker, filmed that. After I met him there, I went to New York for a visit. I can’t remember what year that was, maybe 1967. I was there just briefly, and then came back to San Francisco. Then I went to Europe to live, first in Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, I had reconnected with Bill Wiley, and I started a dust exchange with him. I would send dust from a certain metro in Paris, and he would send me dust, and we would write letters to each other also, saying where we got the dust. I took dust from the Louvre, and all kinds of very interesting places in Paris, and he would take dust from places like the San Francisco Museum of Art, or the San Francisco Art Institute, and then the dust I sent him from the Louvre, he would put back in the place where he took the dust, and I would take the dust that he sent and put it in the Louvre.

**You were cross-pollinating the dust in the world!**

Yes. It lasted a long time, I think eight months or so in 1967.

**That’s so interesting because it was invisible work that only the people involved would know about, because you couldn’t see it.**

Yes, it was never in any magazines, or gallery shows; there was nothing to show. It was just ... a dust exchange.

**People today would probably be very paranoid because you were introducing spores from one continent to another. But that’s about now, and when you were doing your dust exchange people didn’t worry about anything like that.**

No. It was before anthrax. In 1967, I had also brought with me two paintings on glass. I think they were about 1.5 ft. x 1.5 ft., and as an event, I went to Cologne and was in a film showing. While I was there, I deposited these paintings at Gallery Zwirner, which was the best gallery in Cologne. I don’t know what Zwirner did with them. He’s not there anymore.

**He didn’t show them?**

He wasn’t there when I went there. So I just left the paintings. They were signed on the back, but I don’t know what happened to them. Maybe he sold them. Who knows?

**Did you mind that you never knew what happened to them?**

No. While I lived in Amsterdam, I dug a hole in the wall of the apartment I was staying in and filled it full of fish, and called the piece *Fish Vault*. All these things weren’t known. They were private. I did a lot of these things before I started showing in galleries. Like the public theater. Do you know about that?

**Why don’t you tell me about it?**

I just picked either six or eight places that I liked in San Francisco that would be interesting. I did one piece at Anna Halprin’s workshop. I used to go there once a week. As for the public theater, I made an announcement that said, “Public Theater, Fillmore-McAllister, 8 PM” on a certain date. At that time, Fillmore-McAllister was a very dangerous intersection. You know, I didn’t even go to that performance.

**It was the idea that was the important part of it?**

Yes. That also came from being in Paris in 1968, the theater in the streets. I was really interested in Artaud at that time, and Grotowski also. I was trying to combine theater and art.

**It sounds like it. It also sounds as if you consistently responded to where you were, so when you were in Amsterdam you were responding to that place, or when you were in San Francisco, even though the ideas might be useable in either place, that you responded to the place specifically.**

Yes, that’s right. I was responding to the situation of the place. That started very early, this very localized response to wherever I am. It’s still going on.

**Is this still 1967?**

No, now it’s 1968. At the end of 1968 I moved back to San Francisco. I did a lot of work on Golden Gate Park Beach with free-flying polyethylene sheets, just flying in the wind. Then, in 1969 I had my first show, *Summer Symposium*, at the Karl Van De Voort Gallery. For that I filled the whole basement floor with polyethylene sheets that were powered by a fan, so they rippled like waves. You couldn’t walk on the floor, but you could stand on the bottom step and look in. Tom Marioni was in the same *Summer Symposium* show. That’s when I met him.

**That must have been a significant meeting.**

It was for me. Tom was already the curator at the Richmond Art Center. When he invited me in 1969 to be in *The Return of Abstract Expressionism*, I again used flying sheets. Some were outside being moved by the wind, and some were inside. The next thing Tom did was a sort of radical idea. He had hired Larry Bell to visit a lot of artists and look at their work, and pick out three. Then he invited us to a show in Richmond in the *Sculpture Annual* that they had every year. That was 1970. That’s when I did my *Levitation* piece.

**Do you want to talk about it a bit?**

Sure. At that time I had Hodgkin’s disease, and I had just gone through an operation. I really wanted to get rid of it, and I really did want to levitate. I was given the big major gallery, and I covered the floor with white paper so the walls, the ceiling, and the floor were all white. It was already kind of like ... floating.

**Sort of like a hospital room?**

Yes. I lived on Capp Street near Army in San Francisco, and they were just building the freeway there. We rented a truck and took a ton and a half of dirt from there to Richmond, and then I laid the dirt down in a square that was twice my body height on this paper floor. I had polyethylene tubes, and I had some of my blood taken out and I filled a tube with blood and made a circle, like you always see in Leonardo’s drawings. Then I lay on the earth in the circle, but I fasted for three days and nights first, to really empty myself. I had four long polyethylene tubes that were much longer than the one full of blood. One was full of milk, and one was full of urine, one blood, and the fourth water. I held two in each hand, and I lay there by myself for six hours trying to levitate. The door was locked, so it wasn’t a performance that people could see—nobody was allowed in the room. I really felt like I levitated because I lost all the sensation in my body. I wanted to leave the Hodgkin’s behind, and that was a way of doing it.

**Did you eventually get rid of the disease?**

Yes.

**So maybe that helped?**

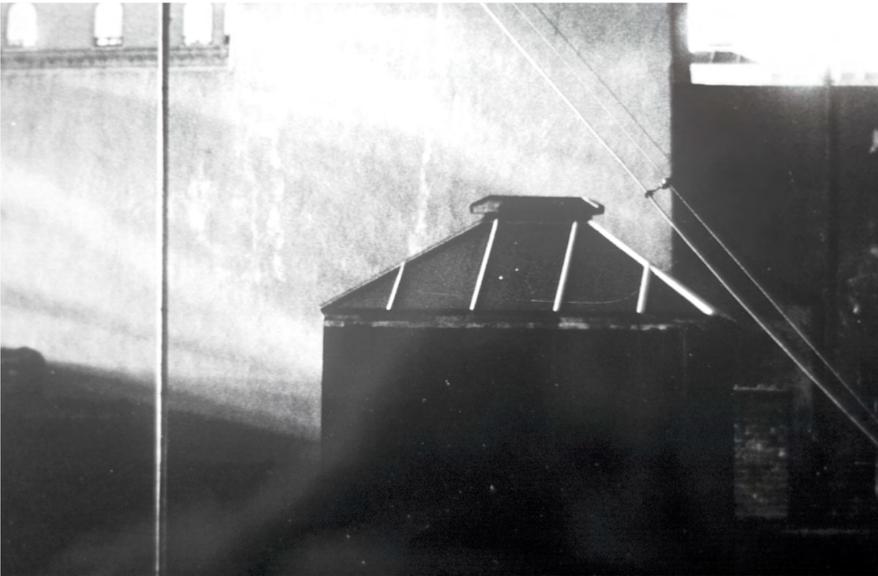
Yes.

**It sounds like an amazing experience.**

What I was trying to do was to energize that space in such a way that when people came in after I was gone, they could feel the energy. That was the sculptural idea behind the whole thing.

**Did the installation stay up for a period of time?**

No! But Tom can tell you that story. He got fired because of that. The director, Hayward King, really didn’t like this piece at all, and so he brought in the Fire Department, the Health Department, everybody. Of course the Fire Department immediately tore some of the paper off the floor, and said, “That’s extremely flammable”; the Health



Memento Mori, 1973. Exterior roof view of installation at MOCA (Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco) for the All Night Sculptures exhibition, curated by Tom Marioni. Courtesy of MOCA archives and Tom Marioni.



Memento Mori, 1973. Interior view of installation at MOCA (Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco) for the All Night Sculptures exhibition, curated by Tom Marioni. Courtesy of MOCA archives and Tom Marioni.

Department guy said, “We don’t know where this dirt came from. It could be full of poisons,” and so on. I think that the Bay Area was fairly traditional, and that was pretty “out there” for the time.

**What happened after that, Terry?**

When he got fired, Tom decided, since he was a curator, to found the Museum of Conceptual Art. We had become really good friends by then, and I needed a studio. He found an office space across the street from Breens Bar, and that was the first Museum of Conceptual Art. It had a small glass cubicle in the front and that was his part, and the big space I covered with white paper, and that was my part. Whenever he did the shows, I would just clear my things away and we would do it in the back, in my space. Then we both moved together across the street, above Breens, and Tom had the second floor and I had the top floor.

**That must have been amazing, to have a whole floor.**

Yes, because the upper floor was really in ruins. And there was a totally vacant building next to ours that we could go through the window of, and get into what had been a hotel. It was full of their stuff too, so that whole experience was really wonderful.

**What kind of work were you doing at that point?**

I participated in all the shows that Tom had in the Museum of Conceptual Art, and I did a piece at the de Saisset Museum in Santa Clara.

**I know that a number of artists in your group showed at the de Saisset. Tom had driven his car into the museum as a piece. Lydia Modi-Vitale, who was the director at the time, was very interested in conceptual art.**

In 1971, there was a show there called *Fish, Fox, and Kos*, which included Paul Kos, Tom (his pseudonym was Allan Fish), and me. That was another kind of strange experience for me. Again, I did a long fast, and didn’t sleep beforehand.

**There seems to be a pattern here, that you spent periods of time either not sleeping or not eating prior to an event.**
Yes. This was both. It was still in my mind a way of cleansing my body, of cleansing all this disease out. So I bought two live fish in Chinatown, big bass. I used cords and tied one to my tongue and one to my penis. Then I sat up until they died, which was really a long time. I thought it would be like twenty minutes, but it was at least two hours. I thought they’d be dead and then suddenly I’d see the tail flip a little bit and I could feel the vibrations really strongly through the cords. With that, and passing whatever I had to them I hoped they could take it and die with it.

I had covered the floor in the museum with a white tarp. About three feet off of the floor, I made a roofing of white tarp over the whole space and I brought the sheets. I retied the fish, and just lay down and then I immediately went to sleep. There was an opening and people could look through the door but not come in the space. So they saw me sleeping with these fish tied to me.

**It must have been exhausting too to do that!**

No! It was very relaxing. It was nice to sleep, because I hadn’t slept for so long. I slept through the whole opening. They had to come and wake me up and say it was over.

**Your actions seem to have so much personal significance and symbolism connected to them. But you also have a sense of humor, somehow, about your work. Most artists wouldn’t dream of sleeping through an opening. Everybody is so involved with their own self-importance. There’s something refreshing about that. It’s wonderful**

**that you left those paintings at that gallery in Cologne, and you didn’t know whatever happened to them; it didn’t matter. It was the act of doing it that was important.**

Yes, and it was the most important gallery in Cologne.

**How long did you stay in San Francisco at that point until you left again?**

I left in 1972.

**So you only stayed for a few years?**

No, I was there from 1962 to 1967.

**Did you feel that there was support for doing the type of work you were doing in San Francisco?**

At first there wasn’t; that’s why Tom had to open his own museum. But then people like Carol Lindsley, who was working at Reese Palley Gallery in 1970, let me use objects and paintings and do performances. But the performances also were private ... actions like asbestos tracking, and pushing the wall as hard as I could. There was a big dip in the concrete floor of the space, so I filled that full of water, and made kind of a huge pond there.

**In the gallery?**

Yes, a reflecting pond.

**It must have been beautiful.**

It was. Reese Palley was a really great gallery. They weren’t so much into sales, because Reese Palley himself sold porcelain birds. That’s how he made his money.

**So he could be committed to doing more avant-garde things because he had another source of income?**

Yes, that’s right.

**Are you still doing the kind of work now that you were doing then?**

Sort of. I mean, things change.

**Of course. It seems you also had a very strong interest in the link between art and life in your work, and in connecting sound and space.**

I did change to working more with sound. Also, in 1972 I got an NEA grant, so I bought a camera and started making videos. That really opened a big path for me because I could send videos to shows. So I started being in shows that weren’t in San Francisco. There was a show in Düsseldorf, *Prospect 71 Projections*, and it included one of my favorite artists, Joseph Beuys. They paid for my trip to go there, but my main purpose was to meet Beuys. I also wanted to do a performance somewhere. So I went to the Art Academy and I met him. He was really wonderful. His wife and children were gone, so he drove me to his house and made dinner and we talked. He said I could do my performance in the basement of the Art Academy. He arranged to have the poster made; it was really nice. Then he talked to me about a week before, and asked if he could do the performance with me. It was totally incredible for me!

The reason he wanted to do the performance with me was, he had a mouse that lived under his bed and this mouse had just died. I know, the story doesn’t sound believable at all, but it’s true. Anyway, this mouse had died, and Beuys wanted to do a kind of funeral for it. When he asked if he could do it, of course I was thrilled. So both of our names were on the announcement card and poster for *Isolation Unit*. They were put up on the walls all around in Düsseldorf. He had just made his *Block Edition Felt Suit* and he wore it for the first time to this performance. He had a reel-to-reel tape recorder and he gave the mouse a ride on the reels as it was going. We recorded the whole

thing. I had long iron pipes that I banged together, because I was already as interested in sound as in performance. I was changing a little bit, always including sound in my work. I had a window with six panes in the corner and I tried to break the glass with the vibrations from the pipes. When I felt like it was almost breaking, I’d smash the glass with the pipes. I had a candle in the middle of the space with a light bulb hanging right next to it, so you couldn’t see the light from the candle except very close up.

**Because the light bulb would block the candlelight out?**

Yes, that’s right. Then with the two smallest pipes—they were maybe a foot long—at the end of the performance I sat and tried to bend the candle flame with their vibrations. That did work. Beuys walked around holding his hand open, showing the dead mouse to the public, who were behind a rope at the entrance. They couldn’t come into the room. It was a real dirty room. It was a former coal bin in the bottom of the Academy.

**It sounds like quite a contrast to all the pristine white spaces you usually work in.**

It was exactly the opposite. After doing that, I changed my interest in the kinds of spaces I wanted to work in, too. I didn’t even think about that until you mentioned the white spaces.

**What kind of spaces did you decide to work in after that?**

Oh, interesting spaces! That performance helped me a lot, because we also made a record, and then afterwards Lucio Amelio, who ran a gallery in Naples, came to buy some work from Beuys. He was looking through a stack of papers and Beuys said, “Oh this is a great artist. You should give him a show.” Lucio couldn’t say no because he wanted Beuys’s drawings. So he said I could have a show in Naples, and my next show was in Naples at his gallery. It just went on from there. I met more and more people, and I really liked Europe anyway. I was in *Documenta* in 1972.

**So it sounds like it was a natural progression for you to eventually just stay in Europe and to not come back here.**
Yes, I still like it better.

**Is that how you ended up moving to Germany?**

No, I lived in Italy for 7 or 8 years. The last place was Florence. But at the same time I was taking train trips and showing in Vienna and Düsseldorf and in shows like *Documenta*. So I started to meet more and more people. I had a show in Eindhoven at Paul Panhuysen’s space at Het Apollohuis. At that time, I was losing my apartment in Florence, and he told me about Liège, and that his friend Arnold Dreyblatt, who is a sound artist, had just moved there. So I went, and there just happened to be a house available right next to Arnold’s. I rented it and then the people from Eindhoven had a truck and I went back to Florence, packed all my stuff and put it in their truck and we drove to Belgium. I lived in Belgium until I moved to Cologne in 1996.

**Have you liked living there?**

Yes, I like it. When I was still living in Belgium, Marita Loosen, who worked for the television station in Cologne, organized a big sound festival. She came there on the recommendation of Julius, a German sound artist, and invited me to be in it. We met and we fell in love, and we’re still together.

<sup>[1]</sup> Interview conducted via telephone, San Francisco–Cologne, on January 9, 2002. Permission to publish granted by Terry Fox Estate, Cologne, 2015.

# Lita Albuquerque

## In Conversation With Jocko Weyland

For more than four decades, Lita Albuquerque has been on a diversified yet aesthetically and conceptually cohesive mission, making installations, ephemeral environments, performances involving the artist alone or hundreds of participants, large-scale public commissions, paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Born in Santa Monica, she was raised in Tunisia and Paris before returning to California. In the 1970s she was associated with the Light and Space movement, creating poetically fleeting pigment pieces in the desert; the beginnings of a lifelong quest to map personal identity in the face of the universe's infinitude; a humanistic investigation of what it means to be one person, alone, yet simultaneously connected to the unfathomable vastness of both outer and inner space. This grappling with the enormity of boundless expanses and eternal time is not mere rhetoric. In Albuquerque's case it is the basis for a heartfelt sifting through of the multiple meanings of what that entails, and she remains an embodiment of unflagging curiosity, vibrant and vital, and very much active in the now. The latest manifestation of that is a dream turned creative reality, a vision of a future astronaut crash-landed in Mali six millennia before Christ. 20/20: Accelerando, her new multimedia space and time travel epic, will make its debut at USC's Fisher Museum of Art, opening January 24, 2016.

This might seem like an odd start, but this quote of yours reflects on an extremely important aspect of what you do. My sense from an art historical perspective is that people shy away from talking about this, but it appears to be essential to everything you do, so why not begin there. To paraphrase, you've said, "Consciousness is the prize of life." What does that mean exactly?

I love that you are starting the interview with that question. I couldn't be happier because it really is an integral part of my thinking and what I mean by that is that, in the end what we have left, what we take away from life, is just that: our consciousness, the development of our consciousness. And I believe it goes beyond life—it is the gift of life, that's why I said that. I believe that.

### Beyond the corporeal.

Yes, beyond that and, therefore, the most important thing to do is to develop that consciousness. And I don't know why I have such a belief in it, but I do.

### Does this consciousness, after the lifetime of one individual, still exist in some form?

Yes, and it did exist before. I'm on the core faculty of the Fine Art Graduate Program at Art Center College of Design, and I took my students to Mexico and to the Yucatán. Do you know what Cenotes are? They're caves that are 30 feet under the surface of the earth and full of water. The Mayans have built ladders down to the water and I took my students there and had this experience. I was in the water lying down, I'm focusing on the time and location and I'm looking up the root of an aloe tree 30 feet up—the roots are hanging down from the surface of the earth—and then thirty feet up through this hole to the sky, and I couldn't help but think in terms of seeing the horn of the Yucatán as if I was looking from outer space, and here I was way underneath the earth, and all of a sudden it was like I really got the connection between—well, what I saw was a robe of thousands of galaxies and way, way, way down there was the Milky Way Galaxy, so it was this kind of relationship of where we are in the grand scheme of things.

### So light that eight billion years ago left a star and arrived at Earth and through photosynthesis gave life. Is it at that level of literalness? That this energy of light in particular, which I know you talk about a lot, came here—is it the essence of energy through light that comes through to you or me?

Yes, it's very much about physics, it's that. But also what I got at that moment was the relationship of all these galaxies to the soul, and the correlation between time and space, between the cosmos and the individual. The immensity of the cape was like the immensity of all the lives and that my lying in the water under the earth was just one of my lives, almost as if the millions of galaxies were also the millions of lives?

A transcendence of time. Obviously those are traditional religious concepts, but this has a more scientific aspect to it, a synthesis of the religious and secular, if I understand correctly. And matter doesn't get created or go away, it's always transformed, and energy is perpetually there in some shape or form. I'm not a physicist, but that's the way I understand it. I wanted to ask you that to start because there are other possible interpretations. Your consciousness is really what you take away from life.

I think of it being an awareness of the other, and an awareness of what is around you, not just taking it for granted. Which I think is often what people do, which is kind of understandable. It's easier.

Yes, the other way is really hard and there are no maps. That's a heavy-duty start to the interview! But just to continue that—there's no such thing as completion, it is about understanding and perceiving the body in space and time.

You also said that you want to "develop a visual language that brings the realities of time and space to a human scale." Does there need to be a translation of the realities of time and space? Is that what your work is about on some level?

Exactly, that's what I'm interested in—the visualization. What I'm trying to do as an artist is on the one hand, create an emotional response with material and color which brings us to the body (or perception), and on another to utilize a more scientific way and visualize some of these concepts through geometry and these concepts always start out as an image.

Like the stranded astronaut from 20/20: Accelerando, which we're going to talk more about.

Yes, like the astronaut waking up and just seeing herself, and then she realizes—actually another influence is Egypt. I don't know if you've been to Cairo?

No, I haven't.

The Museum of Cairo is one of my favorite museums. I don't know if you've heard about it. It's, well, a mess.

Like the state museums in China: they're dusty, drab, dirty, and neglected, and that's why I like them.

Me too! So in this one huge room in Cairo are all these sarcophagi and they're all looking up. I've always been fascinated with that upward gaze and what that implies. I also heard that schooling initiates had to go inside the sarcophagus with the lid on top. So I imagine my astronaut like that.

What's compelling is that your work doesn't have a stereotypical science fiction look at all, though there is a science fiction element. A very familiar trope is the traveler in a suspended animation pod that opens up like a sarcophagus and they wake up and groggily emerge after a journey of hundreds of years. What you are describing has a correlation to things that have been visualized in movies and novels, but it doesn't look like that. It's more fundamental.

From space to Earth, related, I know you were quite young, but you spent time in Tunisia, and then you ended up doing work in the desert, and again, the desert is a big part of the science fiction imagination, as in Star Wars and Dune. When you started doing work in the Mojave was there a conscious connection to the Tunisia of your childhood?

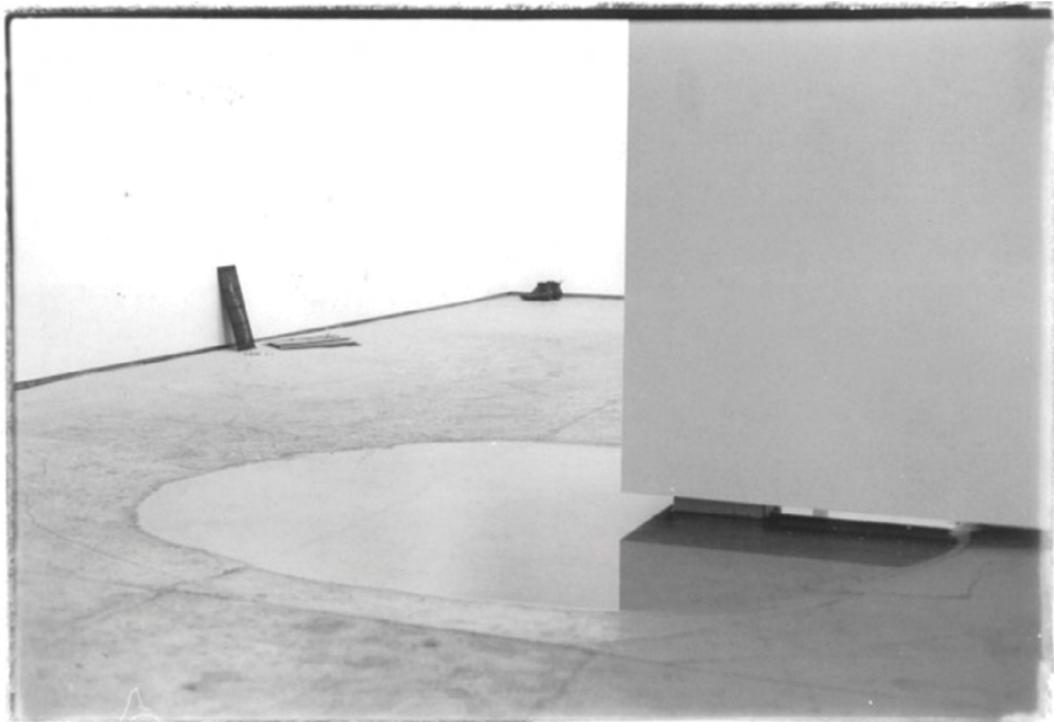
It was all historical. It's interesting, you would think there would be that connection, but really it was seeing earth art, and friends of mine who actually had gone—John Gordon and John Sturgeon, video artists we were in school together—and they went to the desert and did their work. And I was thinking, "Whoa, what if I just put color out there in this minimalist space!" It was the minimalist space that fascinated me.

The blank geological canvas. Were you aware of Michael Heizer at that time?

Yes, of course. At that point I had very little outside influence besides my circle of friends at UCLA. Even with Yves Klein, my friend the artist Susan Kaiser Vogel started using blue which may or not have been influenced by him, and I started using blue inspired by her, but I did not know of him. So it was this indirect lineage.



Untitled, 1967. Ink on paper. Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Evaporated, 1970. 25 gallons of water. Installation view at Gallery Reese Palley, San Francisco, 1970. Courtesy of the Terry Fox Archives.



Malibu Line, 1978. Pigment, 41 feet x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.

Let's talk about Malibu Line, a blue line leaving the beach. The water is leaving the water, the basin of the ocean, up on to the land, and then presumably to the sky. That's the ocean, and the desert is the opposite of the ocean.

Well, Tunisia has both. So does California.

Those transitory works like Blue Rock, where the pigment on the rock gets blown away, there's entropy, and that's part of the universe winding down. And this is back to consciousness—is that piece a small version of that overall degeneration? Yes.

You're making artwork and you want people to see it and experience it, but it's temporary and disappears. Totally.

You made Rock and Pigment Installation in the Mojave the same year. Is that a landscape painting? They remind me of Yves Tanguy, particularly his The Furniture of Time. Do you think of those installations as painting landscapes?

I certainly wasn't thinking of Yves Tanguy or surrealists, but when I applied the pigment to the rocks it was a move from painting to sculpture, it was about time, too, about a gesture. It was the idea of, in a way, a painterly gesture, but also the gesture of a body's relationship to either the horizon line or the sky. Malibu Line had to do with the horizon line. Rock and Pigment Installation was the first installation where I did a reflection of the stars. Man and the Mountain #2 was the relationship to the horizon line, how the body is situated almost out of the Earth's plane, but still on the Earth. A gesture in relationship to the horizon, the sun, or the moon. It's very elemental.

People were painting on canvases and, to make a gross generalization, many of them simultaneously in different parts of the world decided to leave the canvas behind. There was something in the air, it seems. Completely in the air.

What was your personal motive? Was it conceptually really thought out, or was it more an inchoate feeling?

I was really intrigued with moving away from the wall and using the land as a two-dimensional drawing surface. The first one was what I just said in terms of the relationship of the body to the landscape. I was taking dance and I lived on this property, an artist's colony called Coffee House Positano, which had 132 acres of land overlooking the ocean. I really grew up and developed as an artist there. I really became aware of location and space.

To get into painting, your desert pieces started off as what most would consider abstraction. They're abstract paintings in the landscape.

I don't think of them as abstract paintings in the landscape, I think of bringing color to the landscape and making marks that would be gestures in relation to the space around me.

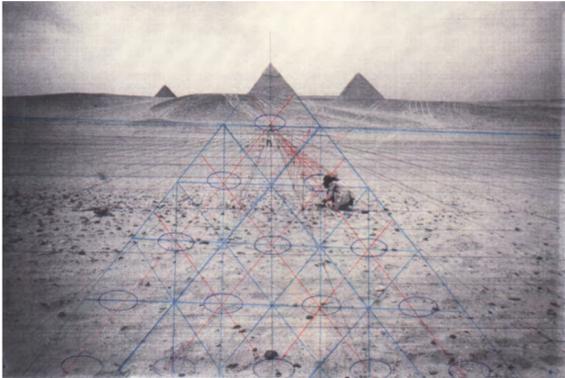
That's intriguing. Prior to written language, symbols—going back 40,000 years or however long—might have developed from trying to mimic the body's correspondence to the Earth. Maybe this is sort of obvious, but in Man and the Mountain I, also from 1978, you look at it and there's the shadow and to me it looks precisely like primitive drawings. Isn't that amazing!

Was that intentional?

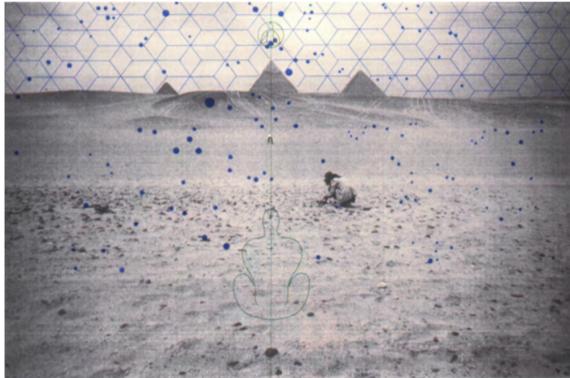
No! My friends went up there, and I was like, "Oh my God, you look exactly like the petroglyphs."

So you noticed that, too. And I was talking about science fiction, but those figures, which are found in petroglyphs all around the world, have a frightening scarecrow-like quality that reminds me of seeing the first Planet of the Apes as a kid. Yes, it's odd.

There's something foreboding about them. They're simplified, menacing stickmen. And it comes from shadows.



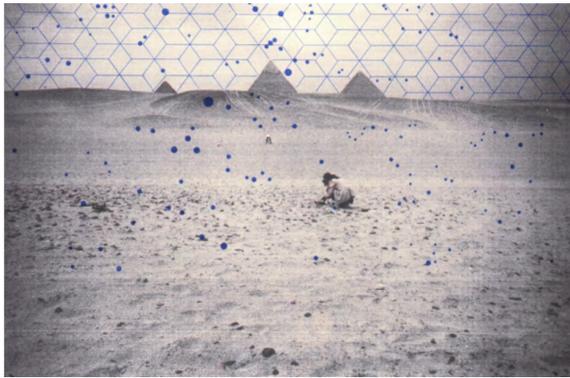
Sol Star (Triangular Grid), 2013 (from preliminary study for the Sixth Cairo International Biennale, 1996). Pigment print on silver paper, 16.5 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.



Sol Star (Alignment), 2013 (from preliminary study for the Sixth Cairo International Biennale, 1996). Pigment print on silver paper, 16.5 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.



Sol Star (Hexagonal Grid), 2013 (from preliminary study for the Sixth Cairo International Biennale, 1996). Pigment print on silver paper, 16.5 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.



Sol Star (Star Map), 2013 (from preliminary study for the Sixth Cairo International Biennale, 1996). Pigment print on silver paper, 16.5 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.

**Primitive man or woman saw another man and his shadow. Is that the beginning of representation? Wanting to express the idea of the other person or the animal, but not having a tool to do so, and then realizing that shadows could give them a way?**

It could be. It would be interesting to find out if it's been written about. And if shadow is the beginning of representation, that's really interesting, because of what shadows symbolically represent, and the relation to the sun.

**There's an ironic feature of ephemeral artwork and land art, and specifically with your Sol Star installation at the Great Pyramids of Giza, which are in a way the ultimate in land art.**

And permanent.

**You talk about entropy and impermanence and though the pyramids won't last forever, they've survived longer than almost anything else humans have done. Were you conscious of that at the time? That you were doing something deliberately that wouldn't last next to massive constructions that have?**

It was not conscious at the time, I'll be honest, but it's pretty great, the two.

**Circles, squares, and triangles. Underlying geometries.**

Yes, I was interested in underlying geometries and how the pyramids would fit exactly in an imaginary hexagonal pattern in the sky. I almost got kicked out of the country because originally the piece was going to be this hexagonal pattern in front of the pyramids, and they thought it was a Star of David. But what is fascinating is if you do a hexagonal pattern—which Pythagoras made his students meditate on every day—if you do that over the pyramids they fit into the hexagon.

**Again, associated with painting or just modernism overall, the geometric 1920s international avant-garde use of basic shapes—was that at all on your mind? Malevich and the rest?**

I love Malevich; I just think he's an absolute champion of art history, but also that entire period. I went to the opening of the new Whitney and on the eighth floor they have some early Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and Stuart Davis, and it's something I really love, but really it had more to do with ancient man using these very primal shapes. The cross, the spiral, the circle, and the square.

**Which are repeated in all cultures.**

Everywhere. I was also studying sacred geometry quite a bit at that time.

**With the original Spine of the Earth in 1980 the participants were in a circle, and in the 2012 iteration at Baldwin Hill in Los Angeles, it was an unfolding of the circle, an unspooling. They walked straight down the path on Baldwin Hill as if the circle turned into a line.**

Yes. From a circle to a line. It was like that. And people actually told me they could see it from the freeway! I had called it Spine of the Earth when it was flat, and then the 2012 version was literally like a spine.

**So you grew up—**

I grew up Catholic.

**Oh, I wasn't going to that ask, but did you grow up, after Tunisia and France, in California?**

Yes, I arrived in 1957. We actually arrived in New York December 31, 1956. We then went to Scottsdale. My mother only had one contact in the United States. She was a playwright, and her contact was a designer for Frank Lloyd Wright, and we met Frank Lloyd Wright.

**You met the leader of the cult.**

We ended up in Scottsdale for six months, and then we came here. I actually lived in Malibu right over there. I lived on the beach.

**Were you into the whole nature scene, hiking and being outside?**

I was really solitary. I thought I was going to be a poet, and I loved the beach.

**How was the beach?**

It was great. I loved it and I loved bicycling.

**So you were active, out and about. California in the 1950s might have been as close as you could get to a certain kind of suntanned paradise.**

It was golden, it was Gidget. I lived next to James Arness.

**Really?**

I hardly spoke English at that time, I was just learning. So it was like the United States and TV!

**That immersion in wilderness, maybe "earthy" is not the best word to use, but what you do certainly reflects an essential physical connection with the Earth.**

I go swimming every day.

**You're not an armchair nature person. And you've done art in Antarctica and the North Pole, places of extreme climates at the opposite ends of the Earth.**

When I did Stellar Axis: 90 Degrees North, I lay down on my stomach and lapped the water—the sweetest water I've tasted in my entire life. Just amazing. If I fell in there and died, it would be okay.

**There are worse ways to go. You mentioned Yves Klein and your feeling of connection to him. Klein is well known but there remains a mystique even if he's become entrenched in the canon. There's the sensational, naked-women-as-paintbrushes, the Anthropometry series, but also varied and arcane territory in the fairly short span of his life. One of those "the light that burns twice as bright burns half as long" situations, to use a cliché from Bladerunner. Obviously, people must ask you about the blue you use, a very deep hue, since it's so similar to International Klein Blue.**

Sidi Bou Said and Carthage in Tunisia are very much like Greece, all whitewashed with blue. The Mediterranean, the landscape, the white and the blue, and Klein was from Nice, across the Mediterranean from there. The relationship to the sky is what I was interested in more than anything, to unite the Earth and the sky. And then later on I read about Yves Klein and Arman and how in their twenties Yves claimed the sky, and Arman claimed plenitude. And I wondered, "What am I claiming?" And I made a claim—claiming the relationship between the Earth and the sky.

**Bringing them together. So then there's not just the color, obviously.**

In his case, it comes from not only the Mediterranean, but also Klein's involvement in Rosicrucianism, Judo, the body, the physicality of it, but more than anything he was able to visualize the Earth from space before we even had that capability, which is extraordinary. A lot of his imagery comes from Rosicrucianism. I didn't know much about Rosicrucianism so I decided I'd better learn about it to understand him, and interestingly the internal exercises I have created over the years bring me to that same place, though it's not necessarily scholarly.

**Rosicrucianism is Gnostic, cryptic knowledge, but your work is less scholarly, as you said.**

It's less from somewhere external, from something learned and less from specific spiritual or religious practices; it's something experienced.

**With Klein the connection is about internality?**

Yes, it is about interiority, it comes from within, and I have trained myself through various practices I have developed over the years to sense myself in the now in the now of the space time continuum. It may sound . . . but in actuality, in terms of physics, it is what is happening in a very objective sense. We just never really think outside of our 3D reality, but we exist in a much vaster and complex system, I am interested in visualizing this, so the viewer can actually get there just by experiencing the work, a tall order I know, I think it is achieved subliminally.

I've done all these practices like automatic writing and going running on the beach while doing these intense breathing exercises. Maybe it's because I was put in a convent for school when I was three—so I was very solitary and I had to go internally, and I also had the whole Catholic pageantry and symbolism. I think all of these more scholarly or more esoteric groups are about—initially it came internally and then started to get passed down from the originator, becoming externalized. And the Rosicrucians talk about blue; they talk a lot about color.

**Your pigment paintings are predominantly blue and red. Is it a coincidence they look like those Hubble Telescope pictures? They have that milky galaxy in space look that you get in these photos, or the Aurora Borealis, I'm sure people say.**

Or the wind.

**Yes, and to extrapolate, solar wind. But those paintings, they have the tie-in with the cosmos and the macro and the micro.**

Those paintings come from the wind, but I do think a lot in terms of supernova explosions and the beginning of everything. I'm not surprised that we have violence in us because we come from violence.

**The Big Bang was really violent.**

Yes! We're completely from violence.

**Everyone is in favor of stopping humans from being violent but on a cosmic level violence is a basis of life.**

**The charcoal drawings from 2005 also look alien, though in that "ancient mysteries" sense, like the Carne Abbas Giant in Dorset holding a big club and with a really big penis.**

Those came from my energetic meditations: You start out running, and inhale from the sun to your heart, and exhale from your heart to the sun ten times. As you do this at different times of the day. It's like living geometry. The next one arms extended, head thrown back, you do 33 breath of fire into the sky. Then you exhale, and when you have completely exhaled the breath, you inhale and spiral the breath clockwise around all the chakras, then you go back and you do it the other way around, and repeat it three times.

**That's what's in those drawings?**

They're describing that. Another connection that I'm interested in—we are in space.

**Yes, we are flying around through space.**

We are in outer space, and that's what I love. We really never—we don't think that way, right? It's so interesting to me, how we perceive. If we could see it, we're just one of those little dots out there that isn't seen because planets—we're not a star, so we're not visible. The only way we're visible actually is if we get in front of a star, just this little blip, right?

**Yes, a negligible speck in the immeasurable sweep. So coming up at the Salar de Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia, for 20/20: Accelerando, the crash-landing in Mali six thousand years ago, that's what you are working on now?**

What I am working on now is 20/20: Accelerando which will be exhibited at the Fisher Museum at USC in LA. I am hoping to shoot part of the project at the Salt Flats. My going to Bolivia was originally going to be this 24-hour performance with hundreds of people, but it's 12,000 feet high so possibly not too feasible. I just received a Santa Monica Artist Fellowship grant for my writing and performance work, and now I am thinking of going there to shoot part of 20/20: Accelerando. So it certainly won't be the whole performance, or it may even be Part II, but it will give me images that I need for this project and I'll be able to understand what I need to do there for the extended piece.

**You said you had the origins quite a while ago.**

Yes, I wrote the original narrative in 2003, and I did not use it in my work until 2014 with Particle Horizon exhibited at the Laguna Museum of Art. But first I want to show you something called An Elongated Now, which I did at the Laguna Art Museum in 2014 which served as a prologue to Particle Horizon. The original idea was for hundreds of people dressed in white to go on the arc of the beach in Laguna and point to the sunrise, all watch the sunrise, so they would be all pointing, and then at noon, and then at sunset, and then come back. But it was impossible.

**Logistically?**

Logistically it just wasn't realistic, so I thought, "Okay, I'll just have them come at sunset." They were to stay there and stand there from sunset until nighttime and then go into the museum to be part of Particle Horizon. It was quite a feat.

20/20: Accelerando is a development of that work which is about a 25th-century female astronaut who crash-landed in what is now Mali in the year 6,000 BC, and her mission is to show the inhabitants of planet Earth about their relationship to the stars. But when she enters earth's atmosphere she forgets everything and forgets her mission. So she does all these overlays of maps and tries to figure out what is what. The performance begins with the naming of the stars sung in the space as well as on a video that will be projected. In Stellar Axis: Antarctica, there were 99 stars that were aligned to 99 blue spheres on the ice of the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica, so I wanted to have singers do that which would also serve to contextualize her character and her mission. I'm collaborating with video artist and composer Robbie C. Williamson and there's an alien language with English subtitles sung by Cassandra Bickman. It's how the stars are being spoken, which is kind of wonderful. This is going to be a performance with musicians, singers, and dancers. This part I'm showing to you, with the audio, so you can hear the sound of the stars.



Southern Cross, 2014 (from Stellar Axis: Antarctica, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica, 2006). Inkjet print, 50 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery. Photograph by Jean De Pomeroy.



Man and the Mountain #1, 1978, Death Valley, California. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery.



Spine of the Earth 2012, 2015 (from Spine of the Earth 2012, performance for the Getty Museum Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival, Baldwin Hills Overlook, Los Angeles, 2012). Inkjet print, 50 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery. Photograph by Marissa Roth.



An Elongated Now, 2014. Documentation of performance for the Laguna Museum of Art, Art and Nature Festival. 300 performers dressed in white parallel the arc of Main Beach, Laguna over 3/4 of a mile, Laguna Beach, California. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery. Photograph by Eric Minh Swenson.

# Stefan Simchowitz

## In Conversation With Marta Gnypt

### Are you never tired of Facebook?

No, it's an amazing platform. It's given me an audience of thousands of people for free.

### To which extent does the audience influence your choices? For example, if you post an image of a painting on Instagram and get 300 likes, while another one gets five likes, does it influence what you think about the artist?

Absolutely not. Instagram is very random. If you take a picture of a girl in a bikini you'll get 450—it's really just there to message and communicate a story and a narrative for me. It's not a popularity contest. Facebook is like a diary that I use as much to express to the outside world what I'm interested in as to record and remember what I am interested in myself so I can refer back to my page in a notebook fashion.

### But the difference is that Facebook is not completely private.

That's not true. Facebook has an extraordinary amount of control for managing privacy in every aspect of your photo albums, individual photographs, your articles, your postings... the privacy settings that you can use on Facebook are extraordinary. You can make certain things private, which I do often. I often post things that I make visible only to myself or only visible to friends, or sometimes to the public.

### So you are permanently making choices between what you give to whom, more or less.

Yeah, I consider myself very generous with the amount of information that I share, and sometimes when people connect with me on Facebook, I ask them who they are, especially if they don't have much information.

### Are Facebook and Instagram very helpful for your art activities?

It works on many, many levels for me. It helps to market my artists and to tell the story, a narrative of my engagement with them, and their engagement with the world. There is a lot of content on my Facebook that has to do with prison reform in the United States or the refugee crisis, and a lot of people don't pay attention to that because they like the more sensational sort of elements of it. If you go to my Facebook it's actually a pretty well balanced smorgasbord of content: a diverse range of interests and articles. I'm interested in history, American history, and I have a lot of followers who actually send me an email every now and again and say, "You've got one of the most interesting, if not the most interesting, Facebook profiles," or in some cases, "the only one I follow." I see it as almost like a service where you're providing content that you've eliminated and sorted for people, in a way like a blog works.

### How many hours per day are you spending on Facebook and Instagram?

Instagram I don't spend much time on. I love photography. I shoot with Leicas and other fancy cameras. I'll usually do an upload when I've got something interesting to put up. I don't spend much time looking at Instagram. I'm a content pusher on Instagram as opposed to a content consumer. I like Facebook as a medium because it is three-dimensional—I like the ability to narrate the comments and to create a discourse.

### Do you really believe that you can have a serious conversation on Facebook?

Absolutely. Without a doubt.

### Don't you think that people are mostly interested in reading their own texts?

We have this sort of delineation between Facebook and the real world. Well, in the real world most people aren't interested in anything except themselves. It's the same on Facebook. But I've met some remarkable people on Facebook. I met a guy named Robert Keil, who's one of the most intelligent thinkers I've come across in my life. He's an amazing writer. He's brilliant. I met Stephen Elcock, who I think is one of the most significant and prodigious curators of content on the web today. He's got tens of thousands more followers than me, and I've actually communicated with him, and he's been an inspiration to me and to some artists I work with in the pictorial content that he shares. I have a friend named Gilda Oliver who is a teacher and an older artist, who I have a great communication with. I've actually had many relationships with people I've never met. I met a wonderful woman named Tisza Jaurique, who once attacked me for posting a picture of a friend of mine wearing a Native American headdress. She explained to me that it's very insulting to Native Americans; it's like painting someone in black face. She works as an Education consultant at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, and she's very knowledgeable of the history of Native Americans. I've learned a tremendous amount from her.

### Speaking about Facebook and Instagram, I would like to go to something different, but related to new media. In one of your talks you called yourself Luther. This comparison makes sense as, among many other things, what Martin Luther did could only happen because of possibilities offered by the new media of his time: the printing press. Luther posted his theses against the misbehavior of the Church. What kind of theses would you postulate, and against whom?

I wouldn't postulate anything against anyone in particular. I don't have a mandate per se to attack anyone in the system. I believe that the system needs to open, integrate, communicate, and collaborate. I don't call for the destruction of anyone or anything. What I do call for is an open-mindedness and an encouragement to embrace all the different aspects and skills that we all have. The way I read Luther is that the Catholic Church was very singular in saying that they were the only ones that could send you to heaven, and that singularity of idea—that there is only one path—is what I think Luther attacked. I think there are many paths to salvation, and many paths to communicate spiritual redemption. I think the art system is very similar to this singular solidarity in that you have to follow a path that is very structured. You go to art school, you get picked by curators, you get collected by museums, you get collected by the right collectors, you show with the right galleries. You can follow those guidelines, but those guidelines have become corrupted by social relationships and they have corroded the ability for artists who are outside of those systems to find a pathway to success. What I would call for is a questioning of those authorities, and questioning whether they are as valid as they were.

### Do you think you can break the system open without breaking the fundamentals of the system? Luther never wanted to break the Church, but on the other hand he did it partially by fragmenting the power structures.

I don't think you ever break infrastructure. The Catholic Church never broke but adapted. The Catholic Church today, centuries later, you know, is a very different Catholic Church from what it was hundreds of years ago. I've been reading a lot of American history lately, including Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), which offers some good insight into the



Stefan Simchowitz. Photograph by Lisa Marie Pomares.

adaptability of American spiritual life. He talks about how the strict Puritanism of the early settlers was challenged as urbanization gained momentum giving rise to the more unstructured, tin tabernacles and the Pentecostals, which ran hot and heavy in the cities of the US, offering a different kind of experience for religious observers that today is observed in the mega churches of America and their charismatic TV-ready preachers and practical everyday advice—a far cry from the rigid authority and intellectual strictness of early Puritan theology. Theology went from Saint Augustine to Joel Osteen to Pastor Creffo Dollar. So too will art go from the October School to Instagram. It is neither good nor bad, it is just is. Understand it, accept the evolution, and adapt accordingly.

### How will such a structural shift work in the art world?

The new world is Instagram and Facebook, the social media platforms that promote the dissemination and distribution of cultural content through validated social networks where no one is in charge. I think that, as with all systems, if there is a strong theology behind the cultural content and a strong intellectual structure behind the emergence of these new ideas, the quality and emergence of those cultural perspectives will be validated and supported very healthily within these new distributed networks and will scale accordingly in reaching larger audiences via non-hierarchical social distribution. It is a much more efficient and scalable mode of disseminating culture, autonomous from the singularity of entrenched institutional thinking and often in direct contravention to the education establishment and their stodgy, outdated modes of thinking about and teaching art production.

### What would the new media change in the art world?

It's very simple. In the postwar period we see an idea of a neoclassical economic model where a singular hierarchy of smart people deal with simple situations. We come from a system that is singular to an evolutionarily adaptive economic system where no one is in charge, where there are many, many hierarchies moving toward equilibrium. So eventually, I think the evolution of the art business is really given real force by social media—a guy like me who engages an audience and gets to intimately utilize the consumer mass-market social media tools he has at hand. And many more people like myself are able to come along and do the same thing. That creates a situation where the singular hierarchies are challenged and there are now many hierarchical, evolutionary, adaptive systems in which no one is in charge!

### But you are not using this media as the only source of your communication. You are working with artists who are also spread through galleries and institutions, so you are also part of the old system. You are doing both.

What would Luther be without the Catholic Church? What would Luther be without the theological history of the Catholic Church? Nothing.

### So you are adding something new, not replacing. What do you think are the consequences of new media?

Amplification. I still need galleries, museums, and collectors—the traditional. But contributions from new media weaken the absolute strength and absolute significance of the monoliths that make those structures so potent. It provides alternative sources of awareness. It doesn't mean in absolute terms they're weakened, it just means in relative terms they are. I think that's an important distinction. You still have to have an understanding of how the system works because you still need the system. Just like Luther still needs God and the devil, heaven and hell—he still needs these elements to base a Christian theology. Just like the Pentecostals and the Tabernacles and the Protestants and the Catholics are all similar in that there is God, there is Jesus, there is creation, the infrastructure doesn't change, it's just—the path to salvation changes, the path to knowledge changes.

### Do you think that the current art world infrastructure still has a lot to offer?

The art world infrastructure is very, very valid, and it always has been. There needs to be platforms for exhibitions; there certainly are and always will be experts. There will be people who spend their lives thinking and writing about art; there will be people who are aesthetically framed to look at art. They will always control the lion's share of the discourse. It's just that there are people who come from outside, like myself, who don't have a degree in critical studies, who never worked in a gallery or an auction house or a museum. I have been able to come along and become someone who has a real voice. Jerry Saltz was very similar. He was a truck driver who basically became one of the most well-read and well-respected critics in the world today. He was a great beneficiary of media, of the platform that social media provided to him. I think that's great. Jerry is one of those voices with a great power.

### Are you friends now?

I'm not friends with him, I don't know him. But one could say he's got more power than Roberta Smith in many respects. He's certainly better known. I think that no one is right, no one is wrong, it's an evolutionarily adaptive system that is not hierarchical. As human beings we have a very tough time accepting a condition in which there is no order. It's very difficult for us to come to terms with that because we're always looking for systems to move toward equilibrium, or a finite and fixed point where they're defined. There are artists at the museum, therefore you're safe, but this is not true anymore. The sooner we accept that as a condition of life we're able to deal with the circumstances at hand in a much more logical and productive way.

### But we cannot do without hierarchies. I think that's how most people function.

They do, but you can have a dictatorship run by one person, or you can have a country like the United States run by Congress and a senate. The hierarchy gets more evenly distributed.

### I would like to speak with you now about the position of the artist. We have this 19th-century idea that the artist is someone special, which was created according to the then new capitalistic structures that allowed artists to become autonomous. We created all kinds of autonomous artist models—revolutionary, avant-garde, romantic, someone who has a sixth sense—and up until today these models of the artist remain in place. The ideology of the artist treats him as someone between a priest, a rebel, and a visionary. Do you think this ideology can survive in the current art system?

I think the elevation of the artist today is a problem for both the creative act and for the long-term sustainability of the artist. I think it's problematic in that it creates a completely false mythology where the artist is essentially in complete control. I don't think the artist is in complete control. Artists, like anyone, start young and need guidance and collaboration. All other people are special, based on their achievements and the way they live their life and the decisions they make. A good artist is special, and a bad artist is not.

### Do you think artists have a function in our society?

Yes, to communicate ideas.

### So they are mediums.

Yes, they're mediums of mankind's experience, to communicate it through an aesthetic lens that can be carried through time and space. They communicate all different aspects of humanity: political, aesthetic, decorative, sexual, psychological, ambition, hatred, anxiety, love, lust, everything.

### In your opinion, they don't deserve a special status?

We have this mass "I'm an Artist" club—I suffer therefore I'm special. There's always this excuse of being overlooked for not being talented. I think it creates a problem. Insofar as the physicist is special, the thinker is special, the writer is special, they should be treated as such if they actually are; by denominating his activity as an artist does not implicitly make him special. A physicist who has no grasp of real physics is not special because he's a physicist. But it's very easy for someone to say, "I'm an artist! I'm special!" You experience it in everyday life, each and every one of us will meet some deluded character who is drawing nudes or doing paintings of flowers and thinks he is a genius, and can't tell the difference between himself and Jackson Pollock. We see this delusion because a conceptual framework has been constructed to educate them with it. They've been able to learn the commodity of ideas through art schools, a conceptual framework that validates them, which is false as well. Just like the guy who paints the Sunday painting is false, the guy who spent \$50,000 on education arming himself with conceptual ideas can be equally false, just much more refined.

### From my conversations with many artists I noticed that almost nobody is interested in previous avant-garde ideas of changing society and being a revolutionary—I think this idea has completely died. Is the artist becoming a profession instead of a calling?

It absolutely is becoming a profession. No question. I know people who are physicists who had a calling to be a physicist. I mean, some doctors have a calling to be a doctor.

### Okay, so being an artist is a profession as any other profession. Is art a commodity as any other commodity?

No, it's not; no commodity is the same. It's a different kind of commodity. Oil is a different kind of commodity from wheat. Wheat is a different kind of commodity from the services of a hotelier. All commodities are different.

### Would you agree that the moral system in the art market is more present than in markets of other commodities? Absolutely, but all systems are regulated by moral rules.

### Take for example the myth of the good collector who never sells. This is a moral rule that is actually only needed to regulate the art market. It is a mythology, but it's a mythology with a function.

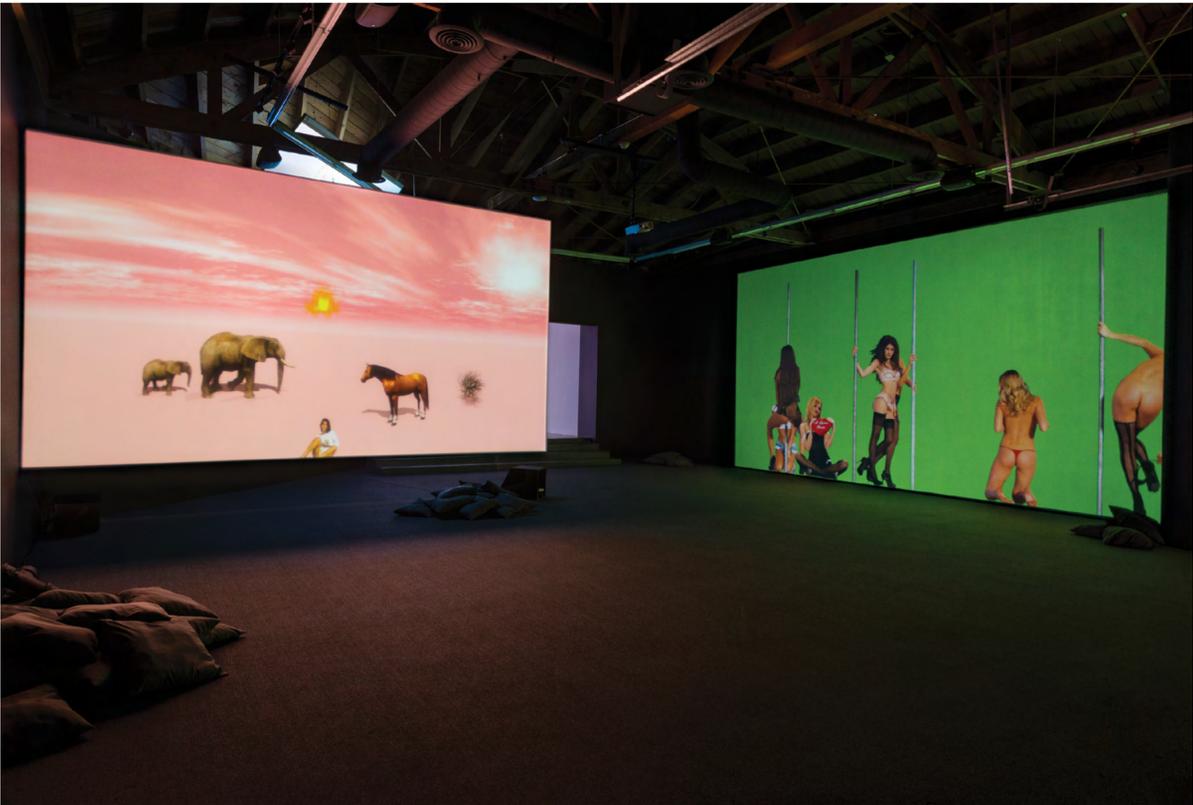
But it doesn't function, because they're selling anyway. I believe in limiting the supply and managing demand of art, and I believe that like any commodity it has to be, to some degree, protected. Farmers need to be protected from oversupply of bad product from overseas for example. But when you've got a bunch of people pretending that they're doing one thing when they're doing another so that they can have status and stature, then they have a problem. We now have this situation.

### I think they are pretending because there's a kind of moral pressure surrounding what you should and what you shouldn't do. What about the second myth—which is also very present in the art world—that a good collector buys with his eyes and not with ears?

I think that's a terrible myth because most people's eyes are shit. Most people's ears are better than their eyes. That basically says that if you like it then it's good. Well that's also false, because most people, honestly, have terrible taste and they're not trained to see properly. I think that's bullshit: "Oh I only buy what I like." I mean,



Petra Cortright, 2big teensbig, 2014. Digital painting on aluminum, 48 x 91.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view NIKI, LUCY, LOLA, VIOLA, Petra Cortright at Depart Foundation, Los Angeles, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

you're a hedge fund manager who basically grew up in the mountains of Russia and made money buying and selling aluminum, or you're a hedge fund guy who spends your time behind a computer screen basically trading currency, and you wake up and you're 50 and rich and suddenly you like it with your eyes. The only thing that they're good at is making money. That's why so many of these collections look like shit warmed up.

### And they're all similar.

And they're all similar. I commented on Facebook on some rich guy's house with the two little armchairs next to a fireplace with the typical Anish Kapoor above the fireplace right by Damien Hirst and Rudolf Stingel and Dan Colen with a Takashi Murakami sculpture on the floor next to it, you know? Individually, there might be some quality to the work, but it looks like shit. It just looks like Crate and Barrel for rich people. Breaking that is very difficult.

### What do you do in such a case? Do you try to tell someone like him that he has a shitty collection?

I told him on Facebook his collection looks like shit. Absolutely. I posted that this is a typical rich guy's collection that is like a Crate and Barrel for rich people. I don't know how he reacted. Some people get offended and just never work with me again, but what can I do?

### You don't believe in this very idea of collecting as a personal discovery?

Yeah, the idea of collecting is an action of discovery, and oftentimes these artists who are collected make some very good work in their time. I mean, Stingel is an amazing artist, Colen has made some very good work, as have Kapoor and Murakami, and as has Hirst. But these collectors just end up buying the sort of commoditized, churned-out, second-rate stuff that these artists manufacture in the more advanced years of their career, so the work has lost its spiritual soul. I can't attack the artists individually, but there is some corruption in the system as these guys expand through the network.

### Interesting. This skill makes you certain about your discoveries and your choices.

I think that's a skill that I developed over decades of taking pictures. There was not a moment in my life since I was 15 years old that I stopped taking various photographs, large format, medium format—I mean, I have tens of thousands of images. Today I consider myself a very, very good photographer, but that is sort of something that I trained my eye to do and see that other people don't really have access to. I have a friend and a client, Albert Chehebar, who happens to be a very good photographer and

### Tell me about your "Trust Me Special," which is something opposite from the personal discovery; with your good eye you are buying works for your collectors without them seeing what you are buying.

I did the Trust Me Special at a time when I was trying to protect myself from a gentleman who would try to copycat me. But the Trust Me Special is good. I think that's fine. I have great faith in my ability and my taste over, frankly, most people. And I think that people would be smart to listen to and to follow me. I've spent my life living, breathing, and eating aesthetics, thinking about culture, and loving and looking at art.

### How do you recognize quality?

It's instinctive. I don't know, I wouldn't say it's knowing—I know nothing.

### Very often you see something for the first or only time on the Internet. Did you train your eye so well that you can recognize quality from the Internet?

I'm a photographer, I've taken photographs my whole life. I've always, pretty much consistently for 30 years, looked through the lens of the camera and documented things. I think that's been very helpful to me in interpreting how something physical is translated into an image. Actually, for the first time I thought of it in those terms a few days ago, because I see a lot of stuff online. I've been very successful in identifying work that I see in an online-only environment, and I think it's because I understand the translation of object into image quite intimately, and I can—just like when you hold a camera up to someone, you can snap a picture, and you kind of know how the picture is going to look after you've taken it. You can reverse that and see from the picture what the object is like in the flesh. I think that's a skill very few people have. I think photography has this sort of inversion, of being able to document something and to look at an image and un-document something and see what it looks like in its original form.

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also a very adept and skilled collector, who uses social media. I can see from the quality of his photographs that he's able to see things in a way that's probably better than most people.

### Is the quality not something that depends on the point of view? The same garden can be seen either as neglected or enchanting.

Most people cannot see quality. They interpret quality based on perception. We're talking about Plato's cave. We're talking about what the shadow is and what is real, and most people see the shadow. But some people go outside and they have a look, you know? I'm sure I would find most houses I go to that are expensive awful and disgusting. Most people come to my house and find it not that impressive. I love my house. Most people are tuned in very basic ways; they register scale, shininess, very basic things.

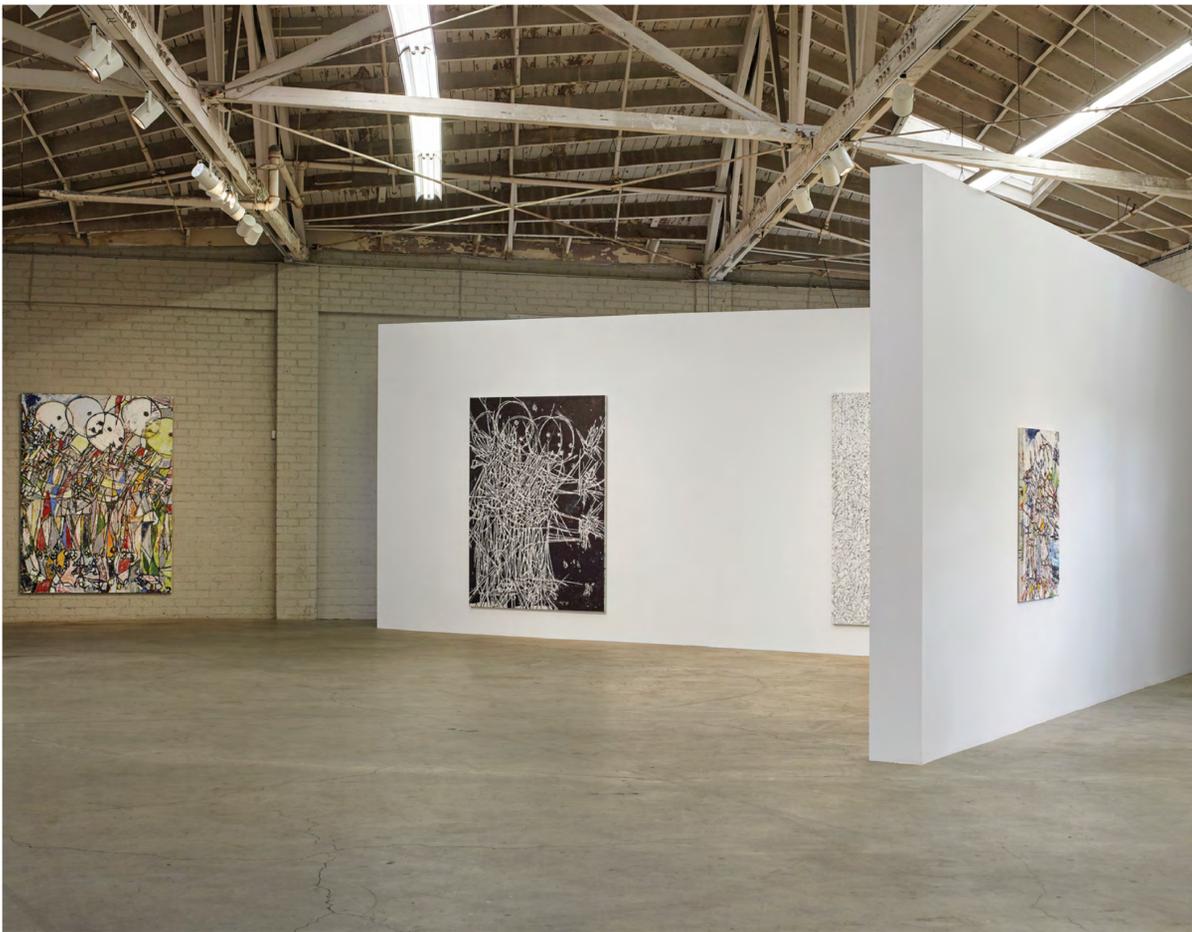
### So the quality, according to you, is something that is there, unchangeable. Yes.

### Who are the artists that you think are the best quality of our time at this moment?

I think there's a lot of good work being produced today. We're in a very competitive environment, in a very well-financed environment for culture, in an environment where there is a lot of training for artists. I think we're actually in a golden age of cultural production with an immense amount of high-quality work. Obviously, the artists I work with closely: Petra Cortright, Kour Pour, Zachary Armstrong, Serge Attukwei Clottey, Oscar Murillo; and artists I don't work directly with such as Sterling Ruby, Jon Rafman, Jimmy Merris, Michael Pybus, Nikolas Gambaroff... I can go on and on. I could probably give you a hundred good artists. Easily.

### Most artists you just mentioned are younger than you are. What do you think about the idea that you understand best your own generation?

It depends on who you are. I think there's a lot of knowledge that's required to understand anything properly. It's not actually your generation, but it's where your specialty lies, and your open-mindedness. I think it's where you put your time and your resources to understand something. For me, I've spent a lot of resources in understanding the generations around me, up and above, around



Installation view, *Goodnight Bojangles*, Zachary Armstrong at Night Gallery, Los Angeles, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Luke Diorio, *Untitled (Athers to London)*, 2015. Graphite, marker, pigment on hand-folded linen, canvas, jute, and digital print on vinyl mesh, 40 x 20 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

an age group. I'm 44 and I'm collecting people who are 25, 26, 27; they're not my generation, but they are over the landscape of the world that I see and can understand and can have access to.

**Why are you so critical of Paddle8?**

Because I think venture funding in these auction systems essentially promises people the opportunity of making money, thereby encouraging those collectors who aren't really collectors, but very silly sort of short-sighted opportunists, to go and buy material from galleries and artists where there's very little demand for it. I think they're very destructive and they create a sense of false liquidity. I don't think it means the market is bad, it just means that you can't buy something and three months later sell it. What's happening is that these guys are buying it thinking they can sell it, and the artist is thinking he's a genius who found a huge supply of collectors, and the gallery is thinking they're brilliant for doing the same thing. These young people who have no real idea how the world works or its complexity essentially overproduce and get overly exuberant and confident because they're naive. I think that venture funding of these auction houses has been excessive. I think Phillips has been excessive in the amount of material they take. It takes years for material to cook. Art is a lamb stew—you want it in the oven for as long as possible before it's ready to eat.

**Will it not regulate itself after a couple of months, a couple of years?**

Yeah, it regulates itself, but in between those periods a lot of damage gets done, and it's in everyone's best interest if you can reduce the damage. Did we need the housing crisis to get to the recovery? We didn't really. There was a lot of pain and suffering that was caused, you know?

**I found it interesting to see you make a difference between collectors and real collectors.**

I absolutely make a distinction. I don't get bluffed by this fake mythology people create through presentation. I'm just less gullible and more sophisticated in my thinking to tell the difference. The galleries have art consultants arriving at the VIP preview along with 9,000 other people, and they're happy to accept the art consultants as representing a collector who has empowered them with the rights to distribution. I'm not impressed by big "name collectors." Most of the time they get the classification because they are rich and rich people tend to buy a lot of different things. I'm impressed by people for real reasons. I'm impressed by the Rubells not because they've got the best taste in the world, but because their commitment for decades has been consistent. I don't think whether or not they sell is relevant. I think their commitment is impressive, and therefore valid. They have contributed over an extraordinarily long period of time.

**So where is the art world in 20 years?**

It's bigger, it's faster, it's more diverse. You have a much bigger collecting class collecting emerging contemporary. You have more institutions, more museums. You have more players like myself in the market and you have faster Internet and hopefully SFAQ in every major city!



Marc Horowitz, *Chad Augustine*, 2015. Oil stick, gaffers tape, acrylic spray paint, marker on linen, 65 x 45 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, *The Displaced*, 2015. Sculptural installation/performance, Labadi Beach, Ghana. Photograph by Charles Whitcher. Courtesy of the artist.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, *American Lottery*, 2015. Plastic, wire and oil paint, 94 x 51 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

# Math Bass

## In Conversation With Courtney Malick

Los Angeles-based artist *Math Bass*, whose current solo show *Off the Clock* at MoMA PS1 runs through August 31st, 2015, has been carving out a dynamic practice that freely shifts from performance to sculpture to painting to installation, taking up all of the images and objects therein in the same way that one might think of a rotating cast of actors whose appearances stay the same while their characters continue to change from project to project. In other words, outwardly, the works themselves often stay relatively the same, but their behaviors and relationships towards one another continually get redirected and configured. Similarly, Bass's work traverses one-off and collaborative performances (in which audience members sometimes participate) that involve sculptural sets and props, singular sculptures, interactive architectural installations, and graphic paintings that incorporate her own lexicon of symbols and signs.

While Bass's practice continues to evolve, it's an evolution that occurs through conscious recycling and clever interchangeability rather than constantly seeking out the next new thing or drastic change of direction. In this way, previous performances and videos can inform and triangulate a current sculpture or installation, as is the case in *Off the Clock*, which brings together an array of works formed over the past three years that speak to each other through their shared histories. Each work has stemmed from past performances or previous sculptural projects and now finds themselves repositioned in time and space as well as within the roles that they play in juxtaposition to one another. *Off the Clock* marks an important and rare example of an exhibition that at the surface seems purely abstract but gradually reveals itself to stand for and interrogate larger questions about perception, language, interchangeability, and perhaps most centrally, where and how the body of the viewer is configured within a given space—not just the space within this show, but space on a much broader and ultimately more intimate level.

To begin, I wanted to talk about the connection between your current work, which is geared towards the creation of environments as exhibitions, and the strong performative impulse that I imagine is still present in your work but was perhaps more at the forefront a few years ago. Do you feel as though performance continues to be a through-line of your practice even if in a more abstracted sense than in the past?

Yeah, that's true. It's hard for me to always verbally explain the ways that my work has functioned or changed over time.

I know, I realize this is the case for lots of artists as they choose not to express their ideas in a purely verbal way. But with that in mind, it's kind of funny because there is also an integration of vocabularies and linguistic symbols that runs throughout your work, particularly in your paintings.

Yes, that is there. I am really interested in language as a structural and psychic tool. It is a physical thing and yet at the same time it is also so ephemeral and in that way it opens up these psychic spaces. I like to find ways that a single sentence or the coupling of a few sentences can pull in two different directions simultaneously, which creates this tension in between those polarities. It is between those two poles that I find that a space can be activated and where the performativity of language occurs. In that sense, the way that both language and performativity gets carried out in my work is that I continue to return to those kinds of tensions.

Is that something that you plan out ahead of time? Sometimes your work appears as if a specific frame or set of borders have been preconceived and then set into motion through other paintings, sculptures, and objects within the exhibition. Is that the case?

I don't usually approach things from a very premeditated position. I'm never saying to myself beforehand, "If I do this I will achieve this effect."

That's interesting because something that I noticed from *Off the Clock*, and also at your show *Lies Inside* at Overduin & Co. last year, is that the positioning of the viewer seems as though it is a central concern in the way that both shows were put together. I guess that is not actually how your process unfolds?

I am interested in the way that the position of the body opens up a frame and that depending on where you are in relationship to an object or an image within that space you are opening up different frames while also becoming part of them. So that definitely also has to do with performativity in regards to these installations, though I really don't even want to call them installations, particularly the work in *Off the Clock*.

Oh really, why is that?

Well I don't really feel like it is an installation because everything in it is discrete. I feel like every object or image can function on its own. But maybe I can let go of that idea, maybe the term "installation" doesn't have to mean that everything has to be supported by each other and therefore always stay together.

I think it is kind of important to make that distinction actually. It seems like people say "installation" to refer to anything that is not a singular work, but technically an installation would mean a set of objects that are meant to be exhibited together in the same or relatively similar configuration.

That also leads into something else that I wanted to ask you about *Off the Clock*. Can it be seen as a documentary project since a lot of the work has been exhibited previously but in different formats and contexts? Because now there is this culmination of, as you say, "discrete works" that have been shown in the past in fragments and are now all coming together at the same time.

Yes, for this show I pulled from a few different bodies of work. It was a combination of making new work and revisiting older works and remaking them. It ended up being really important to me that I remake certain pieces and sort of go back into them, rather than show the originals. Even though I thought to myself, "Why am I doing this?!" I have already made this! In some instances it was useful for me to return to them and think through them again, and in other cases it was necessary because the originals had been made quickly and were not in the best condition.

So all of the older works at PS1 are actually new versions of their originals?

Not all of them, but some. Others did not need to be remade and some of them had in the past not been used as sculptures but more as performance props or as parts of sets. I am interested in recirculating these works and thinking of them like characters. I have returned to the same sentences that I have used in songs that appear in multiple projects in different ways—they have been in performances, PowerPoints, texts... it's the same idea with the objects that are currently at PS1. For example the cast concrete pants have been used as part of a set that I made for a performance at the Hammer and now they are functioning as singular sculptures in *Off the Clock*. It's interesting for me to see how these characters continue to shift and expand in relation to one another as they progress through different formats.

I am wondering if, after selecting certain older works to include in the show and others to recreate, you began making the new works with the intention of responding to your previous works?

I don't know if I was fully responding to my previous work or more just expanding off of it. For example I made a new piece that looks kind of like two hard-edged dog figures that are connected, which comes from a similar piece that had been two separate dogs. There is also a new version of a piece called *Slingbed*, which looks like something in between a gurney and a lounge chair that had been used in a performance in the past. I also made new paintings that directly relate to those that were in *Lies Inside*. With every project it seems like a mad dash and a huge overhaul, and then after the show opens, and I can finally decompress. Afterward, it is hard for me to find an access point into the work. So *Off the Clock* allowed me to re-enter into a lot of previous work that I felt sort of detached from, which was really nice.

That makes sense. Maybe it was less of a responsive or reflexive approach but more just meditative. Did you make all the new work in New York?

No, most of them I made in my LA studio and shipped to PS1, but I did pour the concrete pants at the museum.

And altogether *Off the Clock* represents at least three or four years of work, right?

Yes, about three and a half years of my work in different capacities.

Wow! They have functioned in different ways throughout various types of projects over that time and now have finally all been exhibited alongside one another. Does it feel as though they have come to some state of completion or will they continue to be reworked into future projects?

I really like the idea of being able to continue to reconfigure works, though some of course get phased out and then maybe reappear much later and by then have become something totally different but have still stemmed from the same sort of visual or conceptual root of one initial, discrete element.

I am interested in work that is able to function in that way as well, particularly because it can manifest in different ways but continue to ultimately convey the same message. I am still wondering how you see all of these pieces, or characters as you referred to them, now that they have all been shown together. Does that somehow change their meaning for you? Would you be able to do another show like this or is this sort of an end point for their ability to work with one another?

No, I don't think I would do another show like this. For me this show is this show, and I don't know what my next will be like. But with this one, it felt sort of like an opening up of everything I'd done over the past few years, and then a closing in a way. Of course, I don't want to be too definitive about that because I am not totally sure what will happen in the future.

Right. Does it ever gets confusing for you working in this recycling mode? Do you ever start to question the meaning of a particular piece when you are now inserting it into a context that is so different from the one in which it was initially created? Do you ever worry about its legibility as it flows through these various contexts? You mean is there an aspect of something that becomes almost autoerotic going on?

Yeah, in a way... I guess that can be good or bad depending on how you utilize it.

There is definitely that sort of line that you realize exists when you are essentially creating your own language, and that at some point you can potentially go so deep into it that then you start to think, "Wait, this may be illegible to anyone else."

Is that a concern for you when you think of the viewer?

No, not really.

There is symbology inserted into your work—mainly the paintings—that you must realize viewers are going to make direct references to, like the cigarette, for example, or abstracted letters, steps, or clouds.

Well, some of those symbols that occur within the paintings are more recognizable. I've always called that particular image "the cigarette" when thinking about it, even though I wasn't really trying to depict the actual pictorial representation of a real cigarette. Although, when I first started that series the images were cruder, and the cigarette was much more of a real-looking cigarette. Over time it's become more formalized and it looks like a shape with a gradient and a plume of smoke. So yes, you can still make the reference to a cigarette, but at other times throughout the series it reads as a column, or a matchstick, or sometimes it becomes more abstract and just looks like any other formal or architectural shape. And in that way it gets used as something that breaks up a plane or gets laid on top of another image in order to disrupt its continuity.

Sometimes everything looks as though it is all on one axis and is contained within a grid and then there is this cigarette or other object that comes into that space that tilts and disrupts the flatness. I did always call that particular image a cigarette, but I have names like that for all of the images or symbols that come into my work.

Really? Even for the things that are much more abstract?

Yes. For example, I had made this amorphous green, tarped object and I always called it "the hedge."

So do you mainly give those kinds of names just for yourself in order to keep track of them, or do they end up becoming the titles of the works, too?

Sometimes they do. I find titling works to be difficult. Sometimes I just can't think of anything and don't want to spend hours trying to come up with something clever. But, at the same time, I do think that titles can be a really effective tool for understanding a work, so I do like coming up with them even though at times it can be agonizing.

I often get a lot out of the title of an artwork. Sometimes I may not have known the name of a work and then when I find out it can really add to or shift my understanding of it. Because of that I am always interested to learn about different artists' titling processes. Do you usually come up with yours after having made something or can they be a guiding force at the onset?

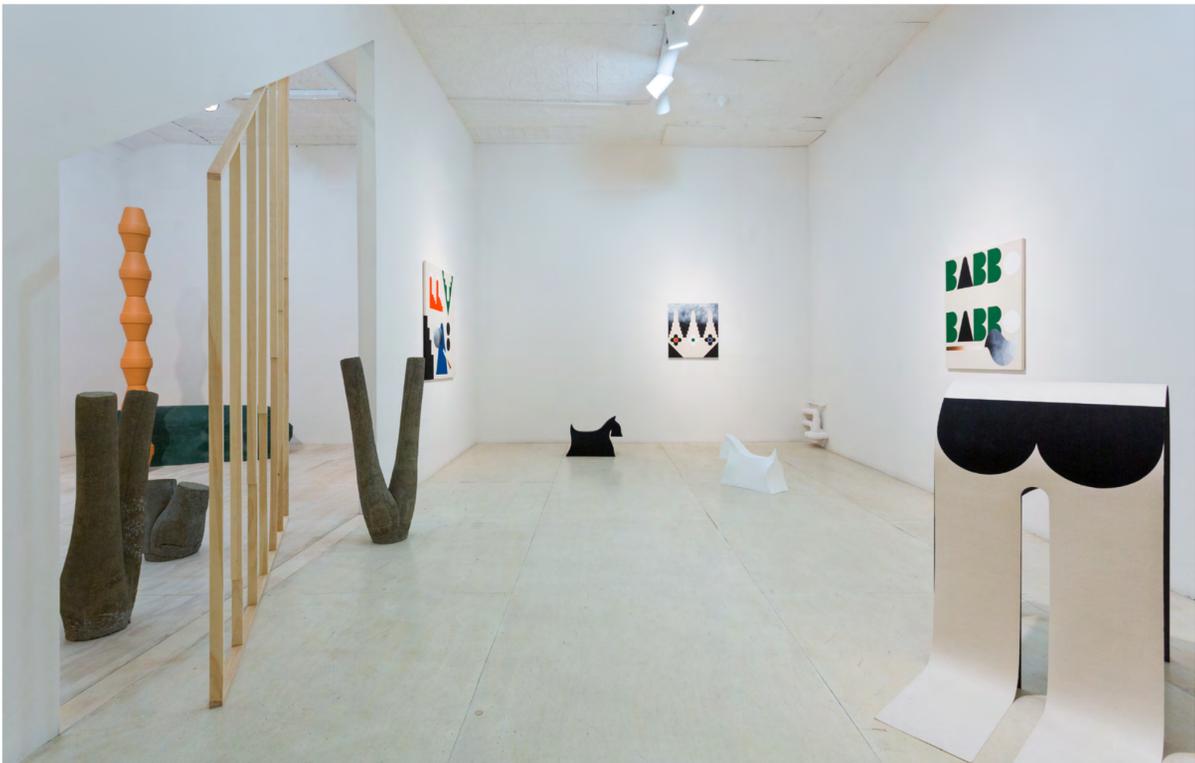
It depends. Sometimes it can be helpful to start off with one. For example, I did a two-person show with Leidy Churchman at Human Resources in LA in 2013 titled *Monte Cristo*. It was collaborative in that we were making our own works at the same time and were in constant conversation with each other about them and the show. We had come up with that title at the very beginning, even before either of us had any idea what the work would be. In that instance, as we were making work we were thinking about Monte Cristo, and...

He seeped in?

Yeah, somehow Monte Cristo came through in both of our works. We each evoked this kind of island that you could really feel within the exhibition. But it doesn't always work like that. Other times I will have already made something and then all of the sudden the title will pop into my head.

As I am looking at your paintings I see a very formal and even palette-based connection to Fernand Léger. Is that someone that you have considered as a reference? His works are mainly figurative, but I am wondering when it was that you first made this transition from more ephemeral, performance-based work to these very formal, starkly color-contrasted paintings that you have been showing recently?

I'd have to look at his work to see the connection, but generally I've incorporated drawing and other 2D work into my practice so it wasn't really a total shift, although earlier on I did tend to use paint more as a prop. I did a lot of these large text-based paintings on raw canvas. They weren't stretched so they were more like banners than paintings. They had phrases painted on them like, "Who says you have to be a dead dog?" or, "Who says you have to be a historical dog?" At that time I was working with raw canvas and gesso and using this font that was really just basic shapes that sort of represented letters.



Installation view, *Math Bass: Off the Clock* at MoMA PS1, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1. Photograph by Pablo Enriquez.



Installation view, *Math Bass: Off the Clock* at MoMA PS1, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1. Photograph by Pablo Enriquez.



Installation view, *Math Bass: Off the Clock* at MoMA PS1, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1. Photograph by Pablo Enriquez.

# FIRST LOOK

COLLECTING  
CONTEMPORARY  
AT THE ASIAN

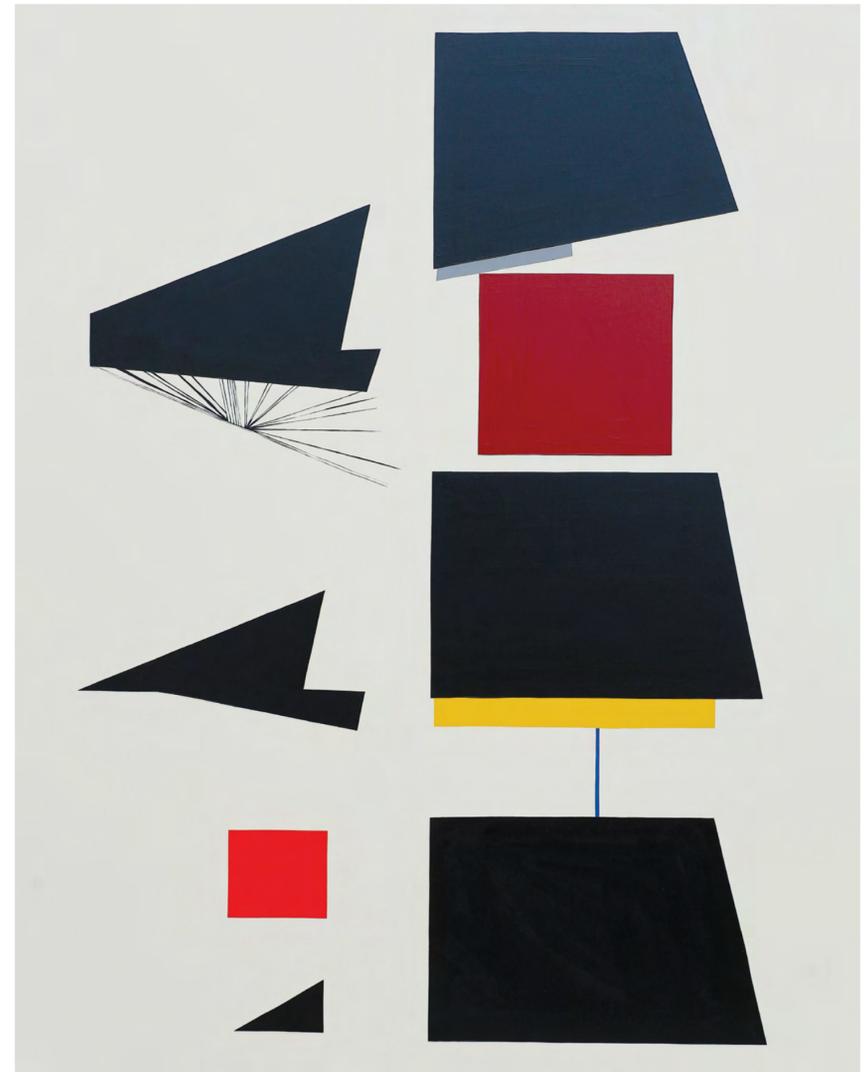


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We've got new stuff, and we're ready to show it off. The museum has spent the last 15 years enriching our celebrated collection with outstanding contemporary art, and **First Look** reveals highlights from these acquisitions. There's something for everybody, from acclaimed work by Bay Area favorites like Hung Liu to exciting debuts like Ahmed Mater's *Illumination Waqf*. You will also encounter new digital work from Japanese "Ultra-technologists group" teamLab and large-scale paintings by Zhu Jinshi and Manuel Ocampo. These pieces are remarkable on their own, but they activate the rest of the museum's collection in compelling new ways, infusing traditional themes, mediums and cultural history with the urgency of present-day ideas.

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First Look: Collecting Contemporary at the Asian was organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, China Guardian Auctions, and an anonymous donor. Image: Untitled, No. 25 (detail), 2008, by RongRong (Chinese, b. 1968) & ini (Japanese, b. 1973), Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Gift of Jack and Susy Wadsworth, 2013.15. © RongRong & ini. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



Clare Rojas, *Untitled*, 2015, oil on canvas 50 x 40 inches

*September - October, 2015*

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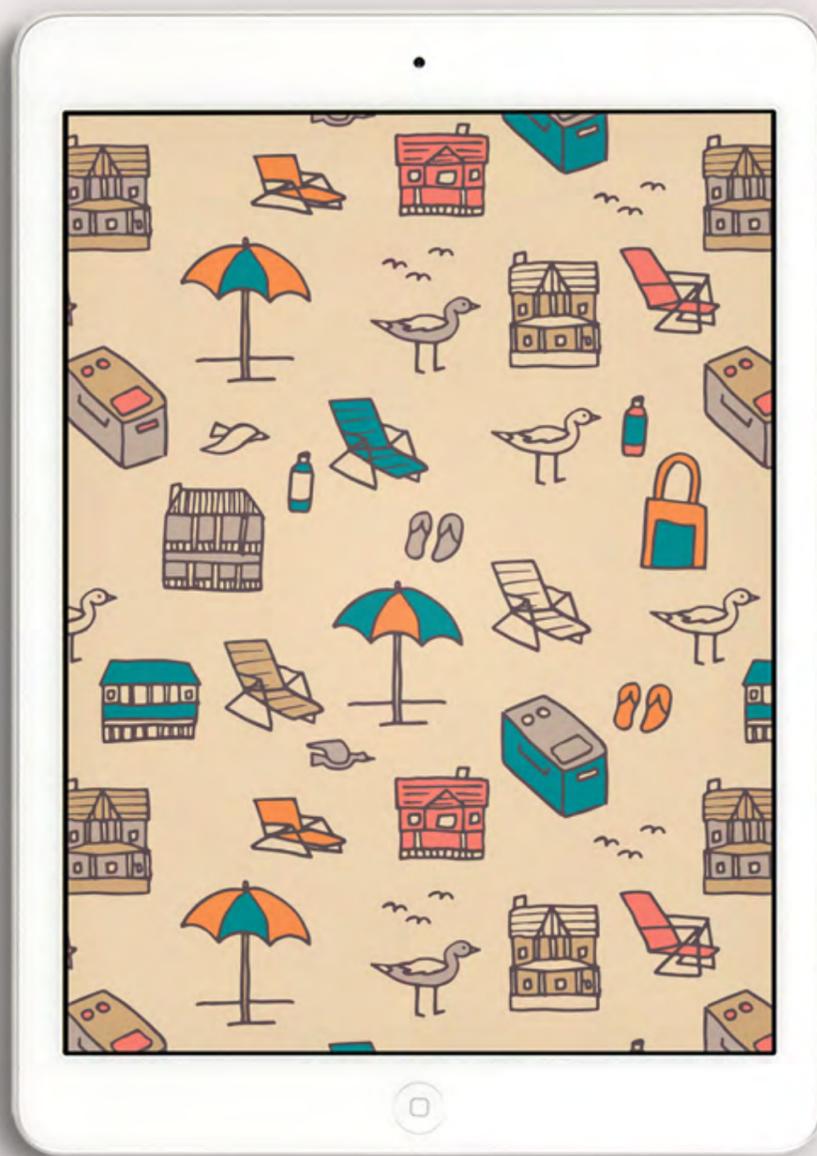
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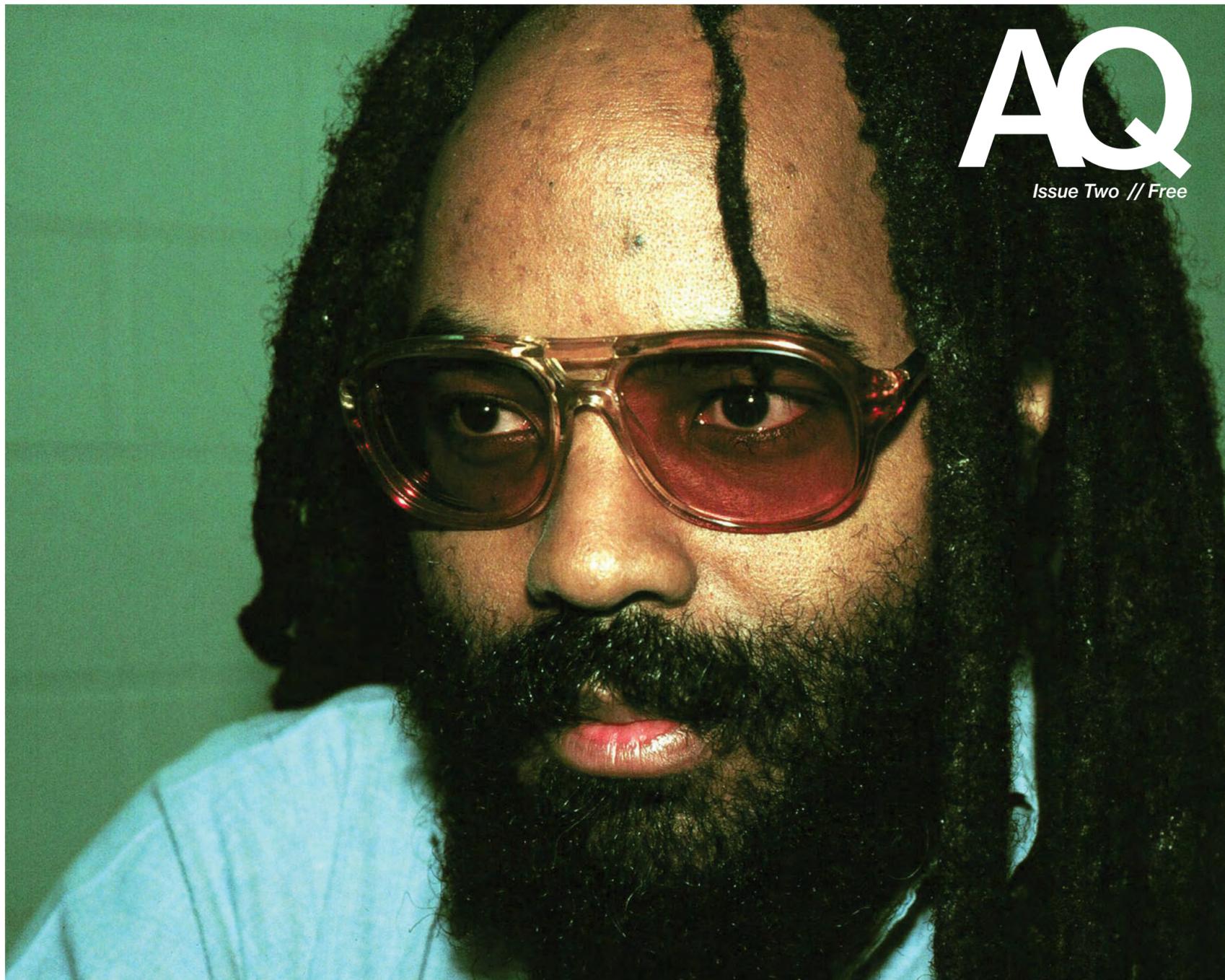


# Adobe Creative Residency

Illustration by Creative Resident, Becky Simpson.

[www.adobe.com/go/creative-residency](http://www.adobe.com/go/creative-residency)

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**Mumia Abu Jamal** *Writing On The Wall* • **Adam Rothstein** *Seeing Water* • **Nicole Archer** *Style Wars: Critical Reflections On The Power Of Style* • **Ben Valentine** *Infrastructures Of Power And Magic* • **John Zarobell** *The Informal Economy And The Global Art Market* • **Nicholas O'Brien** *Can The Blockchain Save Digital Art?* • **John Rapko** *The Anti-Genius, Or, Why Do Curators Talk Like That? (Part Two)* • **Dave Hickey** *In Conversation With Jarrett Earnest (Part Three)* • **Mark Van Proyen** *On Point 2.07: The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Art Critic* • **Arie Amaya-Akkermans** *Unfinished Centuries*

## Writing On The Wall

### Mumia Abu Jamal

#### 1. Christmas in a Cage January 1982

Shortly before 6 a.m., the speaker in this tiny, barren cell blares a message, said to be from prison superintendent David Owens: "A Merry Christmas to all inmates of the Philadelphia prison system. It is our hope that this will be the last holiday season you spend with us."

A guard reads Owens's name and the speaker falls silent for a half hour. I wonder at the words, and ponder my first Christmas in the hospital wing of the Detention Center.

#### Christmas in a cage

I have finally been able to read press accounts of the incident that left me near death, a policeman dead, and me charged with his murder. It is nightmarish that my brother and I should be in this foul predicament, particularly since my main accusers, the police, were my attackers as well. My true crime seems to have been my survival of their assaults, for we were the victims that night.

To add insult to injury, I have learned that the forces of "law and order" have threatened my brother and burned, or permitted the burning of, my brother's street business. Talk about curbside justice! According to some press accounts, cops stood around the fire joking and then celebrated at the station house.

Nowhere have I read an account of how I got shot, how a bullet happened to find its way near my spine, shattering a rib, splitting a kidney and nearly destroying my diaphragm. And people wonder why I have no trust in a "fair trial." Nowhere have I read that a bullet left a hole in my lung, filling it with blood.

Nowhere have I read how police found me lying in a pool of my blood, unable to breathe, and then proceeded to punch, kick and stomp me—not question me. I remember being rammed into a pole or a fireplug with police at both arms. I remember kicks to my head, my face, my chest, my belly, my back and other places. But I have read no press accounts of this, and have heard tell of no witnesses. Nowhere have I read of how I was handcuffed, thrown into a paddy wagon and beaten, kicked, punched and pummeled. Where are the witnesses to a police captain or inspector entering the wagon and beating me with a police radio, all the while addressing me as a "Black motherfucker"? Where are the witnesses to the beating that left me with a four-inch scar on my forehead? A swollen jaw? Chipped teeth?

Not to end prematurely, who witnessed me pulled from the paddy wagon, dropped three feet to the cold hard earth, beaten some more, dragged into Jefferson Hospital, and then beaten inside the hospital as I fought for breath on one lung?

I awoke after surgery to find my belly ripped from top to bottom, with metallic staples protruding. My penis strapped to a tube, and tubes leading from each nostril to God knows where, was my first recollection. My second was intense pain and pressure in my already ripped kidneys, as a policeman stood at the doorway, a smile on his mustached lips, his name tag removed and his badge covered. Why was he smiling, and why the pain? He was standing on a square plastic bag, the receptacle for my urine.

Am I to trust these men, as they attempt to murder me again, in a public hospital? Not long afterward, I was shaken to consciousness by a kick at the foot of my bed. I opened my eyes to see a cop standing in the doorway, an Uzi submachine gun in his hands. "Innocent until proven guilty"?

#### High-water pants and cold

Days later, after being transferred to city custody at Giuffre Medical Center under armed police guard, I was put into room #202 in the basement's detention unit, which is the coldest in the place.

After I was transferred to what's laughingly referred to as the new "hospital wing" of the Detention Center, I found out what "cold" really means. For the first two days, the temperature plummeted so low that inmates wore blankets over their prison jackets.

I had been officially issued a short-sleeved shirt and some tight high-water pants, and I was so cold that for the first night I could not sleep. Other inmates saved me from the cold. One found a prison jacket for me. (I had asked a guard, but he told me I would have to wait until an old inmate rolls, or gets out. So much for "using the system.") Other inmates, and a kind nurse, supplemented my night warmth.

The prison issued one bedsheet and one light wool blanket. When I protested to a social worker, she told me defensively, "I know it's cold, but there's nothing I can do. The warden's been told about the problem." Why am I concerned about the cold? Because the doctor who treated me at Jefferson Hospital explained that the only real threat to my health was pneumonia, because of my punctured lung. Is it purely coincidental that for the next week I spent some of the coldest nights and days of my life? Is the city, through the prison system, trying to kill me before I go to trial? What do they fear? I told all this to my prison social worker (a Mrs. Barbara Waldbaum), and she pooh-poohed the suggestion.

"No, Mr. Jamal, we want to see you get better."

"Not hardly," I replied.

Miraculously, after my complaints, some semblance of heat found its way into the cells on my side of the wall. Enough to sleep, at least. Is it coincidental, too, that the heat began to go on the night I was visited by Superintendent David Owens?

"It is our hope that this will be the last holiday season you spend with us..." Owens's words ring through my mind again—is there another, grim meaning to this seemingly innocuous holiday greeting?

#### Echoes of Pedro Serrano

There is another side to this controversial case that people are not aware of. My cell is reasonably close to the place where Pedro Serrano was severely beaten and strangled to death. I have talked to eyewitnesses—some of whom I knew in the street. These brothers, at considerable personal peril, have told their stories to police and to prison officials, to city Managing Director W.W. Goode, to the Puerto Rican Alliance, and to me. Some have been threatened by guards for doing so, but they have done so despite the threats.

According to several versions, Serrano, who had already been beaten by guards, was shaking his cell door, making noise to attract attention. Guards, angered at the noise, ordered all inmates into lock-up. Most complied. One, a paralyzed, wheelchair-bound inmate, did not. He drove his chair near a wall and watched in silence.

The guards opened Serrano's cell, dragged him out, and proceeded to punch, kick and stomp him. He cried out in pain and terror, but the other inmates, locked up, were helpless. One guard, well known for his violence, reportedly whipped him with his long key chain, producing thin red welts in Serrano's white flesh.

Before this latest assault on my brother and myself, I had covered a press conference called by the Puerto Rican Alliance and members of the Serrano family. I saw photographs of Pedro Serrano, his face swollen even in death. I saw a body riddled with swellings, bruises and welts. I remember the thick, dark bruises beneath his neck, and I remember calling David Owens for a comment.

"Mumia, Mr. Serrano was not beaten to death, according to all the reports I've received. The Medical Examiner concurs," Owens said authoritatively. "Mr. Serrano was not beaten by any members of my staff," Owens would later proclaim to my radio listeners.

Remember the dark bruise around Serrano's neck? Owens told me he apparently strangled on a leather restraining belt, by exerting pressure until death. Inmate eyewitnesses said a guard wrapped the leather strap around Serrano's neck and pulled him back into the room, where he was again beaten and placed in restraints. Serrano, arrested for burglary, was described by his wife as being in love with life, and surely not suicidal, as prison officials have suggested.

Why have I recounted these intricacies of a case that is now public knowledge? I'll tell you why: Because my jailers, the men who decide whether I am to leave my cell for food, for phone calls, for pain medication, for a visit with a loved one, are the very same men who are accused of murdering Pedro Serrano.

Remember the DA's claim that police had enough evidence to charge me with murder? How much more evidence do they have on Serrano's accused murderers? Yet every day they come to work, do their do, and return home to their loved ones... while others sit in isolation and squalor. Consider the scenario—accused murderers guarding accused murderers! How insane—yet how telling it is of the system's brutality.



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n the bearing, carriage,  
or air of a person

f i s #RadicalPresence

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# Seeing Water

Adam Rothstein

You can see the drought if you stare into the end of your faucet, like staring at the black part of a candle flame.

This method works just as well as any of the myriad charts, maps, visualizations, and website-embedded animations of a hamburger abstractly labeled with numbers of gallons of water. Look into the faucet. Stare into its dark, fathomless depths, then turn the knob, let loose the water, rinse clean your illusions, and open your third eye, which looks like nothing so much as the clockwise, Coriolis swirl of 70% of our body weight circling around a drain.

You just have to look hard enough. It is about effort, the sheer force of will to see what is hidden, so that you might understand about the water. We are told endlessly of how we must learn to handle the drought. We must understand and comply with water-saving techniques. We need to be on the lookout for water-wasting, for failures to comply with emergency measures. We must be shown data that explains the *real* cause of the drought. We must study maps that show which percent of what area is using what portion of the total water. We have to see this water infrastructure. If only we could embody the truth about water with our senses and our mind, then the drought would go away. If only we knew how much water we were using, and how precious it is to our lives, then the water accounting problem would solve itself. In this miraculous revelation, the fundamental collision of overpopulation and climate change that our civilization has wrought would simply—if one will pardon the phrase—evaporate. And so the great magical trick begins. The dark visualization wand is waved, and as we are ocularly prestidigitated, the water spurts out of the tap like a rabbit from a hat.

If you are one who wants it badly enough, there are places where you can take pilgrimage to learn the ways of water. At the California Department of Water Resources' visitor center in Vista del Lago this sort of artificial visual slip is performed on repeat, as the video track recycles every six minutes.

Vista del Lago means "view of the lake," of course. It's not a place, really—it's an exit high in the mountains off Interstate 5 north of Los Angeles that oddly has beach access. The view is not really of a lake, but of the Pyramid Lake reservoir. The pyramid is not really a pyramid, but an island in the middle of the lake that itself is not really an island, only a hill that has been partially submerged. It's named Chumash Island, after the former indigenous inhabitants of the area that are not really inhabitants anymore, having been reduced in number from more than 10,000 before Spanish contact to just 200 by 1900. But the island is named after them, and the lake named after the island, and the view of the lake named in Spanish, which just so happens to be the primary language of most of the people using the beach access for family barbecues on fine spring Sundays.

The visitor center's visuals are not really a view of California's water resources. Inside the dark, air-conditioned auditorium plays an aged animation called *Water Wasters*, featuring an anthropomorphic faucet dressed like Sherlock Holmes running through a rap sheet of criminal appliances such as "Runny Basin" and "Rinsey Sink" and suffering a strange case of painfully normative gender roles in addition to being responsible for wasting household water. There is the ever-present large hamburger model, molded out of compressed wood painted bright red, green, yellow, and brown, with accompanying values of gallons printed on each ingredient (eleven gallons a bun!). There are a number of photos of ships and fields of crops in

various locations. There is a scale model that shows the elevations over which water is pumped through the California Aqueduct. There is a video of Ronald Reagan blessing the Oroville Dam. But the real pinnacle of visual media is a video called *Wings Over Water*. In a darkened alcove, there is a giant red button in front of a dark screen. One presses it, and light leaps to the screen, sound to speakers. While a meditative, New Age score plays that might have been lifted directly from a yogaretreant or a crystal shop, the viewer is enjoined to marvel at video clips of the entire California Aqueduct system, shot from an aircraft tracing graceful arcs over the beautiful Central Valley.

You probably know where the Central Valley is, and you probably know why it is significant. Any article about the drought in the media makes sure to drive this point home. The Central Valley is the Californian Eden, where the waters come from: the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates replaced by the Sacramento, the American, the Feather, and the San Joaquin. You've probably seen maps, charts, aerial photographs of vegetable fields and land subsidence, of the unnaturally parallel lines of the California Aqueduct, the third largest river in the state, carrying water in quantities of millions of acre-feet off into infinity. You might have even crossed it, seen it from Interstate 5 as you fly north or south on radial tires at or above the beautiful, Californian 70 MPH speed limit.

The water is sucked out of the combined delta east of San Francisco Bay and transported by pump and engineered gravity flows in the wrong direction, uphill and over mountains to the largest metropolitan areas of California. Some of the water goes to the Bay Area itself, another aqueduct branch goes over the Coast Range towards San Luis Obispo. The rest of the water is pumped over the Tehachapi Mountains, where half of it flows west into Pyramid Lake, while the other half flows east across the Mojave Desert to San Bernardino. It is quite a thing, in the *Wings Over Water* video, to see the point at which a river splits into two equal halves—something quite impossible in nature.

You can also see maps of the California Aqueduct at the visitor center. You can even get one for free from the Department of Water Resources. It is printed on a thick, high-quality paper in shades of yellow and blue. It shows all the waterways of California: including the natural rivers that only flow thick during the wet times of the year; the dams that ensure these flows are saved and metered out on a schedule to make sure the sucking pumps can extract what they need from the rivers even in the driest of summers; the California Aqueduct, the Los Angeles Aqueduct, the Colorado River Aqueduct, and the other smaller concrete-lined canals that Federal and State projects have built across the state to create an intravenous lifeline for the burgeoning population and agriculture that has made the state famous.

But I wanted to learn more, to know the truth about the water. To see the real, hidden secrets not visible at the public shrine. And so I went to wander in the desert, to see the sacred sites of water infrastructure, to try to understand the knowledge there. I drove the entire length of the major aqueducts of California. Down I-5 from Shasta all the way to Los Angeles, then back north up the San Francisco Canyon along the Los Angeles Aqueduct to Owens Valley, where the city famously muscled out the locals of their water rights some hundred years ago to allow it to become the metropolis that it is today. Then I drove down to the Colorado River, held back by the Hoover Dam—built to provide electricity so that Los Angeles could pump water out of that river, held back by another dam named Parker, further south at Lake Havasu. And I returned to the city along the Colorado River Aqueduct, back through the Inland Empire where the reservoirs are fed from both east and north. I traced the steps taken by California's infrastructural patriarchs, where water was forced to burst from the rocks, where the promised land was deeded, where the land was conquered so that cities could be built.

This wet network is laced all across the state, and although one can see it wherever one turns if one knows where to look, there is still something elusive. There is an ingredient of this infrastructural hamburger that refuses to be colored in. At Lake Mathews where the Colorado River Aqueduct terminates in the Inland Empire, the overlock is closed off by chain link and barbed wire, and warnings of imminent prosecution suggest that the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (who runs this particular artificial river) would rather you took your vistas elsewhere. At the point in the Mojave Desert where the Los Angeles Aqueduct crosses the eastern branch of the California Aqueduct, one can wander the site at will. But I still felt that there was something missing. I took an aerial camera on a tiny quadrotor, my own electronically summoned angel, and sent it skyward into the desert wind for a better view. I caught the streaming rays of sunlight passing through the clouds over the Tehachapis, the California Aqueduct extending horizon-bound in two cardinal directions while the silver-pipe enclosed Los Angeles Aqueduct completes the other points of the compass rose, vaulting over the open California Aqueduct like a massive worm chewing through the landscape. A rural road passes over the California Aqueduct on a bridge, and the open aqueduct siphons down underneath the natural path of a storm water wash to allow runoff to cross it without eroding the smooth concrete banks and stifling its flow with silt. The Pacific Crest Trail also crosses both aqueducts here in the desert, making this a path of many crossings. And my flying digital camera caught it all, suspended on electrically torqued blades in the billowing sky. My own shaky wings over water, with the digital eye suspended between them. But for what? What have I seen? What do I now know about the drought? What knowledge have I gained that will reveal the secrets of anthropocentric water management to me?

Every home has a water meter, the numbers of which spin only upwards by design, like the pages of a calendar as the Earth rotates in the light of the sun. But the units are mere numerology, abstract figures that we are told are either too much or not enough. Our water infrastructure is occult. As a total system providing for the lives of 38.8 million California residents, it is a cosmology not designed to be seen or understood. It has become impossible. There are too many people, too many tunnels, too many acres, too many pounds of beef, too many hamburger buns. Too many wet, fleshy life forms running around aspirating, perspiring, evaporating. And yet, who knows by weight the amount of water they need to survive? How much to drink, and how much to piss away down the drain? These sorts of biological knowledge have been replaced by sheer will, the ability to hold one's water and resist one's thirst.

We are shown altars and symbols, given texts and told to study and pray. The designs of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Water Resources, the Metropolitan Water District, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the pantheon of lesser water districts and bureaus that stretch across the patchworks of farmland and subdivision, are like the eyes of absentee gods. We draw out maps like zodiacs, we inscribe the diagram of the sacred water-measured hamburger on the walls of holy spaces and websites and in the coloring books of our children. But despite all of the attention we pay to the religious practice of attempting to see and understand water, we continue to live and die, our precious resources of freshwater inevitably flowing out into the saline sea.



A mocked up copy of the DWR map. Courtesy of the author.



Photographs of California by Adam Rothstein.



## Style Wars: Critical Reflections On The Power Of Style

Nicole Archer

The fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent famously quipped that “fashion fades, style is eternal.” This enigmatic statement does much to elucidate the powerful place that style holds in many contemporary cultures. In particular, it alerts us to the relationship that exists between notions of style and notions of history. Or, to the idea that “to have style” is to have the means of inserting oneself into history, while “to lack style” is to risk oblivion. *Style Wars*—a new, regular column in *AQ*—suggests that the tracing of style’s fluctuating movements across varied social, political, aesthetic, and philosophical terrains is important work, and that this is particularly true within the realms of fine art, design, art history, and “visual studies” (as many important figures within these fields have long vied to claim and contest the ownership of this term). *Style Wars* aims to appreciate how critical considerations of style can offer opportunities to think across sets of subjectivities and cultural practices that are often disassociated or pitted against one another.

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As Halloween superstores again occupy empty storefronts across the United States, and legions of “sexy soldiers” and “sultry police officers” march out to flood city streets, house parties, and Instagram feeds, the inaugural installment of *Style Wars* stops to consider what the erotic stylization of deadly force might mean—particularly in light of recent police brutalities, and a long-overdue national conversation about the ways in which this force is disproportionately applied to marginalized communities. By focusing critical attention on a key antecedent to this endless stream of coquettish cop costumes, this piece asks, why is it stylish for one to be attracted to the kind of power that “the uniform” signifies? Furthermore, it examines how these sartorial styles, however campy or grotesque, serve as a serious index of our collective complicity in the ongoing production of state violence.

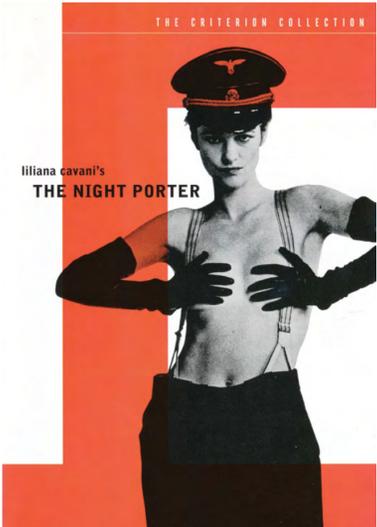
### The Erotic Stylization of Deadly Force

During the twilight of the Vietnam War, Liliana Cavani’s 1974 film *The Night Porter* re-styled the fantasies and material cultures surrounding World War II (the “last good war”) to critically interrogate the notion that the presence of a strong military and police force works to create a less violent world. Some 40 years since the film’s first appearance in theaters, *The Night Porter* continues to ask viewers how modern technologies of acute corporeal discipline have altered our ethical and aesthetic fields. Its formidable claim is that cultures of uniformity—cultures that dictate regularity, consistency, and uniform behavior—also inspire particularly unique forms of cruelty and violence. Through its highly stylized plot and mise-en-scène, Cavani’s film boldly underscores how uniformity makes it increasingly desirable (if not necessary) for expressly “singular” forms of (dis) pleasure to eventuate within modern erotic and political life.

*The Night Porter*’s storyline follows the complex, sadomasochistic relationship between a young woman formerly imprisoned within an unnamed concentration camp, Lucia Atherton (Charlotte Rampling), and an older man who more than willingly served as an officer in Hitler’s *Schutzstaffel* (SS), Max Aldorfer (Dirk Bogarde). The complexity of this psycho-sexual relationship is powerfully shorthand in the infamous image of Lucia, painfully thin yet resiliently beautiful, seductively wearing a Nazi officer’s cap and little else but black, opera-length leather gloves and a pair of oversized men’s trousers, held in place by elasticized suspenders. Cavani does most of her heavy lifting simply by bringing this iconic image into representation, an image that has arguably come to serve as the modern template for how to stylize the erotics of power. The image encapsulates the perverse way that war, as Cavani explains it, “[detonates] the sadomasochism that is latent in each of us, [how] when there is war, the state monopolizes the sadomasochistic drive of its citizens, stirs it up, and uses it, legalizes it. . . [how it], therefore, becomes possible to be victims or assassins within the terms of the law.”

Despite critics’ claims to the contrary, Cavani’s explicitly erotic re-styling of the SS uniform is not a neo-Nazi attempt to take perverse pleasure in the Third Reich’s most extreme abuses of power. Nor is it a reduction of fascism to nothing but “a pretext for exploiting themes of kinky sex.” *The Night Porter* is not a prescription for how power ought to function, but an allegory for how it does.

Today, in the midst of another series of endless wars, secondhand versions of Cavani’s paragon of perversity abound. These copies all too easily substitute the Nazi raiments at the center of *The Night Porter*’s iconic image for any number of other, more generalized uniformed forces. These images tend to embody a kind of playful casualness that Rampling’s characterization does not, a lively badness that works to displace the (SS or police) uniform’s association with violence and death by directing our attentions towards the “reproductive narrative” that is literally posited by the models’ heaving breasts and glowing skin.



Cover artwork for Liliana Cavani’s 1974 film *The Night Porter*. Courtesy of the Internet.



The Night Porter (film still), 1974. Directed by Liliana Cavani, distributed by The Criterion Collection. 118 minutes. Courtesy of the Internet.

While much is lost between Cavani’s ashen *femme fatale* (born within the *Camp*) and her progeny (born within the free market), I’d suggest that this ribald style’s foremost political challenge nonetheless remains intact—even if more recent styles tend to camp or commercialize this powerful aptitude for the sake of sublimating its implications. Taken as a whole, these figurations all “work” by drawing fetishistic attentions towards the deeply horrifying knowledge that orderly, modern forms of beauty cannot only survive, but can literally “get off” in hideous proximity to radical forms of violence. These styles highlight how uniforms function to materially harness and instrumentalize our desires’ transformative energy for the sake of varied interests. As the French philosopher and critic Michel Foucault explained in a 1974 interview for *Cahiers du cinéma*, “*The Night Porter* [’s] problem is—in general as in the present conjuncture—a very important one: it’s that of the love of power,” or the undeniable problem that, “Power has an erotic charge.”

Ultimately, all uniforms work to provide us with a stable and immediately fulfilling sense of power. The uniform produces an ostensibly immutable and powerfully predictable body—a body that stands in opposition to the capricious and more volatile corpses captured by everyday fashions. Positioned beyond the unpredictability of “fashion,” the uniform becomes a perfect object of desire. But situated outside the purviews of civilian life, its inaccessibility gives its wearer the decisive ground needed to produce the circumstances and terms under which “justifiable” forms of lethal, corporeal violence might be enacted by the selectively dressed few.

In Cavani’s debauched re-figuration of the uniformed body, the uniform’s power is proffered as extreme, differentiated (i.e., gendered) profanity. It is presented as an impious woman who takes pleasure in toying with the trappings of order and consistency. Put simply, Cavani subverts the stability of the uniform. She produces a uniformed body that is patently unpredictable, and in its wake, the popular proliferation of sexy-cop-costumes work to trivialize this challenge. Unlike the figure located at the heart of *The Night Porter*, these camp yet predictably heteronormative costumes fail to challenge the uniform’s authority. Rather than reveal just how constructed the power of the uniforms is, and how complicit we all are in buying into its power, these ready-to-wear fetishes reify the uniform’s power and the authority of uniformed forces.

*The Night Porter* exposes the extent to which “we” are all made to desire our own oppression within modern culture, or, how power’s strength has come to be measured by the degree to which it can be made desirable to those who are most brutalized by it. And not just within the extreme theaters of war, but within the relatively mundane performances of everyday erotic life and fantasy.

It is midway through *The Night Porter*’s narrative that viewers arrive at the iconic image used in the movie’s promotional posters. The scene, a “flashback,” fantastically combines the aesthetics of a Weimar cabaret (as painted by Otto Dix), the imagined horror of an “officer’s club” located in the heart of a death camp, and the Orientalist story of the biblical *femme fatale*, Salome. At the center of this



Numéro magazine, Issue 14, December 2011. Courtesy of the Internet.

unbelievable setting, Lucia commences a kind of sadomasochistic parody of Marlene Dietrich’s playful and burlesque, cross-dressing character from the 1930 film *Morocco* (Mademoiselle Amy Jolly), and slowly sings a low-key version of one of Dietrich’s most popular songs “Wenn Ich Mir Was Wünschen Dürfte” (“If I Could Have Wished for Anything”). The film’s gilded costumer, Piero Tosi, replaces Dietrich’s famous “industrialist drag,” or tuxedo, with dour, SS fetish-gear, and the rest is history.

As the young, frail Lucia sings her dirge accompanied by a band of Nazi soldiers wearing party masks, baroque ruffs, and pancake makeup, she positively saunters around the room (much to her lover, Max’s delight); holding her small breasts in her gloved hands, teasing the other officers with a tasseled party favor, and pretending to offer them a look into her trousers. These men’s “dates”—*other prisoners who appear less complicit in the evening’s affairs*—seem to be made more nervous by Lucia’s presence than by the officers they are presumably being forced to escort. The fear that these other young women have of Max’s “little girl” is shortly confirmed, when Lucia ends her performance and (like Salome) is presented with a gift from her patron. It is a box containing the head of another one of the camp’s inmates, aptly named Johann—the subject of a complaint Lucia once made to Max in passing. As she peers into the box, Lucia bites down on her fingers and a look that is equal parts revulsion and excitement washes across her face.

This markedly ambiguous and unpredictable body does not just put a kink in our usual sense of order and “rightness,” it perverts any sense in which “the uniform,” with its consistent textures and predictably legible array of signifiers, might serve as a trope for comfort (or as grounds for love). It revels in that which we cannot not want to feel (i.e., arousal in the face of radical evil), and it suggests that the perversion of our normal sensibilities is precisely what contemporary erotics *must* be built upon should we ever hope to get out from under the sway of certain highly organized forms of power. For so long as “the uniform,” any uniform (from the most detestable to the most subversive), is allowed to make use of our desires, it will work to powerfully draw our desires towards *its* highly regulated terms. It will be what primarily sets the terms of our aesthetic and ethical fields. And when uniformity or sameness is law, then violence (i.e., the violation of law) necessarily takes exceptional, unique forms.

No “innocents” lurk in the shadow of Cavani’s image, or in any of its campy citations. The power of these styles lie in their capacity to demand that we consider the consequences of living in a culture where our bodies remain predictable instruments of “the greater good,” and where a form of comportment defined by its ability to arrest our unpredictable, chaotic desires reigns supreme.

- 1) Cavani, Liliana. *Il portiere di notte*. Torino: Einaudi, 1974, translation by the author.
- 2) McCormick, Ruth. “Fascism a la mode or Radical Chic?” *Cineaste*. 64 (1975): 31.



Sexy policewoman costume. Courtesy of the Internet.

## Infrastructures Of Power And Magic

Ben Valentine

For most of recorded human history, the tallest buildings in the world have been religious: the physical manifestations of power and magic. Constructed to be visible at the greatest of distances, cathedrals loom large in our minds. Their spires reach upwards to the heavens, and their sermons down into our souls. At times, cathedrals were even designed for a god’s eye perspective.

For much of recorded Western history, power has been inextricably tied to the church. While kings controlled mighty keeps and large armaments, they bowed to the bishops and monks. The church had a power over the masses the kings couldn’t wield—a divine authority. This power was more metaphysical, even as they spent much of their wealth and hundreds of years building cathedrals to impose that power. Monarchs and priests became conduits of divine power that were meant to impose, both physically and emotionally, on every one of their subjects.

After centuries of rule in the Western world, religious icons were replaced by industrial power, by capitalism. Soaring over global financial centers, skyscrapers impressed upon us the power of money, reaching farther into the heavens than any cathedral ever had, even while often borrowing styles of their religious predecessors. In 1894, standing at a breathtaking 584 feet, Philadelphia City Hall became the tallest building in the world—and the first to soar above a religious spire—surpassing the previous record holder, the Ulm Minster cathedral in Ulm, Germany by 54 feet.

Philadelphia City Hall quickly lost that title in an American-led race to the highest, reaching its pinnacle with the 1973 construction of the Sears Tower in Chicago at 1451 feet tall. By the 1970s, the gods of the West had shifted from religious fervor to economic prowess, a statement that was reflected in the shift away from decadent architectural flourishes to the matte finish of steel and glass. The United States was the irrefutable king of capitalism, holding the record for the tallest building in the world for just over 100 years.

Just as the cathedrals before, these skyscrapers drew us in. While cathedrals promised salvation and protection, the skyscrapers promised riches to those who danced in their walls, and destitution for those not able to make it inside. This symbol of American power was quickly replaced by even taller skyscrapers in other countries. The Sears Tower held the record until 1998 when Kuala Lumpur built the Petronas Towers. After that came Taipei 101 in Taipei in 2004, and then in 2010 the Burj Khalifa in Dubai was built at 2,717 feet tall. The Burj Khalifa remains the tallest building today. Following the money, these new mega-structures are popping up wherever newer markets have emerged, signifying the undeniable wealth and power of Asian markets whose leaders have adopted capitalism wholeheartedly.

Even if some of these countries still masquerade as communist, their skyscrapers show their true allegiances. Were the gods of capitalism no longer appeared by the West, or had the West something new to worship?

At the top of every skyscraper is a large antenna. As a boy this always surprised me. Didn’t the powerful want their office, their restaurant, or home to be the tallest point? Yet what had made all that wealth possible was the communication behind it, of which these antennas were vital.

The architecture of power of the 21st century has shifted from the cathedral, the castle, and the skyscraper to housing centers for the receipt and transmission of data. Now, this display of might has sunk into the land, into undersea cables, and into nondescript, heavily air-conditioned structures few could identify as anything meaningful to anyone. The crucial structures of the networks that allow for global commerce and communication (and surveillance) are hidden black tubes not even a foot in diameter, thoroughly unimpressive structures at the edges of oceans, and bland data centers in the middle of nowhere. There is no monumentality behind them.



Ulm Minster, Ulm, Germany. Tallest building in the world from 1890 to 1901. Courtesy of the Internet.



Wilshire Grand Center in Los Angeles, California. Currently under construction, foundation laid in 2014. Courtesy of the Internet.

It makes sense that the mighty lords of China have some of the tallest buildings today, but what about the saints of Facebook? With more users than any single country has citizens, where are its towers, its identifiable presence in the world? Where do I go to pray to the blue god of Facebook?

The king, the priest, and the Rockefeller have become the Google or the NSA. 60 Hudson Street in New York, formerly the headquarters of the wire transfer and money order company Western Union, is now home to over 100 telecommunications companies and an algorithmic trading device that can make trades faster than those of Wall Street. At 2.9 million square feet, 111 Eighth Avenue remains the fourth largest building in Manhattan and has been the east coast headquarters for Google since 2010. These colocation centers are housed in the gutted remnants of the old sacred halls of capitalism.

These online companies and organizations slide into networks that span the Earth and distribute themselves for maximum impact and minimum accountability. They spread or “distribute” their missionaries across the globe and slide in between every aspect of our daily lives, even our most intimate conversations. We welcome them there. As the skyscraper became a hollow metaphor Asia employed to surpass the West, neoliberal power was reconstituted into nearly invisible satellite streams and GPS transmitted to magical black screens we feel obligated to examine upon awakening. The old dream of kings and priests to have a little black leather Bible in every citizen’s pocket has been achieved, only as magical glass tablets, and companies like Airbnb and Uber get the money we were meant to pay in tithe and taxes.

I once unwittingly had drinks while lounging on a waterbed with friends on top of Los Angeles’s largest colocation center, the Wilshire Grand Tower. This is one of the holiest of sites of today’s neoliberal economy and I didn’t even know I had entered its sacred grounds. I wouldn’t know what rites to perform if I had. As someone who studies these things, I am constantly struck by just how mundane these buildings are. The campuses of Google and Facebook are shiny happy playground for tech wizards, with more money than they know what to do with and more power than they’ll ever admit. The banality of power today belies the extent that it reaches.

From the tallest hotel in Battambang, Cambodia, where I live, I look down at cell towers towering over the flat farms and short buildings that dot the landscape all the way to the horizon. They’re much taller than the Buddhist wats and this new luxury hotel. While the hotel is a proud symbol to local capitalists of the times to come, the cell towers are in control here.

Even as much of the world comes online in the next decade, developing countries won’t get the infrastructures we rely on for our power. The roads, the hospitals, the schools, and the innumerable, now-invisible resources that are the bedrock on which soft power stands aren’t being built for the global South. The US and Facebook only want the next billion connected to their data hungry eyes, searching for more money to build more power, and “all military-age males who might be a threat to that power.” The prayer of today’s networked missionary priests is “connect, observe, categorize, and capitalize.”

In much of the world, cell towers are and will remain the tallest man-made structures around, creating connections between each other and, perhaps more importantly, with the US. They are the last converts and they must join. These tech companies will send holy silver balloons into the sky or fleets of magical unmanned planes to find each and every one, and connect them to us. This new power remains a Western power, even as it secretly moves through an international network. Though this outreach may appear to be obfuscated, it is still centralizing just as it was prior to the World Wide Web.

Conversely, the Abraj al-Bait, the third tallest building in the world, stands over the Kaaba in Mecca as a signal to the West that the Middle East’s power remains firmly tied to religion: that Islam is both a religious and economic force to be reckoned with. These super-structures are not for the West—non-Muslims aren’t even allowed to enter Mecca. The people who circle the Kaaba in prayer know where their taxes are due, or maybe more importantly, where they aren’t. Maybe this is why the sacred penta-union Five Eyes (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States) spend so much time watching them. Their idolatry doesn’t fit with the true cathedrals of today. They must fall in step; they must buy our goods and worship our gods.

But what if our Wi-Fi isn’t magic? What if we’re only connected to each other? What if the wisdom of the crowd is contingent on network affordances, which are determined by businessmen in conference rooms hoping for a raise, or by accidental remnants from coders who don’t really give a damn?

## The Informal Economy And The Global Art Market

John Zarobell

Standing around the Parking Lot Art Fair in San Francisco last May, I was surrounded by a variety of artists who showed up by 7 a.m. to claim parking spots to exhibit their art at a pop-up art exhibition staged outside of a bona fide art fair (Art Market San Francisco), taking place at Fort Mason Center nearby. Satellite art fairs are all the rage, but this one was a bit different. There were no dealers presenting artists, no booths, no walls or labels, and no fees paid to the organizers: instead it was a group of artists with no institutional affiliation. The crowd was pretty good on this sunny Saturday, and though the organizers emphasized that nothing could be sold unless an artist acquired a vendor's permit from the city, transactions were tendered. The spectacle of artists organizing their own make-shift art fair in a parking lot with little prospect of legitimate commerce is a marvelous example of the informal economy at work in the contemporary art world, an economy whose effects have been little considered in the ample discussions of the global art market that have been taking place in the 21st century.

The term "informal economy" was first used by Keith Hart in the 1970s to describe how individuals in developing nations invented new economic devices in order to survive in a world with very few "regular" employment opportunities. Since then, informal economy has been a term employed to describe bottom-up efforts to generate a livelihood among those without secure financial footing in the global economy. It may not be a familiar term, but the concept of the informal economy is not foreign to anyone who has tried to make ends meet as an artist. Edgar Feige has broken down the underground economy into segments: the illegal economy, the unreported economy, the unrecorded economy, and the informal economy. For my purposes, I will use the term informal economy to refer to the last three sections, namely any transaction that is unrecorded, untaxed, and unregulated but not explicitly illegal. This is also described as the "gray market" to distinguish these economic activities from the explicitly illegal "black market."

This distinction is spurious to a certain degree. While some have estimated the black market to be 20% of the global economy, informal employment makes up half of the world's jobs, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>1</sup> While the distinction between illegal and legal business practices may seem clear enough on the face, there is a blending of black markets with gray markets and legitimate—if less regulated—markets such as the art market play a role in this process. The legitimate segment of the art market can be blended into gray and black without detection because there is so much money and art tucked away offshore, beyond regulatory scrutiny. Given the existence of offshore financial mechanisms employed by high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) who invest in art, it would be difficult for a seller of a work of art to determine whether the money transferred to cover the artwork was "clean" because money launderers are known to employ the tactic of "layering" to hide the origins of assets and blend "dirty" money with legitimate investments. One example directly relevant to the art world is the expanding domain of free ports.

A free port is a storage facility that exists formally outside of the territorial jurisdiction of any country. The Geneva Freeport, the first of its kind, was originally created in 1888 to store grain and other agricultural products in transit. The essential aspect of the free port, according to *New York Times* reporter David Segal, is the "temporary exemption of taxes and duties for an unlimited period of time."<sup>2</sup> While one cannot store grain for an unlimited period, more valuable commodities such as art and wine (to say nothing of gold bars) could be stored much longer. In the era of offshore expansion in the late 20th century, tax loopholes and secrecy domains acquired a much greater significance in the global economy and, for art, the free port became the physical equivalent of the Swiss Bank account. Invisible to tax authorities, foreign governments and even the insurers of the art works themselves, art could be stored there with complete anonymity and sold without any taxes being paid.



Beijing Freeport. Courtesy of the Internet.



Geneva Freeport. Courtesy of the Internet.



Luxembourg Freeport. Courtesy of the Internet.

The use of free ports to store art marks a new era in the commoditization of the work of art. It is difficult to imagine a reason to keep artworks in a free port unless there is speculation going on. If you are a collector of fine art, you want to be able to see and to appreciate what you own. But if you are a speculator, all you need is storage since you are betting that the work is going to increase in value. So the free port is the perfect place to park your speculative art purchases because they cannot be traced to you and no government can tax you on these assets. Therefore, if you want to corner the market on the work of a certain artist and wait for it to escalate in value, the free port is your best bet.

In his expansive account of the development of the offshore financial world, Nicholas Shaxson underlines how certain countries, beginning with Switzerland, have regulated financial secrecy as a means to ensure the discretion of the banking industry and to protect assets held in these countries from external regulatory mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> Such a governance model is called a "secrecy jurisdiction." This means that if you made a lot of money that you don't want to report on your income taxes, you can park it in a secrecy jurisdiction and the tax authorities will not be able to find evidence of fraud because it is against the law for these organizations to report the contents of their accounts to the authorities. This does not mean, of course, that all money in Swiss (or Cayman) banks is the result of ill-gotten gains, but it does mean that no one can ever find out whether it is or not. The same is true for free ports. No one can tell if the art inside was stolen, bought with drug money, or simply a prudent investment expected to yield great returns in time. The secrecy of free ports, combined with the unregulated nature of the art market, means that it is very difficult to connect owners with works of art that are stored in a free port. No government can regulate, tax, or investigate property stored inside a secrecy jurisdiction, and so, for all intents and purposes, the art in free ports becomes invisible. Like an offshore financial center, the exclusive high-end domain of the art market is a secrecy domain, and in that world an informal economy thrives.

Yves Bouvier is an excellent example. As the owner of Natural Le Coultre, which runs the Geneva, Luxembourg, Monaco, and Singapore free ports, he is heavily invested in tax-free secrecy jurisdictions, but a recent scandal has exposed the nature of his business practices. In February 2015, he was indicted for money laundering in Monaco in relation to a deal he brokered for the Russian oligarch

Dmitry Rybolovlev. The accusations, denied by Bouvier and as yet unproven, involve a gap in price between the buyer and seller of a Picasso painting that Bouvier brokered. It is certainly not the first money laundering accusation in the art world but the domain of private dealers and intermediaries is a secretive one and any problems are rarely aired in public. While such an accusation is rare, it also exposes the practice of carefully planned negotiations for high-end artistic merchandise that happens outside of the media spotlight and the attention of regulatory agencies and tax authorities. My point is not that anyone involved with free ports is involved in shady business deals, but that much of the top end of the art market is already an informal economy existing beyond regulatory oversight and the players make their own rules since there is no regulatory body overseeing international art transactions.

Considering how the art market has evolved in conjunction with globalization, there has been a clear expansion of cross-border exchange of artworks. As the gap between national regulation and international commerce widens, so does the opportunity for criminal elements to engage in otherwise legitimate forms of exchange. Because it is formed by international commerce, the art market has embraced the globalization of finance and adopted elements of the offshore financial system. The result is that there is a burgeoning art economy that is invisible, undetectable, and so far unmeasured. There is no telling just how large a portion of the art market the offshore system hides.

It is not so difficult then to imagine how free ports allow artworks to be layered into the gray market, but authors who examine the informal economy and offshore finance have also noted that legitimate enterprises sometimes subcontract with informal enterprises in order to make their bottom line and we can find this dynamic in the global art world as well. The sharing economy has brought us more than just Airbnb and Uber—there are also websites that facilitate art auctions and private art sales, and international art fairs also allow many opportunities to skirt national regulations for private actors. Further, artists are the perfect demonstration of an informal labor pool, performing work at home and thereby evading workplace regulations, consigning and sometimes selling their product without a formal contract, and working on the margins of the formal economy.

The informal economy in the art world is not only a series of shady business deals—though it does include this category—but it is also a way that the distant and objective art market is personalized and made immediate. It is both a symptom of the shrouded financial transactions of the offshore economy and it is a salve to the wounds that capitalism inflicts on those whose labor eschews its financial logic. Artists, curators, and non-profit directors, among others, work for free because they want recognition and they want to participate in a public conversation, but also because they do not want their labor to be monetized. Their actions provide a surplus that cannot be quantified and the rewards they receive for doing so are not the kind of thing you can claim on a tax form. Despite being tied to the economic structures that govern the rest of the world, and needing to earn a living, various actors in the art world—artists first among them—participate in a shadow economy where monetary value is not the ultimate goal or the arbiter of reality. They both participate in and reinvent the art market to suit their own needs and as a means to realize their own desires.

So the market for art is no simple thing. Though it is being measured with more precision than ever before, there are so many immeasurable transactions that what we think of as the art market is only a passing glance at what actually exists. It is quite possible that the scale of the informal art market is equal to or greater than the market that is recorded by cultural economists. Certainly, there are market manipulations that are invisible to the general public, if more accepted within a smaller coterie of participants. But there are also uncalculated domains of financial exchange, sales that are off the books, and generous contributions to the development of the aesthetic dimension of the human spirit that could never be quantified. What did it cost to put on the Parking Lot Art Fair? Ostensibly nothing, but that labor and those transactions, immaterial and otherwise, count for more than we might at first imagine. If all the artists and other art world actors who perform labor for free were to bill for these services, how much would it come to? This is a question that no economist can answer with any precision.

<sup>1</sup>) Gilman, Goldhammer and Weber (eds.), *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>) David Segal, "Swiss Freeports are Home for a Growing Treasury of Art", *New York Times* (July 21, 2012). Accessed at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/business/swiss-freeports-are-home-for-a-growing-treasury-of-art.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/business/swiss-freeports-are-home-for-a-growing-treasury-of-art.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>3</sup>) Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure Islands: Uncovering the Damage of Offshore Banking and Tax Havens* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

## Can The Blockchain Save Digital Art?

Nicholas O'Brien

The Seattle Art Fair has generated a significant buzz for being one of the first instances of an earnest attempt to marry tech money with the art world. While others have tried to wed the boom of over-valued, venture-capital-infused businesses to speculative contemporary art markets (including last year's Art Silicon Valley / San Francisco), none have been primarily instigated from within the tech industry. For the Seattle Art Fair, Microsoft co-founder and private art collector Paul Allen attempts to bring together industries that have been dancing around each other for quite some time. Whether the fair can be viewed as a success or not (or depending on what metric of success one wishes to use), it seems as though the nut of contemporary art being of interest to boy billionaires is finally being cracked.

The fair didn't come off as overly tech-centric or pandering to the interests of genius programmers. That being said, some galleries who focus on digital art and so-called new media undoubtedly saw an opportunity to reach a much sought-after audience. Interactive sculptures, drone painting performances, and HD videos of 3D renderings attempted to lure collectors by appealing to shared interest in contemporary technology. As fruitful as tapping into a pool of newfound wealth can be for emerging artists working with technology, I can't help but wonder if abiding by the tropes and strategies of art market economics stifles the potential disruptive qualities of digital art practices.

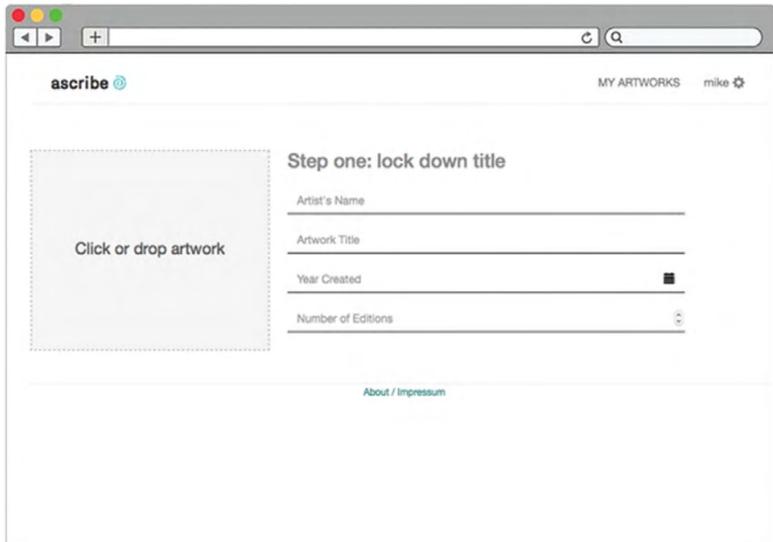
The Seattle Art Fair might be an easy target for directing these criticisms—it does not, after all, attempt to claim any radical agenda and only loosely promises a unique opportunity for emerging and established galleries to interface with tech-industry collectors. However, for artists already invested in and responding to digital culture, the Seattle Art Fair might seem like a step backwards. Is a fair made and financially fronted by a well-known technologist in a technology hub the best bet for artists working in digital media to achieve long-term success? Perhaps a more important question could be: has the moment when digital art could confront the status quo of the art world already gone?

I ask these questions, particularly in the wake of the Seattle Art Fair, because I have seen, repeatedly, how digital art suffers from trying to be something that it is not. Over the years, many have tried to bring digital art into the contemporary fold, but few have made it stick in any meaningful way. If anything, private conversations I've had with digital artists about their experience with traditional art world dealings have been mostly negative. Though these artists yearn for recognition and participation within a larger contemporary art discourse, most inroads that lead toward that activity appear to contain unforeseen compromises that go against the ethos of their practice. Where some have found great success in translating their concepts from the browser or screen to the gallery, others continue to struggle to appease market demands and traditional methodologies for creating "significant" or salable work.

I suspect that much of this has to do with inherent political and social differences between digital media and the commercial art world. This probably comes as no great shock, but I think that recognizing these differences still gets systematically overlooked by artists and dealers alike. I will resist the temptation to fully enumerate these differences here, but instead will merely say that one primary divide is that digital art wants to be free and commercial art wants to be owned. This gap, though simply phrased, is the most significant problem facing galleries and dealers wanting to bring together digital artists and the tech industry.

Finding a middle ground where digital art can remain free and where commercial galleries value the propriety of ownership has found some recent headway within the tech industry. Initial attempts at solving some of these systemic problems started bubbling up when Anil Dash and Kevin McCoy teamed up at Rhizome's Seven on Seven event in 2014 to create a cryptosignature service called Monegraph. Using a cryptocurrency called Namecoin, the duo proposed creating a system wherein artists could authenticate works distributed online against forgery or unauthorized duplication. More recently other companies have also taken up the mantle of attempting to create a system of cryptosecurity to assist artists and creatives to gain more power over their content.

For roughly two years, a company based in Berlin called Ascribe has been attempting to create a magic circle where creators and owners can manage, oversee, and troubleshoot the distribution of intellectual property over digital networks. Started by partners



Screenshot from Ascribe.io tour showcasing interface for uploading content. Courtesy of Ascribe.

Masha and Trent McConaghy with Bruce Pon, Ascribe is using the blockchain to create what they've called an "ownership layer of the Internet." According to Trent, the blockchain is like a "a database or spreadsheet, just one with very special characteristics." He added: "Once you add an entry to it, you can't remove it. Those entries are public and transparent for all to see. As a result, no one owns it—or another way to look at it is everyone owns it."

I spoke with Masha, Trent, and Ascribe's arts organizer Jazmina Figueroa over Skype several weeks ago to discuss how their product was attempting to create "digital ownership for the creatives of the world." By allowing users to register work and embed encrypted metadata into assets they wish to distribute online, Ascribe is attempting to give everyday users a legal leg up against a world of endless terms and conditions on proprietary websites.

This is not to say that Ascribe is merely another service for tracking content online. Consumer/User-based web traffic analytics systems have been around for several years, and combined with social media analytic services found on Facebook and Twitter, users have been able to observe extensively the online distribution of their content. But access to this information alone is not sufficient for users to claim ownership of intellectual property. In most cases, users who distribute personal content of any kind have very little knowledge about their intellectual property rights. According to Trent, what Ascribe hopes to do is to "fix the user experience of intellectual property." By "welding" the intellectual property more easily through Ascribe, the creators of this service are hoping to give back power to creatives by giving them tools to claim proper attribution.

Currently, attribution is nearly impossible to trace without tirelessly combing the web manually. Masha told me of one story where a video artist was employing someone on a regular basis to search for bootlegs of her work online and to send cease and desist notifications. Needless to say, the labor of maintaining attribution for most artists who want to prevent unauthorized copies of their work to circulate online, siphons time and energy away from one's studio practice. Where some attribution can be embedded and traced within the source code of HTML files and/or Who's domain registration information, more discreet forms of media like GIFs don't have this affordance.



Experimental certificate prototype by Monegraph. Courtesy of Monegraph.

As an independent curator and arts professional working with digital artists, Masha had been experimenting with and researching ways of getting collectors more interested in work made and distributed primarily online. She initially found that the main concern for collectors had to do with the provenance of the media. Collectors not only wanted to make sure that the work they owned was genuine, but also wanted to be reassured of the origin of a work. It was not only important that the creation of the work be documented and accounted for, but that the transfer of the ownership be equally legitimate. This is where the blockchain becomes particularly useful, because modifications to an asset's ownership can be re-attributed at the point of sale, thus preserving its provenance.

Maintaining transfers of ownership and understanding the copyrights held on a work is often the least visible and hardest to access piece of information for any work of digital media. Some long-term plans for Ascribe are to use the blockchain to make ownership more visible for everyday users. Jazmina added how the tool could also be used by communities of makers to support their friends:

"We were brainstorming and wondered if a user found someone's work [online, if we] could work together to properly attribute media. Someone could find a piece and say, 'This is me!' or else help out a colleague/peer ... There becomes a chance for action for everyone to get proper attribution as opposed to one person trying to control everything."

By exposing this layer of ownership to everyday users, and allowing those individuals to act/engage with how their content is circulating online, Ascribe starts to outline a potential common ground for commercial art and digital art to coexist. Ascribe is creating what Trent calls a "thin layer" on top of the Internet for proper attribution to exist in a transparent way. Whether an artist decides to financially capitalize on preserving that attribution is left to their discretion. In other words, Ascribe only provides information; it does not provide mandates. All decisions—whether they be cease and desist orders or letters of thanks—are left to the individual who properly owns the work. As a way of encouraging the latter behavior, Ascribe is partnering with Creative Commons to encourage users to protect their work under a "Free Cultural Works" approved license. In doing so, "ownership" does not have to be synonymous with "commercial." Trent continued to emphasize the need for digital media to remain open and accessible by discussing ownership as a component of an end goal:

"We're not really interested in ownership as much as we're interested in attribution. Ownership is just a benefit of attribution ... Attribution is unfortunately a bit of a mouthful, and people don't understand it as quickly. We don't have a formed solution yet, but emphasizing the ability to share securely is a really exciting idea ... When you even say the phrase 'intellectual property' it implies something that you own. Property is analogous with ownership. But there's no agreed upon phrase for 'intellectual attribution.' There's no phrase, but there really should be!"

Perhaps I should argue that Seattle Art Fair isn't necessarily a step backward, but maybe just a step along the long road of trying to find the best meeting point between the worlds of digital technology and contemporary art. This ongoing process of shaping that middle ground won't be solved by a simple keystroke and a genius piece of IP, but participation is necessary from all invested members. Designing the better phrases, and better frameworks, can't happen in isolation from one another, and it is my hope that better alternatives for addressing our problems happen together.



During MAK NITE Lab on May 31st, 2015, the first digital artwork (a file) was purchased on contemporary.com for bitcoin using ascribe.io to authenticate and transfer the ownership of the file through the blockchain. © MAK/Nathan Murrell

## The Anti-Genius, Or, Why Do Curators Talk Like That? (Part Two)

### John Rapko

*Dedicated, as promised, to Dave Hickey*

Everyone remembers one’s first time. In 2002, I first heard a lecture by an international curator,<sup>1</sup> that is, one of the people who was allegedly the leading figure in contemporary art since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent pre-eminence of “biennials,” large, short-term shows of international artists occurring regularly on every continent except Antarctica. The speaker, the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, was not so much connected with biennials as with an innovative contemporary art space, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. There was an air of expectancy, for Bourriaud had recently coined the term “relational art” (or rather *art relationnel*, a monograph explicating the term was published in French in 1998 and had not yet been published in English at the time of Bourriaud’s lecture<sup>2</sup>), and art magazines had begun trumpeting this new kind of art as the latest thing, the most “advanced” art of our time. It had something to do with inducing the establishment of human relationships. But what?

Relational art, so we were instructed, is the authentic art of our time. The historical contrast is with pop art, the previous, though alas now outdated, authentic art. We learned that in the not-so-distant past we lived in the world of industrial consumerism. Our primary way of forming identities, expressing and enjoying ourselves, signaling our social status to each other, and creating the quotidian meanings and significances of our lives was through buying from the great menus of the supermarket and the auto dealership, and “consuming” our purchases. The kind of art appropriate to this condition was one that mirrored both this kind of life’s contents and their manner of production, and then held the image of these, a synthesis of consumer icon and mechanical presentation, up for inspection. So the need for an art of microscreens of coke bottles and movie stars, and of paintings of soup cans and wallpaper, was born. But now, so we were asked to understand, we live in a different world, one of information, and information is something that is made for, and indeed only exists in, communication, i.e., something that passes from person to person. In this passage some “relationship,” albeit thin and ephemeral, is established. So our new authentic art must reflect this condition. We need an art without “objects,” one wherein the artist modestly conceives of herself as setting up a situation wherein information begins to move. But for information to flow, some persons other than the artist must actively take up the information, and then others in turn might respond further to those first active recipients. There is no consumption of the process of artistic making and reception but only the possibility of further extending the passages of communication. Since there is never a “complete” work offered, but only a potentially non-finite process of communication, there is nothing for aesthetic judgment to latch onto. To the extent that such works can be evaluated, judged, and appreciated, they are so in terms of the relative density and duration of the relationships induced by the work. Relational works are only more or less interesting in their appeal to participate, and more or less productive of a density and durability of the relationships induced.

Fortunately, we were further informed, a number of artists have answered the call for this new kind of art, and Bourriaud laid it out for us. Rirkrit Tiravanija, Carsten Höller, and half a dozen others I have forgotten (likely those discussed in the book, including Angela Bulloch and Liam Gillick) were each represented by an image or two of one of their pieces, or rather, part of the piece, which the artist presented as the situation intended to attract viewer-participants and to induce communications in the service of establishing new relationships. In playing out that excruciating ritual lecturing so familiar to today’s art enthusiast, Bourriaud put up an image, identified the piece depicted and the relevant artist, in a few sentences described the project here instantiated, and then pronounced the piece “interesting and productive.” A further merit of the productive in such art was that, since such projects were artistically non-traditional but typically ranged across everyday life and mimicked the activities of some non-artistic practice or institution—such as cooking and serving Thai food, or selling handmade trinkets at a gift shop—these works attracted non-traditional audiences into the formerly insular and elitist world of late-modern and contemporary art.

Bourriaud described one piece as consisting of the display of documentation of what, in the eras before relational art, would have been called a well-meaning switcheroo: an artist solicited funds for a project, and then gave the money instead to a charitable organization of unimpeachable goodness. This was again pronounced “interesting”—but in what sense?—and “productive”—but of what? During the question period, I asked Bourriaud to consider an imaginary piece, identical to the one he described, except that the money went to an evil organization; would not that piece be more interesting in challenging the art world’s complacent liberalism, and more productive in bringing the concerns, if not the proponents, of an evil ideology into the art world? After a bit of back-and-forth, Bourriaud sadly but with an unmistakable vehemence informed me that I was a proponent of the outdated ideology of genius. Egad, had I been

exposed again as a young fogey? At the time, I was most struck by the non sequitur (I had said nothing about genius, nor about artistic creation generally), but since then what seems more thought-provoking are the questions whether and why appeal in the discourse about contemporary art is allegedly outdated. More pointedly: Why is this most articulate and thoughtful of curators concerned to insist such? What role does this rejection play in the discourse of the international curator?

For the past two hundred or so years, the term “genius” marks the place of the mystery of artistic making insofar as that process results in superlative works. Though the high evaluation of superlative artworks as necessarily produced by genius is a product of romanticism, with Goethe and Beethoven providing the initial exemplars, something of the concern to conceptualize artistic process is nearly coeval with Western philosophy itself. Plato’s early dialogue *Ion* provided romantics, in particular Shelley, with one central model of the artist as *inspired* genius: the character Ion is supremely effective in reciting Homer, but he does so without being able to explain how he does it. The power to move the audience just happens, and he is like a piece of iron magnetized by Homer, and who in turn magnetizes the audience. Ion is also indifferent to the ethical or political import of his art, and is only concerned that he is monetarily rewarded for it. Aristotle’s only surviving treatment of an art, namely tragedy, treats the art as *poiesis*, a kind of making wherein the product is distinct from the process out of which it arises. An art (or craft; Aristotle’s term is *techné*) is a rationally organized practice oriented towards the production of some good.<sup>3</sup> *Poiesis* is distinguished from *praxis*, a higher and more complete kind of action wherein the outcome is among other things the very process itself.<sup>4</sup> Process as *poiesis*, including artistic process, is conceptualized in terms of a particular schema fundamental to Aristotle’s thought, wherein the maker in some sense possesses the form or intelligibility of the product prior to engaging with the material from which the product arises; the producer brings the form to the material. Correlatively, the material is conceptualized as mere stuff, but full of potential, and the process of production is the actualization of some of the material’s potentials. Aristotle also provides a rich array of other materials for thinking about artistic process, in particular with reference to what have been called “autotelic” activities—that is, activities such as playing the flute that are in some sense good in themselves and self-perpetuating. Still, it would perhaps not be a complete exaggeration to say that something like the Aristotelian conception of *poiesis* has dominated the Western image of the making of artifacts.<sup>5</sup>

One criticism of the appropriateness of Aristotle’s schema for understanding artistic process that immediately suggests itself, concerns the assumption that the form or intelligibility of the work is somehow unaffected by the process of its materialization. It seems the near-universal experience of artists that the initial motivating conception of the work is drastically transformed in the artist’s encounter with her materials. Indeed, William Kentridge has said that the real work of artistic making only begins when the initiating idea is abandoned. But the conception of the artistic process as the work of genius can readily accommodate this thought, and in many prominent formulations the genius is said to work “unconsciously” or “like a force of nature.” Or, alternatively, in a typical modernist formulation the genius-artist’s process is a work of self-discovery or “journey into the interior.” And it is surely these romantic conceptions, which propose the artwork as a kind of counter to everyday artifacts in their reliance upon “inspiration,” together with the slightly earlier thoughts from Kant that a genius’ significant artistic achievements are necessarily original and do not arise primarily from the application of rules,<sup>6</sup> that are the target of Bourriaud’s and other international curators’ rejection.

Two further criticisms might seem to motivate Bourriaud’s rejection of the genius-model and proposal of the relational artist as a replacement: (a) in the genius-conception, agency is wholly the prerogative of the maker. The artist is a form-giving agency who imposes some meaning on an otherwise unformed and meaningless matter, and the audience of the work has no allotted role in the work’s consummation other than exercising a distanced, contemplative, hands-off appreciation. Both material and viewer are passive. (b) The genius-model ignores the historical and political dimensions of artistic making, and short-circuits possibilities for more collective forms of making and reception. The genius’ artistic process is a timeless monologue, unanchored in place, wherein the genius only ever finds aspects of himself. The actual psychological, practical, and institutional embodiment of the genius-model inevitably carries with it further maligned characteristics. Perhaps the most repellent of these for a contemporary sensibility is the stereotypically gendered dynamics wherein active creation is figured as male, and passive reception as female. The genius-model also resonates with 19th-century productivism, which treats production as an unqualified good, and conceptualizes the material Earth as just a collection of resources to be extracted and put to use.

But if one granted that parts of the idea of the artist as necessarily a genius are unsustainable, should one also follow the international curator in rejecting the whole conception? And is Bourriaud’s proposed replacement, the relational artist, sustainable, or even desirable? One of the most central discussions in the visual arts in the past fifteen years has been a tense exchange of criticisms of Bourriaud’s conception between the art historian-cum-theorists Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. In a highly influential article in 2004 Bishop argued that Bourriaud offered no reason to think that the relationships generated by a piece of relational art were valuable or sustainable, and that the relational conception embodied the loss of a valuable political aspect of artworks, their “democratic” role of contesting

orthodoxies in favor of creating ephemeral micro-utopias that are “[u]nbridged both from artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate.” When, in 2006, Bishop put similar criticisms to the significantly different model of a new kind of social art proposed by Kester, he responded that Bishop’s criticisms themselves presuppose a kind of insufficiently social conception of art wherein the viewer/theorist can still grasp the meanings placed in work by an artist or artists. On Kester’s own conception of social art, the ongoing contribution of numerous workers, the numbers or identities of whom are not rigidly fixed in advance, remove the (initial) artist from a position of principle, stipulating the meaning, or even the content and shape, of the work. My sketch here of the complex issues is highly truncated, but one can sense the un-decidability of the debate among the competing conceptions.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Bishop and Kester would agree with Bourriaud in rejecting the genius-model.

To test this rejection, consider the recent remarkable work of the Bay Area photographer Bijan Yashar. Recently Yashar has exhibited two bodies of work. For one Yashar has photographed details of paintings not to offer the details for inspection but rather to render and stabilize two aspects of the viewing of pictures that are habitually treated annoyances and extraneous to appreciative viewing: the micro-textures of cracks, warping, and uneven applications of the paint; and the occluding pools of light created by spotlights, windows, and other sources of uneven illumination. The density of detail and evenness of focus create a peculiar sort of trompe l’oeil effect in making it seem that the smooth paper of the print itself has the rough texture of what is (merely) depicted thereon. A second group of photographs taken on Santa Catalina Island focus on the weathered surfaces of cracked paint and shreds of accumulated posters. These superlative works merit their own article, but for my limited purpose here I would urge that they fit comfortably within the genius-model (stripped of the repellent accretions noted above) in the way in which they are initiated by a kind of noticing and the fusion of project and perception that undergirds the body of the work. Further, the two bodies of work enrich each other in gaining additional meaningfulness in comparison; the Catalina works’ greater distance from their motif acquires additional significance when contrasted with the close view of the photographs of paintings. Bourriaud and the international curators generally offer no reason to despise the kinds of exemplary significance that arise in an artist’s development, achievement of a characteristic style, and the testing of that style in her practice; their exhibitions show them to be uninterested in this variety of meanings, and their anti-genius discourse jettisons the conceptual resources needed to grasp it.

Now, Bourriaud and the international curators might respond (without a non sequitur) that Yashar’s work, whatever its merits, lacks the foregrounding of collective or inter-subjective production and reception demanded of the authentic art of our time. But consider a second example: the artist Gema Alava has undertaken a project wherein she led a single blindfolded individual through a gallery of a museum and described evocatively the works exhibited therein. She performed this action eleven times with different individuals as the piece *Trust Me* (2010). A striking feature of this is the novelty and the intensity of the experience of the blindfolded person, who experiences the voluntary and temporary sacrifice of vision as an inducement to heightened visual imagination, and further the intensification of what would otherwise be the auxiliary and unnoticed sense of sound (Alava’s voice), touch (Alava’s hand), and kinesthesia. Inter-subjectivity is foregrounded, but what is in striking contrast to relational art is the continued constitutive role left for a non-participant viewer—that is, most of us whose access to the piece is through photographs of an instance of it. The continued role of the contemplative viewer seems to me responsive to a problematic feature of Bourriaud’s conception of relational art: its lack of wholeness or unity, whether perceptual or imaginary, or even as a regulative idea. For any group of people to form a social unity, they must sense themselves, grasp themselves, and understand themselves to be such a unit.<sup>8</sup> The collected co-contributors to a piece of relational art are no more or less members of a collective than a few hundred people who happen to find themselves at a shopping mall at the same time. Alava’s piece, by contrast, induces a structure of complementary imaginative tasks: the blindfolded person knows herself to be visible to a viewer, whether directly or through being photographed, and so can set herself as a secondary task imagining being seen. The non-participant viewer has a central imaginative task imagining what it’s like to be the blindfolded person.

When the international curator pronounces the end of genius, many babies are thrown out with the bathwater. Perhaps one way of seeing what is valuable in the curators’ rejection of genius is to consider it as part of a criticism of the hyper-individualism that afflicts modern and contemporary art. But the curator has neglected to consider the perennial mechanisms and forms of meaning-making in the arts, while accepting the fashionable dogma that contemplative viewing is only a kind of passivity, and solely the artifact of bourgeois art. It’s hard to avoid the suspicion that the curators’ seeming obliviousness is not ideologically motivated, for the evident effect of rejecting the genius-model is to wrest agency from the artist, and the failure to construct a model wherein collective artistic meaning might arise in such a way that it can be grasped by those who produce it and those who appreciate it leaves only one person with a grasp of the work’s meaning: the curator him- or herself. Yashar’s and Alava’s works show, by contrast, that there is nothing obligatory in following the curators’ lead in this.

### Dave Hickey

### In Conversation With Jarrett Earnest (Part Three)

**Third Morning: Being Hit by a Soft Buick**

*Mid-morning phone call: ‘Jarrett—Dave, I’m going to leave tomorrow because I’m not having any fun. But I thought of some more things about art writing that could really save you some time so come over today when you have a chance.’*

The biggest problem when I started writing criticism was transitions. “How does it get from here to there?” Gradually I read enough to realize that you don’t use them. No transitions. What you do is what I call a “jump shift.” In an art essay, I will start off with some sort of conversational anecdote and it will amount to about three hundred words, then you jump shift. An essay I was working on once started off with a little narrative about being in Julian Schnabel’s studio while they were tearing out the window to move out a 30-foot painting. Julian is directing everyone with his hands in the air and one of the working guys turns and says, “I bet Julian was an asshole in high school.” If you build that up and give it the time to create a little mise-en-scène, then you can just put a dot at the end and start again cold: “Julian Schnabel was born in Brooklyn, New York in April, 1951.” Then you go into that if you have that first hook nailed. My trick is to write paragraphs—don’t worry about where they go or if they go. After I have paragraphs I put them in order: here’s the narrative, here’s the hook, here’s the lede, here’s the jump shift—it’s a little train that goes along and you find the place to hook in another two paragraphs, then it’s the end. That means you are developing these little groups of leitmotifs. If you try to write it rationally, it will sound stupid because it’s not rational. It’s a set of waves. What I spend a lot of time on is just keeping it close to the ground, so we can go through this, we can go through Julian’s background, we can go through the rise of neo-expressionism and get to the place I was ultimately going. Julian’s career as a movie director, for which he was rehearsing when he was moving the painting through the window. That was the sort of loose hook that was there—and I’ll write it up one of these days, maybe—so I’m sorta going there and I’m sorta starting here. But mostly, if you write good paragraphs, you don’t need a transition, you can jump.

**You reference John Ruskin a lot, who would you write endless, paragraph-long sentences, so what do you see that needs to be in a paragraph to make it a complete unit?**

Well I agree with Henry James who said the paragraph is the basic unit of writing—James’s paragraphs are a bit more portly than mine are, since I believe in the nested theory that eight bars of music is, statement, restatement, release, return, and twenty-four bars of music is: statement, restatement, release, return. So you’re almost trying to write the essay in each paragraph starting from a different point of view. But the thing is to write good paragraphs, and what you want is a good stop at the end of the paragraph, because if it stops well you can go anywhere from there. And you want a good lede, like in any story. The trick in a paragraph, I think, is that they are like sonnets in the sense that they have pivots, called “volta” in a sonnet. There is a place in every paragraph where it *turns*. You start out here and you end up there in a slightly more skewed position. Three-fifths into a paragraph I better start turning—something better start happening. Same thing applies to the essay—three-fifths into the essay it better start turning. What imposing a rational structure on things (and Arthur Danto was the main offender in this infelicity) is that the marching prose just soaks into the soil. You have to go back to the visible as much as possible. My preference—which most critics ignore—is to spend a lot of time actually describing the work. If you can describe the work then you have said what you have to say about the painting. You can presume that they are moving right along. So we have the scene in Julian’s studio, then you have lots of background—what an asshole Julian was in high school in Houston, where I first met him; I mean he was not really mean; he was just who he is, he has a sense of drama—

**You met Julian Schnabel when he was in high school?**

No, I met him when he was out of high school and hanging around Houston trying to be an artist. Julian was trading his crap to all of his friend artists for their art, and I’m sure they threw it all away—it looked like crap—but I’m sure the ones that held them are very happy. So here is your lede, here is your backstory—such that you need to fill in historical things—here is your description of the work, and if you can’t get out from those three points *you’re in trouble!* It sounds a lot more mechanical than it is. A lot of it is prosody and instinct. Sometimes I don’t do it at all, but in general I try to start off with that thing I suggested to Peter Schjeldahl — “the lady standing next to me looking at the Kiefer blew her nose.”

**When it comes to that set-up, the conversational lede, the biographical stuff, and then the descriptive, how do you connect the biographical to the descriptive?**

It will connect because you say it does. The narrative pushes it up. You’re the boss. That is what you discover, that is why you don’t worry about transitions. If it’s not there, the words will put it there and you won’t have to do all the shit Arthur Danto does. I think it’s fairly important to make your preferences clear; I’ve written essays where I’ve said, “In my universe I don’t like this art. But in this universe I’m going to tell you how it might be good.”

**What do you think of the personal essay as a form? Is “art criticism” something else?**

I mostly write personal essays. I find them much more flexible. I really learned how to do it when I was writing slick magazine profiles on celebrities—how do you profile a celebrity? where do you put in their background? where do you put in their performance—how do you arrange things like that, without having to say “thus” or “because” too much, *because you shouldn’t do that*. Better to describe Roger Miller changing clothes 10 times before a show.

**The logic of the celebrity profile seems to be the “up close and personal,” something more than the public face everyone knows.**

Bob Christgau used to say, “You are not the celebrity’s friend, you are the reader’s guy.” I agree. You are noticing the socks with the holes in them and the bottles of cognac and whatever is around. I think you will find when you start doing this, it’s like dressing a set, that you’ll put in the things you want, like how in Julian’s apartment there is a lot of North African stuff, but like Jeff Koons, strangely enough, nothing is funny, Julian has no sense of humor. There are hijinks, that kind of clunky “oh I’m going to bump into you on the school yard” stuff but



Dave Hickey. Courtesy of the Internet.

there’s not much there. I actually think that by going into the movies Julian saved himself—his movies are very nice. That is because, I think, Julian’s temperament is Diaghilev’s—it’s the organizer, it’s the guy that is casting the parts. He was always trying to make a movie for himself, which purportedly he did in *Basquiat* (1996). But how and where that connects to the paintings would be the hard part. If I were writing this essay in my imagination, I would basically call the paintings “set dressing.”

**In what ways are figurative language—metaphors—useful or invisible for describing art?**

Well, I wrote a piece about Lynda Benglis’s big pour pieces that come out of the wall, and I ended up having to say about the same things about Robert Gober’s legs coming out of the wall—they are about a natural world bifurcated by industry. I think that is right in both cases. I’m really an “everyday language” person, so if I start by saying, “The solution proscribed in this case . . .” I would say, “Would be a big dose of talent.” You don’t send out for figurative expression, it is forced out of the vocabulary in which you’re writing. It just rises up. I think metaphors are forced up on the prose.

**There was something you wrote about the Primary Atmospheres show, where you say the object’s relationship to its form is that of aspiric to its mold, which I thought clicked a lot of evocative stuff together in a very simple way.**

That is pretty much the idea, and it’s a version of the idea I was talking about with Jasper Johns: why does Jasper use letters and numbers and targets? Well, first because they are forms that have no originals and I think Jasper liked that, but, most importantly, they are *real stupid*, and stupid nearly always pays off in that sense.

**There is something he said to Leo Steinberg about the targets, that he uses them because they are something your mind “already knows,” which is the same thing.**

Right, and I think that a lot of Jasper’s iconography is just an excuse to make sexy surface paintings. I think children will be wondering about whether the target is an asshole for the rest of this century—and in Lari Pittman it occasionally is—but I don’t think it is in Jasper’s case. Like the logic of the flags: “The thing about the flag is not who made it but who salutes it”—“The best thing about the target is that you aim at it.” You move the whole presence of the object into its extension in space. To go back to writing, I think you keep your promises. If what you’re doing is all out of shape, the reason is probably that there is a promise you made up at the top that you are not keeping at the end. The fat lady in the second sentence must reappear if you’re writing literary prose. Everything should be accounted for. But what you do about picking the wrong artists—shit, I don’t know. I was talking about that Pistoletto piece, which was my first “big” essay, so I let it slide. That is why I find negative reviews much more difficult to write than positive reviews. I can figure out the conditions under which something might be good, but I can’t explain why anyone would make bad art. I don’t have a fucking clue!

**When you get into the description part of it, you mainly talk about the physical object itself in a tight frame, as opposed to the exhibition as an entity.**

If it is an exhibition I will usually pick out a typical object in the show. Nuance resides in the single occasion, so I think you’re better off just talking about one. This goes back to the advice of Paul Williams, the songwriter: “Never put more than one interesting line in a song.” And there is tendency to do that—you want to make everything gorgeous, but if it’s a good hook just let it emanate. If you’re being clear and grammatical don’t worry about boring—people can read clear and grammatical very rapidly. If you want to make it hard, make it beautiful and difficult. Except criticism is a craft and not an art.

**You mainly write monographic pieces.**

That is what I write lately. I have this very interesting problem now: this story I should have been writing for two weeks while I’ve been down here seeing stars and jaguars, which is this story on David Levinthal. It’s for the Smithsonian. There is a nice, simple, little “Smithsonian essay” to be written. But there is a much more complicated essay to be written about what happens when the stopped time in a toy and the stopped time in a photograph create the illusion of action—it’s like a double negative. That is a little more grown-up than the Smithsonian wants, but . . . There is also the argument to be made that “this is Western art because the size of the figure is related to the scale of the ground” so you can use a little bitty ground to make something look big. That seems simple enough, unless you have been to the Middle East or a Byzantine church—it’s hard to describe. Even so, I like to write about things that I like but that I don’t understand when I start. When I started writing I did learn some very basic rules, one of which is: don’t start writing until you are ready to start writing. The transition from typewriter to computer, which you have never suffered, was that, on a computer, you can just write and erase and write and erase, but it won’t get you there because you really need to wait until you have something to say. So—put it off.

**Until you have to do it?**

Yeah. Then you’re getting more money per hour and you’re not going to be boring. I can’t imagine writing boring stuff for a long time. I think the deadline pressure really helps periodical journalism. Were it not for that I would probably still be revising my first little essay.

**Before you start writing do you envision how things go, like how the narrative works?**

No. I envision random words—a kind of bouquet of possible meanings. “Turtle,” “veranda,” “enfilade,” or “mountain chickadee”—how they look.”

**Descriptions?**

“Taller than a dog”—just vigorous little shots at describing or observing the art. I remember I wrote a pretty good piece on Mary Heilmann—I’ve known her for years. I knew her when she lived in El Segundo (all my girlfriends are ranked up and down the beaches of Southern California). I decided that the most persuasive, imaginative image of “Mary Heilmann” would be the Norman Rockwell picture of the little girl sitting out in front of the principal’s office with a black eye and a big smile—that is *Mary*. She’s such a willful imp that she didn’t start painting until she was sure painting was dead. She was going around asking everyone, “Is painting dead?” Then, she started making paintings that have no lateral pressure—she was a ceramist—so all her paintings piss off at the edges, which is very effective of course.

All painters grow up learning discipline: “This is too much, this is too little, this goes in, this goes out, this should go flat”—all of these kinds of decisions. I always thought that Liz Murray had the ability to break every one of those rules. I don’t think she ever thought, “This shouldn’t stick out three feet,” whereas any normal person would. Liz was perfectly free, and I think that explains her prodigious production. She was really having fun. In a sane world she would be recognized at the greatest art comedian of the 20th century. The Carol Burnett of art.

**How does humor and wit function in both your writing about art and the work of art itself?**

I thought early on John Currin was humorous, now it just looks frat house. There is art like Ruscha’s that is witty, but wit is not going to get you a blowjob in New York. Personally, although I traffic in wit, I know that it doesn’t really help and that people don’t really like it. I come out of Alexander Pope and all of that ongoing ongoingness. So the idea of just lining all your little cars in the railroad yard and attaching them as they need to be attached is a pretty good strategy for me. I can’t remember the day, but I can remember the feeling when I got an assignment that I *knew* I could write! When you think, “I don’t know if I can write this,” or, “What am I going to write about Bachman-Turner Overdrive?” you’re dead. What I did with Bachman-Turner Overdrive, who fell somewhat short of valedictorians, was to invent a teenage companion, Norman, who was much hipper



Jarrett Earnest reading Dave Hickey in the tub.

to childlike things, and I would take him theoretically on trips with me and he would keep me from getting too excited about Nils Lofgren or whatever was the latest pop of the day. There are thousands of devices. If the content is too personal, too much grounded in my experience, I’m much more comfortable going into the third person and writing it as “he.”

**You did that for the introduction for the revised edition of Invisible Dragon.**

And I did it in the last essay in my short story book. The essay was called *Proof through the Night*, which I regard as the last great title from the Star Spangled Banner—I was happy about that. Proof through the night, don’t we all need that? Also I have to tell you something else: one of the ways out of swanning narcissism, if worse comes to worse, is to quote yourself. You don’t say, “I thought . . .” you say, “I have a friend who thinks . . .” Then you have some calm distance—you don’t have to say who that person was. You really have a lot of options when you write, but that presumes that you have something in your mouth that you are chewing on, unlike that asshole at Princeton—he’s not chewing on anything. What I’m saying is: a good essay on art is not always a good argument, it is a good story with implications—that is what you learn writing celebrity journalism. You are writing a story with available materials, available light. I learned how to do that—an evening in a room with Jeff Beck isn’t as dazzling as you might think, but the interview was about Stratocasters. That is what Jeff Beck knows and loves so it was very sweet. Another real insight for me: I stopped taping interviews because I found that once I started using the tape recorder my eyes and ears shut off, like, “I’m going to trust the tape recorder on the table,” and you can’t do that. I write better than I experience, so I remember the voices.

You just need to understand that as you move on, you are not going to be any smarter than you are today. I’m not any smarter than I was when I was 23, but eventually I acquired the confidence that I was right. At first you think, “I think this, but everyone is going to hate me,” then as you grow you think, but “I’m right—*fuck you!*” That is a good feeling. It gives you more energy if you think you’re right about a certain kind of thing.

**I don’t want to live in a world where everyone agrees, even if it is with me.**

I don’t either! I do frequently. If everyone loves it—I don’t. I really think that Andy Warhol moved into Valhalla by having his work largely misinterpreted. Barbara Rose still thinks the soup cans are ironic, on *no evidence whatsoever*. Just because she couldn’t get her mind around them they aren’t being ironic, just because she couldn’t see the residues of Mark Rothko amid the soup cans. Things like that can really fuck up the discourse. Like Wade Guyton, if you were old enough to have lived through the ‘70s, you don’t really want to look at those Wade Guyton printouts and think of the shit everybody was doing in 1972 and threw away. A lot of artists now are suffering from what I call the “Dolly Parton problem,” which she mentioned to me in her early days. She said, “The thing is, if you have big tits when you’re 19 and 20 years old, it’s really hard to change. You’ve got a bunch of disc jockeys saying: *Doesn’t sound like Dolly!*”

**You were talking to her in the ‘70s, and she starts to transition into a pop idiom in the late-’80s?**

Mid-’70s. I went on the last tour she took with Porter Wagner. It was kind of fun and kind of sad. They loved each other, not sexually, but they had been singing together for years and it’s hard to lose your harmony line. Dolly was really going somewhere. She’s an amazing songwriter and getting hugged by her is like being hit by a soft Buick. But the Dolly Parton problem is going to grasp all these young zombic abstractions. Sooner rather than later they’re going to have to have a new idea . . .

**Do you feel you got perceived in a certain stylistic way you tried to move away from?**

No, I never tried to move away from it. I was really surprised, given the essays that I have written, that my accent and my home state would turn me into a monster. I’ve lost millions of dollars being from Texas, a place I detest, and I’ve always written about marginal, difficult artists—that is *what I do*. But show me to some academic feminist and she’s right down my throat. I don’t know why. Maybe I am a little sharp about academic footwear, but what do you want? Dull?

**What do you think it is to bring theoretical texts into teaching artists? Is there a best way?**

The writing that’s not about art is the best, because the stuff about art is mostly lame, and most art is lame. I’ve taught a lot of books. I taught Northrop Frye, who is good because he classifies narratives in terms of the protagonist’s control over the environment, so you start in the heroic mode where the protagonist has total control and you end up in the ironic mode where the protagonist turns into a beetle. It really helps kids sort out what they’re doing and where they are placing things. It also helps abstract painters to see that there is a kind of class system in abstract painting. You can do Mary Heilmann right off the beach, or you can do Philip Taaffe right out of the beauty shop. Once you see these categories it gives you more clarity.

**You’ve written about a lot of artists that you know personally. Do you think that is useful or not useful?**

Actually, it’s not useful at all. Artists are interesting people, there is no doubt about that, but they’re like poker players. If you know a poker player socially, you know one person—that ain’t the lady who plays poker with you. You know an artist as a person, but that ain’t necessarily the one who makes art—it’s a parallel reality. How someone as impudent as Ed Ruscha could have gone through life as such a courtly person—and he is a courtly person—don’t ask me. And there are a lot of things I’ve written about people whom I simply don’t like, but you don’t have to be nice to be good, and all that like-don’t-like shit just drips right away. I think that artists present themselves to the world very differently than they present themselves to their art. Maybe, if that were not the case, they wouldn’t be artists. You were asking me if my rough manner was a defense mechanism? Yes. Except for my wife and Dolly Parton, I like art better than people. I would also say your theatrical promiscuity is a defense mechanism as well. I tried it. It worked, but I could never corner Hannah Wilke.

**Well, that is obvious. I would also say your theatrical promiscuity distances in the guise of being open.**

I know exactly what you mean: we develop these things because we are embarrassed by this ridiculous, wimpy profession—the art world is just plain wimpy, the people are way more wimpy—so we theatricalize our little edge. Nauman does this too. I have always done the things I say I’ve done, but it doesn’t take a lot of ways to do all the terrible things I’ve said I’ve done—it’s not like a major investment of time to fuck up a lot. You will notice there is a lot of Dave in this interview, but not much you can understand.

## On Point 2.07 The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Art Critic

### Mark Van Proyen

I swear, we were there on time. The website said that the recent incarnation of the Agnes Denes *Wheatfield* in Milan would be open until 8:00 pm, but when we arrived at a few minutes after five, the site was closed—this owing to the time needed for a small army of caterers and stagehands to prepare for a special event to take place under a temporary pagoda that looked like a younger sibling of the Sydney Opera House. Nonetheless, a decent view of the piece could be had from the fenced-off perimeter around it, which, in terms of square meters, was somewhat larger than the original version that was installed under the auspices of the Public Art Fund at New York’s Battery Park in 1982. Next to the entry gate was a plaque hosting the heraldic emblems of all of the project’s sponsoring entities, some corporate, some government, but mostly *fondazioni* of the type that seem to have proliferated amidst the permacrasis that is southern Europe. No doubt these entities were providing the honored guests for the ensuing festivity, conveniently coordinated with EXPO Milan, that being the most recent iteration of what was once called The World’s Fair.

As was the case with the original 1982 version, the symbolism of the current *Wheatfield* remains pointed: at the moment when real estate becomes mega-exponentially more valuable than the land’s capacity for food production, a kind of absurdity sets in, and by calling attention to this absurdity as *absurdity* (rather than as the mass delusion of “normalcy”) is the point, because food is kind of important. I am told that the wheat will be harvested in the fall, and turned into baked goods that will be given away. From the looks of the large throng of refugees from North Africa huddled in a cordoned-off balcony at the Milano Centrale train station, harvest time cannot come too soon.

One could go on to read the piece as a latter-day ode to the cult of Demeter, sung at a time when the world could really use her help. Yet another reading takes note of the location of the new version: about halfway between Milano Centrale and the new corporate headquarters of UniCredit—perhaps the largest bank in Italy. The former is the world’s most complete and dramatic example of extant 1930s Italian Fascist architecture, while the latter is a hyper-futuristic phallus that towers over *Wheatfield* and the Milanese skyline like an upraised middle finger of gigantic proportions, the *vaffanculo qua non* of neoliberal triumphalism. It was not too long ago that UniCredit lost almost a quarter of its market capitalization in a single day of financial hemorrhage in the equity markets. But now it is back—resurrected!—although one wonders how long it will be before the rest of Italy follows suit. As it now stands, the building appears as the neoliberal *yang* casing a long shadow of *Wheatfield’s yin*, a lord of the manor surveying his domain of domesticated avant-garde art.

In 1982, Denes’s *Wheatfield* seemed uncanny and almost surrealist. Part of the reason for this was its close proximity to Wall Street, which at that time had just begun to use computerized trading technologies and electronic fund transfer—removing much of the human element insofar as the international flow of capital was concerned. By placing something so economically fundamental as the amber waves of grain production in such close proximity to the circus of abstractions that was Michael Milken-era Wall Street, an obvious question pertaining to the common good was slyly raised and then answered with an immersive experience that traded intangible abstractions for the tangible reality of earth.

*Wheatfield* was and still is readable as an eco-feminist editorial on the earlier earthworks projects that were executed by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria, many initially sponsored by Virginia Dwan, who owned the gallery that sold the editioned “documentations” of said projects. These artists received a lot of attention in *Artforum* during the early-middle 1970s, but their work was far from the be-all and end-all of land art. Writers such as Anna Chave have gone so far as to read rape fantasies undergirding Heizer’s brutalist upturnings of top soil, and San Francisco’s own Kenneth Baker published an eloquent book in 2008 about the analogy that can be made between De Maria’s *Lightning Field* (1977) and the unimaginable terror of a nuclear missile exchange. It was a topic that was on people’s minds on the eve of Ronald Reagan’s first term. At that time, a kinder and gentler land art seemed to be called for, and it first came in the form of Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Maintenance Art* projects undertaken with the New York City Department of Sanitation (circa 1972), followed up by Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1976—in memory of Smithson, who had died in a 1973 aircraft accident). Alice Aycock also did work in this vein during the late 1970s, but the jury is still out as to whether

## Unfinished Centuries

### Arie Amaya-Akkermans

The circumstances were perhaps special on the early afternoon of May 31st, 2013 in central Istanbul, when disproportionate use of violence by police forces, in response to an environmental protest, escalated into one of the major popular uprisings in the history of Turkey, a country not particularly skilled at handling dissent peacefully. Yes, the circumstances were exceptional, as the reality of violence brought Turks from all walks of life together in an episodic moment of participatory democracy, albeit only in the form of contestation and not of agreement, which turned the country upside down. The complex set of relations dictating contemporary urban life means that a protest movement for the environment today is also about architecture, about housing, about inequality, and ultimately about the public and political domain.

Journalistic comparisons to Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring or May 1968, did very little to clarify what this moment of transition was or could have been. How do you address a moment of transition when you are profoundly immersed in it? This question haunted Turkish artist Didem Pekün, observing the uprising from London as a distant spectator, and then arriving back in Istanbul to take part in the protests that lasted for months and that still echo profoundly in the political consciousness of the present moment in Turkey, marked by increasing political uncertainty and the possibility of next door’s war in Syria penetrating Turkey’s porous border. Where do the borders of reality meet the horizon of what is visible to us?

These moments of convolution that all those involved in the protests remember to a degree now seem further than they really are, as if they were part of a political cosmology erasing all previous histories yet so deeply embedded in them. The protests spread quickly nationwide, and in the unexpected solidarity that is born as a consequence of losing the objective world, very few people in central Istanbul slept that night and witnessed the hundreds of protesters marching from one side of the Bosphorus Bridge to the other at 4 AM, as we broke into tears from both shock and excitement. And that was only the beginning.



Wheatfield and UniCredit, Milan, 2015. Photograph by Caroline Maxwell.

it was land art or public sculpture. Maybe the difference is not as important now as it seemed to be then, but at that time, it was crucial to divorce Earthworks from the realm of the human for the sake of calling attention to the workings of trans-humanistic geological time separated from humanistic biological time—from the standpoint of geological time, biological entities are mere infestations that come and go rather quickly. Thus, the sites of the early Earthworks tended to be the treeless deserts of the Great Basin and the Southwest, not just because they suggested the extraterrestrial topographies of vintage science fiction illustration, but because they were haunted by a remorseless indifference to the periodic bleatings that called themselves “human culture.”

George Kubler’s 1962 book titled *The Shape of Time* provided inspiration and guidance on this front (especially to Smithson), but when Denes executed *Wheatfield*, the polarity of humans and trans-humans found a different emphasis. The work did not partake in the remorseless indifference toward the human realm that gave the earlier Earthworks their sublime edge; rather, it showed a kind of nature that could, if given the chance, work in sustainable partnership with the human world, if that human world humanized itself away from abstraction, strategy, and paranoid projection. Not much sign of that ever happening.

To be forlorn is not necessarily to be forearmed. That was the takeaway from several dispersed art viewings in Italy during the summer. One of these was a small retrospective of the work of Charles Pollock presented at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, nicely coinciding with the rare presentation of Charles’s brother Jackson’s *Mural* (1943), which was originally commissioned by Ms. Guggenheim, and is now in the collection of the University of Iowa Museum of Art. Another painting by Jackson that remains in the Guggenheim collection titled *Alchemy* (1947) was also given new pride of placement, mostly to show off the stunning results of a lengthy restoration that it underwent during the past year. But Charles Pollock is a perplexity. He was ten years older than Jackson, and still managed to outlive his younger brother by 32 years. His early paintings bespoke the influences of social realism and American scene painting, and he flirted with almost every style that came along since that time, including one that was obviously and unconvincingly influenced by Jackson. But Charles’s story gets



Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Destroy your house, build up a boat, save life!, 2014-2015 and Docks, 2014. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photograph by Mustafa Haznedci.

Didem Pekün had begun her ongoing project *Of Dice and Men*, already in 2011 during an anti-austerity demonstration in London, two years before the events of Gezi Park. Upon returning to Istanbul, the artist’s lens was met with raw footage from iconic moments of the Gezi Park protests, juxtaposed by a pre-existing visual monologue, staged between London and Istanbul, in which the artist reflects on the possibility of the everyday, existing alongside so many different



interesting in 1956, the point when Jackson met his untimely death. It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and the work that he started doing soon thereafter showed it—largish and foreboding works in oil featuring the interaction of two dark, deeply saturated colors. Think William Baziotzes meets Franz Kline. Because Charles’s brother introduced him to the circle of artists that were close to Clement Greenberg in the 1940s, his work shifted again at the turn of the 1960s, this time toward the use of bright acrylic stain painting in the manner of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler. These too were unconvincing; clearly the work of an artist who was trying too hard to fit into a mode defined by the work of other artists—proof that family romances live long and die slowly. Being the responsible big brother is its own suffocating cross to bear.

My vote for the loneliest painting in the world goes to a crucifixion scene painted between 1495 and 1497 by Giovanni Donato da Montorfano. In any normal circumstance it would be worth a great deal of very serious study; a large mural-like multi-figure composition that makes brilliant use of the architectural space containing it (that being the church at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan). In fact, it is a rather epic image, and it elegantly intertwines gospel symbolism with references to the politics of the high-late-Renaissance as they might have been understood in late-15<sup>th</sup> century Lombardy—one can even see the Sforza castle in the deep background of the center of the image. So why is this painting so forlorn? If your answer was that it is located in some inaccessible mountain monastery, you would be wrong. Many hundreds of people walk past it every day, and almost no one stops to take even a momentary glance at it. Why? Because on the wall of the other end of the old dining hall that it inhabits is another large painting executed around the same time titled *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo da Vinci. Maybe you have heard of it?



Didem Pekün, Of Dice and Men, 2011. Video Loop, 29 minutes. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photography by Baris Dogrusoz.



Didem Pekün, Of Dice and Men, 2011. Video Loop, 29 minutes. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photography by Baris Dogrusoz.

To live in the moment or to document the moment? A strange seamlessness foams up in between the truly cinematic and the more intimate descriptions of the everyday: a tram in London, or a window view from Istanbul. As cosmic background waves, the grandeur of the temporal ruptures; the intoxication of the future breaks through the sewn patches of the here-and-now. Passing through a number of different adopted positions, Pekün doubles and triples into persons and voices, into moments and eras, into histories and telltales. But *Of Dice and Men* is not a filmic essay about a protest movement somewhere, which sounds very ubiquitous today and not particularly incisive. The anxious loop between the everyday and the sublime and the artist’s question of whether we are able to move back and forth between them, and how, is not something specific to Gezi or Istanbul or Turkey but related to a profound moment of change and global transition of which Gezi is only a late symptom.

It is then not surprising that *Of Dice and Men* is the work at the core of *A Century of Centuries*, the exhibition curated by November Paynter that took place this year at SALT Beyoğlu, which was marked by the hundred-year commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in Istanbul, to this date not recognized by the government of Turkey. As in 2013, when the Gezi Park protesters battled the police and the clouds of tear gas, so it was in 2015 when demonstrators marching in recognition of the centennial of the genocide were followed closely by Turkish nationalists separated only by a very thin police barrier as they passed the Sinioşsogluu Apartment building that today houses SALT Beyoğlu. Paynter was primarily interested in works imbued with the memory of temporal transformations that continue to shape our present moment here and elsewhere.

But “transformation” is not strong enough a noun to denote the temporal gaps being addressed here. A transformation is merely a conversion from one symbol or function into a different one of similar value, whereas a transition implies a change in morphology, a crossover. A moment of transition is one in which the validity of certain concepts or symbols that guide us through the structure of reality begins to fail, thus we are expected to build new concepts based on knowledge of the past and wild guessing about the future. The transition is not a temporal unit but a leaped second; an adjustment that corrects time.

The installation as *if nothing has ever been said before us* (2007–2015) by Dilek Winchester, another local artist living on the islands of Istanbul—a place of exile and imprisonment in Byzantine times and later a place for minorities—takes on the polyglossic nature of Turkey in the early-20th century, rescuing cultural forms that have been buried in oblivion after the language and alphabet reforms in Turkey led to a rather violent and merciless process of homogenization and unification, which begot many of Turkey’s distinctively authoritarian and intolerant traits. Winchester’s investigation looks into Karamanlidika—Turkish written in the Greek alphabet—and Armeno-Turkish—Turkish written in the Armenian alphabet—and reveals buried chapters of Turkish literary history, where the first novels in modern Turkish were written by minority authors, using their own alphabets, but never registered in the official literary history.

In as *if nothing has ever been said before us*, Winchester explores the ideology of identity in relation to language, the title of which is based in the writer Öğüz Atay’s 1971 novel *Tutunamayanlar* (*The Dis-connected*): “We are knocking on your doors with an emotion and arrogance unparalleled in world history and without fear of seeming like those who are conected and behave as if nothing has ever been said before them.” The phonetic transcription is in Turkish but the alphabets include Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, all used extensively by the Ottoman population until the language reforms. As varieties of historical time are embedded in language, Winchester addresses the political consequences of linguistic policies and their long-term effects on the physical location of pasts: do they still shed light on us?

On the same floor, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Winchester’s neighbor on the same island, constructs a dialogue across time that complements the former’s investigation on Karamanlidika and Armeno-Turkish with a poetic utterance traveling far across eras. Profoundly engaged with the history of Greeks and Armenians in Istanbul, it is not a place of diaspora or exile for Büyüktaşçıyan but the epicenter of cultural and linguistic history of centuries. The artist travels in time and place between Byzantium, Constantin-

and re-organized: Where exactly are we when we remember? Is this a personal space or one we share with others? Navigating the no-longer and not-yet-of-consciousness, as they relate to broader frameworks that include historical and social knowledge, how do we merge different temporalities into a consistent seamless whole? While the question is not answered by the performance, the artists involved turn to movement from theoretical knowledge and attempt to create something such as movement or dance scores based on memories, which are also part of an extended web of political events and interruptions in the flow of consciousness: revolution, upheaval, dictatorship, freedom.

November Paynter’s eye and focus in selecting the artists for the exhibition expanded into a larger question about the nature of our historical consciousness, far beyond Turkey, to include Russian collective Chlo Delat’ with their performance-installation *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger* (2014) addresses forms of political organization of subjects under different forms of oppression, subtle and otherwise, and Kapwani Kiwanga’s installation . . . *rumors Maji was a lie* (2014) based on accounts of the 1905–1907 uprising in the African continent against the Germans le by a spiritual medium, resonate strongly within the exhibition, but it is difficult not to be overpowered by the loud volume of the conversation between Turkish artists, especially bearing in mind the erratic nature of contemporary art in the country, where it is very difficult to find meeting points between the practices of artists living in the same city; something consistent with the transformative moments that Paynter sought after.

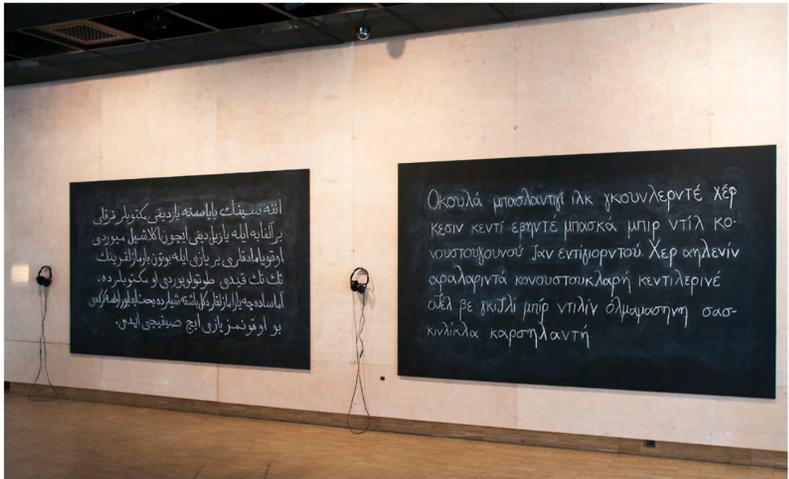
Other works in the exhibition include Judith Rauml’s *eser* (2014–2015), documenting German colonialism in Anatolia; Jumana Mana and Sille Storihié’s *The Goodness Regime* (2013), a film about the foundations of ideology and national self-image in Norway; Maha Maamoun’s videos about Egypt’s visual history; and Shilpa Gupta’s *Untitled* (2013–2014), dealing with geographical tensions between India and Pakistan. As a generalization, all the works in the exhibition investigate the becoming of our present world not in terms of causes, effects, and consequences, but under the light of how untold or obscured histories—be they visual, cultural, political, linguistic—can affect profound transformations in how we relate to immediacy or the past or not, and whether that will cause us to be derailed from the present into a frenzied state of suspended judgment where we are unable to move between past and future, between fiction and fact, between history and myth.

Almost hidden in plain view, lying quite anonymously in the middle of the exhibition, was the work that encapsulated the exhibition best. Dilek Winchester’s hermetic *Negative Epiphany* (2015) is a series of black prints made by overexposing paper, developed in traditional printing techniques and presented alongside vintage cameras from 1900–1915. The prints are not metaphorical; they stand blackened in lieu of photographs that have been shot somewhere, but that cannot be shown in the exhibition. Does this refer to images that we forgot or to objects that disappeared? To things that are not present or that have not been imagined? The work does not reveal much—a vault with indecipherable documents. The transmission of knowledge does not occur as an uninterrupted consciousness, therefore it is imperative to excavate, and to let objects speak for themselves, rather than to accommodate them.

It seems as if the central question of *A Century of Centuries* is not one of personal or even collective narratives, but what happens in politics and in artistic production when different moments in time pose themselves simultaneously as starting points of historical knowledge and as political futures. Our concept of history, as it stands today, is far removed from the way in which our ancestors looked at their narrated lives, and belongs to the 18th-century Enlightenment, in which the determinations for human experience were laid out rationally, removed from experience itself. It is a politico-philosophical concept. Historical time, should there be one, is bound up with our social and political circumstances and no longer anchored in a metaphysical hierarchy. To locate this time with precision is not merely a function of knowledge, or even of orientation, but of discovering how to move between different eras without being under the illusion that one or the other determines the whole.

What are the markers between one era and the other? Say, if you want to discuss the dividing line between the 19th century and the 20th and the 21st, what key events or places would come to mind? At the turning point between reality and belief, this long century played that of the imperialism of Bismarck’s Germany in the 1860s and that of corporate interests in the Middle East and elsewhere in 2015, is one and the same century punctuated by some of the most defining humanitarian crises of the modern era: the Armenian genocide in 1915 inaugurating the era of crimes against humanity and the indiscriminate slaughter of Syrians and Iraqis in 2015, which effectively ended that era together with international law and the international treaties enshrined to protect refugees all over the world from the horrors of genocide.

Not surprisingly, we are living in a very similar momentum, part and parcel of the same unfinished century: at the gates of a promising new world, propelled by economic and scientific growth, significant constitutional reforms and liberalization of the legal apparatus, reduction of poverty, and a fragile world peace. All of this paired with unspeakable humanitarian crises, the threat of an impending war, and the destruction of the middle classes. In order to “finish” this century, to move into the new one and pick up on the sublime that Didem Pekün was offering us in her work, it is necessary to think up forms of the future in which the current system of social and political organization will not be a “necessary evil” or an “inescapable circumstance” for those wanting to live in a democracy. It takes more than good judgment to walk into the future. It also takes imagination. *A Century of Centuries* imagines in reverse: it looks at the past as if it had shed light on the future.



Dilek Winchester, As if Nothing Has Ever Been Said Before Us, 2007-2015. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photograph by Mustafa Haznedci.



This issue is dedicated to Chris Burden and Sammy "the mick" Winston



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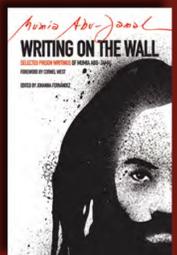


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