

HACK LIFE

TEXT / KAREN ARCHEY

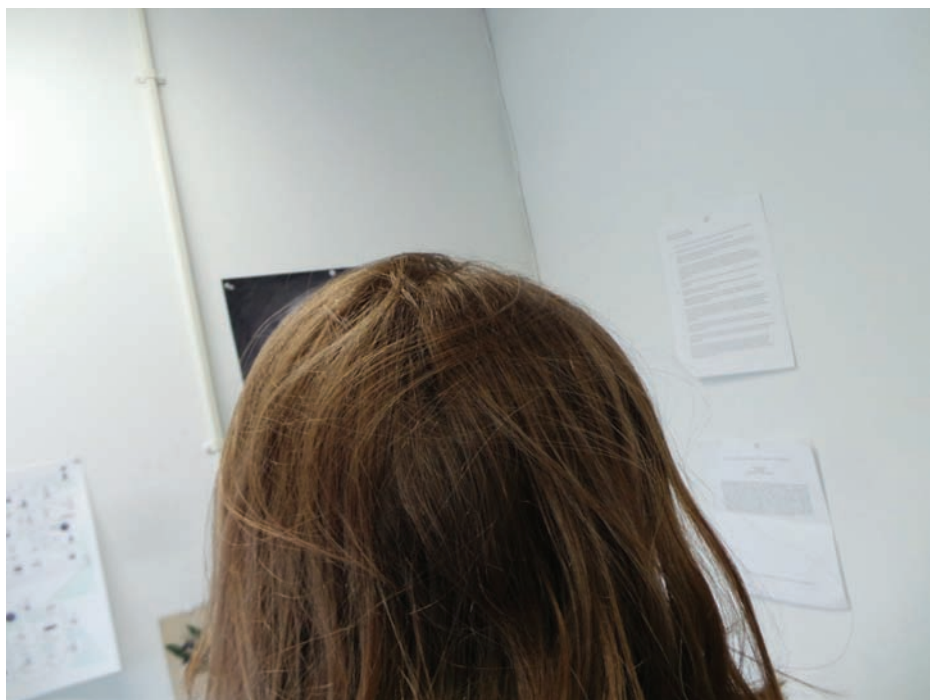
"I wish I could be more of a hack," proclaimed the British guy I recently started sleeping with. We were walking down Orchard Street in the Lower East Side after a few gallery openings and drinks. He was in town on break from Yale, where he was pursuing his Ph.D. in art history. I met him a few months before, when I was exceedingly drunk at a Reena Spaulings after party. "I wish I could be more of a hack," he reiterated, "so that I could write quickly. Like an article a *week!*" My eyes and stomach rolled simultaneously. I write an article a week. Sometimes I write two or three articles a week. Sometimes I write two reviews in a day. *A hack like ME?* I thought to myself. I really should've said it out loud.

Growing up in rural Ohio taught me not to wave my freak flag at everyone, and to concentrate on normalizing my behavior to get ahead in life. New York has trained me—somehow even more than the Midwest—to get ahead in life by not saying what I feel. Rather than hit back at my Yale beau with a hearty "Fuck you," I responded with a total lie: "Yeah, I know what you mean. How do they do it? It would be nice to just *not care* so much."



The truth is, I probably care too much. My career "A-ha!" moment happened when I was watching Robert Iscove's teen rom-com, *She's All That*, during my freshman year of high school. I found wholeness in Rachael Leigh Cook's Laney Boggs, an emotive, artsy humanitarian who brazenly explored the darker, deeper aspects of life through art. *I would commit myself to art*, I thought, *at all costs*. Laney was the girl who would skip soccer practice to go to edgy performance art events in the city. Choosing to wear glasses, she was the girl who could actually see outside her privileged existence and realize that it was her responsibility as a human to lift up this desperately unfair world. So, when I turned 18 I naturally decided to run away from home and enroll at a \$35,000-a-year private art school.

Photos: Karen Archey



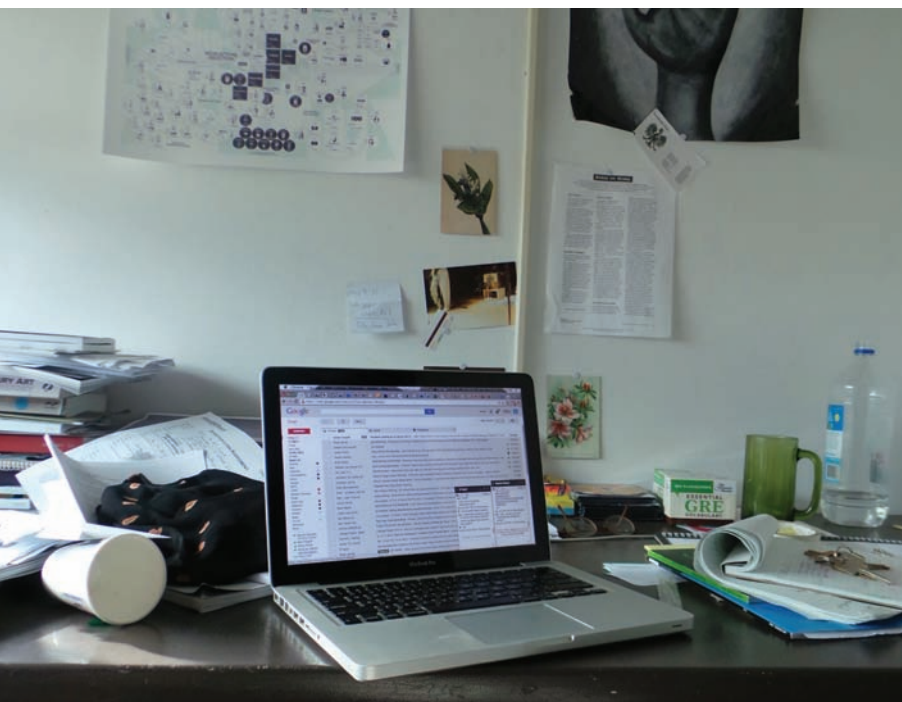
Fast-forward about 10 years, and I'm wandering a skate park on the south side of Chicago, looking for Renaissance Society curator Hamza Walker. It was the end of my third year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Visual and Critical Studies program, and I somehow figured out that Walker, my resident hero at the time, would be testing out some skateboards—recently airbrushed by German artist Katharina Grosse—at the park. Turns out Walker doesn't skateboard, but he invited others to skate, including Maxwell Graham, a friend and fellow SAIC student who would go on to found the Chinatown gallery Essex Street. While Max and the boys skated, I dutifully followed Walker around, desperately waiting for an entrance to conversation. I had been in a serious bind: Why was I in art school and how was I ever going to be able to pay back my loans? My saint of a father eventually co-signed my gargantuan loans, but I found my studio classes at SAIC frustrating and my academic classes uncompetitive. Interning at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, I began to see there was a looming, sublime thing out there called the "art world," but flipping through the pages of *Artforum* felt like crashing a party and knowing absolutely no one in the room. Hamza, I convinced myself, would offer me some much-needed direction. I found him overlooking the cement skateboarding pool, and eventually just blurted it out: "Why did you even decide to go to the art world? Isn't this all bullshit? Doesn't it have all the same shitty aspects as the rest of the world?"

He looked at me, calmly, and said, "I came to the art world because it was the only place I knew that would accept a freak like me."

I walked away from that encounter feeling slightly better, or just better understood. Maybe I had found another Laney Boggs. But I also had a sinking feeling that I couldn't shake. I intuitively sensed that the art world wasn't made for the kind of freaks that I had come to know.



The following fall I took my least favorite class ever, abstract painting. Clearly, I had traveled too far away from the impetus that initially brought me to art school, so I was attempting to re-create the teenage years I spent



channeling Laney, obsessively painting in my basement. The class was a horrible failure.

My painting progressively sucked more and more over the semester, and my classmates' lack of motivation infected my work ethic. The only solace I found was in writing. I also seemed to excel—freakishly and a little guiltily—at critiquing other people's work. The studio classes were six hours long, and oftentimes our group critiques would take an entire six-hour day or more. Most of us went balls-out aggro or were crying by the end. One day I was issued a particularly devastating assessment of my latest Anselm Kiefer monstrosity. Sensing my frustration, my instructor approached me after class and asked me how my semester was going. "I'm only interested in writing at this point," I admitted, suggesting my worth extended beyond the painting travesties I offered in her class.

"Writing?" she asked, incredulously. "You don't want to be an art critic, do you?"

"Well ... maybe? I mean, no. I've heard they're not very pleasant people. And why would anyone want to make a profession out of being unpleasant?"

"You're right, Karen," she said, her eyes narrowing in on my terrified face. "Art critics are miserable, spiteful people who couldn't hack it as artists and take out their frustration on everyone else. You are not an art critic. You're just not a very talented painter."



A few years later, I triumphantly started my writing career—by receiving a lump sum insurance settlement after getting hit by a car.

Let me tell you what it's been like.

The money didn't last long. In fact, I'll spare you the details of my bank account, as I fear we'll both burst into tears.

I have two deadlines today. I'm writing this piece for Dushko, and will finish my column for *LEAP* before heading out to Chelsea openings. I'm almost done with both, but I've overcaffeinated and have a sneaking suspicion something will go horribly wrong. Both pieces were due this week, but I spent Sunday, Monday, and part of Tuesday staring at my computer too despondent

and overwhelmed by this coming season's workload to write anything coherent. It's a pathetic cycle, being too overwhelmed to work and then having more work and less time as a result.

I'm taking breaks right now to "prime" by reading articles by the British food and culture writer A.A. Gill. Priming is a practice I began to employ a few years ago after developing regular writer's block, and essentially all it entails is reading another writer that you admire in order to get your writing juices flowing. Although it's anything but ideal that Gill is oftentimes labeled as a callous sexist and racist, I frequently turn to him for the immediacy of his writing—perhaps it's because Gill is dyslexic, and dictates, rather than writes, his pieces for his editor. Take the lede for his 2004 *Vanity Fair* report on his visit to a downtown Manhattan Crunch gym, gleefully titled "The Sorrow and the Pilates":

Nobody told me I'd need a sarong. The girl at the desk with the open-heart-surgery scar down her impressively toned chest never mentioned it. She just looked at me with a touch too much wide-eyed surprise and said, "So you're going to do the African-dance class?" and then paused a beat too long before adding an open-heart-felt "Well good for you."

Gill's passage inspired the lede for an article I wrote about the Artists Space occupation in October 2011:

"Hi stranger, my name is Catharsis," a young man says as I walk up to the stoop of 38 Greene Street early Sunday evening. He extends a hand covered in baba ghanoush and Kettle Chip dust, and says "Oh, they're not letting anyone in anymore. I've gotten kicked out of enough places to know to always take my stuff with me. That's why I brought my things when I went to Whole Foods." Welcome to Take Artists Space, a land where occupiers ironically are able to shop at bourgeois anti-union chain supermarkets while raging against the machine.

Although the tone of this Artists Space piece clearly begins as flippant, it ends as a sincere investigation into the uncanny, paralyzing feelings of being caught in a moment of political unrest. The article was hosted on my ARTINFO blog, which ran 2011–2012. It was probably my most-read piece to date, but it represents a style of journalistic, hit-the-pavement writing I unfortunately haven't been able to keep up with.

That said, retiring my (uncompensated) ARTINFO blog was an easy decision, as it allowed me to focus on the more remunerative realm of print criticism. My *LEAP* column is one of my favorite things to write—every two months, I write a 1,300-word profile on either an emerging-ish artist who hasn't had much substantial writing on their work published, or a well-known artist who has yet to be fully understood by the art world. For example, my last two columns featured the design duo Metahaven and artist Hito Steyerl. Both are fairly well known, but they are active in so many different fields—graphic design, publishing, and Internet policy for Metahaven; video, installation, and essay-writing for Steyerl—that there hadn't been much cohesive scholarship on either. Today

I'm writing about Aleksandra Domanovic, a Berlin-based artist making work primarily about the history of technology and the former Yugoslavia whom I've known since 2009. Herein lies my most fulfilling profile-writing scenario: (Step 1) Read everything published on the artist. (Step 2) Interview them; grill them; almost become friends with them. (Step 3) Write a (hopefully) incisive new profile that gracefully synthesizes all pre-existing and new knowledge on the artist. Now if only I got paid a livable wage!

This is how much I make from various magazines:

I make \$300 every two months from my *LEAP* column.

I make \$100 per 400-word review or \$1,200 for a feature for *Modern Painters*, which is paid about six months after I turn in my final draft (they are currently six weeks behind on my fall payment, with which I was expecting to pay my rent).

I make \$300 for a 550-word review for *Art Agenda*, which is paid within three weeks.

I make 14 cents per word, maximum \$180, when I write for *Rhizome*.

I make €200 for *Kaleidoscope* features, which are paid basically never.

I make €400 for features and about €150 for reviews from *Spike*, who graciously remind me to invoice them when I haven't.

I make £120 from writing reviews for *frieze*.

I make \$300–\$2,500 for catalog essays, hopefully paid within a month.

I actually don't know how much I'm going to make for writing this piece.

As you can see, these numbers don't exactly add up to a livable wage—not in New York. Sometimes I have to sublet my room one month to save up money for the next. Since I started freelancing 18 months ago, I've spent about eight months subletting my \$965/month tiny Manhattan apartment room, oftentimes staying with my parents in rural Ohio. Getting laid off from my previous job came with an unexpected bonus: I'm closer than ever with my parents!

I was even considering altering my byline to read, "Karen Archey is an art critic and curator based in New York, New York, and Sharon Center, Ohio."



I recently took the Amtrak to Richmond, Virginia, to do studio visits with the summer post-Bacc students at Virginia Commonwealth University. Most of the students had recently graduated and didn't get into grad programs, so they felt a little lost. I got off the train at 5:45 pm and was scheduled to give a two-hour lecture at 6. Having recently botched some public speaking engagements by over-planning, I had decided to wing this one. Julie Grosche, the program director, encouraged me to speak openly about the personal aspects of my success since the students might be confused by how I'm working professionally at a young age. I didn't want to scar them, I said, but I'd try to impress upon them that sometimes even a purportedly successful career feels, from the inside, more like a farce.

I started with my experience as a middle-class kid in rural Ohio who escaped my region's oppressive conservatism by hanging out on the Internet and downloading Fugazi songs on Napster, went candidly through some of the ups and downs of my "success," and I ended by talking about how I still can barely pay my rent. As awkwardly, uncomfortably blunt as I was, they seemed to appreciate me. I was their Hamza. I was their Laney.

Actually, it's probably about time to stop bludgeoning you with this painful, cringe-inducing Laney Boggs trope. Truth be told, it's pretty depressing that Rachael Leigh Cook was the only thing I had to hold on to in late-90s

Ohio. Even the name "Laney Boggs" sounds pitiful—like a portmanteau of "loony" and "zany," suggesting she may be insane, and "bog," which is basically a muddy ground, an all-encompassing wet blanket, an entanglement. Although Laney was supposed to function as an illustration of how my initial, painfully naïve desire to enact change through art was out of synch with the "real" art world, she actually *does* end up selling out and hooking up with the jock. She transforms from the slight, quiet, self-actualized outsider—whom we all privately relate to—to alienation-inducing "fresh-faced" insider, whom we all innately oppose.

As many of us have felt, this insiderism took over the art world as the American income divide began to swell, and the wealthy, richer than ever, had more money to spend on luxury goods. This is why there are so many yachts parked outside the Venice Biennale, and also, coincidentally, why I don't have any money (they took it all). I've been insulated from these economic adverts as a former middle-class Midwesterner and current impoverished New Yorker and thus, perhaps luckily, I have an outmoded view on art: it should provide a space where we come together as equals, regardless of—but respectful to—class difference, gender, sexual orientation, race, birthright, et cetera. I know through various conversations with artists, writers, and curators that so many of us relate to this sentiment yet feel the conflicting need to play to insider politics. How do I get to have these conversations? Why do I get to write about *She's All That* and income inequality in the same breath?

Because I am a hack.



Karen Archey is an art critic and curator based in New York, and the 2012–2013 Curator in Residence at Abrons Arts Center. Her writing has been featured in *Spike Art Quarterly*, *Art Agenda*, *frieze*, *Art Review*, and *LEAP*, where she writes a bilingual Chinese/English column on emerging Western art. Archey regularly speaks about Internet-related art practices, and she has recently spoken at the International Center of Photography, New York; Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, where she organized the panel "Post-Net Aesthetics" in collaboration with *Rhizome*. Archey will launch a survey of post-Internet art at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in January 2014.