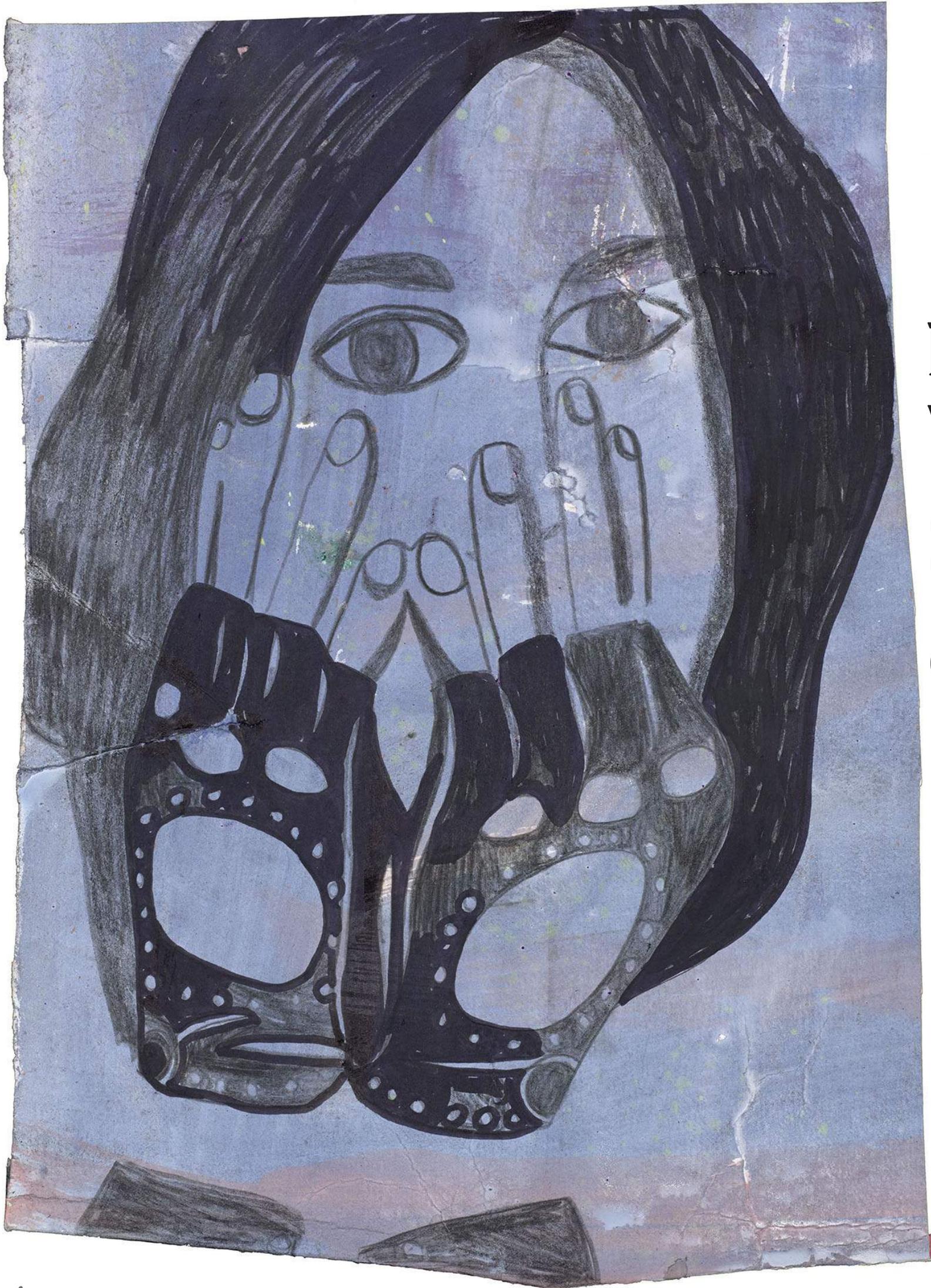


BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE FEBRUARY 2015

Field Notes from **Ayotzinapa**



On Virgil Thomson
COIL Festival

Interviews: Tal R, An-My Lê, Yael Bartana, and Sarah Lewis

1933 CARL GUSTAVE JUNG STAMATA STAMOS 1922
 MODERN MAN IN SEARCH OF A SOUL LOWER EAST SIDE RUPTURED SPLEEN
 SIGMUND FREUD HAT CLEANING
 THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL
 MAX ERNST JOAN MIRO AMERICAN ARTISTS SCHOOL
 WILLIAM BAZIOTES MARK ROTHKO ART STUDENTS LEAGUE
 PRIMITIVE ART 1955 BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE
 CLEMENT GREENBERG THE IDEOGRAPHIC PICTURE CLYFFORD STILL
 HERBERT READ
 AMERICAN-TYPE PAINTING
 PARTISAN REVIEW BEN ZION 1951 1961 LAWRENCE ALLOWAY
 JOE SOLMAN THE TEN BETTY PARSONS MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
 ART NEWS PROVINCETOWN
 MATTA 1956 POSSIBILITIES 1 DOROTHY MILLER
 THE NATION NEW REPUBLIC MANNY FARBER WHITNEY MUSEUM
 ART OF THIS CENTURY JACKSON POLLOCK
 NEW YORK 1947 ANCESTRAL WORSHIP 1967 STANLEY KUNITZ
 SIDNEY JANIS MYTH MAKERS EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY
 ANDRE EMMERICH DORE ASHTON HAROLD ROSENBERG DYLAN THOMAS

RE-IRASCIBLES

THEODOROS STAMOS

JOHN ZINSSER

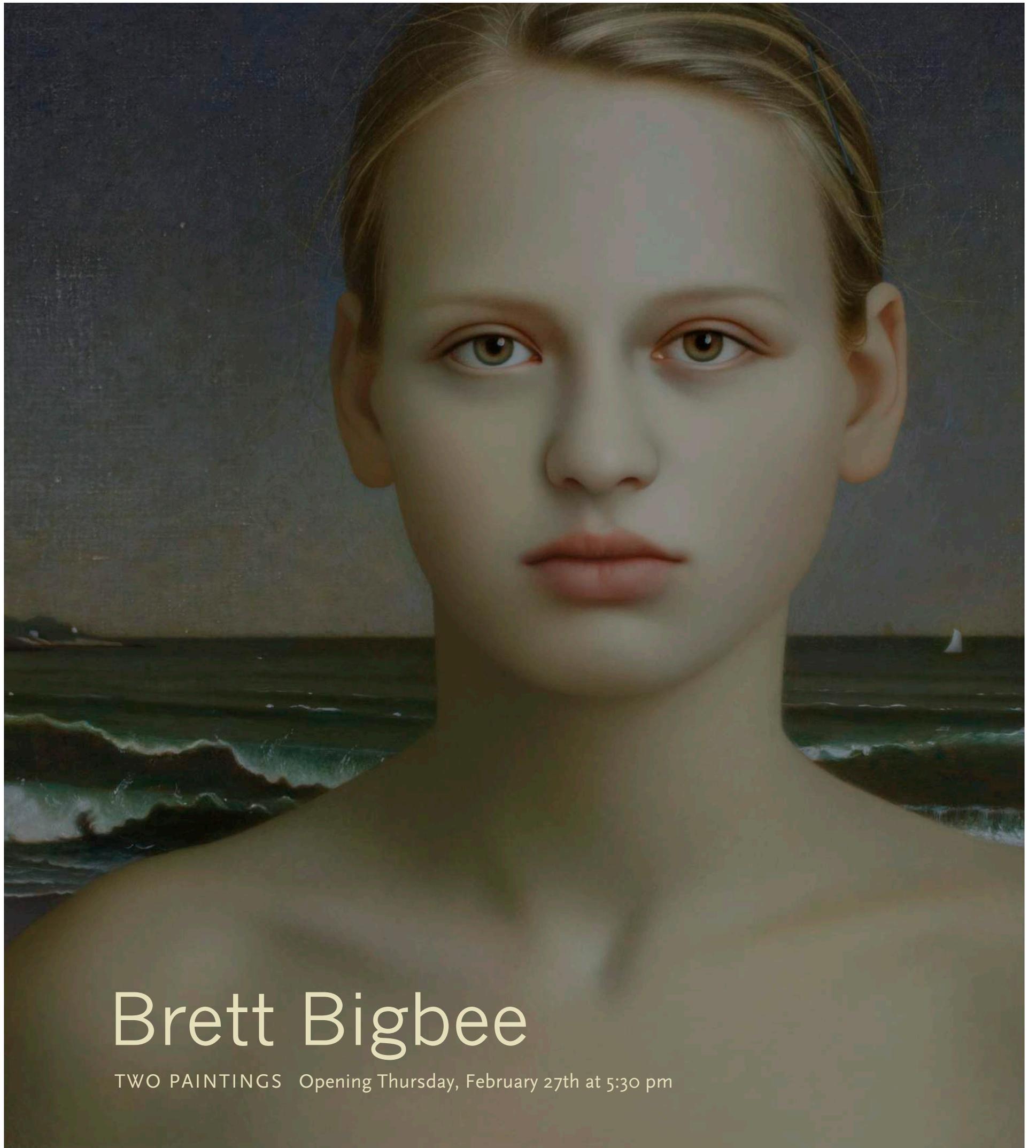
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Josie Over Time, 2011–15, oil on linen, 13 3/8 x 12 1/8 inches

Dear Friends and Readers,

Tied to a tree
together
one barking
The other has a bad ear
Squeals
at him

—Aram Saroyan

Having kept up with the insightful articles that appeared in our Field Notes section, as well as those in the *NY Times*, the *Nation*, and other news sources that cover social and political affairs around the world, I was deeply saddened, like most of us, by the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting on January 7, which quickly became the top news story, overshadowing the endless bombings in Baghdad; the Ebola crisis in West Africa; the missing AirAsia flight 8501; the ISIS hostage situation; and Winter Storm Fropa that took 16 lives in the Midwest, the Great Lakes, and the Northeast, among many other natural and human disasters. How is it that we can be subjected to steady and simultaneous streams of bad news and consumerist distraction? How can we still aspire to notions of freedom and justice while we are haunted by religious wars, ideological genocides, and other masochistic terrors which lurk right beneath the surface of our fears?

Having been brought up in a Vietnamese family where divided politics was always a source of conflict, especially after the Tet Offensive in 1968 in Vietnam, I was primed in my youth by the past of my old country: from the nearly 2,000 years of Chinese domination, 200 years of French colonization, and 25 years of war with the Americans, to the recent and ongoing disputes with the ancient adversary China over Vietnamese borders. Recent events are more fluid and symptomatic that we like to think—I mean the inevitable complexities that are tied to the mere differences that polarize Western emphasis on individualism and Eastern depersonalized systems of belief. Even though Nietzsche's concept of "will to power"—which once undermined a dominant Christian ethos—is now seamlessly integrated with both pragmatism and capitalism, the greatest resistance to it is based on a longing to restore a utopian dream associated with brotherhood. Religious conflicts are inevitable in our times.

Late last night, in between working on the *Rail's* editorial content and the portraits for the featured interviews in the Art section, I was pacing my racing thoughts (thanks to Jasper Johns for having concretized the term in his 1983 painting "Racing Thoughts") over the pages of William James's classic volume *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. What I found in the following words was quite revelatory:

The warring gods and formulas of the various religions do indeed cancel each other, but there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts:

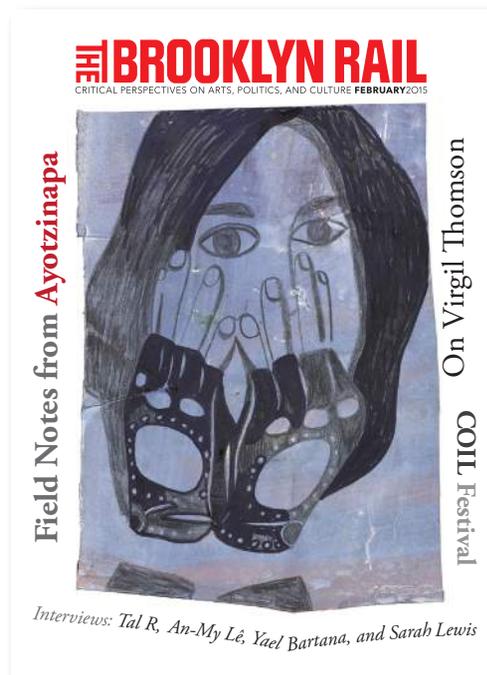
1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution.

1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we stand.
2. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.

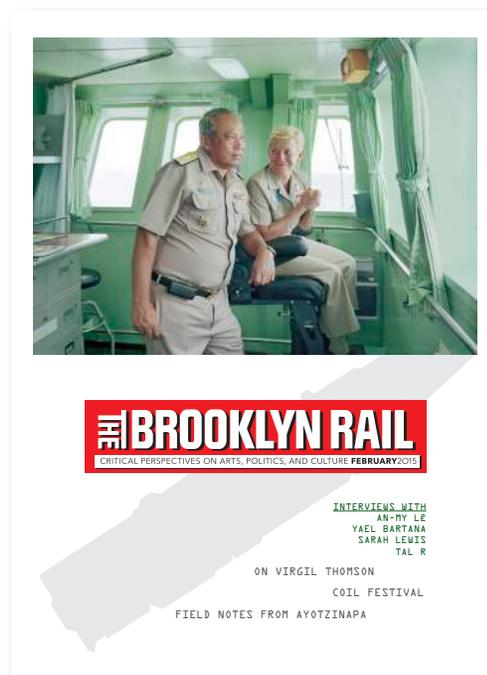
As life goes on we are urgently reminded how short is it before we all leave this earth. What is it that we all want to accomplish and what differences do we wish to make for the betterment of our culture before we die? At the *Rail*, we turn to the labor of love shared among creative individuals in the fields of the arts and the humanities, as well as sciences and other disciplines that are driven by inner necessity. However much all are guided by their particular notion of truth, they are constantly correcting themselves for the sake of greater unity. They're the masters of their works and rise above the fears of others. Their freedom can inspire others to be free.

All the updates about our forthcoming projects and publications will be sent out for your attention as soon as these coming weeks in February. Thanks for your support and compassion.

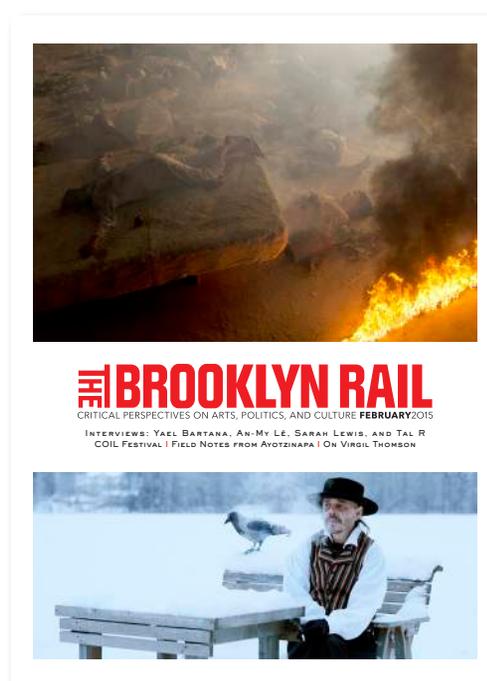
In solidarity as always,
Phong



TAL R
"m" 2014. Crayon, pigment, and rabbit skin glue on painted paper. 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ ".
Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.



AN-MY LÊ
"Thai and U.S. Navy Admiral, HTMS Chakri Naruebet, Gulf of Thailand," 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.



Yael BARTANA
(Top) Still from *Inferno*, 2013. Alexa camera transferred onto HD, 22 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.
(Bottom) Still from *True Finn*, 2014. HD, 50 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.

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Martin Hartley, "Route Finder, Adventure Ecology Trans-Arctic Expedition," 2004.

in conversation

Sarah Lewis WITH PHONG BUI

I should confess that it has been a long time since I last read a book of this compelling nature about human failure, about the journey that some of us embark upon, about the search for mastery which is driven from within, and lies among other creative impulses that dictate how we live our lives, in spite of the risks of being misunderstood and underestimated. In reading Sarah Lewis's *The Rise* I was at once reminded of how deeply appreciative I am of having read Freud, Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz, Karen Horney, Erik H. Erikson, Sir Anthony Storr, even Paul Tillich, among others. In Lewis's use of accessible yet uncompromised language, all the concerns of what elevates human spirit seem to coalesce into one unified geography of human courage that offers dignity to those who seek to understand the power and limitations of visions. Just before the publication of the paperback edition of *The Rise* from Simon & Schuster, the writer/critic/curator paid a visit to the Rail HQ in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to talk about her book with *Rail* publisher Phong Bui.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): In reading the book I was compelled to think through several issues concerning the unpredictable nature of how an ordinary person becomes someone remarkable, how in his or her early formation a specific experience, whether bad or good—an epiphany of joyous realization in response to a particular incident, or the opposite, a scar that is left for life and whatnot—would intensely inform the mature phase or outcome of his or her life. Somehow some were fortunate enough, despite their hardship, to have one person in their family that offered them encouragement early on, which gave them a sense of confidence that prepared them for a lifelong search of an unattainable goal, whatever that goal may be. For those not as fortunate to have that someone in their family, they must find a mentor from the outside world to foster what it is that their lives are about. It seems that person was your maternal grandfather.

SARAH LEWIS: Shadrach Emmanuel Lee.

RAIL: Who was a jazz musician, and in order to support his love for music and his family he had to work at night as a janitor, and as a sign painter on the weekend. You wrote that his dream was shaped by hardship. When did you realize your admiration for him?

LEWIS: The question of how an ordinary person becomes someone remarkable is precisely the reason that I not only wrote the book, but decided to reference my grandfather in the first essay, "Archer's Paradox." I noticed when I was very young that there was a paradox he had to wrestle with, the different lives he had lived and how difficult they all were. I remember he was telling me that in the 11th grade he was expelled from high school for asking where African Americans were in history books. The teacher told him that African Americans had done nothing to merit inclusion, so stop asking. He was expelled. His pride was so wounded that he never went back. That difficult circumstance created a fire in him that launched his career as an artist. It just occurred to me that we often don't discuss this paradox enough in our everyday discourse. The book therefore is part of my fascination with this kind of journey. I examined a selection of inventors, explorers, scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, anyone who's blazed a new path; it seems that they often had this paradox as part of their stories.

RAIL: Knowing that what you love in life would allow you to suffer with clarity.

LEWIS: Exactly. Sometimes you have to suffer before you get to realize what you really want to do in life. Because of that desire you may be given strength to get to a place of bliss, full of paradoxes and adversaries, yet you don't think of them as burdens.

RAIL: And once you accept it you would not feel frightened or surprised by any form of challenge in life.

LEWIS: Yes. I also think that how we respond to circumstances is our choice. There are limitations to that idea, of course, but by and large I think in the case of my grandfather, he lived out that principle, which enabled him to find solace and fulfill his life as an artist, a musician. I was 10 when I remember wanting to become an artist because of him. I would sit at his knee and paint with him and learn how to draw the figure from him down at his home in Virginia whenever my family came to visit. In his will, he bequeathed to me a stack of drawing paper that was yellowing at the edges, a few boxes of hardened cray-pas, pencil, ink, and other art supplies because he knew that was our connection. So in college at Harvard, I actually thought I wanted to be a painter, but I decided to change course and support and examine the creative lives of others as a curator, as an author. Nevertheless, his model

remained instructive and helped me to rethink every circumstance I went through to find something from it that could spark, ignite a passion in me that might not have been there otherwise.

RAIL: You also mentioned that you were being underestimated.

LEWIS: It wasn't one particular circumstance. It's simply the assumption people may have about me when they see me, a young looking, African American petite woman, say in a coffee shop. The likelihood that they will assume that I went to Harvard and Oxford and Yale, curated at MoMA, and so on, and am now a fellow at Harvard, is miniscule. One percent. That's what I mean. That's underestimation, to be regarded, gazed upon, and not perceived to be who you actually are. It is the experience of millions of others who don't fit a given expected model for the package that people consider excellence, all the way up to President Obama. The question is what do you do with that narrow convention?

RAIL: Well, one way of addressing that feeling of underestimation is what Ben Saunders, the legendary explorer did—I mean he framed his report card from when he was 13 above his desk at home that reads, “Ben lacks sufficient impetus to achieve anything worthwhile.”

LEWIS: That's it, yes. What did that do for him? Ben became the first person in the world to trek to the North Pole and back, solo and on foot, South Pole and back, solo and on foot. What shifted in Ben when he saw that report card? That is the same question I asked myself when I saw Dr. Martin Luther King received Cs on his report card in an oratory class in seminary and then went on to awaken our nation with the power of his spoken truth.

RAIL: Not to mention his speech impediment.

LEWIS: Right. We don't usually associate such an impediment, a failing of that degree, with Dr. King. But he did manage to overcome his tic—a speech hiccup. As he told his friend Harry Belafonte, “Once I'd made my peace with death, I could make my peace with all else.” I think that we rob ourselves of the guidepost that we need to understand the true nature of becoming by not acknowledging the challenges people go through. It's the fuller nature of becoming that leads to the journeys of endurance.

RAIL: Which is what ambitious people desire. At any rate, what prompted you to select archery as an art, as an activity, an action, in order to get to the notion and context of mastery?

LEWIS: I chose archery because I was fascinated by the endless process of hitting a target not just once but again and again, and also its relative obscurity compared to other athletic activities. It's like being an artist—there is always the potential for obscurity throughout your lifetime. I felt that archery would be vivid enough for readers who might not understand the art world enough to know what it's like to be in an art studio making works, day in and day out, that may not bring any immediate public reward. Not to mention the solitude that is constantly required for the pursuit. In archery, there is this idea that once you get proficient and can hit the 10 ring, eventually if you stop focusing on process you can lose your technique, and eventually your arrows will just start landing in the parking lot instead of hitting the target. And once that happens it really muddles with an archer's psychology, so she or he must just wrap up, recompose, and do it all over again. What I realized I was watching in archery is the distinction between success and mastery. Success is just an event, it's just hitting that 9 or 10 ring once, but it would've meant nothing if they couldn't do it again and again and again, and what does that require? I

realized that it required caring about this near win, it required caring about that gap between having hit a 7 but knowing you're an archer who really can hit a 10. Watching them reframe their perceptions of themselves in front of me was incredible. I saw the techniques that they use, how they would pace, lie down on the ground to meditate, figure out how they can let go of their previous failure, and move on, and line up to shoot without anyone giving them any acclaim or glory.

RAIL: It's certainly not a spectacle sport like basketball, football, or tennis, for example.

LEWIS: Exactly! In fact, few can even watch an archery practice because it's so dangerous. These arrows are flying at 150 miles an hour, and the targets are about 75 yards away, so they have to practice in complete isolation.

RAIL: It reminded me of a story told by Joseph Campbell on Buddhism, part of a five lecture series, called *The Eastern Way*, about a samurai whose overlord was murdered by another samurai from a rival clan. His life onward was nothing else but to avenge his overlord's death. He spent years and years looking for revenge. He finally tracked down his enemy, had a duel with him, won the duel, and with his sword right in front of the enemy's throat and his body against the wall, he was just about to kill him. In an act of desperation the other samurai spit on him, and you know what he did? He put his sword down and walked away. Why did he walk away? Because he was angry. His initial aim was just centering on the act of vengeance as though it was a technical execution, nothing else. Being angry took him away from that focus, so he had to walk away.

LEWIS: Thanks for bringing up Joseph Campbell because I was deeply impacted by *The Power of Myth*, and how he reminds us that mythology is about archetypes that help us, that guide us through our eternal journeys. To me archery embodies so much of what it means to actually aim at something that's in our sights, regardless of what it is—writing a book, creating a life as a painter, or whatever—accounting for all the things that might knock you off course, and then picking yourself up and doing it all over again.

RAIL: Which brings up the most difficult action or activity—to surrender. You start with Toni Morrison's line, “If you surrender to the wind you can ride it,” which seems to be—

LEWIS: The hardest thing I've ever done in writing.

RAIL: Tell us more, Sarah.

LEWIS: This idea of surrender, which is beautifully described in the samurai story too, is at the heart of “Arctic Summer,” a chapter that begins with Toni Morrison's epigraph. Surrender is not about giving up, but giving over to something far larger and letting that power move you forward. Now, when I say much larger, I don't mean it necessarily in a religious or spiritual sense. I mean Ben is out in the Arctic, which is not a stable continent; under his feet are floating ice sheets. He can trek in sub-50-degree temperatures for an entire day with a 200-pound sled on his back, sleep that night, and erase his gains from the day by the act of sleeping—drifting away from his goal. He's also faced with not having anyone to speak to—the Arctic is the size of the United States, but completely depopulated. The psychological isolation just made me wonder what kind of fortitude you have to have to do this. And it occurred to me, this is why surrender is so important. It had nothing to do with physical training, or brute strength; it rather had to do with a kind of psychological flexibility that was about letting go of what you couldn't control, such that you could harness all the internal resources you need to go forward, and that's what Ben did.



Portrait of Sarah Lewis. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

RAIL: The concept of surrender, as you had pointed out, is tied to Nietzsche's term *amor fati*, to love your fate, and reminds me of a few lines from a beautiful poem by Rilke, “The Man Watching”: “What we choose to fight is so tiny! / What fights with us is so great. / If only we let ourselves be dominated / as things do by some immense storm, / we too would be strong, and not need names.”

LEWIS: That's it. Ben let himself be dominated and it allowed him to endure on his epic journey, which is also at the heart of the martial art of Aikido. Bruce Lee called it the most perfect martial art because it is the art of learning how to surrender to, and not resist an incoming force but redirect it—the energy—to the ground. The main idea is that when you stop resisting something you stop giving it power. So letting yourself be dominated, finding a way to be a vessel to contain and then to release what doesn't serve you is at the heart of what surrender is about. I really enjoyed the interviews with the Aikidoists in particular, because they were helpful in learning ways that we can surrender in our daily lives. Not everyone is going to the Arctic.

RAIL: That's good to remember. I also remember, in a lost interview from 1971 (on the Pierre Berton show) Bruce Lee was saying, “Be like water my friend. If you pour water into a cup, it becomes a cup.”

LEWIS: He remains absolutely amazing. It's also the analogy that Wendy Palmer, the American Aikidoist, taught me. She said, “Well, hold two glass cups and one contains water and one doesn't. Grip them both tight with the same pressure, and see if you can tell any difference in their relative weight.” You can't. But she said, “Now make sure the table's underneath the cups and let them go.” Then you can tell the difference. This is what surrender is about, it's about letting us retain the resources we need to discern what to do next.

RAIL: Does surrender relate at all to someone who is referred to as the so-called deliberate amateur?

LEWIS: The deliberate amateur is a term I coined to consider what the road of mastery also requires, like a relinquishing expertise, and letting yourself surrender to a state of being we all were once in, being a child, being in a place of wonder. So yes, it is an act of surrender, especially among us adults. The

chapter about deliberate amateurs actually centers on the story of two Nobel Prize winners, Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov, who I interviewed about two years ago. They employ a brilliant practice of bracketing their time in the laboratory so that they can surrender, ultimately, by asking questions that their expertise and their pride wouldn't allow them to otherwise.

RAIL: You mean like children asking simple questions when they're at play!

LEWIS: Yes. In fact, Geim's initial experiment was with diamagnetic force, which resulted in levitating a frog that earned him an Ig Nobel Prize. It went on and on—gecko tape being used as a prototype for the best cleaning agent. And eventually they asked: Well, if carbon is the material that people are using to try to isolate a two-dimensional object, why not just use scotch tape? And, of course, that was the thinnest recorded attempt—just the wastebins scotch tape and carbon from another experiment. But they had to surrender to these seemingly foolish questions that we all have within us that often contain the first step on a potentially path-breaking journey, that we deprive ourselves of by simply not asking. So, what I love about the deliberate amateur is the idea of surrender as it relates to these scientists is that they're offering us a kind of structure to use to get around the feelings of being too embarrassed to surrender in professional contexts where we feel like we will be made fun of for asking a question like the ones that they did.

RAIL: I certainly can relate to Geim's perspective, "Better to be wrong than to be boring."

LEWIS: He also said, "I don't research: I only search."

RAIL: I am also interested in another of your remarks, "To transform from failure, you first have to let yourself feel badly about it."

LEWIS: Right. This is something that I experienced, and then a psychologist, Abigail Lipson who leads Harvard's Success-Failure Project encouraged me to put the idea in the book. The idea is that, in order to benefit from a difficult circumstance—a failure, setback, or learning experience—you have to let yourself actually feel it. You can't just wish it away and then expect to find the lesson. The idea of failure is a very internal condition: it is the gap between where you are and where you want to go. The greater it is the more it feels like a chasm, the more you feel like you have fallen into a valley, the more it might be, in your mind, a failure. What Abigail was encouraging me to make clear is what pain management specialists understand: that in order to actually move out of a certain circumstance, you have to stop resisting it, which gives it more energy physically, and let it be.

RAIL: This of course relates to each person's ability to mediate criticism and pressure. I was blown away by Louis Horst's review of Paul Taylor's *7 New Dances*, which was nothing but a blank page, except for the name of the dance company, date, and place. That was it!

LEWIS: Yes, Bill T. Jones told me about the story when I was working on the book. In 1957, Paul Taylor was trying to define his now signature style of severe minimalism. He was working countless jobs to support himself, living in a loft that feels like it's winter when it is winter outside, and coping with all sorts of New York infestations. Enduring extreme circumstances for the love of his craft. So Paul Taylor and the dance company that he created at that point debuted their *7 New Dances* at the Kaufmann Center at the 92nd Street Y. In the first 10 minutes of the performance people start flooding out. The only people left were his stalwart friends and the reviewer was forced to decide: okay, if austere minimalism is going to qualify as dance and you're just going to

stand there, my review—this is Horst thinking—is going to be austere too: I'm simply not going to write. The metaphor of a blank review, I think, summarizes the paradox of what it means to create in the face of critique. Anyone who creates in public has to learn to blanket some critiques, not listen to them, ignore them for a time, and then learn to take some of that critique, as if giving oneself a blank slate to begin anew. I really devised that chapter to look at that nimble dance that artists have to embark upon themselves, to toggle between those two states of being. And that's what Paul Taylor had to do. He was of course scandalized and horrified when he saw the blank review, but then you look at a piece like *Aureole*, which premiered at Lincoln Center a few years later, in 1962, it had so many of the central elements that were panned through the blank review. So the chapter is really dealing with how he dealt with that paradox to crystallize his now celebrated style.

Paul Taylor and Dance Company

Y.M.-Y.W.H.A.
October 20, 1957

L. H.

Louis Horst, "Paul Taylor and Dance Company Review," *Dance Observer* 24.9 (November 1957), 139.

RAIL: I also admire what Leonard Bernstein said, "To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan and not quite enough time." How can we convey that art has its own timing, which Hannah Arendt articulated most brilliantly in the difference between work and labor in her timeless volume *The Human Condition*. Work has a beginning and an end whereas with labor, it is perpetually continuous. It doesn't matter whether a work of art takes more than two years to finish like Willem de Kooning's "Woman, I" or Jackson Pollock making a painting in one day. You simply can't put value on it in terms of time in relation to labor.

LEWIS: No, you can't because labor is about becoming and work is about manufacture. They're two different things entirely. The paradox, the riddle of labor is much in the riddle of what it actually means to be in labor. You have to discern when something is ready. It's very much connected to you the entire time, you can't just be pregnant for a minute.

RAIL: It's as though each second, minute should be filled with some useful thoughts or action like how Umberto Eco standing in the elevator, thinking, was writing an article in his head.

LEWIS: We all have these empty spaces on a daily basis, whether we fill them consciously or unconsciously, but when we empty them, much of this is getting into meditation and what it means to empty the mind, but when you empty it enough to be a space that you can work with, then you can really work productively. Essentially the process of filling the space and emptying it out has to be a continuous mediation.

RAIL: Have you ever experienced your empty space being filled with all the things that you do not want to do?

LEWIS: I grew up an only child so I spent a lot of time in my own head as a young person, so I did notice the monkey-mind phenomenon. Eventually, I realized that there's a voice, a narrative in there: a construction of me, but not really me. Then I began to fill it with all the things that I had strong desire to do, and the narratives that were more productive for me.

RAIL: I'd like to bring up the potential union of the arts—art and science. Of course, Samuel F. B. Morse was a great example.

LEWIS: Yes. I wouldn't have known about Samuel Morse's journey from being an aspirant painter for 26 years to being the inventor of the telegraph, using the stretcher bars of a failed painting as the first telegraph model, if not for being trained as an Americanist art historian. I did my Ph.D. at Yale under Alexander Nemerov and Robert Farris Thompson, and I was surprised to see these paintings by Morse when I studied for my oral exams. Again, to the larger point, I wanted to make sure that we were looking at the full life stories of the people who we just celebrate to no end because we are often omitting pieces that are central to how they actually arrived there. Samuel Morse didn't just want to be a painter; he wanted to rival Titian, Raphael, and Rembrandt. He gave it everything he had. He looked at the life of Pope Gregory and others, he would write back to his brother and family and say, I now think I understand how I can overcome the debilitating force of critique of my own work, as he's being critiqued by Washington Allston when he went to Europe for training and by Benjamin West, these titanic figures. He became the first professor of painting at NYU, had a studio in Washington Square, and eventually surrendered. And this gets us to the union of art and science. He surrendered to the fact that invention with paint and wires was, in his mind, one and the same, which was more common in the 19th century than it is now. But for sure the fortitude that it took to receive a patent from Congress for the telegraph model, which is really the foundation of the communications revolution, was born through his ability to endure critique for his work as a painter.

RAIL: And that ability to endure critique was tied to his desire to achieve great things in life. I was especially taken by Angela Duckworth's father when she asked him what he wanted from life. He said, "I want to be successful. I want to be accomplished."

LEWIS: That's right! Then she went further, "Well, no," she told her father, "what you really mean is that you want to be happy, and being accomplished is what makes you happy." And he said, "No, what I mean is that I want to be accomplished. I don't care if I end up happy or not."

RAIL: Some folks I know would take it quite similar to Albert Camus's existential crisis between Sisyphean condition and suicide. It's quite fatalistic!

LEWIS: Well, not in her case. In her landmark study of grit, for which she was awarded the MacArthur, she said, "How can this not be dysfunctional persistence? What is the dark side of grit?" I really went to her to understand how it can *not* be so dark, how we can pivot like Samuel Morse, as an analogy, who eventually realized that painting wasn't going to be what he had in mind to give the world. His invention shows us the relationship between play and grit, how grit can be supple, and how that's expressed as a form of nimbleness and discernment.

RAIL: And how that leads to the chrysalis nature of becoming is impossible to describe. How Abraham Lincoln, for instance, in seeing Carlton Watkins's

There is a power to the arts that we often deny, and it's important as we consider what a life of service is about. We often forget that the arts can allow us to have a contributory life because they ignite these inner shifts that have led to some of our most impactful social movements.

photographs of Yosemite Valley's granite cliffs, was inspired by the natural beauty that resulted in the signing of legislation in 1864.

LEWIS: Which led to the founding of the National Park Service. I couldn't believe when I found that reference. We're often inspired by these moments of aesthetic force, which is a catalyst for some of the profound changes in our lives, more than we would admit, when we surrender ourselves to the power of the beauty of nature or a work of art that may evoke some deeper sources within ourselves. This is why I wrote what Aristotle said, "Reason alone is not enough to make men good," or women good, it's whatever frees you from the relative reality around you, be it music, as it happened to Charles Black, who heard the genius coming out of Louis Armstrong's horn in 1931 when he was just a freshman in college; he knew immediately that segregation must be wrong. This of course led to his prominent role as a lawyer in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954.

RAIL: That's really not that different from your grandfather, asking why African Americans are not in the history book.

LEWIS: You're right. And that's why I loved that my grandfather chose the arts as a way to express what had been denied to him as a form of education—seeing

the full embrace of American life. He chose the arts because, I believe, he knew and anticipated, by playing bass often as a backup for Count Basie and Duke Ellington, that the arts could impact us with a unique force. There is a power to the arts that we often deny, and it's important as we consider what a life of service is about. We often forget that the arts can allow us to have a contributory life because they ignite these inner shifts that have led to some of our most impactful social movements.

RAIL: And in order to appreciate the relationship between life and the arts we all should embrace the notion of imperfection. It's similar to the example of the Navajo craftsmen and women, as you had pointed out, who welcome imperfection as a given condition to endow their textiles and ceramics with an irregular appearance.

LEWIS: Yes, so it would give them something to strive for the next time. Michelangelo stated it best in this succinct prayer, "Lord, grant that I always desire more than I can accomplish." Meaning let the work be imperfect enough to keep me striving for something more. This brings us back to caring about those near wins that the archers focused on, between hitting a 7 and hitting a 10. When we have nothing to strive for we don't endure, we don't have the catalytic force

that moves a journey onward. So, imperfection and deliberate imperfection are a part of this equation. Actually, I recently came across this practice in Japan called "Kintsukuroi." It means, "To repair with gold." It's the art of repairing a bowl or a cup with gold and silver lacquer, with an understanding it is even more beautiful for having been broken.

RAIL: It's similar to a haiku poem by Mizuta Masahide, "My barn having burned down / I can now see the moon." It's poignant and beautiful. What's your next book about?

LEWIS: It's actually looking at, as I wrote about in *The Rise* a bit, how Frederick Douglass had recognized the importance or the impact of aesthetic force that compelled him to imagine the larger vision of the world. I'm excited about it.

RAIL: Would it be fair to say that your understanding has roots in the time when you made the decision not to be an artist, but to write and advocate the importance of the arts; this seems to be a natural evolution to what you have written in *The Rise*?

LEWIS: Yes. I'd say that I'm glad that I made that decision, because we all want to contribute to our communities. There's so much we can do for the betterment of culture. I'm just trying to do my part. 

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An-My Lê, "29 Palms: Night Operations III," 2003-04. Images courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

in conversation An-My Lê with Sara Christoph

Living through the Vietnam War as a child and immigrating to the United States as a teenager, An-My Lê's life has been indelibly marked by international conflict. For over two decades, her work as a photographer has engaged the unseen facets within the theater of war. With her large-format camera in tow, she has immersed herself in the Appalachian forest with Vietnam War reenactors, and traveled aboard U.S. aircraft carriers around the globe. Lê identifies as a landscape photographer, a perspective that grounds her subtle, impactful images of American interventionism within a larger history of violence. After her second book, *Events Ashore*, was published by Aperture in late 2014, Lê met *Rail* managing director Sara Christoph in her Brooklyn studio to discuss the many incarnations of military force, and the fictions inherent in them all.

SARA CHRISTOPH (RAIL): The current blockbuster *American Sniper*, which deals with the same subject matter as your own work, might be a good place for us to begin. The success of these types of movies fascinates me, though it is not surprising, given the way the films tend to mythologize the soldier's experience in a one-dimensional way. As someone who has spent years carefully parsing the nuances of what it means to live through or participate in a war, what was your reaction to the film?

AN-MY LÊ: You know, I rarely have time to go to the movies, but I did see *American Sniper*. I also saw Rory Kennedy's *Last Days in Vietnam*. I should have seen it months ago. I think I had P.T.S.D. afterwards. I was very happy to see *American Sniper*, because I am always fascinated with this subject, but I was disappointed. It was kind of a great story—

RAIL: Just the feat of his accomplishments, leaving aside the moral issues.

LÊ: Yes, the feat of it. The stress, the focus, the psychology of the mission and how it affected him—all of that really interests me more than anything else. But you're right, it is very one-dimensional. Some filmmakers, like Kathryn Bigelow and her film *Zero*

Dark Thirty, are interested in portraying something that is three-dimensional. She's an artist, and hers is a fictional account. And there is something about working within that fiction that allows for a satisfying and challenging description. I don't think Clint Eastwood did that, even though he can be a great filmmaker. I'm not sure why. Perhaps he got so caught up in wanting to pay tribute to Chris Kyle as a veteran. And of course that is important. It is a responsibility.

RAIL: Specifically because of the way Kyle's story ends, being killed by a fellow vet. There's an added responsibility to an individual's legacy.

LÊ: The topic of the military raises questions in ways that other topics would not. There are photographers who have dealt with extreme poverty, or who have photographed horrific labor conditions, and they are not held accountable in the same way. They aren't asked: what do you think of poverty? But the question of the military is so complicated that it riles up people's opinions. And when your work is about the military, people want to know: are you for or are you against it? Maybe *American Sniper* was too caught up in having a straightforward message.

RAIL: When dealing with such a contentious topic, how do you, in your own work, avoid the polemical? I'm sure people ask you all the time: is this a critique of the military, or are you glorifying their power? In our culture of red states and blue states, you almost always have to fall on one side or the other.

LÊ: Absolutely. I think artists deal with something messy, and they keep it messy. Which is frustrating for people, especially when it comes to topics in which everyone has an opinion. I think we do move the conversation forward, but I also like to keep it messy. It is not a math problem. In a way, we should approach these topics in the way one would write an essay. There's no perfect answer, but at least you throw in some questions and ideas to start the discussion. I feel that is what I try to do.

RAIL: When I look at your photographs, they feel very open. I don't see a polemical stance, or a specific message. Although they depict a very particular outside world in great detail—and often from a great distance—it feels as if the photographs give the viewer a space for contemplation, even introspection. Without any political rhetoric, we can think about our own relationship—complicated or not—to the

American military and its presence around the world. So many other depictions of the military don't allow for this space of ambiguity.

LÊ: First and foremost, I'm interested in being there and witnessing something. I use whatever tools I have. Whether it is stepping into a scene and the picture is perfect, or whether it is moving things around and redirecting people—I have no scruples about how I do it. It is about being there and processing it into a picture that makes sense. I want to make a picture that is challenging, layered, evocative, and surprising.

RAIL: It's interesting that you, and many other photographers I'm sure, use the phrase *make* a picture, instead of the typical phrase, *take* a picture. To take a picture denotes a quick, snapshot aesthetic, whereas *make* functions as a nod to the long process, both before and after.

LÊ: I do use the phrase "to take a picture," but I think my work involves labor. It is a certain reworking of what you see and of the facts, in order to create this new fiction. It is certainly a making, a transformation.

RAIL: How do you navigate the decision of when to step back and snap the picture, and when to intervene? I'm thinking specifically of your project *Small Wars* (1999 – 2002), and the many difficulties you faced working deep in the Virginia forest with men reenacting the Vietnam War—people who may or may not have wanted to cooperate with your vision.

LÊ: That issue definitely came up when I worked with the reenactors. I would come down for the weekend, and I would try to ingratiate myself with them. And often, I felt they weren't giving me the focus I needed. I was so frustrated! Around the same time, Jeff Wall came to Bard, where I have been teaching for years. We all went out to dinner, and he asked me what I was working on, so I shared a little of my frustrations. He said: you should pay them! Just hire them! [Laughter.]

I thought a lot about that choice. Ultimately I decided that I really wanted to touch on the specificity of reenactment culture, and so there *should* be a kind of disjunction between myself and them. They should look a little uncomfortable, they shouldn't look like flowers in the forest.

People always say that it is so bizarre how these men reenact the Vietnam War, and go to so much trouble to do so! But then, you think about Steven Spielberg or even Kathryn Bigelow, and in a way, their work is a kind of reenactment pushed to the extreme. And no one has any issues with that! Just because it is a movie and there are millions of dollars involved, it is entertainment. And then you look to the military. All the training, practice drills, etc. They use the same language of reenactment. "Today, our scenario is..."

RAIL: This leads to your series *29 Palms* (2003–04), for which you photographed a training facility in the California desert where the Marine Corps sends new recruits before their deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq. That project came about because you applied to be an embedded photographer, and that didn't work out?

LÊ: Yes. The day the war started I was extremely distraught. I thought about all the consequences of war, the young men and women shipping out and the effect it would have on them, their families, and their communities. I was still trying to deal with what happened to me three decades ago in Vietnam. Now a new set of young people were being sent abroad and given a complicated history they are going to have to deal with for the rest of their lives. I tried to make some pictures that day, but I just couldn't find anything. If I were a different kind of photographer, I would have gone back to the studio and come up with something. But I want to see things for myself; I want

to be there. So my first impulse was to become an embed. I got on the waitlist, but most photographers and journalists were already in Kuwait, waiting for the invasion. When I saw photographs of the marines training in the high desert near Joshua Tree National Park, I got impatient. I decided to just go to California.

RAIL: I wonder what kind of pictures you would have made had you been embedded? To be entrenched in rapid-action combat seems almost antithetical to your aesthetic.

LÊ: I certainly would have made a different kind of picture. I would have tried to use a view camera to describe things. I still think in another life, I would have become a combat photographer.

RAIL: Are there specific combat photographers whose work you admire?

LÊ: I'm always drawn to Tyler Hicks's photographs in the *NY Times*. Going back in history, Larry Burrows, Robert Capa, all those guys were really amazing. I've looked at the work of North Vietnamese combat photographers as well. It seemed that they were interested in the landscape much more so than American photographers. I think American photographers became interested in the individual story, especially when the drive was to show what the war was really like, to explain the cost to the American public. The horror of it. The North Vietnamese photographers seemed to include the context, and I'm always more interested in something happening in the landscape. I think it gives perspective.

RAIL: This may be an overgeneralization, but it seems that Americans of my generation aren't so connected to the land in a historical way, certainly not in a way that is intrinsic to our identity. The whole notion of the American Dream is built upon the triumph of the individual *over* the landscape. The privilege of individualism. Perhaps that is partly why in the American perspective, the landscape becomes a secondary character, specifically when deciding how to tell a story within a single picture.

LÊ: Since we are talking about this relationship as a cultural experience, what is your relationship to the landscape?

RAIL: Before moving to New York, I lived in California for a while, and so I had the opportunity to drive cross-country. What was so remarkable to me was the transformation of the landscape. Growing up in Virginia by the ocean, I was familiar with flatness. There was no height or depth to the land, just a large, unknowable expanse of water. The American West existed only as an idea.

LÊ: And so when you experienced it, how did it make you feel?

RAIL: At that moment in my life, it really represented a sense of possibility. Making that journey, not only do you witness drastic shifts in altitude, color, and climate, you see how the landscape so thoroughly influences the way people move through life. It shapes the culture of each place in very distinctive ways.

LÊ: For me, the landscape has always been the constant in my work. I work with scale as a way to give context to human endeavors, military endeavors, and the history of power. In the end, Vietnam has endured many battles and gone through so many changes. The Chinese invasion, the Japanese occupation, the colonialism of the French, the Indochina War, the Americans—the constancy was always the landscape. And people change, cultures change over time, but there is something about the land. Even as our world modernizes, there is a certain consistency, a certain authenticity.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

RAIL: The land as a record.

LÊ: Yes, and when I went back to Vietnam for the first time in the 1990s after we normalized relations—you know, it's funny that I say "we." After my whole *Vietnam* (1994 – 98) project, I actually felt much more American. But the colors, the air remains. You reconnect to the land in spite of the changes.

RAIL: This thread of the steadfast landscape continues in your recent body of work, *Events Ashore* (2005 – 14). The project took you around the world by way of numerous U. S. Navy aircraft carriers for a span of nine years. You photographed landings in Thailand, training camps in Ghana, scientific excursions in the Arctic, even relief missions in Haiti. Looking through the book, I couldn't help but think about the notion of the sublime so adored by the Romantics. Eighteenth-century writers like Edmund Burke were so interested in the sublime as a tension between the land, the ocean, and man. And yet, these same ideas could also be used to describe the U. S. military and its reign abroad: the force that both builds and destroys, the competition between powers, the terrifying beauty and vastness. Do you think about the sublime in making your work?

LÊ: I think at sea, it is always about some greater force. The forces of the weather, the sky, the wind, all these uncontrollable things, you really feel the greater force of nature. But at the same time, you are on this massive aircraft carrier that costs about one million dollars a day to run! You really see that tension between the natural world and the force of technology. I think for me, the sublime is always a tension of something that you can't quite control. It creates these emotions in you that are rare, and that make you aware.

RAIL: Some of the pictures in *Events Ashore* echo the work of landscape painters like Caspar David Friedrich or J.M.W. Turner, painters who were very much concerned with the ideas we're talking about. In your photographs, there is often a lone figure looking out onto the water, his or her back to us, presumably experiencing some form of contemplation. With everything you witnessed throughout your travels, did you ever have an experience, personally, that you might classify as "sublime?"

LÊ: Actually, *29 Palms* was the first extended period of time I spent in an unpopulated landscape. That was where I first started to think about this idea of the sublime. You see this extraordinary, open land, and you understand how insignificant we are.

The most powerful experience I had happened during a night exercise in the middle of the desert. It was completely dark, we were at least a two-hour drive from the camp, and then, the whole sky lit up. It was the most extraordinary fireworks I have ever seen—20 minutes of jets dropping bombs, howitzers firing, and tracers in the air. My assistant and I were the only ones outside unprotected, with our cameras! You start to think: do they have the right coordinates? [Laughter.]

You could feel the tremors in your heart. It was a rush of life power, but at the same time, it was devastating. The kind of destruction that this exercise entails, a destruction that is all our own doing. I was really torn between how to feel, and all the while, trying to be calm and think about the pictures!

RAIL: In *Events Ashore*, you also chose to show a counterpoint to this type of exercise in monumental force: you include portraiture. The portraits stand out as moments of a single individual set against,



An-My Lê, "Small Wars, Ambush I," 1999–2002. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.



An-My Lê, "29 Palms: Mechanized Assault," 2003–04. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.



An-My Lê, "Ship Security, Earthquake Relief, Naval Hospital, USNS Comfort, Haiti," 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

or within, the monumentality of the entire military machine. Is it accurate to say this is a new turn in your work?

LÊ: Well, I think my strength is in the use of scale within the landscape. I do think of portraiture as involving scale as well, the individual within a context: within the machinery, within the military, within the culture, within a type. Working on *29 Palms*—it is not that I felt the work was especially distant—but I heard so many personal stories. People would often ask me, do you talk to these marines? Of course I talk to them! I was interested in telling their stories, yet I did not want to heroicize them.

I had been taking portraits for a long time, but they were never successful. I look up to August Sander, Diane Arbus, Judith Joy Ross—they are the real portraitists. At one point, I was alone onboard a Coast Guard icebreaker in the Arctic; it was summer and there was practically no ice. After about a week of photographing birds and scientific experiments, I thought, alright, portraits. I was determined to be productive, because of all the effort that it had taken to get there. I even borrowed a crew member's flash—and some of the portraits actually worked.

To me, the more interesting ones are the pictures of women. I really started to think about what women go through working on those ships, especially on aircraft carriers and submarines—places they weren't even allowed until fairly recently. How each woman navigates that world in her own way is fascinating to me. Some women found the perfectly fitted shirt that still showed off their curves and their eyebrows were perfectly plucked, while for others, you can see the grease under their fingernails and they are like "one of the guys." I wanted to understand how they perform their job while still trying to retain their individuality, their femininity. I'm interested in what one can do within a structure that is so rigid.

RAIL: The photograph of the female admiral is so memorable.

LÊ: That picture gave me a bit of grief. I couldn't decide between two versions: one in which she is smiling, and one in which she isn't. At one point, she was the highest operational female admiral in the Navy. How did you read her character?

RAIL: I understood her as confident and self-assured in a way that didn't require overcompensation. Unlike some of the pictures of men, her authority was clear without relying on boisterous gestures or macho body language. The picture felt very genuine to me. Of course, that's impossible for me to say because I don't know her.

LÊ: Right, but the whole point is that it *feels* genuine, like there's something there, something palpable. And what you say is so interesting: is it genuine or not genuine. That idea of fiction and blurring the line between—really, I think it is all fiction. Have you read any of Phil Klay's stories in *Redeployment* (2014)?

RAIL: No, I haven't worked up the courage yet.

LÊ: It is fiction, but it doesn't matter. You jump into it, it feels real, and you don't wonder: what is his responsibility? He has no responsibility. Still, there is something so evocative that comes from his stories. They make you think about real issues, and that is what matters. It is strange that in photography, that flexibility with fiction isn't as accepted.

RAIL: Going all the way back to the Greeks, they had so many stories that dealt with these issues of how to place the warrior clan within civilian society. The plays of Sophocles—*Ajax*, *Philoktetes*, even the *Women of Trakhis*—they all addressed the conflicts inherent in a culture that both relies upon and chastises the members of its military. And yes, of course these stories were fictional—they were performed



An-My Lê, "Line Shack Supervisor for EA-6B Prowler, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf," 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

on a stage—but that did not make them any less important as a way for the culture to understand, or even just talk about, the balance of force in a society.

Of course, photography is inherently different from the written or performed word. At the core of its origin was the idea of the photograph as a physical trace—a characteristic so hailed by one of its originators, Henry Fox Talbot. And so, the medium has always had to answer this plaguing question: Is it true?

LÊ: It's true, photography is a lame duck in a way. But I have deep faith in photography. Of course it is very limiting, but within those limitations a lot can be done. An expressive voice can emerge.

RAIL: Thinking about all these complications between the military and photography, what are your thoughts on the future of war photography? We see so much of it, our screens are filled with images of violence from Iraq and Syria, Egypt and the Congo, and yet, the pictures never seem to enter public consciousness the way they once did for the wars of previous generations. I just read a piece by Christopher Anderson in *The Photobook Review*, himself a Magnum photographer. He begins his review by stating that he really doesn't want to look at another picture from a war. For such a visual subject, and I'm paraphrasing, so little seems to come from war photography that means much of anything at all. Do you think there will come a point when war photography will become a genre of the past?

LÊ: Rather than whether or not there is a future for combat photography, I think one of the big differences now is the role of the civilian—the amateur photographer. Conflicts will always be newsworthy, someone will always need to be there to document. Now the technology is such that anyone can be there and take a quick picture, post it, and send it out to the world. In these pictures you don't look at the artistry anymore—if there is such a thing—it is just information.

War photographers were always placed on a pedestal. They put their lives at risk. Of course it is still very dangerous, but it also seems that now, there could just as easily be a civilian taking the picture. Maybe it is less a question of whether war photography will continue, and more a question of whether this idea of the heroic, self-sacrificing combat photographer will live on. ☹



An-My Lê, "Small Wars, GI," 1999–2002. Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.



Yael Bartana, Still from *True Finn*, 2014. HD 50 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.

in conversation Yael Bartana WITH SARA ROFFINO

Yael Bartana's current exhibition at Petzel Gallery presents two recent films: *True Finn* (2014) and *Inferno* (2013). The former, an examination of the possibilities and limitations of identity in Finland, takes its title from the English translation of Perussuomalaiset, the right-wing populist, nationalist political party which has been the largest Parliamentary opposition party in Finland since 2011. Bartana, who is Israeli and lives between Berlin, Amsterdam, and Tel Aviv, takes the recent completion of a replica of Solomon's Temple in São Paulo—built as the new home for the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, costing approximately \$300 million, and with space for 10,000 parishioners—as her point of departure for *Inferno*. Just before the exhibition opened to the public Bartana met with *Rail* managing editor Sara Roffino to discuss rising nationalism, utopic visions, and *Avinu Malkeinu*.

SARA ROFFINO (RAIL): Yesterday's tragedy in Paris was a really extreme example of what can happen as a result of something an artist makes and then puts out in the world. Your work, which deals very directly with nationalism, statehood, and political and social identity, often elicits strong reactions so I thought we could start by talking about risk. How do you think about risk in the sense of the risk of reaction, violent or not? And how do you think of it in the subtler but more permeable way that artists always risk their work being misunderstood?

Yael Bartana: Yeah, this is a very sad example of that risk. The reaction was outstanding of any proportion. It tells a lot about how much we do not and cannot consider—there is a huge gap between the thinking of radical Islam and the West.

I do put myself at risk with my work, but maybe because it's not in the mass media it's a bit safer. I very often receive quite strong negative reactions. With the trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007–11) I was a bit scared. Sometimes I would think: my god, maybe I will get assassinated for touching the flag or national flags, and maybe allowing myself too much. At the same time though I see the practice of art as the possibility for exactly that—to allow one person to dare more. People react in really unexpected ways. With *Inferno* people from the church saw the film and they were mostly disturbed by the fact that I worked with a gay person, they weren't so concerned about the destruction of the temple. [Laughter.] It tells a lot about the emphasis of their beliefs, but you know, all these ideas of the messiah, or messianic thinking,

it's all about catastrophes—it's all about apocalyptic kinds of moments, so maybe somehow *Inferno* is actually promoting their visions.

I think maybe what the art world needs—and there are some people who are doing this, actually this week there is a congress in Berlin called Artist Organization International—is to think of a possibility for a kind of union or a situation where there is an organization for artists who have movements. Support and solidarity should be promoted.

RAIL: Do you align yourself politically? Or do you feel that as an artist there's an exemption, or that your role is different?

BARTANA: I think my role is very different. I practice in contact with politics, but I try to suggest something different. It is political, whatever I do is very political, but I'm trying not to limit myself. Politics are very much attached to a very specific agenda. I think my works are quite ambivalent and therefore you can have leftist people loving the work and right-wing people loving the work—that's actually what I encounter because they both see that it represents themselves in some way. I am interested in the art of the impossible.

RAIL: You're not proposing an agenda, you're not saying these are my beliefs or these are what your beliefs should be. You're really using politics as a medium to look at these other parts of living together in the world. Does that feel accurate to you?



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

BARTANA: I think I look into what society provides and how we can question it, and how we can undermine and how we can propose different kinds of readings and spheres and open the imagination to new possibilities. That's what every artist begins with and proposes, but I'm very connected to the reality and always very much motivated by it. When I first heard about the nationalistic, populist True Finn party, I was inspired to ask: What is a true Finn? Who is a true Finn? And when I heard about this mega-church in Brazil, I wanted to react; I want to pull these new strings and think about the future of such a project. In the past I would call myself an amateur anthropologist, but I'm not really—I'm still an artist.

RAIL: With *True Finn* you brought eight strangers living in Finland to a remote house and had them do different activities together exploring what it means to be Finnish. For *Inferno* you made a highly dramatic fictional film centered on the non-fictional

replica of the first temple constructed in São Paulo last year. Built by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a neo-Pentecostal evangelical church, the building's inauguration drew nearly 10,000 people, including the president of Brazil. Were these projects the first time you were working in a culture that you didn't have a personal history or relationship with?

BARTANA: Actually in 2004 I was commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial to make a new piece and I tried to investigate Liverpool through horseracing. It was one of my early films, titled *You Could Be Lucky*. I was focused on the crowd because in Liverpool these races are a time when the working-class people really dress up and change their appearance. It came out as a very funny film, quite funny.

RAIL: How are the stakes different when you're working with Poland, Israel, or Jewish identity than when you're working in Finland or Liverpool or Brazil, where you don't have a personal access point?

BARTANA: Regardless of where I am working, I am always interested in the questions of identity politics and political imagination and how you can expand that and allow for different possibilities. With *True Finn*, I wanted to expand and update the idea of what it means to be a Finn by creating a platform for the people involved with the project to express their own identity. So it wasn't in my hands in a way—it was only in my hands to create a structure, but I had absolutely no idea how it would look in the end.

RAIL: When we're talking about our own culture it's easier to be critical than when we're talking about other people. Do you feel more of a responsibility to be neutral when you're working outside of your own history or identity? How do you navigate that difference?

BARTANA: It's very different when my own history is involved because it comes from many years of exploring the issues and questions and my personal biography. For several years before going to Poland I was focused on Israel and Palestine. I already had a body of work dealing with the issues involved. I had already developed my critical approach. I had a mission to expand the Israel/Palestine conflict back to its origin, back to Europe. Poland, of course, has a very specific history with Jews, but I saw it also as a laboratory of how to write a new narrative. I wanted to imagine a new page in the history book and to explore the social change that art can bring. Maybe I didn't actually change anything, but at least it opened something up. I can tell after six years of working there that it did open up a new dimension, at least among a number of people. Maybe it isn't a national change, but more Israelis are now interested in going to work in Poland. It's kind of the fashion to work in Poland right now. I feel I was a part of Polish culture and art. In a way they were really waiting for the Jew to come and open the discussion. I was maybe fitting into some kind of empty spot. [In 2011, Bartana was the first non-Pole to represent Poland in the Venice Biennial.]

In Finland, I was totally foreign. I had a Finnish partner a long time ago, but I really didn't know much

about the country. When I got there and started to meet people, and find out about Finland, I slowly developed the project with the help of many people. I first wanted to meet activists. It was during the time of Occupy and everyone was occupying the squares and so I met an activist because I wanted to know what the discourse was about and where it was coming from. I created a think tank for which I invited the curator of the festival, as well as Finnish and Israeli scholars. The topic wasn't something I had specifically thought about, but the ideas it concerns are very close to my heart.

RAIL: And was that a similar experience in Brazil? How closely were you working with people in São Paulo?

BARTANA: In São Paulo I worked with a curator named Benjamin Seroussi very closely—he worked for a Jewish cultural center. He and an Israeli curator, Eyal Danon, invited me to be a part of a small project he was working on about new religious movements in Brazil. Many evangelists were coming to his center to study Hebrew to be able to read the Old Testament and suddenly all different Jewish symbols began appearing—you know, like the arc and the menorah, and he wanted to know more about what it was all about. I worked with him very, very closely.

RAIL: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the church that built the replica of Solomon's temple, has been involved in several different scandals, including a federal Brazilian report stating that they had been spreading religious intolerance. Was this also a part of your interest in the church? Is it an exploitation of Israel and of Jewish history?

BARTANA: I don't know if they're exploiting, but I would say very much that they are manipulating their own people. It's an extremely manipulative church, but I didn't want to criticize it because it's not the only manipulative church or religious institute. I consciously didn't want to criticize the bishop. From the very beginning my protagonist was the temple itself, the building. With Israel I feel like I can criticize, I can do whatever, I'm from there, you can put me in jail if you want. But here I was focusing on the temple, on the very fact that the Bishop, Edir Macedo, is trying to create a sort of new Jerusalem. My main focus was trying to figure out what this guy is doing. He's borrowing elements from Jewish theology and trying to create a story, a narrative. He's using other, let's say, tragedy narratives to match tragedies of the people of Brazil—very poor people who have had their own exodus from the northeast parts of Brazil to São Paulo.

RAIL: With *Inferno* and with *True Finn*, it feels like you were more interested in the present than looking to the past, as opposed to *And Europe Will Be Stunned*. Has there been a shift in terms of how you're thinking about time? You've spoken before about the importance of acknowledging the present and I'm curious about how you're thinking about the present versus the past right now. *True Finn* is very much about negotiating new dynamics within Finland and Europe, and *Inferno* is similarly about a church that was constructed just last year.



Yael Bartana, "Stalag," 2014. Color photograph, 11.02 × 16.54". Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.

BARTANA: I see *True Finn* more as a laboratory of what's happening in Europe in general right now. The recent era of migration has created a fundamentalist and reactionary voice against the organization of the West. I wanted to look into this whole story of the nation-state from the 19th century, which is currently readjusting itself. I'm interested in the effects of hegemony—the exclusion of the small voices that are trying to fight for their rights or identity. They want to be acknowledged. And in regard to *Inferno*, I am completely fascinated by this whole current affair of religions crossing geographical borders.

RAIL: Do you feel that you've reconciled something you were thinking about historically and now you're starting to look to the future, to the present?

BARTANA: The history of the Finnish nation is there in *True Finn* in the archival cuts. The creation of the nation-state, the Finnish nation-state, is represented by those archival films, so the history is there. And I include the traditional clothing, which is obviously not something people still wear. But yeah, I wanted to do a contemporary film from a very specific perspective, which is not in the mainstream, to sort of update what is Finnish identity today and to show, for example, that a Sami person would never agree to those terms.

RAIL: Yeah, I love the costumes and the artifice of it all, the dramatization of it was sort of funny to watch from an American perspective because, at least for me, these were conversations I was forced to have as a kid. Where is your family from? Are you Jewish or Italian and blah blah blah.

BARTANA: Don't forget where you are from! [Laughter.]

RAIL: *True Finn* was commissioned by the IHME Contemporary Art Festival, based in Finland, and it was available on Finnish public television through the end of 2014. In order to make the piece, you held an open call and then selected eight people (of varying backgrounds and political affiliations, but all of whom live in Finland) who you then brought to live together in the countryside for a week. You staged different activities for them—like making a new Finnish flag, writing a new national anthem, all this very gimmicky nationalist stuff—and nobody resisted or even questioned it. You mentioned in a previous interview that you were surprised about that, and I was too, partly because those activities are like children's activities.

BARTANA: I was not surprised by the fact that people wanted to join such a project, but I was surprised by the fact that no one resisted or questioned the tasks. Nobody asked why we need all these symbols or if there is an alternative. I was really hoping somebody would resist it and ask, Why do we need this stuff? Why do we actually need the nation-state? Why do we need to do all these exercises? But they really obeyed me, maybe they felt very committed to me. On some level the anarchist kind of fulfilled that role, saying, "I don't care about politics," and, "I am a nihilist. What do you want from me?"

RAIL: Right, yeah. And the young woman who says, "Fuck you, I'm not voting."

BARTANA: I love that, yeah.



Yael Bartana, Still from *True Finn*, 2014. HD 50 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.



RAIL: And it's interesting that Mustafe, who's from Somalia and Tiina, the Roma woman, are the most engaged in the activities. Or was it edited to seem that way?

BARTANA: No, they were like that.

RAIL: Why, do you think?

BARTANA: It was very important for them to be included in the project and it's really real, it's very sincere. It's an obvious kind of reaction to the situations they were placed in, but they really do want to be recognized as true Finns. If you're privileged and are not deprived of your rights, there is no doubt about who you are. You don't have to fight for it, you're just there. But they have to fight to be recognized.

RAIL: And because of the blend of fact and fiction, because there is the fiction to it and because there is the humor of the Somali man wearing traditional Finnish clothing and ice fishing—it allows you to access the ideas. It is not fraught. The humor lets you see it and talk about it.

True Finn made me think about this case that's been in the news a bit lately. There was this man who went and lived in the woods for 25 years. He didn't speak to another human being for 25 years. He would steal what he needed to survive from people's homes and eventually he was caught, and one of the things he said after he was caught was that when he was alone he became irrelevant. He said he lost his identity because he wasn't in relation to other people. That's the tension that *True Finn* explores, that we need the other in order to define the self.

BARTANA: Absolutely, that's the point: you can't define yourself without the other. Identity is not fixed. I first found out that I'm Jewish when I left Israel because I never thought to look at myself as a Jew. Jewish people are religious people to me. I'm not Jewish. Jewish identity has a unique situation since the establishment of Israel. Until then it was only ethnic and religious and now it is also national.

RAIL: And for me so much of it is because I have such conflict with Israel and I don't want to be a part of that.

BARTANA: What kind of Jew are you? I am joking—

RAIL: I don't practice, I don't do anything, and part of that is because it's all sort of lumped together in my mind as one thing that I don't really want to support. But then, when I was watching *True Finn* in the gallery, I heard "Avinu Malkeinu" from the other room and it was sort of like the smell of my grandmother's perfume, or just something that I knew.

BARTANA: You feel at home.

RAIL: There's a familiarity.

BARTANA: And it feels good or bad?

RAIL: It feels good, but I don't know what that means. Why did you choose "Avinu Malkeinu" (perhaps the most recognizable Jewish song) for *Inferno*?

BARTANA: It's the most gay song ever. The Barbara Streisand version of it—all the gay men in my life love this version. I don't understand why. It is a kind of dramaturgic decision. I wanted this moment in the film to be extremely emotional, you know we are in the temple so it is very meaningful, but also disturbing.

RAIL: Absolutely.



BARTANA: The church borrows all of these Jewish symbols so I took it all the way using all the basic common knowledge of every Jew and the exodus from Israel. I was inspired by Cecile B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*—the overly theatrical, funny approach. To me it is funny, maybe for you it is serious. This was the only sound piece that really worked for this moment in the film. We tried all different music, we even tried "Ave Maria."

RAIL: Which would be such a different experience.

BARTANA: It would be identified as super-Catholic. I don't know if "Avinu Malkeinu" was the right decision, but I think it works. It's not Barbara Streisand.

RAIL: So it was an aesthetic choice rather than—

BARTANA: It is beyond kitschy dramatization, very beyond. This wasn't the case in my earlier works, which were much more intimate. But this was really about the aesthetic decision and the style of the film as it connects to the content. Building this church was a mega-project for this guy, so the film had to be a mega super-production. It wouldn't work if it was a small film or documentary. I didn't want to make a documentary about this. I wanted to emphasize the fact that the idea of a construction of a third temple would naturally end in destruction, a pre-enacted tragedy.

RAIL: You are very diplomatic in not wanting to say outright that the church is exploiting people, but you do acknowledge that there is a huge element of exploitation.

BARTANA: Yes, of course, but the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is not the only one. There are so many other movements, this is a problem in Judaism as well. And the whole church business—it is a business. Prosperity theology, it's very capitalistic: if you give more money to the church you become richer and richer. But that is not what this film is about. That would have been a very different approach. The logic of the project is based on historical facts, the destructions of the first and second temples, which are the history of the Diaspora—the central myths of the Jewish people. It's very metaphoric and symbolic.

RAIL: And the end, the fire and the destruction, can you talk about that?

BARTANA: Think about Jerusalem, all of its history. It also made sense in terms of the narrative. Sacred places always attract crazy people. The film was about destruction from the very beginning. With the construction of the church, you can already foresee the destruction. That was my point of departure, and from there I built the story.

RAIL: And there are a lot of visual references from your childhood. You grew up on a kibbutz and have spent a lot of time looking at ideas of utopia, the failed utopia that people thought Israel could be.

BARTANA: It wasn't a kibbutz, but it was a village with a small-scale agricultural community. There was a lot of disappointment with the utopia—the perfect society was exploding. But I still believe in utopia.

RAIL: You've spoken before about a utopian vision or utopian language, which I think is really interesting. We know that utopias don't work, but believing in a utopian vision allows for a nuance where maybe it is actually possible. Israel was utopian in its vision, but ultimately,



Yael Bartana, Stills from *Inferno*, 2013. Alexa camera transferred onto HD 22 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv.

it has failed. That model of a utopia has *never* worked, yet we haven't created a new model. Occupy, that was maybe in the same vein, but we haven't shifted, haven't formed a new idea, a new vision, and we know that what exists doesn't work—

BARTANA: We are individualists in the West, we are not a community-based society. It is all about Google; Google is a kind of a utopian vision for a certain kind of people. They've created a closed community/society that does all these things. Are they happy? I don't know. I think I have a strong nostalgia for a sense of community I've experienced in the past, but which was nonetheless very exclusive so I wonder how one can be inclusive.

RAIL: I don't know either. But you *do* believe in a utopia?

BARTANA: Of course, if you look at history it doesn't work. You know the Georges Perec book *W, or the Memory of Childhood*? It is a pretty amazing book. He is a Holocaust survivor and he describes this society living on an island and basically turning into a totalitarian concentration camp. It is a question that I never know how to answer. I like utopian visions, I like this idea. Aesthetically it is actually best. But how can you be an individual and critical at the same time? I am always thinking about the collective and the individual, and how you can define yourself among the collective, and if you can find yourself in the masses as an individual? I am not very clear, I don't have a clear answer. It is something that I keep trying to understand. On one hand I am attracted, but on the other hand I see the consequences.

RAIL: And that unresolved thinking comes through very clearly in your work. You aren't proposing an answer, just examining the possibilities.

BARTANA: Yeah, I don't have an answer. [Laughs]. I try to give space for—

RAIL: Imagining?

BARTANA: Yeah, to help you imagine the possibilities and find yourself within this kind of project. And not everybody can find it. I understand that it talks to some people, but it doesn't talk to others. It is not a work where I say, "Wow, aesthetics, beautiful." It is kind of demanding, it demands that you open up and explore your own identity. You have to work when you see my work, find yourself, and reflect.

RAIL: Yes, but it is the aesthetic qualities—

BARTANA: That keep people in the room to look at it. ☺



Tal R, *Altstadt Girl* installation. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

in conversation Tal R WITH PHONG BUI

The morning after the opening reception of his recent exhibit Tal R: *Altstadt Girl* at Cheim & Read (January 15 – February 14, 2015) the artist Tal R welcomed *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui to the lobby of Bowery Hotel (where he was staying, and just hours before returning to his home and studio in Copenhagen, Denmark) to talk about his life and work.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): I first learned about your work through a catalog of your show *Arabesque* at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin that I bought at my favorite bookstore in Williamsburg, Spoonbill & Sugartown, in 2000. The essay by Hans-Werner Schmidt was also very insightful.

TAL R: Oh yeah! It was my first one-person show.

RAIL: I remember talking to Chris (Martin), “Who the hell is this Tal R?” [*Laughs.*] Both Chris and I have been following your work ever since.

R: I mentioned the last time I saw you that I took my students to see Chris’s show at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, where I was a professor of painting for nine years at the Kunstakademie. Unlike many shows, which have these frosty surfaces that invite you to look but not enter, Chris’s show allowed you to walk in and out, looking at the works as they’re literally hanging inside and outside of the building. You can really relate to them and follow what he’s doing with each work. You can have a discussion with his works, and learn from them. They’re both strong and vulnerable at the same time.

RAIL: My students and artist friends of the younger generation feel the same way.

R: I feel that art is the only field or discipline where vulnerability is thought of as a good quality. It’d be hard to be vulnerable in the world of politics and business. That’s one of the things that makes art special. A work of art can reveal certain aspects of human nature that other fields can’t. Art is so important for a society, because it is the ghost in the machine.

RAIL: And the autonomous act of making art can be perceived as a political action, even when it’s not overtly political art.

R: I agree. It’s weird because there is, for instance, a debate going on at the moment in Europe, which is so narrow and backward: If you say you’re not on the left that means you’re on the right. You really have to explain to people: “No, if I’m not left, it doesn’t mean I’m right.” Or the opposite with the same explanation. Actually you should be entitled to be at different places and belong to no one place at the same time and that’s what art very often is about.

RAIL: True, in art you can be a leftist person and make right-wing paintings. And vice versa. Take Degas, for example, who was an anti-Semite, yet his paintings, especially the late ones as well as the monotypes of the brothel scenes, were of a brilliant, experimental nature, and—

R: They also speak about some aspects of human emotions. They carry sympathy and compassion for his subject.

RAIL: Or Morandi, who early on in his career was associated with fascism: a movement linked to speed, technology, violence, progress, and other features that were more visible in his Futurist art than his quiet metaphysical paintings. Let’s begin with your current show: Would you consider the two tendencies, one seems to be about lightness, and the other density, as representations of two different kinds of emotions? For example, in the painting “The Drawing Class” (2014), you use rabbit skin glue mixed with pigment on canvas that allows this luminous transparency to come through from underneath, while in other paintings, like “Bird Mask” (2014), you paint thickly with a palette so dark that one can hardly make out what the image is. Equally important: Have you ever painted in both styles in one day?

R: In the studio, there are different islands of works. One is about my interest in clouds. With one I’m dealing with painting a girl sitting in front of a window. But no, I never paint two paintings at a time. I generally look at one and think of it as a conversation for one week. But I prefer to paint it all at once, in one breath, and try to finish a painting without any editing. And then weeks after I look at it, and if it is good I put it away. If not, I just make a new painting. Otherwise each painting, regardless of size, takes anything in between a day to two weeks. Most of the time I just sit in front of the painting trying find ways to work against all the plans I have in my head. I want to get something better than what I planned, and this takes a while because I have to break down my expectations and what I imagine. To me it’s not about having great ideas. I think no artist has really brilliant ideas. He or she might have tools to work with brilliant ideas so the ideas get above what they can imagine. For me art comes from a really personal, intuitive place. It’s a private space when you’re at work, but at the same time you have to keep it at a distance so it’s not just about your personal needs, desire, or whatever.

RAIL: Yes, it should be impersonally personal, not the other way around. In any case, you would approach each painting, each time differently.

R: Yes, especially with the transparent work, which has been a challenge since I started it four years ago. I wanted to try to make paintings that are more in the air, and less on the surface. For this, the technique with rabbit skin glue and pigment is perfect. It’s difficult to do it because frescos are like watercolor, once you put a mark down, you can’t really erase it, or paint over since accumulations of more layers would lead to cracking. What I’d do first is take an

unprimed canvas and work to get toward an image with pastels, very light, and then I would brush a layer of glue on top. That means the pastels would dissolve, melt away. All I would see is a soft shadow of the drawing. And that's perfect for me. It's like I get my chance, then my chance is washed away and that's when I can really start the painting. Again that is something to do to break down my previous assumption of the images. Images are like ghosts in your head. You should definitely stick very close to your intention, but you should keep it very wide open how to get there. Most of the time I get there, because I always keep my gun aimed at the target, even when I don't know how to really hit it. I like this tension that occurs in my work at this moment. To give another example, I never want to get into a situation where I would wonder what color to do a painting in. It's the opposite: the painting should tell me at least 50 percent of the time what color I should use, whether I like it or not. The other 50 percent of the time I have to work out what is necessary to make the painting come alive.

RAIL: So it's a very precarious situation! But then at the same time you allow for the opposite to occur: for the heavily, densely-painted painting to coexist simultaneously.

R: Yes, I call it a revenge [laughs]. I just think that when you enforce certain types of restrictions on yourself, something else builds up in you. I'd say after four months of being in this constant fear of making light, ghostly paintings when I go back to the oil, I'd react against that state of mind. I'd take what I call a lazy brush—a lazy brush is something that moves very slowly, and is loaded with colors that usually don't mix. If they did they would turn into a gray or brown chocolate mess. Again with the lazy brush I can take my revenge by either being very aggressive or very passive. I tend to work on the light paintings for a few months and then make the heavy paintings for an equal amount of time.

RAIL: Let's start with your beginning then we can pick up the thread again. You were born in Tel Aviv, Israel in '67. What sort of family did you come from?

R: I was born a few weeks before the Six-Day War (the Third Arab-Israeli War, fought between June 5 and 10 in 1967 by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria). I remember there was a saying whenever there's a war a lot of boys are born. As a child I had no idea about art, but I was always drawing. I was obsessed with making drawings of soldiers, weapons, battle scenes with tanks, helicopters, and so on. Then when I was 15 an important incident happened: I was sitting on a beach in Tel Aviv with an older friend who was in the army. At some point I told him, "I want to go to the army." And he slapped me right in the face and he said, "You have a choice of not doing it. You are not going to the army." Boom! It was an exorcism. This older boy cured me. Because when you are a child, much like a romantic dream, or sexual fantasy, you want to become a soldier marching, playing drums on a field.

RAIL: Or becoming a firefighter. [Both laugh.]

R: Yeah, it has nothing to do with reality.

RAIL: What happened next?

R: My mother was Danish. She was Jewish but Danish so I had a Danish passport. It was soon after that my family decided to move to Copenhagen.

RAIL: Why did you go to Billedskolen, a progressive art school for children, instead of a normal school?

R: It was because I was not good at anything else in school. [Laughs.] All I wanted to do was draw all the time. I told my parents, "I want to go to art school," even though I had no idea what art school was about. It only took one year to realize I didn't want to be an

artist anymore. Instead I went traveling for a year, just to get away from home. It took me a good five years in and out of this school to decide, "Okay, I will really give it a try." I was a late bloomer. And weird enough I still feel like a late bloomer. I feel like there is still so much left to learn and so much to learn about what excites me the most in life. But at that time, I thought of doing anything but art. It's actually a mystery that I became an artist, because I did everything to walk away from it: I went to China. I stayed in Shanghai, lived with farmers for a year.

RAIL: What year was it?

R: '89. I was there during the Tiananmen Square protest and crackdown. There were no foreigners at this time. Most Americans left for Hong Kong. So there I existed somewhere between working in film advertisements and looking like Robinson Crusoe with long hair.

RAIL: After a year in China, you came back to Copenhagen?

R: Yes. As soon as I returned my father said to me, "I will give you an offer you can't refuse! You come in and work at my company."

RAIL: What sort of company?

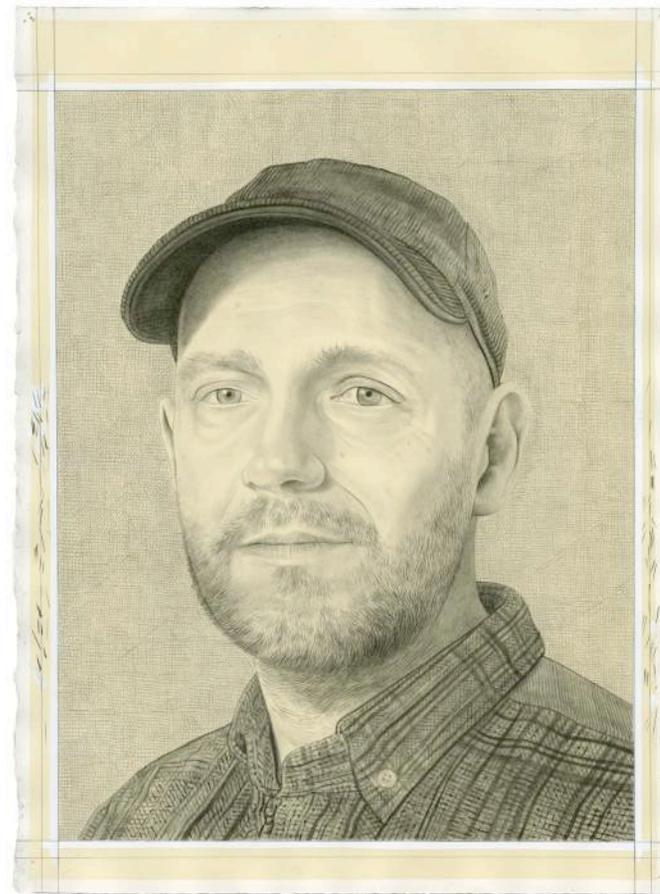
R: Diamonds, but industrial diamonds. And I hated it so much that after five long and hard months I told him: "I want to be artist." But this time I was older, like 24, and I understood, things were getting tighter around me. Now I had a wife and a child. I had no job. I had nothing. So I had to make a commitment and started pushing it for real—and I got into the Royal Art Academy. It was then that I suddenly remembered when I was a child how much I loved drawing all sorts of my images. It was about three years later I realized this need to reconnect to a sense of naturalness. And this doesn't mean you have to look from what's inside for images. It can be from the outside world. In this room (the lobby of the hotel) for example, I have a choice of brightening the light of the lamp or darkening it in order to tell my story of and about you. Actually when you want to tell a story that is so private you can't use images that are private, you need to dress up the outside world with other artificial things to get to the personal. A dog may have a name or a girl lying on a couch may have an attitude or whatever, but that's not really the first thing you see. The first thing you see can be a total feeling of an image or something that is shocking or strangely awkward. It's certainly not natural.

RAIL: I agree. I remember when Julian Schnabel was asked why he painted the big horizontal stripe over the eyes of the big portraits of blonde girls! He said, "I painted the eyes so people can look elsewhere, at the nose and the mouth, and so on." Or somebody asked Morandi, "Why do you paint bottles?" He said, "I don't paint the bottles, I paint the space between them."

R: That's exactly what I mean. It's not the apples in Cézanne's still lifes that make his paintings interesting to us. I'm sure Cézanne would have said the same thing as Morandi.

RAIL: I agree! Can you talk more about the use of collage elements? They appear more overtly in your early drawings—for example, "Birth of Laughing Chinaman" (2002), or "The Boots" (2002)—than your later works, yet I feel they're an integral part of your image-making!

R: Growing up in the '70s, our art history was cartoons. It mostly was about cutting an already existing image from a comic book or an advertisement that could be found anywhere. For a long time I had a hard time translating a drawing into a painting, so collage was a way to arrange images around the space until you felt the picture looked right. In our time, collage seemed like the secret recipe that was no longer a secret. When I was teaching at Kunstakademie,



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photography by Taylor Dafoe.

I often told my students to go to the graphic arts department and learn how apply their ideas with graphic materials. Collage, being one, provides one way of understanding how to cut into the preexisting materials. Even cutting a piece of fabric and putting it on a canvas means you don't have to fill in an area with paint. Mentally it can teach you that it's not just art history that can teach you about painting. Instead, you can learn about painting as a physical thing about either filling out a space or cutting into a space. As for this new body of works I'm trying to ask myself the question: does it make sense at all that I'm making the painting I make today? Is it something I should just leave behind like a ship that sailed away in art history? What is possible today? I've been doing it now for two years. By carrying a suitcase filled with paper and drawing materials with me wherever I go, I'm always ready to make contacts whenever I see an interesting face, an interesting person, and so on. I always walk towards him or her and ask whether they would pose for a drawing.

RAIL: So those drawings in the back of the room of the show were all made directly from life!

R: Yes, every one of them was drawn in front of somebody, and they're not edited afterwards. What I'd do is look at them and ask if it is possible to use this drawing as a model for painting. I discover very often that a bad drawing can be good for a painting. And if a drawing is good I'd just keep it as is.

RAIL: Would you say that having the paper colored in some two or three layers creates a warm patina, which is less intimidating than just the whiteness of the paper?

R: Yes. It gives a certain comfort like having a cat on your lap when you talk to people.

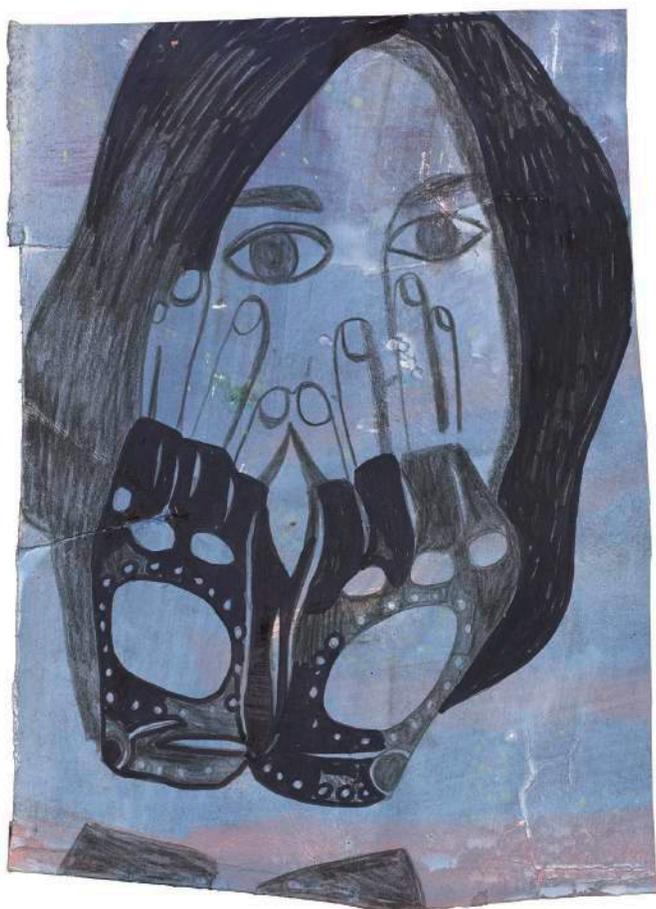
RAIL: Cool analogy. Anyway, would you consider yourself a narrative painter like Philip Guston without the repeated images such as his light bulbs, shoes, the Klansmen, etc.?

R: You know only by doing it for a long period of time can you become better at circulating the images in some form of continuity. What returns and moves forward is something you trust and follow when it tells you. I have always had one main road that I want to walk down. Soon I see a small road that leads to somewhere else. I see the possibility of what I thought

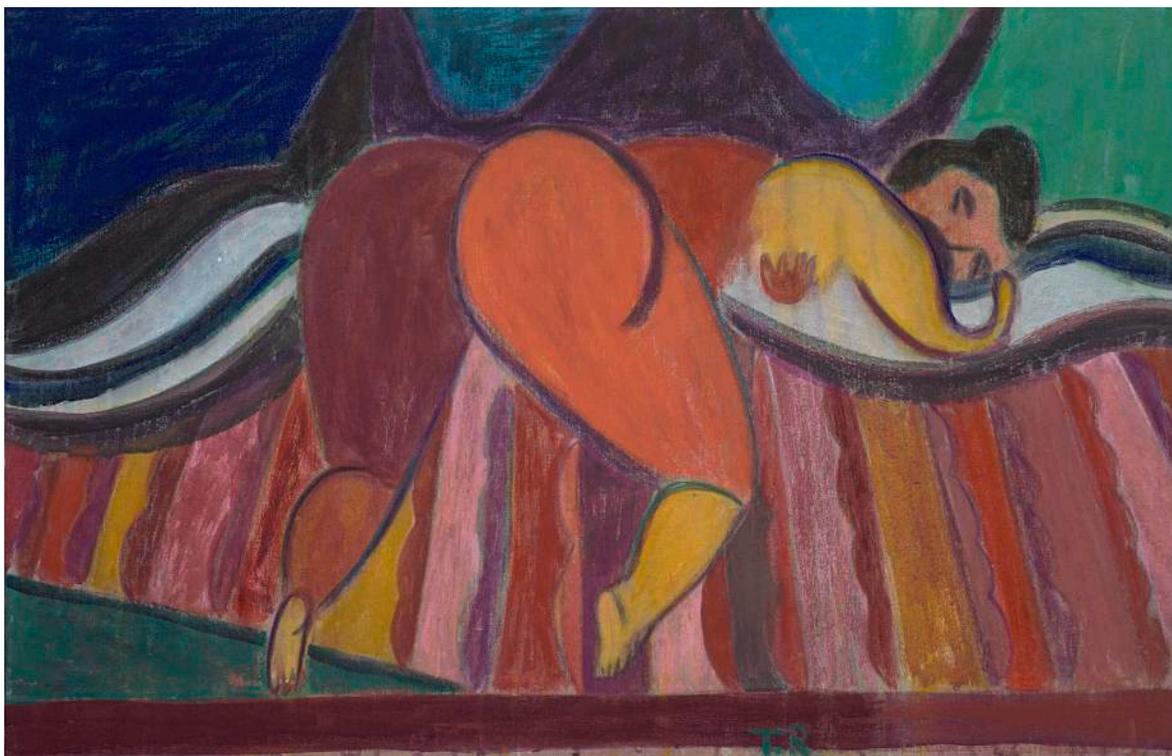
was a ship, but it turned out to be just a square. I want to melt things down. I want to cut off the language. I want it to be mute. I just can't help but go down that road of forms, and take the information back. I also see on the other side the possibility of letting the painting sail into ornaments. Objects and images like rocks, trees, clouds, roads, and endless others would repeat and dance into those ornaments. My work is about taking the information back to narratives. I think behind all the brushes, all the paint, ideas have little to do with art. I always search for form. But at the same time I am also aware that I don't want my work to sail into ornaments like those of Persian carpets for they are minutely and highly crafted and contain so many details. I don't want the painting to go into this kind of level of craft. What I want is to stay very close to a kind of impulse that evokes a narrative without the necessary details. This impulse for me feeds action. I develop this relationship for a while and then I have to go out again to restart it all over again. When I sit in a hotel room and I want to draw a stranger, I don't mind when the eyes and the ears are not correct. What I care about is whether the drawing is alive, or if it can breathe. Years ago I went to the Edvard Munch museum to see his paintings, as well as seeing other works by his contemporaries in Scandinavia like Anders Leonard Zorn, Richard Bergh, Eero Järnefelt, just to name a few at the National Museum in Oslo. There was such a contrast between everything they had painted, from the figure, the house in the forest, the moon to a dog and everything else, and the Munch paintings where all the details fail. But what is moving and alive in Munch's paintings, which the others miss, is the air that breathes in and out of the images at all times. I always feel Munch kept his gun pointed all the time at the target where impulse and action are both right at the edge.

RAIL: You mean where anxiety and vulnerability are about to be infused, and are ready to release the energy.

R: Exactly. This desire to be at that edge is what inspired me to draw from life again, because for years and years I didn't. I was too busy making paintings. I feel it's the first time I was able to combine drawings and paintings into one close relationship.



Tal R, "m" 2014. Crayon, pigment, and rabbit skin glue on painted paper. 15 5/8 x 11 3/8". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.



Tal R, "THE BERLIN" 2014. Pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 30 1/4 x 48". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

RAIL: Guston wrote similarly about the synthesis of the two in the late 1960s: "It is the bareness of drawing I like. The act of drawing is what locates, what suggests, discovers. At times it seems enough to draw, without having the distractions of color and mass. Yet it is an old ambition to make drawing and painting one."

R: That's why his Klansmen are so compelling, because they're also at the edge. They make us feel both anxious and somehow calm at the same time. Sometimes they're quite funny riding on a car in the open, other times one is whipping the other one in a small room, which makes you feel very claustrophobic.

RAIL: Or sometimes the Klansman is Guston himself painting in the studio. Also, the image of the whipping Klansman reminds us of the figure whipping Christ in the left half of Piero's (della Francesca) small panel painting, 23 by 32 inches, "Flagellation of Christ" at the Galerie Nazionale della Marche, Urbino. Piero was the painter Guston admired for his formal construction and sense of monumentality that generates from stillness. Alright, like Guston you're a narrative painter who early on discovered that having a big appetite for devouring endless images means it's impossible to make paintings from them. It's only later that you slowly sort out images in their simple forms in order to paint them. It's like a cow eating hastily then regurgitating.

R: A cow with different stomachs is a good metaphor. Yes, I do feel like what you've just described. I've created my own kind of art school for myself. In the last few years I've learned to be more patient than I have in the past. So yes, it always takes a long time to digest things.

RAIL: What about the impulse that drove you to decide to adapt a systematic approach by making seven paintings in seven months with seven limited colors—yellow, pink, red, green, black, white, and brown—and with one identical dimension, 78 3/4 by 78 3/4 inches?

R: Those are *The Sum* painting series. It was in the same year, 2005, I began to notice a black-and-white reproduction of Munch's painting, "Self-portrait Between the Clock and the Bed" (1940–42), which was of himself standing literally between the clock and the bed, which symbolically referred to his sense of time and death. I wasn't aware at the time that Jasper Johns had noticed a similar thing, the pattern on the bed linen, as I did. For me, it was the part of

the painting that pointed towards something else that would make painting more interesting, more than what already appears in the picture. It was the part that pointed to something that was possible much later. So I started playing with different versions of the stripes initially with six colors, then added pink as a possibility of having more body in the paintings. The reason was whatever I do, I don't want to have a discussion of this color or that color anymore. There are the seven buckets with seven colors all ready to go when I am ready to paint.

RAIL: Are they all premixed?

R: No, the thing is I always want to start from scratch. I tried to reach what I imagined is the shared red: not too blue, not too orange, like the word red. When we talk about color I would say I'm painting with red. Actually that series of paintings, which was shown together in 2004 fed into a new group of paintings that I then showed at Victoria Miro in 2006. They were about the possibility of having something in the center of the painting and something like an ornament around the border corresponding to what's in the center. It's a dialogue between the center and the frame, between the ornamental and the figuration. The restriction of seven paintings, seven months, seven buckets of colors was just a tool, which consisted of two things: an idea and an example of the idea. Once you learn about a tool you have to leave it behind in order to move on and create a new one. It's similar to what you said a while ago about Morandi—it's not about the bottles, it's the space between the bottles. It's a clear idea. It's a clear tool. You take that tool but you can't take the bottles. You have to leave the bottles behind. So for me it's very much like this. Getting in there, understanding the method, the tool, and once the paintings are made, I'd leave the images behind and search for the new tool in order to make new images. I just think that every artist has to create his or her own resistance, something that works against him or her. In a weird way we have to put stones in our shoes. We have to keep adding stuff that makes the whole thing complicated, so you don't eat, breathe with yourself, which can be deadly and boring. I feel artists like de Chirico, Guston, Picabia are among those who cannot let go of the stone in their shoes. This is the reason why the combination of religion and art is doubtful because religion wants to take stones out of your shoe. Art wants to keep the stone in the shoe.

RAIL: So in the current show, having two pronouncedly different bodies of work showing simultaneously is one way to imply having stones in your shoes!

R: I suppose so. [Laughs.] There's nothing wrong when you get comfortable. You can also get good at the things you do if you do them long enough. There's no mystery there. For me I need to be uncomfortable once I reach a certain level of comfort. I have no idea why I need to go through this cycle. Art is the opposite of being constantly conscious. It's the opposite of going to analyze the why this and why that with your psychologist. I feel that I'm working from somewhere real and I have no time to ask why. I want to follow and keep responding to my impulse that lies on the edge that we spoke of earlier. I want to feel that I am connected to the world at all costs. And then when I come back to the stones in the shoe, I'm not afraid of them. I don't mind being uncomfortable, not being free of the stones, or whatever.

RAIL: The notion of freedom is a very complicated one. To most people freedom is a condition of wanting or needing to be free, which is vastly different than the desire to become free. Of course, desire is forever unattainable. This is what keeps a work of art alive, because no great art is just about providing answers. Instead it's about asking different questions about human nature.

R: One of the beautiful things about art is that it inspires us to leave behind our assumptions and expectations. Artists don't leave the idea of the things on the table. Instead they leave behind the images that they have created.

RAIL: If the drawings were made from life we would think the paintings were based on the drawing!

R: Yes, the drawing offers a point of reference from the beginning of the painting, but no, I have never made a painting that is directly based on a drawing. For

example, when I paint, I try to leave the person I am painting behind because I want to create a presence of that person in the painting, which, whether I like it or not, is not derived from any aesthetic discussions. The painting to me should have an authority like a presence of a person.

RAIL: What about the size?

R: Very important. You remember we talked about *The Look* paintings being in one size: 78¾ inches square. In this group of work it is completely different. I have 30 to 35 different sizes of stretchers made in the studio, and different kinds of linen that absorb the glue or the paint differently. But generally they're made to be close to the body, and they all, except one painting in the show, "The Drawing Class," can fit under your arms.

RAIL: So this way of thinking about size is new for you.

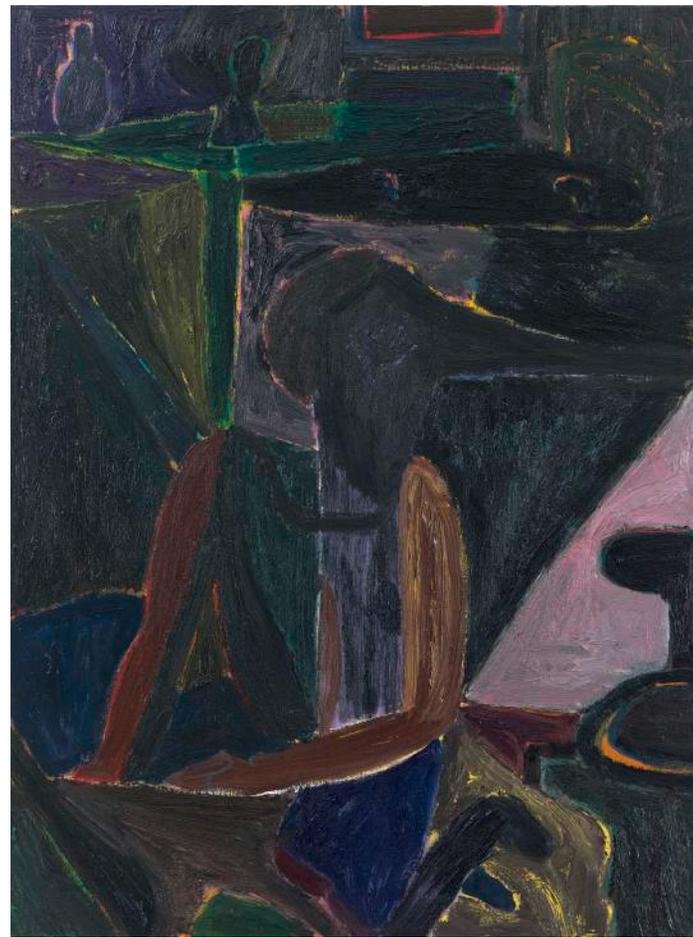
R: Very new, yes.

RAIL: I like what Marie Nipper wrote in her essay "Tal R: The Virgin," in reference to your constant need to shift things around as though it's a balance sheet that needs to be recalculated: "On one hand [it] is dogmatic, symbolic, and neurotic, on the other hand, it is playful, enchanting, and magic."

R: It was very thoughtful and concise.

RAIL: One last question: How did your illustrations of Hugo Ball's "Flametti, or the Dandyism of the Poor" come about?

R: It began with two people from Harpune Verlag, a small press based in Vienna that publishes artists' books in limited editions, named Sarah Bogner and Josef Zekoff. They both are artists, who have no money, with a burning desire for this project. They just kept writing me, so eventually I read the text and realized how great it was. How from the beginning, Max Flametti was sitting there fishing, counting his



Tal R, "BIRDMASK" 2014. Oil on canvas, 52 × 38½".
Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

money, before the other violent, tragic, and funny episodes that happened. The great thing about the book is it's just like life itself: it has no conclusion and no end. I have a similar affinity for what I do as an artist. ☺

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DREAMLAND

CONEY ISLAND AND THE 20TH CENTURY AVANT-GARDE

BY KURT HOLLANDER

In the late 1980s I wrote my last short story, “Skinny Takes a Walk,” which I self-published at that time in my magazine *The Portable Lower East Side*. In the story I take the subway out to the last stop in Brooklyn, walk over to a residential building a few blocks away, ride an elevator up to the 12th floor and stand in front of a door behind which my father is living. In the end, though, I don’t ring the bell, but rather turn around and take the elevator back down and walk around the Coney Island amusement park, boardwalk, and beach. Instead of actually avoiding my father, all I think about that fictional day are the stories he used to tell me about hanging out here as a kid. My trip to Coney Island in the short story is aimless, devoid of any great adventure and without any real connection to the place, and the story ends on a depressed note, wondering how I can do anything of value in a world in which everything of any consequence has already been done, a world in which my father had done so much more than I ever will.

As I mention in the story, Ida, my grandmother, lived in one of the dozens of identical International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union co-op buildings in Coney Island. As a young kid, the gangs of elderly Jews sitting on benches outside the buildings sunbathing and gossiping as they awaited approaching death used to scare me, as did the plastic seat covers on the toy-like furniture and the smell of camphor in my grandmother’s cramped apartment. Ida was a tiny old white-haired woman by the time I knew her, an immigrant from Odessa who had come over as a child during the pogroms and worked in Manhattan sweatshops throughout the Depression. At the beginning of the 20th century, more than one-third of New York City residents were immigrants, most from Europe and Russia, and although the majority of Russian and Eastern European Jews settled in the Lower East Side, many moved out to Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Williamsburg (where my father was born) and to Coney Island, where his mother moved after he ran away from home at the age of 16.

My grandmother died in the 1970s, and my father, an artist living in funky studios on the Lower East Side, moved into her Coney Island apartment, where he was living when I wrote this short story. On the not-so-frequent occasions that I visited him there, my father would get stoned and bombard me with messianic diatribes and artistic rants. To bring him down to earth a bit I would try to get him to tell me more stories about his life growing up in Brooklyn. The story that most disturbed and fascinated me was how he used to go on the Cyclone rollercoaster with the pinhead girls from the Freak Show and as the car careened around the curves and the pinheads were screaming in fear my father would reach over and squeeze their titties. The fact that my father as a young man (along with his friend and future filmmaker Mel Brooks) had worked as a barker for the Freak Show to get people to “Come on in and see the show,” meant that he had taken part in a significant piece of New York City history, while the pinhead breast-squeezing was a detail better than anything I could invent in fiction. This is probably the



All images courtesy of Kurt Hollander.

reason I gave up semi-autobiographical fiction and began writing semi-autobiographical nonfiction, instead.

If “Skinny Takes a Walk” has anything of value beyond what I lifted directly from my father’s life, it’s the references to Coney Island’s unique history. As I research this history more seriously today, I realize how my own experience of using Coney to bolster my own (meager and minor) literary production was common practice, and that in fact Coney Island provided not only essential material but also, more importantly, a fantastic, fictionalized aesthetic to many of the leading artists, writers, performers, and thinkers responsible for producing the 20th century avant-garde.

ALTHOUGH NEITHER THEY NOR ANY other indigenous group actually lived there, the Canarsie Indians would comb the Coney Island beach, which they called the “land without shadows,” for seashells to barter for other goods. When he sailed the *Half Moon* through uncharted territory in 1609 for the Dutch East India Company and first caught sight of this small beach island off the Atlantic coast of Brooklyn, the English Captain Henry Hudson was one the first Europeans to behold what would eventually become the United States of America. Much like the famous purchase of Manhattan (which Hudson discovered the following day), the Dutch bought Coney Island from the local Indians for a few guns, gunpowder, and beads, among the sweetest real estate scams ever conducted.

In 1839, the pirates Gibbs and Wansley, after having jacked the treasure from the *Vineyard* as it sailed to Philadelphia, buried the chests of Mexican gold and silver coins within the uninhabited dunes in Coney Island. Caught soon afterwards, they were given the opportunity to return the treasure they had stolen and have their lives spared, but as the shifting sands had rearranged the monotonous landscape, the pirates wound up swinging from a rope. Almost 10 years later, during an exceptionally low tide, one local resident stumbled upon a thousand coins and a mini-gold rush overtook Coney Island. Since that time, Coney Island has

been a constant destination of treasure seekers, gold diggers, and fortune hunters from all over the world, including those who traded in ideas and images.

The earliest seaside hotels in Coney, built in the 1840s, enticed NYC’s wealthy and cultural class to make the long trip in carriages for fresh air and tranquility. Few visitors of that time, however, actually went into the water, as most feared drowning or having the sea leech them of their essential salts, and it took decades and the assurance of doctors to convince visitors that it was not risky to bathe in the ocean. Herman Melville, Washington Irving, and Edgar Allan Poe all wandered around Coney Island, and Walt Whitman was a fan of Coney’s “long bare unfrequented shore [...] where I loved after bathing to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Homer or Shakespeare to the surf and seagulls by the hours.”

The Coney Island Elephant, one of many hotels designed to attend the needs of the increasing crowds of visitors, was built in 1885 out of wood and tin in the shape of a giant pachyderm, 122 feet high and seven floors tall. A cigar store operated out of one leg, several body parts were used as hotel rooms (and at times as a brothel), and the head was an observatory that offered vistas of the Atlantic Ocean through the eyes. The Elephant Hotel was merely the first of a long line of fantastic constructions in Coney as three huge amusement parks soon rose up in Coney Island, each one more spectacular and surreal. Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland boasted hundreds of extreme rides, lavish performances, and improbable structures, the latest and greatest in vernacular visionary aesthetics. Like the magic tricks performed within the parks, the architecture relied more on sleight of material and façades than actual foundations and constructions.

The Elephant Hotel was built one year before the Statue of Liberty, but even after the Iron Lady began officially greeting immigrants in the New York City harbor, the first glimpse of America that the “tired, huddled masses” saw as their ships arrived in the New World were the quixotic constructions and bright lights of Coney Island. Coney Island’s dream world

was the perfect greeting card advertisement for America, a country that has always sold itself to the world not so much as a land of freedom but rather as a fantasy world where the most extravagant dreams come true.

Like Hollywood today, Coney has always fueled people’s fascination with death and disaster. Spectacular fireworks provided the special effects for the recreation of famous battles, such as the defeat of the Spanish fleet at Manila or that of the Russians at Vladivostok. Other natural disasters, such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, a tenement fire, and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (a show recreating the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, complete with a cast of 400 extras), were reenacted several times a day.

Miniature cities were erected in Coney to simulate exotic cultures. The Streets of Cairo, which opened in 1897, boasted Egyptian architecture and Kasbah-like alleyways. Besides offering camel rides, the attraction featured the wonders of the Turkish dancer named Little Egypt, the first and most famous hootchy-kootchy, muscle and belly dancer in all of America. Thousands of natives from far-off lands were brought to live permanently in Coney, including a tribe of more than 200 Spanish-speaking Filipinos who spent their workday blowing poison darts through reeds and making crafts; 18 Algerians who did tricks on horseback; a tribe of over 100 Somali warriors with self-inflicted scars on their bodies; 19 near-naked Wild Men from Borneo; and a real Hindu village transplanted intact to Coney.

Beauty and ugliness, physical prowess, and physical deformity were all equally exploited in Coney. Lilliputia, a half-scale city built to resemble 15th-century Nuremberg, housed 300 midgets from all over America who enjoyed their own Parliament, a Midget City Fire Department, and their own beach. Midgets were publicly married and divorced daily (unintentionally leading to dozens of children born out of wedlock). The Dreamland Circus Sideshow, the first major freak show in America created in 1911, included albinos, a man billed as a tattooed “art gallery,” a human salamander, a legless man, the tallest and the fattest lady in the world, and the very popular Zip, also known as “What is It,” a black-skinned pinhead with a small tuft of hair on his head. Several other freak shows sprung up in Coney Island to compete with the original, often employing simulated freaks (such as the famous Mexican Siamese twins who after a fight during one of their shows each walked their separate ways).

Many of the scientific wonders associated with Coney were actually imported or copied from the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and later World’s Fairs. While these World’s Fairs displayed the latest technological advances to educate people and to advance science, Coney Island used technology to titillate people’s morbid curiosity. The Infant Incubator, basically a small hospital that housed a dozen or so iron-and-glass incubators heated by hot-water pipes connected to a central boiler, was designed to care for hundreds of babies that had been born prematurely. The fact that the emaciated babies could die at any moment made this one of the most popular exhibits in Coney.



Even more so than any single theme park or act, the greatest new technology on display in Coney Island, however, was electricity.

Only recently discovered, electricity powered the futuristic rides and at night lit up the amusement parks' million electric light bulbs. Thomas Alva Edison, America's most prolific inventor, not only patented the first electric light bulb he also patented a system to distribute electricity in 1880 and supplied much of New York City (including Coney) with direct current (DC).



for producing films. In 1896, Edison started to film the rides, acts, and theme parks at Coney Island, and continued to do so over the next 10 years. Between 1895 and 1905, over 50 films were shot at Coney Island, including films of Harry Houdini performing such acts as the Substitution Trunk or Metamorphosis Illusion.

Films by the French production company Éclair brought Coney's unique dreamlike theme parks and architecture to Europe and

movie entitled *Coney Island*. Although not shot in Coney Island, *Freaks*, directed in 1932 by Todd Browning (who had just made the box office success *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi the year before) was cast with many of the freaks from Coney Island's Sideshow, including the bearded lady, midgets, and pinhead girls. (The idea of treating freaks as real human beings created such a scandal that Browning's career never recovered.)



Living in nearby Sheepshead Bay, McCay lifted many of the most fantastic architectural landscapes within his comic strip directly from Coney's theme parks, and the typography and titles were inspired by its sideshow posters and signs, while the very name *Slumberland* in the comic's title was surely inspired by Dreamland. McCay's versions of Coney Island's Human Roulette Wheel, the Laughing Mirror Gallery and the Loop the Loop, as well as the air vents in the floor routine, were amongst the most striking images within *Little Nemo*. Like many

Coney Island dreamland architecture and theatrical extravaganzas might have been a major inspiration for the dream-drenched artwork and films of the European Surrealist movement, but their influence was even more direct in the creative horizon of many other avant-garde U. S. and European filmmakers.

Edison's monopoly, however, was threatened by the higher voltages and cheaper distribution costs of alternating current (AC), invented by the Serbian Nikola Tesla and promoted by George Westinghouse. To take out the competition, Edison devoted much of his time and money convincing people that AC was dangerous by creating the electric chair just to illustrate the lethal potential of his competitor's electricity. Edison offered public displays of the dangerous AC current in which he electrocuted (or as he referred to it, "Westinghoused") all sizes and species of animals up to and including horses and cows. His greatest publicity stunt came in 1903 when Topsy, an elephant at Coney's Luna Park Zoo, squashed three handlers (including one who had fed her a lit cigarette) and had to be put down. Copper wires attached to her feet were connected to an electrical plant and a 6,600-volt AC charge slammed through her body, frying Topsy instantly.

Besides killing animals in public, Edison was also responsible for another form of entertainment first introduced to the masses in Coney Island. Edison was granted a patent for the motion picture camera Kinetograph and for the Kinetoscope, a peephole viewer, both first publicly exhibited in 1891, and in 1896 the Vitascope, also manufactured by the Edison factory, was used to project motion pictures in public screenings in nickel theaters and outdoors at night. By 1906 as many as 30 moving picture venues were operating in Coney Island, with hundreds of tents and movie boxes showing films, as well.

Not only were the earliest films being viewed there, but Coney also served as the ideal location

influenced a whole generation of artists and thinkers, including the avant-garde filmmaker George Méliès, known as a "cinemagician." A Trip To The Moon, one of Luna Park's most popular rides (850,000 tickets sold during the first summer), was installed in 1902, the same year that *A Trip to the Moon*, directed by Méliès and credited as the first science-fiction film, was shot, and the film's theatrical sets and futuristic effects are surprisingly similar to the ride of the same name in Coney Island. Méliès was unable to release his film in the United States but Edison managed to get his hands on the film and made pirate copies that he distributed in movie venues in Coney Island and throughout the country, netting him a huge profit.

Coney Island dreamland architecture and theatrical extravaganzas might have been a major inspiration for the dream-drenched artwork and films of the European Surrealist movement, but their influence was even more direct in the creative horizon of many other avant-garde U. S. and European filmmakers. *Little Fugitive*, directed and shot by photographer Morris Engel in 1953, portrayed a day in the life of a kid lost in Coney Island, filmed in and around the amusement parks, boardwalk, and beach with camera in hand. The film won the Silver Lion prize in the Venice Film Festival and was a major influence on François Truffaut and his film *400 Blows*, as well as a major influence on French New Wave Cinema.

Coney also provided the film world with future stars of the big screen. The Marx Brothers first performed together in Coney Island in 1908, while one of Buster Keaton's first appearances was in Fatty Arbuckles' 1917

Even more than the featured performers, in Coney the crowds were the protagonists and the biggest attraction. Marilyn Monroe's famous pose, with her white dress fluttering up in the air over a subway grating, might very well have come from Coney's crowd-pleasing air vent that lifted women's dresses as they stepped off of certain rides. One ride, the Barrel of Love, forced strangers, both men and women, into intimate physical contact, or had them come tumbling out head over heels into the jeering crowd, creating a semi-erotic reality show for the crowd's enjoyment.

Walt Disney loathed Coney Island for he saw it as too crude and vulgar and too full of low-rent immigrants. Although the urban, erotic, exotic Coney was the opposite of the all-American fairytales Disney created, one of Disney's finest films, *Dumbo*, about a female elephant who turns on her trainers when provoked, was based on the story of Coney's Topsy. Even though Disney films dominated the animated film market in the U. S., Disney's amusement parks could never match the success Coney Island enjoyed for decades (only five million people went to Disneyland the year it opened in 1955, compared to the 46 million people who visited Coney in 1943).

Although Disney attempted to avoid Coney Island's cultural anarchism and cheap thrills, his work was very much inspired by the comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. Little Nemo, the dream-child of Winsor McCay first published in the *New York Herald* at the beginning of the 20th century, was arguably the most surreal children's comic ever, and by far the most avant-garde in its design and layout.

other artists, the settings of *Little Nemo's* worldwide adventures that McCay didn't get from firsthand travel experience were mostly likely borrowed from Coney Island's theme park "cities."

Due to all the film and cultural production that was inspired by its theme parks, Coney Island's fantastic allure reached far and wide, stimulating the European subconscious. Intellectuals and artists from all over the world were irresistibly drawn to the buzzing lights of Coney. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung stood and watched Coney Island pass by as their ocean liner, the *George Washington*, was tugged into the New York harbor in 1909. On deck that day Jung gushed about how they were bringing enlightenment to the New World, to which Freud dryly replied that they were bringing with them the plague (the dreamland called psychoanalysis). Freud, an analyst of dreamlands of the mind, also remarked: "The only thing about America that interests me is Coney Island."

The Russian writer Maxim Gorky came to Coney Island in 1907 and, wowed by the electric lights and fantastic constructions, wrote about the "fantastic city all of fire [...] Fabulous and beyond conceiving, ineffably beautiful, is this fiery scintillation." Another visit in the daytime changed his views. In his essay "Boredom," Gorky went on to note: "The city, magic and fantastic from afar, now appears an absurd jumble of straight lines of wood, a cheap, hastily constructed toy house for the amusement of children. [...] Everything is stripped naked by the dispassionate glare. The glare is everywhere, and nowhere a

shadow,” (unknowingly referring to Coney’s original, indigenous name). Along the same lines, E. E. Cummings remarked how in the “theater we are merely deceived, at Coney we deceive ourselves.”

In 1926, the Mexican José Juan Tablada, a longtime New York City resident and the man credited for bringing Mexican poetry into the modern era, wrote about the Coney Island Freak Show: “...long before Coney Island rose out of the ocean like a common, commercial Venus, Montezuma had jesters, dwarves and hunchbacks, caged beasts and botanic gardens.”

José Martí, another longtime New York City resident, realized Coney Island’s importance to American culture, calling it “that immense valve of pleasure opened to an immense nation.” Yet this champion of popular culture and democratic values wrote disparagingly about the crowds at Coney, condescendingly noting that “such people eat quantity; we, quality.” Martí wasn’t referring so much to the hotdog, invented and sold by the millions in Coney Island, but about the whole Coney experience, which he believed epitomized the cheapness and excesses of the American imagination.

Federico García Lorca felt the same as Martí, describing Coney Island as, “monstrous,” as well as “stupendous although excessive.” Yet it is just the monstrous American technological and cultural excesses best epitomized by Coney Island that gave rise to the surreal, grotesque flights of fancy in Lorca’s own poetry. In his “Landscape of a Vomiting Multitude (Dusk at Coney Island),” his greatest poem from the collection *Poet in New York* (1929), an afternoon trip to the amusement parks inspires delirious images that perfectly mirror the spectacles in Coney and helped usher in European avant-garde poetry.

With jammed-packed crowds of summer beachgoers and fun-seekers letting it all hang out and playing up to the camera, Coney Island has long provided the raw material for some of the 20th century’s greatest photographers. Weegee’s best known photo was taken of the Coney Island beach on the 4th of July in 1938, while Coney provided Diane Arbus and many other photographers with some of their most iconic images of freaks, decadence, and failed dreams.

The mere inclusion of Coney Island within their work has given many artists and writers a huge boost in both critical and commercial success. In his 1935 story “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” Delmore Schwartz uses the Coney Island boardwalk and amusement parks as the backdrop for a filmic recreation of the day his father proposed marriage to his mother. Written when he was only 21 years old and hailed by the poets Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot for ushering in a new narrative form, the story achieves its vanguard status in large part by introducing Coney Island’s working-class culture and history into a highbrow literary medium (my own short story, inspired in part by Delmore’s work, created no such literary excitement).

Lou Reed, a student of Delmore and his greatest fan, struck gold as well with his 1975 album *Coney Island Baby*, in which the title track, despite its name, is actually about his football team in a Long Island school and only mentions his “Coney Island baby” in passing at the end of the title song. In 1958, the San Franciscan Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti published a collection of poems entitled “Coney Island of the Mind.” Even though it was barely referred to within the book, Coney Island’s



presence in the title and a photo of one of its theme parks at night made it the best-selling American book of poetry ever and showed just how much influence Coney exerted on the American highbrow imagination.

By the mid-1960s, the three main amusement parks that had inspired so many filmmakers, poets, artists, and thinkers from all around the world had burned to the ground (a victim of their own electric fantasies), marking the end of Coney’s golden age. Despite the fact that some rides and games survived, and despite the fact that the boardwalk and beach still attracted millions of visitors in the summer, Coney Island ceased being America’s favorite dreamland destination. Like other inner-city neighborhoods with large minority populations in New York City during the economic downturn in the late ’60s and ’70s, social services were slashed, the white middle- and upper-classes fled to the suburbs, and Coney Island was overrun by gangs and crime. Low-income housing projects, with mainly black and Puerto Rican families stuffed into tiny apartments, replaced much of the area the amusement parks had occupied. At this time, right when I first starting going out there with my family and then later on my own, most tourists kept away from Coney except during the summer weekends or holidays, and the elderly, Jewish residents, such as my grandmother, tended to huddle nervously within their apartments.

The dreamlike fantasy of Coney that had so inspired poets and intellectuals for decades was replaced by a tough, crime-ridden world. Yet, even during these hard times Coney managed to find its way into and inspire some of the greatest works of urban realism, including Sol Yurick’s 1965 novel *Warriors* (adapted to the screen by director Walter Hill in 1979), a tale of New York City gangs that travel from the Bronx all the way to their home turf in Coney Island. Hubert Selby’s 1978 novel *Requiem for a Dream* (decades later directed for the screen by Darren Aronofsky), the story of the amphetamine addiction of an elderly Jewish woman living in the Jewish housing projects and the crimes her son commits to feed his heroin habit, all take place within the bleak backdrop of Coney Island.

Yet just when it seemed that the Coney Island dream world had smashed against the daily grind, a new wave of Russian-Jewish immigration began to repopulate the area in and around Coney Island in the ’80s and ’90s. Jews were

among the few people allowed to emigrate from Russia before the Berlin Wall came down, and Odessa in the Ukraine supplied the largest portion of early immigrants to Brighton Beach (which soon became known as Little Odessa), settling along a beach community that remarkably resembled the city they had just left. (The sea-front city of Odessa had itself been an artistic motor, home to a group of avant-garde Jewish writers that were eventually executed for being “rootless cosmopolitans” during the 1949 Stalin-orchestrated Night of the Murdered Poets).

Although much of the immigration was organized and populated by the Russian mafia, it helped “whiten” the neighborhood, lower crime, and increase real estate value, thus eventually making the area attractive for larger, corporate developers. In 2005, a developer purchased Coney Island’s last remaining amusement park and razed it to install three expensive, Disneyworld rides. This same developer has been lobbying to receive permission to build a shiny glass and metal, Las Vegas-style hotel complex so tall it would dwarf the Wonder Wheel. While approval for this hotel complex is currently pending, several decades-old boardwalk restaurants have been torn down and replaced by venues where middle- and upper-class families can consume behind thick windows that buffer the noise and sight of the “huddled masses” outside.

In his book *Delirious New York*, superstar architect Rem Koolhaas dedicated a chapter to Coney Island in which he describes it as the “fetus” of what was to become Manhattan’s skyscraper center. Yet it is precisely this corporate skyscraper culture, the same one which recently decimated the ethnic and cultural hotbed that was once Times Square, that now threatens to drag Coney Island into the global tourism market. As it inevitably tilts toward mid-American and European package tourism, as glass towers and insurance-friendly rides displace the old theatrical façades and haunted houses, and as corporate interests consolidate their stake in the area and national chains such as Hooters are set to arrive, the artistic and intellectual attraction of Coney Island has finally ended.

Due to its bawdy excesses, cheap theatrics, and technological innovation, its prefab fantasy and futuristic fictions, Coney Island remained at the forefront of modern life and culture for nearly a century, and more than any other

single place on this planet figured prominently in and inspired the work and imagination of some of the greatest American and European avant-garde thinkers and creators. This privileged cultural position has been lost, and Coney Island will never again provide material for our era’s greatest fictional fantasies.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER WRITING my short story “Skinny Takes a Walk,” I step off of the elevated subway in Coney Island and walk through the 4th of July heat and crowds on my way to visit my father. More than two decades ago, I abandoned New York City, which I felt had betrayed its long history of political and cultural opposition, to live in Mexico City, where corporate culture is only now devouring the city and its working-class culture, but I’m back here now on assignment to write about and photograph Coney Island for a Mexican cultural magazine that paid my plane ticket and expenses. I spend the day smoking pot and taking photographs of all the people sitting on the boardwalk benches, and in the afternoon I walk over to visit my dad.

After having lived and painted for a couple of decades in upstate New York in a 20-room house with half a barn in front of a river and train tracks, my father is currently spending what’s left of his life in a retirement home 20 blocks from Coney Island. Within this modern “home,” elderly Jews, Russians, and Brooklynites shuttle around the hallways in wheelchairs in no hurry to go anywhere. Although I wish my father would once again recount to me his early adventures, filling in some of the blanks of his early life and what it was like hanging out in Coney Island over 70 years ago, he will never add a single word to his past stories, as he suffered a massive stroke over 10 years ago and is now semi-paralyzed and unable to speak.

I unsteadily wheel my father out through the huge revolving door of the retirement home and then speed up, exaggerating the curves and maneuvering him over to the oceanfront walkway as if we were making a run for it. Instead, I slam the brakes on and then sit down on a bench next to him, watching the seagulls fly overhead, the dirty waves bumping against the concrete wall, and take a few photos of him in front of the Atlantic Ocean. The Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone, and the abandoned Parachute Jump, locally known as the Brooklyn Eiffel Tower, colossal structures that have witnessed the rise and fall of “America’s Playground,” appear as dim lines in the background of the photos.

The sun beats down hard on my shaved head and when I can’t take the heat any longer I stand up and slowly wheel my father back inside the air-conditioned building. An image of the elderly people here ramming their wheelchairs into each other like the Coney Island bumper cars I used to ride as a kid flashes through my mind but quickly fizzles out as we arrive at my father’s room. The reality of aging and dying is just too overpowering to let imagination take wing within these grey-green walls. I park him in front of the television and kiss him goodbye on his forehead in a clumsy, ashamed, and sad way, not knowing when or even if I will see him or Coney Island ever again. ☹

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DEMYSTIFYING GERHARD RICHTER'S GESTURAL ABSTRACTION: PAINTING IN THE GAP BETWEEN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND POP ART

BY HERBERT R. HARTEL, JR.

In the mid-1970s, Gerhard Richter began making large, colorful, tactile abstract paintings whose sketchy, rough, and blurry effects make us aware of the tools and techniques used and the complicated pictorial thinking involved.¹ Sometimes paint is applied with brushes, but more often it is smeared, dabbed, rubbed, blotted, streaked, and dripped with house painting brushes, palette knives, squeegees, and pieces of wood or glass. The emphatic paint textures created may be sensuous or plain, coarse or smooth, even or inconsistent. The shapes created are irregular, vague, incomplete, overlapped, and compressed. These paintings have been described as “gestural” or “painterly,” although Richter refers to them as his “Abstracts,” and they now constitute the largest and most consistent portion of his enormous, erratic oeuvre. They have made him one of the leading abstract painters of the last 40 years and have been the subject of much discussion, yet a cogent, plausible understanding of them is still needed. How should we interpret, respond to, and contextualize them art historically?

These works have been associated with Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Conceptualism, and Neo-Expressionism, but are not easily situated in any of these. They are most frequently interpreted as examples of the problems and complexities of postmodern painting. Scholars have concluded that Richter's work demonstrates that painting since the 1960s has become meaningless and irrelevant and that expression and content are no longer possible, intended, or desired. They claim that he is causing this deconstruction of painting, that his work is as much a part of the process as it is indicative of it. The problem with these interpretations is that they are counter intuitive to the creative impulse and replace it with postmodern theoretical discourse. How is it possible for an artist to devote his life to such a nihilistic project as destroying the importance, appeal, and efficacy of his own creations? These interpretations linger even though Richter has refuted them in numerous statements and interviews over the years. Scholars often mistakenly take Richter's comments about his technical process and visual thinking as explanations of meaning and purpose.

These interpretations relate Richter's abstract paintings to Conceptual Art since they claim his works explore ideas about contemporary painting and are not important as individual images. The supposed historical self-awareness and reflexive ontology of Richter's paintings are basic to postmodernism and related to Conceptual Art. Although they do not seem as expressive, emotive, spiritual, or philosophical as the mid-century abstract painting to which they are visually most similar, they are not as detached, aloof, and impenetrable as usually thought. Realizing this requires looking at them without imposing theoretical agendas on intuitive responses or substituting them for artistic purpose. We must remember that artworks that are connected stylistically sometimes convey or elicit very different ideas, responses, and feelings. The connection of Richter's

abstractions to Neo-Expressionism seems logical at first because this movement originated in Germany around the time Richter began making these works. However, if Richter is questioning and undermining expression and meaning, how is he part of a movement that supposedly revitalized painting and its expressive capabilities? Moreover, Neo-Expressionism is such a broad and varied movement that it seems almost a moot point to debate Richter's place in it.

Richter's abstract paintings have definite stylistic affinities to Abstract Expressionism in their painterliness, residual evidence of technical processes, bold and powerful effects of color and light, and large scale. Yet they are obviously different in their aesthetic, emotive, and expressive effects. What explains their ambivalent similarity to Abstract Expressionism? They are better understood if their relationship to Pop Art is reconsidered. Pop Art is the mitigating bridge to earlier abstraction that helps explain this complex relationship. This is not surprising since Richter's career blossomed in the early 1960s, shortly after he moved to West Germany and immersed himself in modernist painting and abandoned the Socialist Realism he studied in his youth. This was just when Pop Art was rapidly gaining attention and acclaim and Abstract Expressionism was falling into historical context. In the 1960s Richter was very interested in Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein. His abstract paintings evolved as he absorbed, reinterpreted, and synthesized various aspects of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. The connection between Richter and Pop Art is rooted in his blurry paintings based on photographs of his youth, family, Germany during and after World War II, current events, and political issues, such as “Uncle Rudi” (1965), “Eight Student Nurses” (1966), and “October 18, 1977” (1988). Since these emulate but distort mass media imagery, they have been associated with Pop Art, and Richter became a major proponent of the style in Europe. Over the years, critics have related everything Richter has done to Pop Art in one way or another. Richter's drastic shifting among different painting styles has further complicated how his work has been interpreted. He demonstrates how stylistic development has become so complex, unpredictable, and erratic since the 1960s. In spite of widely accepted postmodernist theories which suggest otherwise, we still expect an artist to develop in a rather linear, orderly, logical way and are surprised when he does not.

Lichtenstein's paintings of brushstrokes, such as “Little Big Painting” and “Big Painting No. 6” (both 1965),² make us acutely aware that a painting consists of brushstrokes and marks of paint deliberately created. Done in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, they seem to be satirical criticisms or expressions of doubt about the philosophical and spiritual capabilities of painting, especially abstraction, and attempt to demystify its aesthetic and expressive possibilities. Lichtenstein's diagrammatic isolation of a few brushstrokes

in the manner of comic book illustration parallels Richter's fascination with paint marks and brushstrokes, which often led him to a curious arbitrariness and ambivalence in his disconnected, barely modeled paint application. Whereas “Red-Blue-Yellow” [Catalogue Raisonné 330] (1972) is a jumble of squiggly brushstrokes, “Abstract Painting” [CR 398–1] (1976) and “Abstract Painting” [CR 432–8] (1978) feature distinct brushstrokes described emphatically while evading emotion. In the earlier painting the scattered gray and white paint lines are most noticeable, while in the later painting the most conspicuous brushstrokes are the intersecting broad areas of blue and yellow. Many of Richter's early abstract paintings were based on photographic close-ups of paint surfaces. In “July” [CR 526] (1983), narrow strokes of green, broad patches of lightly shaded gray, red, yellow, and scribbles of orange create a composition with sharply discordant colors and textures and unevenly dispersed shapes. Richter has discussed his pursuit of “rightness” in pictorial composition, color, and technique, but this idea about painting seems anachronistic today. “July” offers an elusive resolution of purely abstract elements rooted in Pop Art's vivid, gaudy colors.

In “Abstract Painting” [CR 551–6] (1984), swirling streaks of gray and green and broad, thick, slightly modulated brushstrokes of dark green and brown allude to the evocative possibilities of painterly abstraction, but never achieve the potent feeling or genuine sensitivity of Abstract Expressionism because Richter's technique is not as fluid and elegant. This composition is rather similar to Gottlieb's *Bursts* (1957–74), except the irregular, brushy forms across the bottom of Gottlieb's paintings are more nuanced and indicative of the artist's presence and feeling. Richter is receptive to Lichtenstein's skepticism about the mystique of painting but does not completely agree with it. The complex relationship between Richter and Abstract Expressionism is apparent if Richter's “Abstract Painting” [CR 587–5] (1985) is compared to de Kooning's large abstractions of the late 1950s, such as “Palisade” (1957). In de Kooning's painting, violently brushed areas of blue, brown, and tan streak, twist, and crash into one another, while Richter's painting features a large red blotch, spiky black lines, and broadly scraped marks of green. Both have lots of blue and brown, but Richter's are so smoothly rendered as to suggest a landscape background, while de Kooning fluidly integrates these colors spatially with more spontaneous, liberated rendering and traditional blending of different colors and tones. De Kooning achieves a cohesion of forms, textures, and colors that Richter fails to achieve and probably never attempted. In the de Kooning we sense genuine self-revelation and feeling. This is much less apparent in the Richter, and Pop Art's filtration of earlier abstraction is the reason.

From 1969 to 1972, Lichtenstein did numerous paintings about mirrors and their reflections that used the Ben-Day dot system and various illustration techniques

to explore these complex visual phenomena. These paintings may be mildly satirical comments on Greenbergian modernism's ideas on the absence of space when total flatness is achieved. This series led to the merging of the mirror surface with the painting surface in works like “Mirror # 3 (Six Panels)” (1971),³ which are purely abstract in their own right. Richter has often explored the picture surface in similar ways. “Abstract Painting” [CR 554–2] (1984) has broad areas of blue, gray, and yellow-green that are smoothly rendered in most areas, except their intersecting, overlapping contours make it seem as if they squirm against one another as they confront or cling to the picture plane. The long, bent marks of green and orange on the left are similar in pictorial effect to the short parallel lines commonly used in illustrations to indicate reflections in mirrors and other shiny surfaces. “Abstract Painting” [CR 630–4] (1987) has rectangular areas of evenly-textured blue and yellow-green applied with a paint roller that engage the picture plane and attempt to merge with it. In the late 1980s and after, with the enormous “January” [CR 699] (1989) and “Abstract Painting” [CR 840–5] (1997), Richter's fusion of painting and picture plane is virtually complete. Both Lichtenstein and Richter flaunt the mass printing methods that they have employed or imitated. Richter uses squeegees, sponges, wood, and plastic strips to scrape, flatten, abrade, and congeal paint in an even, consistent way over the entire canvas. The use of various implements creates systematic, mechanical effects of textures and colors that mitigate the expressive connection usually expected between a painter and his media.

Warhol demonstrated for Richter some of the most salient aspects of Pop Art, like serial repetition, even dispersal of compositional elements, the blunt presentation of the subject, and the quasi-expressive distortion possible with vivid, garish colors and other visual effects derived from advertising, packaging, and mass printing. Richter absorbed these innovations into a more expressive, abstract mode. He has said he was particularly fascinated with Warhol's ability to obscure and dissolve images and that he was moved emotionally by his *Death and Disasters* series. This series consisted of paintings in which Warhol silkscreened photographs of electric chairs, automobile accidents, suicides, murders, and similarly disturbing subjects onto canvases and probed their meanings by repeating the same photographs, adding vivid colors, blurring, fading, and shifting the photographs while printing them, and altering their scale. Serial repetition and the strict emulation of commercial imagery are first apparent in Richter's abstractions in his color chart paintings of the late-1960s, in which many small rectangles of single hues are evenly dispersed on the canvas. These were based on color charts produced by paint manufacturers. Although their subject is typical of Pop Art, their flatness, composition uniformity, and large size are just as characteristic of Color Field painting. They are a virtually

perfect merger of these separate but concurrent movements.

Warhol's influence on Richter's abstract paintings is most apparent in his work of the past 25 years. "Abstract Painting" [CR 758-2] and "Abstract Painting" [CR 759-1] (both 1992) are two examples of how serial repetition across the composition is the primary visual effect. In the first, silvery gray vertical streaks cling to the picture plane as paler tones between them suggest depth. In the second, a sketchy grid of purple-gray blotches and streaks has the look and feel of an early Warhol silkscreen painting. "Abstract Painting" [CR 795] (1993) is a good example of Richter's success in combining serial repetition with deliberate fading and blurring. Vertical strips of green, red, blue, and orange rendered as fuzzy, hazy forms create horizontal vibrations on the canvas. This suggests that the painting presents a frame from a film of totally abstract images or a ruined and stained film, forever changing yet never really doing so. Warhol used repetition, fading, and blurring for emotional resonance very effectively in "Marilyn Diptych" (1962),⁴ creating an elegiac mood appropriate for the untimely death of the actress. Richter often uses blurring and fading in his paintings based on photographs, where their emotional impact is similar. In the past 25 years, he has often used the same pictorial devices in his abstractions to evoke similar emotions.

"Abstract Painting" [CR 778-2] (1992) is particularly interesting because it is an expressive abstract image based heavily on what Richter learned from Warhol. It features a grid-like array of white square areas tainted with blue and yellow. Oil paint has been textured methodically but creatively with large brushes and squeegees on the smooth metallic surface to create long, thin lines that make the shapes appear to shimmer and vibrate horizontally. Small areas of bright red are dispersed across the composition; some are rectangular blotches of thick, smooth paint and others are drips and streaks of fluid paint. This manipulation of red conveys a sense of shock, danger, and violence similar to Warhol's *Death and Disasters*. A good comparison with Richter's painting may be made with Warhol's "Red Disaster,"⁵ in

which a photograph of an electric chair is drenched in red ink and repeatedly printed as blurry in a grid-like arrangement on the canvas. Richter has admitted to his concerns about social malaise, psychological alienation, death, loss, and self-doubt, which he observed during his childhood in post-World War II Germany as the damage done by the war to many Germans became apparent. Warhol's "Statue of Liberty" (1962)⁶ is intriguingly similar to Richter's painting in its emotively suggestive impact. This painting repeats a photograph of the American monument as blurred, hazy, and tilted with empty space on the left while large areas of blue and gray and smaller areas of bright red stain the printed and altered photographs. Warhol has shocked the viewer with the unsettled, endangered, and violated presentation of this American icon. However, his blunt repetition and lack of personal touch ultimately render his meaning uncertain, and our initial emotional response is quickly halted. Warhol said that emotional responses to these provocative and disturbing photographs were neutralized by their abundant reproduction in the news media, that this desensitized viewers to the horrors shown. Richter's abstract paintings often do very much the same thing.

The vivid, garish, and clashing colors in many of Richter's abstract paintings were probably inspired by those Pop artists who exaggerated the simplified, bold, and eye-catching qualities of magazine illustrations, posters, signs, and billboards. Rosenquist's billboard paintings demonstrate how the intense, vibrant, and sensuous qualities of his subjects are made acutely obvious, gaudy, overwhelming, and chaotic through abrupt and improbable juxtapositions of forms, the extreme distortion and intensification of shapes, colors, and textures, and compositions where crowding, overlapping, and bizarre scale play with our recognition and interpretation of the familiar. Richter has known Rosenquist since at least 1970, when they met in Cologne, and he saw his work there and in New York City that year. Some of Rosenquist's billboard paintings of the 1970s and 1980s are quite similar to Richter's abstractions from the mid-1970s to the late-1980s. Since the 1970s, Rosenquist has explored an increasingly wider range of

subjects, including the cosmic, supernatural, and imaginary, and his style has often become more abstract, with lurid, dazzling, and startling colors as well as extreme, surprising textures that often clash visually.

Richter's "Clouds" [CR 514-1] (1982) is a large horizontal canvas with broad brushstrokes of dark green across the top, smoother, wider areas of blue across the bottom, and dabs and streaks of orange textured with squeegees and trowels on the right. The most jarring aspect of this painting is that the blue which we would assume is the sky is illogically located in the bottom of the composition, as if the world is upside-down. Such bizarre transformations and dislocations are common in Rosenquist's paintings and have become more extreme over the years. They are apparent in "Star Thief" (1980), in which a sliced view of a woman's face, bacon, and various metallic forms float in outer space, and "The Bird of Paradise Approaches the Hot Water Planet" (1989), in which a colorful bird-insect creature passes through layers of thick clouds with the radiant yellow light of a sun filling the space behind it. Richter's "Pavillion" [CR 489-1] (1982) consists of firmly isolated areas of disparate colors and textures with irregular, barely described contours, including smooth areas of blue and green, mottled lava-like orange, and wavy strokes of gray. This painting seems to contain abstract equivalents to the atomic blasts, clouds, astronauts, and canned spaghetti in Rosenquist's "F-111" (1964 - 65). Richter's "Abstract Painting" [CR 591-2] (1986) is a tour de force of vivid, explosive colors and extremely rich, sensuous textures, which vary from flowing, lava-like orange on the right to darker tan on the left, plus dry streaks of green and indigo scattered across the composition but mostly gathered in the left and center. A precisely rendered, dark triangular form that resembles a designer's ruled square juts into the foreground through an opening in these clumps and masses of paint. It is similar to many of Rosenquist's later paintings in its vivid, lush, and unrealistic textures and colors.

Although Richter's abstract paintings were affected greatly by the aesthetics of Pop Art, they have no connection to most of the subjects that Pop Art usually

explored. Despite being visually related to Abstract Expressionism, they are not particularly spiritual, philosophical, introspective, cathartic, or existential. The best explanation of what they mean actually comes from Richter, but it has long been buried under verbose theory. He has said that these abstract paintings are visualizations of imaginary places and experiences, of what has been conceived and invented by the artistic imagination. This is similar to the changing themes in Rosenquist's works in the 1970s and 1980s, to his bizarre, fantastic, and dreamlike subjects, although Rosenquist's paintings have always remained representational. Richter's pursuit of pictorial "rightness" in his abstract paintings, of organizing and balancing the components of a composition for visual, emotive, and expressive impact, is also essential to their meaning. This is as traditional as it is timeless, but some of his works are clearly more effective than others in this respect. "Abstract Painting" [CR 591-2] and "Abstract Painting" [CR 778-2] seem to have this elusive pictorial "rightness," when colors, textures, shapes, and forms come together in an image that is whole, appealing, and captivating. ☞

Endnotes

1. To see the Richter paintings discussed in this essay, consult gerhard-richter.com.
2. See, respectively, whitney.org/Collection/RoyLichtenstein/662, lichtensteinfoundation.org/0391.htm.
3. See artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184362.
4. See tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-marilyn-diptych-t03093.
5. See mfa.org/collections/object/red-disaster-34765.
6. See www.warhol.org/ArtCollections.aspx?id=1541.
7. For the works by James Rosenquist, see www.jimrosenquist-artist.com.

HERBERT R. HARTEL, JR. received his doctorate in modern, contemporary and American art from the CUNY Graduate Center and his B.A. in studio art and art history from Queens College. He has taught at Hofstra University, Baruch College, John Jay College, and Parsons School of Design. He has published articles in *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas*, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, and *New York History*, and numerous reviews in *The Art Book* and *Cassone: The Online Magazine of Art*. He is particularly interested in 20th century American art, abstraction, and symbolism.

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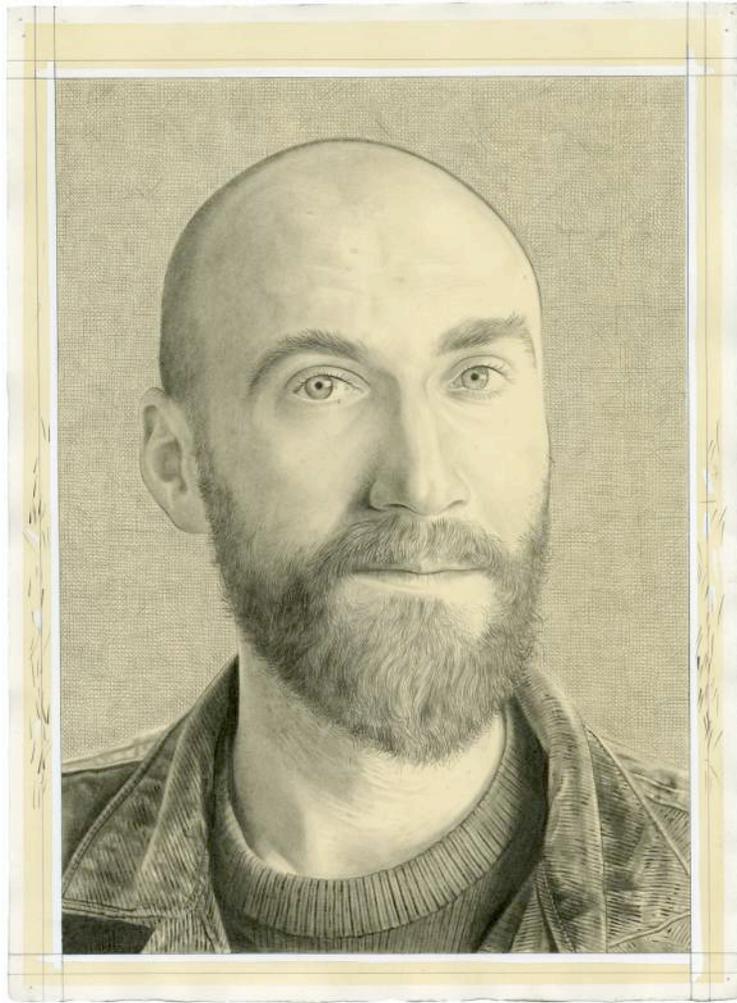
TOWARD POLYPHONIC CRITICISM

BY JARRETT EARNEST

A multivalent arena, rich and strange—something *polyphonic*, as Mikhail Bakhtin described Dostoevsky's work—what art criticism could be.

Sun poured through the third-floor windows overlooking Avenue A, filling the room with light as it continued to swell with strangers. It was the first day of class at BHQFU, the experimental free art school. I asked anyone who wanted to be in the class to arrive prepared to discuss George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* (1962), with no idea who would show up. I didn't expect to find myself looking out at nearly 90 faces from all over the city, almost all of them holding PDF print-outs covered with notes. For two hours we used Kubler's radical proposal—that “the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world”—to discuss what art is and how we go about making it right now in New York City. With this diverse range of people we had a more intellectually rigorous conversation than I ever recall in a doctoral seminar. The class was called “Object Lessons/Object Relations” and focused on the tangled insights and enthusiasms artists have for ideas and things not obviously related to their work. Each week a different guest chose a text for the students to read which we discussed like this on Sunday afternoons. Over two semesters we wrestled everything from the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* with Francesco Clemente, to *Herculine Barbin* with Juliana Huxtable; from Gesualdo's madrigals with Dorothea Rockburne, to Benjamin's *Storyteller* and the art of juggling with Michael Taussig. The special electricity of the meeting was that everyone was there solely because they *wanted* to be. It's an intoxicating feeling of all being in this together.

In opposition to the way a Google search flattens information, polyphony thickens it. Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's novels as “not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, *with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.” It is important that each voice is not subsumed by a unified ideological or authorial perspective, “constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other.” This understanding of the dialogic is why I remain intoxicated by the artist interview as a form: an encounter that can produce a different or unexpected knowing in both directions, for the interviewer and interviewee. My desire for polyphony in contemporary art is against a background of startling homogeneity under the sign of *professionalization*. There are many reasons for our current situation, but mostly it's rooted in the triumph of global capital in the digital age—“the market” is a monolog—reducing the mysterious sensuousness of lived experience into quantifiable and transmittable “information.” It is against this environment that I see both BHQFU and the *Brooklyn Rail* as radical openings in the New York art worlds, where the jangling of a polyphonic art discourse might begin to sound. It is no accident that these spaces are also islands of misfit toys; I believe in my core that art will always be the domain of weirdoes, even if the business of art is transacted in the land of professionals—we must always remember the difference.



Portrait of Jarrett Earnest. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

I assembled this guest editorship like a valentine for those out there I love talking with, attempting to craft the section into a small choir where the specificity of each voice is enriched by the ways it butts against another, forming unusual harmonies. To evoke the spirit of BHQFU I adapted into text Lisa Yuskavage's visit to my class, focusing her discussions of Nina Simone and Giovanni Bellini—it vividly conveys so much of the heart-felt playfulness that can come out of putting people and things in unexpected conversation. There are three personal accounts of early important friendships with poets, accompanied by facsimiles of correspondence and personal ephemera: David Levi Strauss on Robert Duncan and Jess; Nancy Goldring on Robert Lax; and Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve on Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet—each an iconic figure that created their own way of being an artist in the world. The recollections make visible the beautiful, intergenerational complexity with which culture ferments. To pay homage to Bakhtin's polyphony as a graphic metaphor there are two pieces on music. I asked Dave Hickey to expand on his country music criticism of the 1970s, an essay on Dolly Parton's songs, which he says “capture the complexities of life as it is lived in the ambiguities of language as it is spoken.” By contrast Aliza Shvarts meditates on the metal band Sunn O)))'s extended drones, seeking embodied histories of race and sex, witchcraft, and reproductive labor. Many leitmotifs across the group resonate with the acumens of Bill Berkson's “All in One”; in fact the heart of the polyphonic theme itself is summed up breezily when he says: “Pasternak's *Zhivago* told us something about polyphony: ‘You in others—that is your soul.’ I think the other way round is true, too, to some extent.”

I want to warmly thank the intrepid Phong Bui, Sara Roffino, and Sara Christoph for the heroic jobs they do every month to keep the *Brooklyn Rail* symphony bopping along, and Walter Chiu and Maggie Barrett, for always making it radiate. ☺

ABOUT POLYPHONY: All in One BY BILL BERKSON

*When he's painted himself out of it,
de Kooning says his picture's finished*

—Edwin Denby

The most beautiful dream is that moment in *Purgatorio* when first Virgil rejoins the four shades of ancient poets “on the enamelled green,” and after a while they invite Dante in, “so that I was sixth amid so much wisdom”—the gist being there's room for more.

The teachers are always there, in mind, in acquired gestures, voice, things casually said that become markers. Older men who keep teaching me new things are Kenneth Koch, Alex Katz, Frank O'Hara, two of whom are dead, but I hear them constantly.

Did I learn more from them than from the outnumbering ones my own age, or now, much younger poets and artists?

A teacher is not necessarily a hero or role model. “Always meet your heroes,” Robert Creeley once said. That way, you see that everyone is in the same boat.

Almost 50 years since Frank O'Hara died, I know less about the person but more and more about his poems.

I don't feel that art or personality is a contest about exclusivity. Maneuvering for identity in art seems to make artists ill at ease with themselves and others.

Style at best is something you can't help. Most people think it's an achievement, but it mostly comes from flaws and limitations. People borrow other people's glitches.

Funny, I'm hearing Creeley again here, whom I resisted mightily at first because he made such a struggle about his own continuity—“trying to be in my life,” as I once heard him say. But he had this joke: “X says, Who am I? and a voice comes back, Who's asking?”—like out of one of those Magic 8-Ball toys.

Or the old, oft-quoted story—was it John Cage or Philip Guston who told it?—about how, as you work, the room is full of other artists, but as you keep at it, one by one they all leave, and then the work is you. Nonsense—nobody leaves. You are just the same old material for the work, and perhaps at a certain point the work begins to talk back.

I have an unfixed, relatively unstable character, or anyway my poetry seems to reflect that.

As far as personality is concerned, for a long time I was confused. Then, at a certain point, I decided to go with what I had.

Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* told us something about polyphony: “You in others—that is your soul.” I think the other way round is true, too, to some extent.

I like my poems to have good company. ☺

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BILL BERKSON is a poet and art critic living in San Francisco and New York. He is professor emeritus at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he taught art history, writing, and poetry from 1984–2008. The author of many books of poetry and criticism, his newest, *Expect Delays*, was published last fall by Coffee House Press.

To Robert and Jess
 Congratulations on
 your new projector!
 Jane and I will
 be in Buffalo the
 1st week of May - on
 a lec-tour together at
 last. Joy to you,
 Stan

"SONG 6"
 AND
 "SONG 7"
 by Brakhage
 for Robert Duncan
 and Jess Collins
 (for "beeps" if
 you like) Love, Stan

Inscribed box of Stan Brakhage's 8mm films *Song 6* and *Song 7* given to Duncan and Jess, subsequently gifted to David Levi Strauss.

of linguistics came from de Angulo, as did the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) that was a big part of the Poetics Program, allowing us to hear and see poems in languages in which we weren't fluent. Ezra Pound got Duncan a job as de Angulo's typist, and then when de Angulo was dying of cancer, Duncan became his nurse, and learned about death from him. This is right before the beginning of Duncan's life with Jess. In his poem "An Essay at War," Duncan refers to de Angulo as "A bomb house, falling away from us, / reappearing in his own light, / a spiritual refinement," and repeats the line from de Angulo, "What can I teach you / when there is no time for teaching?"

When there was no time left, Duncan continued to teach, to try to give it all away.

Duncan was a muse poet, an Orphic poet, a vatic poet. *Vates* (seer) is the oldest name for a poet, but it fell into disuse and contempt, and was replaced by *poeta* (maker) until restored to honor by Virgil. Now it is used to refer to an oracle, a teacher, a master in any art or profession. It's a Celtic word, and the Indo-European root means to inspire or spiritually arouse. ⑥

* This text was originally given as a talk at an event with the above title, organized by the artist Jesse Bransford and sponsored by NYU's Department of Art, Steinhardt School, and Grey Art Gallery, in conjunction with the exhibition at the Grey Gallery, *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle*. The discussion also included art historian Susan Aberth and artist Carol Bove, and was held in the Einstein Auditorium on Stuyvesant Street in the East Village on February 28, 2014.

DAVID LEVI STRAUSS is a scholar and writer living in New York. He is the chair of the graduate program in Art and Criticism & Writing at the School of Visual Arts. The author of several books on photography and politics, his recent collection *Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow* was published last year by Aperture.

poem consists of verses of
 sounded speech giving rise to → sounded
 silences

Robert Duncan
 SILENCES ARE NOT THE ABSENCE OF SPEECH
 PASSAGES
 In Blood's Domaine

The Angel Syphillis in the circle of Signators loses its hosts to swarm
 mounting the stem of being to the head

are not eased into Death Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Swift
 the undoing of Mind's rule in the brain.

"Yet it is in spirit that nature is timelessly enveloped." And, as above, so below there are
 spirochete invasions that eat at the sublime envelope, not alien, but familiars
 Life in the dis-ease radiates invisibilities devour my star

and Time restless crawls in center upon center cells of lives within life conspire
 the Angel Cancer crawls across the signs of the Zodiac to reach its
 appointed time and bringing down the carnal pride bursts into flower—
 Swift, Baudelaire, Nietzsche into the heart Eternal of what Poetry is
 answer to the genius and science of the Abuss. The first sign of this advancing power
 shows in Fear that goes clear to the bone to gnaw at the marrow
 the secretes Lou Andreas-Salomé sees long before the hour arrives
 [mais] "Tantôt sonnera l'heure où le divin Hasard,
 où l'auguste Vertu, ton épouse encore vierge" where black the infected blood
 gushes forth from Rilke's mouth, from his nose, from his rectal canal
 news his whole body bears as its truth of the septic rose
 Où le Repentir même (oh! la dernière auberge!)

Lovely then
 that Death come to carry you away from the moment of this splendor
 that bursts the cells of your body like a million larvae triumphant
 come to life in the fruit All the spreading seeds, the viral array
 taking over flesh as the earth is it scarlet eruptions

And the pneumatics torn in the secret workings of the Angel Tuberculosis
 (No, I do not speak of the Evils or of Agents of Death but these Angels
 are attendants of lives raging within life, and these Wings we dread
 viruses, bacilli come home to thrive in us où tout te dira
 "Meurs, vieux lâche! il est trop tardi!" Die, you old coward,
 It is too late. I feel the ringing of tomorrow's bell.

But what ate at Pound's immortal Mind? for the Cantos, for Les Fleurs de Mal—
 what malady? what undoing-of-all-Good work behind speech?
 are the matter I come from: these poisons I must know the hidden intensions of
 where "This coil of Geryon" (Djerion) said Mr Carlyle, who now becomes
 Thomas Carlyle, not in Congress, but the genius of "Hero Worship" his (our) congress
 And if I know not my wound it does not appear to suppurate? in this intercourse
 "Adolf furious from perception" —does this though refer to Hitler?
 Link by link I can disown no link of this chain from my conscience.
 Would you forget the furnaces of burning meat purity demands?
 There is no ecstasy of Beauty in which I will not remember Man's misery.
 Jesus, in this passage (he is like a man coming forward in a hospital theater)
 cries out: I come not to heal but to tear the scab from the wound you want to forget.
 May the grass no longer spread out to cover the works of man in the ruin of earth.
 What Angel? what Gift of the Poem, has brought into my body
 this sickness of the living? Into the very Gloria of Life's theme and variations
 my own counterpart of Baudelaire's terrible Ennuie?

(Corrected by Duncan 5; IV; 82)

David Levi Strauss's copy of *Sulfur* #3 (1982) with Robert Duncan's "In Blood's Domain" corrected by Duncan April 5, 1982. In part, text reads "silences are not the absence of speech."

GROUND WORK
 for David Levi Strauss
 adhering to his source!
 (R) July 1984

Robert Duncan's inscription in his *Ground Work* (1984) "for David Levi Strauss/adhering to his source! (RD/July 1984," referencing Duncan's *Dante Études: Book Two* (1974):

Lovely

The way Dante bestows himself
 monarchical throughout his thought
 and in every imagination
 adhering to his source!

LISA YUSKAVAGE ON NINA SIMONE AND GIOVANNI BELLINI

Painter Lisa Yuskavage was a guest in my spring 2014 class “Object Lessons” at BHFU, the experimental free art school in the East Village. Each guest chose a book, film, or work of art for the class to study prior to a group conversation. Yuskavage selected a video on YouTube of Nina Simone performing “Feelings” live at the Montreux Jazz Festival (1976) and the documentary *Comedian* (2002) which follows Jerry Seinfeld and a fledgling comedian through the world of stand-up comedy. She also asked for everyone to look at Giovanni Bellini’s “St. Francis in the Desert” (1480) at the Frick collection. This text was adapted from the beginning and end of that two-hour sprawling conversation. —JE

LISA YUSKAVAGE: When I first found this clip, I am not sure what I was looking for but it was certainly not because I was looking for this particular song—I disliked it in the ’70s when it was played a lot on the radio—“feelings, nothing more than feelings whoa whoa whoa feelings.” I looked it up last night and read that Julie Andrews declared that she would never sing this song because it had no meaning whatsoever. My interest in this clip is really not about the song but rather what Nina does with it. Nor did I ask you to watch it because of Nina Simone fandom. Who doesn’t love Nina Simone? I have to admit that I watch this video for a long period just prior to painting. It contains a glimpse of something that is almost never or just seen. It allows us to watch a transformational moment in a great artist. When an artist is doing something publicly, often they’re very polished, distanced from the viewer. Part of the reason it’s important to do these types of talks at schools, where younger artists come in person and observe, is that it’s helpful to get a sense of what another artist is like, what is the cut of their jib, “what do they smell like?” or “what is their laundry detergent?” or whatever. All that kind of stuff somehow helps make people real, and at the same time it kind of helps you understand how this might be done, as opposed to looking at a glossy finished thing, which is never very helpful. Anyway, somehow I looked at this video of Nina Simone singing “Feelings” live. I never saw her perform but someone that I know did and said that she would get angry at her audience all the time, and I was fascinated by that—and wonder what’s that like? In this clip she’s definitely pissed off at her audience over and over again—you can see that. What you don’t see here is the beginning where she’s been playing another song and has been wandering around the stage saying, “Where is David Bowie?” And the audience is shouting, “Just play a song!” And she yells back, “Oh, shut up.” She’s in this weird dynamic with the audience, a real push and pull, but she’s very grand and puffed up and then she finally sits down at the piano and begins to play and just peels into this supposedly meaningless and cornball song “Feelings” which is not on any of her albums. She starts playing it in an improvisational way and then stops—and I think the audience may have been talking or whatever—and she says ironically, “Like ... a ... robot.” She’s getting very nasty with the audience now, and continues, “the ... robot ... is ... going ... to play,”—just being rude, in a really great way. “Okay?” Here is an artist having a head on confrontation with the audience: they’re NOT connecting with her and she’s attacking them, and then she somehow miraculously gets totally reabsorbed—playing this song that, for Julie Andrews has absolutely no meaning but for Nina, in playing the piano and singing the words, she loses herself so completely. I’ve never witnessed anything like it. Especially since she’s just been yelling at the audience three seconds before. Watching the fluid movements of her brain is what I found fascinating as a maker of art. To watch someone go from that much confrontation and being outside of themselves to what you watch here: an artist who is before your eyes, is traveling through time and space and connecting to the songwriter’s innermost heart—“Feelings like I’ve never lost you, and feelings like

I’ll never have you, again in my heart.” She is singing and then—she stops playing—and says, “Goddammit. Like, what a shame to have to write a song like that.” It’s so intense, witnessing this and she’s experiencing some profound emotional range that Julie Andrews said didn’t exist and I certainly never heard before. Nina’s in it, like deep, deep, deep. And she starts talking about the emotions, and the audience apparently didn’t know how to respond. They’re obviously stunned, and she then gets really nasty again, berates them, “Well come on people, clap!” I’m now dramatizing the whole thing in slow motion for you because it actually goes so quickly. I’ve watched it so many times, and you may wonder “Why would I want you to watch it?” I don’t know why I want to watch it other than I love watching a real inner transformation happening, and that’s what this is. It’s so rare to catch it.

[Nina Simone video “Feelings” plays.]

I love that the whole time, Nina keeps rooting for the audience. She’s like this person from outer space that is so powerful, so disconnected from those people, they just don’t know what to do with her. They’re clapping at the wrong times, they’re not clapping, and she just keeps coming back to bringing it and believing in them. It’s so intense. YouTube can be very intense. [Laughter.] And I just always wanted to show that to somebody.

JARRETT EARNEST: And there is nothing like starting a discussion by being punched in the gut emotionally.

STUDENT 1: You cut it before that part where she says it’s “embarrassingly soft.” I watched it this morning, and there’s a part where she’s like, “now it’s embarrassingly soft.” And she gets really quiet, and it’s like, *oh my god*.

STUDENT 2: She’s really conflicted about singing it, too. In a sense, she’s also questioning herself, it’s not just Julie Andrews—this is like a showbiz joke, this song.

YUSKAVAGE: I looked it up on Wikipedia last night in preparation for today—it has its own page, this song—it is listed among the “World’s Worst Songs,” whatever that means—things come and go as awful—but that’s why, in a weird way, it’s even more amazing.

STUDENT 3: She actually takes something that’s debased and elevates it.

YUSKAVAGE: That moment when she stops and says to herself or to the spirit of Morris Albert, “Goddamn,” I don’t know what I would have done had I been in the audience at the time. After she was just berating me—I don’t know if you’ve ever been in the presence of somebody where you can just never get it right. You know they’re great and no matter what you say, you’re just constantly wrong—Wrong! Wrong!—and you just start getting more and more intimidated. I can imagine how intimidating it was, but actually that audience that day got to see something that is more profound, and rarer at least, than seeing a baby being born. [Laughter.] And that’s the kind of thing I am looking for everyday—every minute of everyday—that’s what I want to see. Of course you’re never going to get to see it. It would be a worthwhile goal to bring forth that kind of intensity into the world every once in a while. It’s not about being sophisticated, it’s just about sharing something, going somewhere, and letting others witness it.

That’s what we are doing in the pesky business of art making, we people who are feeling, being empathic—I don’t mean to refer to that song—but we are the people who are feeling and creating visual philosophies for the world. What we are doing is utterly useless until it’s not useless. After 9/11 I was on a jury for the Sharpe Foundation, and this image goes up—and the problem with these juries, especially now, is that everything is digital and it all looks the same. This guy, Stephen Vitiello, was a sound artist and he had his studio at the World Trade Center, on the 100th-something floor. Luckily I had just heard on NPR a conversation with the artist, and I was the only one in the room who had heard it. Everybody was questioning what we were looking at, “What the hell are we looking at? Is that a Realist painting? What

is that?” And everybody was ready to pass but I said, “Wait a minute, I think that that’s a microphone and the view is from the World Trade Center. Let’s stop and read about this guy.” It turns out there was a little audio file. His work puts microphones on buildings and takes sound—you know, whatever, ephemeral, who the fuck cares, right? Until you really need it. It’s what we all do, it only is important when it’s needed, and that’s why we just need to keep doing it even though it seems utterly useless. There is a way in which everything has its place, and we can’t say when that moment is going to happen. Now that’s an extreme example, and those sounds are amazing—that building moved quite a bit, it swayed in the wind—and there is something very powerful about that work after 9/11 with the towers gone.



EARNEST: You also wanted to talk about Bellini.

YUSKAVAGE: I went to Tyler and they had a third year abroad. When I heard about it, wild horses could not have stopped me from going. I did whatever I could to earn the dough, I was a nude model, I taught swimming lessons, waited on tables, I did anything to save money to go. I finally got to Italy and it was really ridiculous because the painting teachers assigned us to make 100 paintings while we were there for three months—I hate that kind of teacher. First of all, maybe I’m not the kind of person that makes 100 paintings—what a dumb assignment. So instead I said, “I’m in Italy, I’m going out there, and I’m not going to be stuck in the studios, sorry dude.” I got very bad grades that year in every subject, but it was worth it. I remember I went on this trip to Venice, which is how I got into the Bellininess of Bellini. Even better than seeing something in person is to see it *in situ*, in the place it was made for, where it was meant to be. One November day at five o’clock in Venice on this field trip, it was cold and already pitch black outside. Our art history teacher, Flavia, had more energy than we did and she was running to see one more painting—most people went back to the hotel to get a drink. The guy I had a crush on was going with her to see it, and that’s the only reason I went too. We go to the Church of San Zaccaria and she put some money in the meter and these lights go on, and the painting lights up. It’s a Bellini painting called the “Sacred Conversation” (1505). I totally forgot about the boy—I forgot about boys for a long time after that—I was like “This is the best fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” It blew me away. I spent years trying to understand it—I had 10 minutes looking at it.

EARNEST: Could you talk a little bit more about what the Bellininess of Bellini is?

YUSKAVAGE: Well this is the point, you go to Venice and you get it. There’s a term *poesis*, which sounds kind of bad—I don’t like the sound of it, because it sounds limp, but it’s not. *Poesis* is also in Giorgione; it’s paintings which, for the first time in history, have no narrative—the narrative is created by the viewer. I was one of the only kids at Tyler who was neither Jewish nor an atheist. I had been raised Catholic and so I knew all the stories behind all the paintings and all the kids asked over and over “Lisa, who is this saint, what are they doing?” I walked into San Zaccaria and I saw this amazing Bellini painting with no narrative, unlike any other works we had seen, and then the fact that the title was “Sacred Conversation.” For years I studied it, and I think *poesis* is important because it is essentially formalism as narrative.

EARNEST: What was it you found in the painting years later?

YUSKAVAGE: It’s an extremely contemporary, modern idea. In the “Sacred Conversation” if you just follow what you’re seeing, you don’t need to know anything about St. Francis, you don’t need to know that it’s Italy—the humanity in the work comes through the visual language. Pictorial language, if you’re a painter or if you like to look at paintings, is simply the construction of the painting as

emotion. You can see it from a mile away, it's aggressive. The painting's aggressive, the painting is mournful. The "Sacred Conversation" painting in Venice has four saints, and none of them are looking at each other. None of them seem to be aware of anyone else in this alcove. Bellini painted the alcove, which actually does represent the church, it has the same architectural details and everything, and he painted a make-believe window with light coming in. I think that the state of mind of Venetians is part of what led to the ability to think this way, in this kind of dreaminess. It's a dream, the way dreams don't really make sense but within dreams they make perfect sense. They seem to be nonsensical, and every character in it is you. You look at this painting and see the two male saints, the two female saints, then there's Madonna and child on the throne and then there's an angel playing the viola. And you have to ask yourself where's the conversation? Nobody is talking, there is no conversation. So what's happening? Then you realize the conversation is a psychic one and I truly believe that painting communicates through form psychically. It speaks through the mind. I think that in great art something happens like that. I don't mean *psychic* like the gypsy in the storefront who wants to read your palm—"Pretty lady, come here!" I think it's amazing you can really feel something like mourning and loss, and that's what a lot of those paintings are about. And then, the Bellini painting, the "Sacred Conversation" painting,



Giovanni Bellini, "The Sacred Conversation," San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505. Oil on wood.

When I first started making punchy art people started punching back at me, and I was like "whoa that hurt!" I realized after a while, I hit them first, and that's fucking awesome—you connected, and they're connecting back, now it's game on.

when I looked at it again and again and again, one thing I realized was that all of these people didn't even speak the same language, they're from different countries and they died at different times in history, and in this painting, in this alcove, through representation, through the sleight of hand, the gift of representing something in this light, you believe they're there. He brings them together, and obviously they didn't live at the same time as the baby Jesus, because Jesus supposedly, if you follow the narrative, had been crucified. For these people to die and be made saints, this kid was grown up and dead already. So, what's going on in this room?—I realized that this is blissful heaven. This is a depiction of life after death. I looked at it again and I thought "Oh my god, all of these people died in excruciating pain." And then, this painting is so peaceful, there's such peace there, it's like when pain stops. It's a very profound painting and

I think that Bellini has this ability to transmit all that. He was a person of great feeling and of great awe. He was a believer.

In that Seinfeld thing they talked about stand-up being like going up there in your underwear. I think painting can be far more horrifying than that. I'd go up in my underwear any day. If I could go into the gallery and stand in my underwear as opposed to have a show, it would be a cinch. People would come in and make fun of me, I would make fun back. That would be easy. The real problem is to show something and be even more vulnerable. To let even more out. Believe in stuff. I guess that's kind of why, when I looked at all the things I gave you today, I was thinking "Don't be afraid to believe in stuff. Be open." I want to keep being a sucka, and I don't want to get jaded. When I first started making punchy art people started punching back at me, and I was like

"whoa that hurt!" I realized after a while, I hit them first, and that's fucking awesome—you connected, and they're connecting back, now it's game on. I'm going to be black and blue, but I like contact. I like art as a contact sport. I know what it's like to make art that is not heard, and I don't know if you feel that way, but it's very painful. It's very painful to make art and there's absolutely no audience for it. Not even bad; bad is better. But in the process of all of that you must not let it change you and the sort of art you make. It's like people calling my paintings "horrible" or then "old masterly." I agree with it both half the time but I don't want it to change me. I want to remain vulnerable. Goddamn. ☹

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LISA YUSKAVAGE is a painter living in New York. Her next solo exhibition will be in April at David Zwirner, New York. *The Brood*, a survey of her polyptychs, opens Fall 2015 at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.



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Photo: Exhibition of works by Cindy Sherman at Metro Pictures Gallery, 2008



BLACK WEDDING

BY ALIZA SHVARTS

Metal is an overwhelmingly white and heteromascu-
linist subculture. Yet as such, it offers something useful to a prurient queer feminist interest. Let me be clear: there are a lot of different people who make metal and different people who listen to it. But what interests me more than metal's arguable diversity is the way it creates a rich aesthetic world from the discourses of degradation, brutality, degeneracy, and wayward flesh that have historically disciplined racial and sexual difference. To put it more simply: metal is a relevant site to dark radical queers and feminists precisely because it is usually not for us but about us. Its corporeal excess, occult allegiances, and bestial imaginary were first ours—marks assigned to the dark queer effeminate deviations from the universal subject's cohesive form. I listen to metal from behind, from the shadows of a stowaway's hideout, a parasitical perspective. And I like metal because I recognize myself as its material substrate.

Take, for example, the drone metal band Sunn O)))'s song "Black Wedding (Lament For A Nordic Vision Buried by Time and Dust)." An early composition from their first recorded album, *GrimmRobe Demos* (1998), it's just over 19-minutes long and consists almost entirely of low guitar and bass notes. Slow, heavy, and long, the song becomes intense through its duration. Lacking metal's characteristic hard fast rhythms, it makes metal of soft extremity. The way the elongated tail of each held note blends into a new one feels cyclical, exhausting, doomed. The song is elegiac not just in its title but in its general tonality, making audible the circular temporality of mourning. Every now and then, you can hear higher fleeting electronic sounds, which are like brief interludes of individual interest against the unending background sound of something being lost. You can also hear the sound of wind—the enormity of time itself.¹

While Sunn O))) is usually discussed in relation to another drone metal band, Earth, by whom they were deeply influenced, the title of "Black Wedding" suggests that they also have a more unlikely bedfellow: Norwegian black metal. An extreme sub-genre that emerged in Oslo in the early 1990s, black metal is characterized by rapid rhythms, shrieking vocals, distinctive "corpse paint" make-up, and harsh (sometimes blood-letting) performances. Often called "satanic metal" in the press, the early scene was associated in Norway with numerous church burnings and several murders.² Sunn O))) has acknowledged their indebtedness to black metal in multiple interviews, including one for the black metal fanzine *Slayer*.³ Sunn O))) guitarist Stephen O'Malley even used to make a black metal fanzine himself.⁴ Though most of their work sounds nothing like black metal, their fifth album *Black One* (2005) uses clear black metal tremolos and features singer Malefic from black metal band Xasthur. Moreover, Atilla Csihar, vocalist for the black metal band Mayhem, is a frequent collaborator. For these reasons, I understand "Black Wedding" as an announcement of an underlying consanguinity. The first song on the first album, it is a promise of what is to come: of the musical innovations that Sunn O))) will later become so well known for in both metal and avant-garde music circles. It is, as the title tells us, a wedding: a promise that forges a relation, an act that conjures a familial bond in order to imagine a future.

A wedding is a very specific type of act in our Western context. As speech act theorist J.L. Austin famously asserted, a wedding is a performative instance par excellence, as the marriage vow "I do" is a powerful example of when *saying something* is literally *to do it*.⁵ As queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick later elaborated, the wedding scene and the contractual consent of the marriage vow are historically conditioned by structural formations of power: by heterosexuality (or as we might

now further specify in the age of gay marriage, a hetero- and homo-normativity premised on the nuclear family unit that is the reproducing agent of good citizenship as recognized by the State) and the noncontractual and nonconsensual legacy of chattel slavery against which contracts and consent between emancipated citizen-subjects can take shape.⁶ Yet listen to the song *as a wedding*, and otherwise unasked questions form: What does its soundscape bring together? What lineage does its unique droning composition recall? To my ear, it is clear that "Black Wedding" calls on the historical structures of power that are its condition of possibility. It sounds the genealogical formations and reproductive labors that suture the rights of subjecthood to the inheritance of citizenship and property.⁷ Like the low cyclical guitar sounds, these reproductive relations are immersive, miasmatic, perpetuating, and unending, imagined as an endless ecological resource. They are not remunerated as work, but vitally prepare a *capacity* to work—maintaining the body, the labor force, the system of commodity production and property itself.⁸

The horror of this reproductive labor—of its formation through primitive accumulation, colonial expropriation, and dispossession—has always been the subject of black metal, as imagined from the subject position of the white European. The "satanic" elements of black metal—its anti-Christianity, demon-worship, and occult iconography—are a form of anti-coloniality; after all, buried beneath the nihilism and will to destruction is an imagination of and longing for a lost Pagan past. Without a doubt, a lot of black metal is misogynist, racist, homophobic, and has in the past decades become more and more aligned with fascist right-wing movements; yet these virulent outgrowths might be better understood as symptomatic of black metal's traumatic attachment to historical wounds that continue to fester. Black metal makes putrescent what mainstream culture has sanitized. It unearths the bodies buried by enlightened rational thought. This exhumation is quite literal insofar as black metal's occult imagery invokes narratives of witchcraft forged in the mass gynocides following the Protestant Reformation. In the 16th century, a witch was a woman who exerted intention and control over her reproductive capacity, which posed a threat to social reproduction at large. A midwife, spinster, or abortionist. And with the European imperialist expansion of the 16th–20th centuries, witchcraft became a cipher for race, comingling ideas of darkness, blackness, femaleness, and beastliness, creating a specter of the occult served to legitimate enslavement and domestic servitude.⁹ To this end, black metal's demon-worship is a necromancy that revivifies the horror of very real historical crimes too-often forgotten.

Despite the recent theoretical attention, scholars have thus far overlooked precisely what is "black" about black metal. Media theorists such as Eugene Thacker have turned to black metal as a provocation for philosophy, using it to think through broader questions about being and nothingness, meaning and its negation.¹⁰ Importantly, for these scholars, blackness is absence, void. And it is in relation to *this* point that Sunn O)))'s sonically saturated "Black Wedding" sounds what the theorists cannot think to say. Blackness—even as abstraction—is not nothing but something. The idea of blackness cannot be separated from blackness as a historically lived position.¹¹ The armed conflict and enslavement that enabled trans-Atlantic and eventually global trade produced two types of life: one that could legally own and inherit property, and the other that was reproduced as property able to be owned. The chromatic abstraction of blackness as nothing correlates to the historical production of whiteness as the legal prerogative to own something. Black metal is not merely an aesthetic premised on negation, on the annihilation of the human subject, but is more specifically, a revolt against the humanism forged in the crucible of colonial conquest that selectively produced bodies as subjects under the law. Black metal can thus be

useful for philosophical and political inquiry precisely because it is a hysterical and reactionary recognition of the normalized racism and misogyny upon which the West's cultural hegemony depends—useful not so much for its primary producers and consumers, but for an umbral audience.

In Sunn O))) I hear amplified this lineage, this project, this use. As a performative coupling between two metal practices, "Black Wedding" distills the extreme propositions of black metal into an extended sonic drone. Music critics have long pointed out that metal bears a relation to the sound of industry: the cacophony of the machine, the clamor of the factory, the noisy labor of waged work. And while Black metal explores the roots of this sonic economy—the originary thefts that made industrialization possible—bands such as Sunn O))) shift metal's focus to the murmur of reproductive and affective work which has always enabled productive industry and has come to new prominence in service economies. It is in this connection to black metal, this connection to the extremity and extension of reproductive labor—its magic, horror, and drone—that "Black Wedding" sounds questions of feminism that we struggle to ask in more mainstreamed conversations. It is not only that feminism as a practical politics need be inclusive; it is not that feminism needs to be less white, less straight; it is that there can be no straight white feminism. As a radical philosophy, feminism can be nothing else than a critique of that able-bodied, legally-endowed subject against which blackness, queerness, femininity, deviancy, and debility have been historically defined. These might be big claims to make in relation to metal, but they are not for metal: they are about us. And what I am suggesting is that when we listen, we can hear clearly our common material stake. ☞

ALIZA SHVARTS is an artist and scholar, finishing her PhD in Performance Studies at New York University, and is currently on the editorial board of *Women & Performance*, a journal of feminist theory.

Endnotes

1. For more of my writing on Sunn O))), see "Troubled Air: The Drone and Doom of Reproduction in Sunn O)))'s Metal Maieutic" in *Women & Performance*, 24:2 (January 2015).
2. For more a more in-depth history of black metal, see Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind's *comprehensive though controversial Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 1998).
3. See *Slayer XX: BLOOD FIRE DEATH* (2010).
4. See *Descent* (1994-1999).
5. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1962] 1975).
6. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
7. For a more on the relationship between marriage, sexual assault, property, and enslavement, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
8. For more on reproductive labor in relation to a labor theory of value, see Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hillary Creek, ed. Jim Fleming (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia: 1995).
9. For more on the witchcraft and reproductive labor in the context of Western European gynocide and colonial encounter, see Silvia Federici's excellent *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia 2004).
10. See Eugene Thacker's "Occultural Studies 1.0: Black Metal" in *Mute Magazine* (metamute.org, 2010). See also *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro (CreativeSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).
11. See Fred Moten's "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism*, 20:2 (Spring 2008).

“PUTTING YOURSELF IN A PLACE WHERE GRACE CAN FLOW TO YOU”

Nancy Goldring on Robert Lax

“One of the great original voices of our times ... a pilgrim in search of beautiful innocence, writing lovingly, finding it simply, in his own way,” Jack Kerouac said of American poet Robert Lax (1915 – 2000). Lax lived on the Greek island of Patmos much of his life, writing small crystalline poems that recall the formal severity and emotional richness of his friends Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt. In 1978 artist Nancy Goldring met Lax and began a friendship which continued to his death. During that time, Goldring developed her unique work process called “foto-projections” that involves layering slide-projected images onto drawings which are re-photographed in cycles, becoming tangled webs of time, space, and memory. Here she recalls their time together and collaborating on the installation *Legend* (1991).

NANCY GOLDRING: I arrived on Patmos in May 1978 age 33. My original plan was to stay on nearby Samos until I realized living alone on an island with an army base might not be a good idea. Advised by a Dutch family that Patmos was a good place to be “lonely,” I set off on a tiny boat filled with priests and goats. The last to exit the boat, having been elbowed out of the way by the holy men and their flock, I managed to negotiate a simple room with exquisite views looking up to the monastery and out onto the harbor. It was low season with few tourists and the locals friendly. Soon people began to ask if I had met the poet, “Have you met Petrus? He comes to town for his mail, you’ll recognize him.” Maybe two weeks passed before he arrived in town. He came looking for “the artist”—and so we found each other. I wrote about our encounter in my journal. I’ll read it:

Roberto Petrus Lax. Has been here for 16 years. He walks around the island, bushy white hair, wild blue eyes, stubble beard, with an abstracted gait. His loose blue jeans identified him as an American and his special lean look revealed him as not a Greek. Our first conversation I felt as if I could babble on and on and he wouldn’t halt the flow. We had stories to tell each other, travels, places. “America is just a place for us,” he laughs, tells stories, speaks to everyone in town with a friendliness all his own, has been so removed from the world that I grew up in, and yet it seemed not foreign to his experience. He hasn’t lost himself and makes immediate contact for someone who would be so lonely.

Many called him “the hermit”—but that wasn’t remotely true. There was always a steady stream of visitors. All the surfaces of his little house were covered with piles of letters. His was a rich and complicated life. Imagine, Avedon flew in on a helicopter to photograph him.

He looked carefully and long at my drawings and seemed to understand them. He didn’t need make any complimentary comments. He felt they suited their poems.

That was the summer I took only one book, Wallace Steven’s *Palm at the End of the Mind*. I didn’t want to get lost in novels, I wanted to be *there*—

That they suited their poems seemed important to me too. We stopped in the restaurant with a view I had used in one of the drawings and the owner asked if I were his daughter. She insisted that we absolutely resembled each other. He confirmed her beliefs and we laughed on it. He recited at a fast clip, stopped only to check his watch, and asked if I had seen the monastery and told me the cross was from the sixteenth century and then he ran down the steps as if chased by the devil.

That is the entry about my first meeting with Lax. I didn’t know what I was “finding” but our conversations were spontaneous and intense. He wanted to know what

I thought of this or that artist. People like Joel Shapiro, Reinhardt, Newman, Piero della Francesca. And then we started to see each other everyday. I can remember, he’d come at sunset and bring whatever he had written. During my second visit—it might have been ’82 or ’83—I would draw in the afternoon and he would sometimes yell from his house high on the hill above mine to see if I was ready before descending. One time he just came down. I was just finishing a drawing and I called out “I’ll be out in just a minute.” He sat down out on the terrace. Without knowing it over an hour had passed before I finished the drawing. I thought, “oh my god Bob is here, what I have done? How rude!” and I rushed out to find him just sitting calmly. “Oh, I was just counting the birds.” Then he read his poems and it was all fine. “You have a wonderful sense of order,” he said—which I thought it was a generous thing to say about someone who had just kept you waiting for an hour.

This was the last entry written the day I left that first summer in 1978:

More and more I discovered in him and his life the peculiar blend of mundanity and purity—

And that is really what it was. He was so savvy and yet so profoundly pure, an impossible combination.

That evening he was discouraged. Always encouraging to me but that evening I felt as if I wasn’t able to say the right thing to assuage whatever it was that worried him. It was too hard to think of not seeing him again soon.

For two months we saw each other everyday and I guess we were both very sad about my leaving.

JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL): Between the first trip and the next were you in touch by letter?

NANCY GOLDRING: Yes, letters all the time—it never occurred to use the phone. They were always about work or “oodles and oodles of love” or funny things. Once he sent a packet of metro cards from Paris that had been used and said “I know how you artists love little things to put in you collages, so I send you these. Please throw them away if you’re not making collages at the moment. Or send them to Juan Gris.” He would sometimes sign them with silly names which is what he and Thomas Merton did in their correspondence a lot. Or a short poem like this:

On
the
walls
of
my
co
coon
spring rain

RAIL: Why was he on Patmos?

GOLDRING: This is what he told me following a long conversation about his religious beliefs: When he was young he spent a lot of time with a rabbi whom he admired asking questions and questions. He was born Jewish, and after all his questioning it didn’t make sense to him. And of course he had a close friendship with Thomas Merton—they were baptized in the same church on 125th Street. Lax was writing movie reviews for the *New Yorker*, and he said one day he couldn’t pick his head up off his desk and really had to get out of town. The next thing he knew he was standing in front of a luggage store and before he could blink he was traveling with the circus. Then after that, he says—this is the way he articulated it—he saw a postcard of a medieval painting in which there was “a



Robert Lax and Nancy Goldring on Patmos, 1978. Courtesy the author.

big man on a little rock”—St. John of Patmos. He said, “I think I’d like to be like that.” Patmos is one of the most sacred Greek islands with this beautiful monastery which you could visit back then. He knew every little chapel and would go and perhaps pray in his own way. They called him Petrus for Saint Peter, the rock. I don’t think he went to church to pray, but he did visit these little sacred chapels and he would never eat without saying a blessing. Once he wrote “putting yourself in the place where grace can flow to you” and I think that answers why he was on Patmos. His profound minimal sensibility that he shared with Reinhardt really comes from that spiritual core. These poems are like icons. He always used to tell young writers who made pilgrimages to him: “If you can say it in two syllables, don’t say it in three; if you can say it in four words, don’t say it in five—two is even better.” He would absolutely get things down to their most essential.

RAIL: One poem I love that was broken into:

sea
sun
sea
sun
sea
sun
everything in its season.

GOLDRING: You know how he made those poems? We used to go swimming in a leaky old boat with his friend Michalis who would row us to a tiny cove near the harbor. He would recite these poems through his snorkel—“sea ... sun ... sea ... sun ... sea ... sun ...” while he was breathing in and out, paddling around, to the fish.

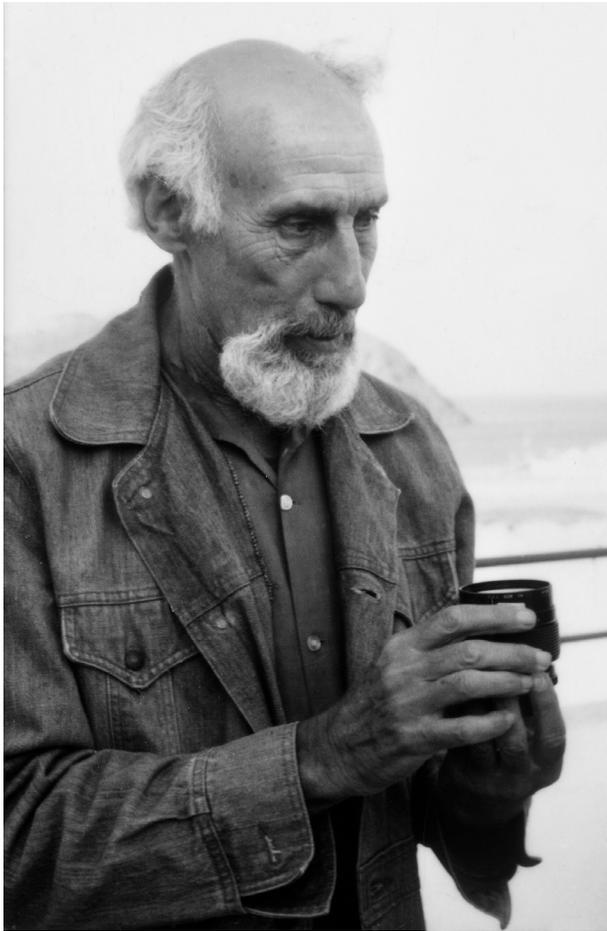
RAIL: In conversations about your drawings, and his poems, what was the nature of your interest in each other’s work?

GOLDRING: It was not so much talking about them but a response within his poetry to them. We seemed to be finding more and more affinities within our work or how we worked. I sent him an image I made after visiting Borobudur and he wrote back:

You send me beautiful things.
Buddha, the
Buddha, the
Bud
dha

It would be interesting or useful to trace the ways he affected my work—it was always something I felt. The thing about drawing in Greece is that the light is so clear. *So clear* that it makes you think you can really see *everything*, so if you draw and you really want to see the quality of every mark, there is no place like Greece. I think that was conducive to the pairing down of things. 1978 was the year I can mark where I started drawing. Of course I had been drawing for many years and had already shown my drawings and foto-projections but this is when it felt like I *really can draw* or *know why I am drawing*, that it was something profoundly connected to me. I think Bob had a big part in this.

The last visit to Patmos was to work on our installation project. I had been wanting to do a piece that was a



Robert Lax in 1992, courtesy of the author.

“legend,” having just revisited Arezzo to see *The Legend of the True Cross* because it had been so important to me when I was a student in Italy. Piero’s epic narrative is so crystalline while the narrative brings to life important mythical/historical moments. I wanted to make my own legend with Lax—one that was situated in our contemporary world. In the background was the skyline of Manhattan with the World Trade Center towers—in ’88 or ’89 I had done a commissioned piece for the opening of Ellis Island using the New York skyline. That view became the architecture or structure of the installation. The foreground was entirely built with collages from the newspaper—a kind of ruined structure within which you could detect posed dancing figures. In the installation as the slides change you see suddenly that something happens, the world goes dark and then overwhelmingly light, a man parachutes out. Then the city goes up in flames. Firemen come and put the flame out, at the center a beast—actually an iguana from the Galapagos—goes up, appears briefly within the fire, and finally a glowing rock remains. Then the cycle begins again. We sat in his house each afternoon, looking at the images and Bob would speak the text. We planned that each image would dissolve to white and Lax’s text would appear on the screen—a beautiful clean yellow. Then we went up to one of the chapels and I recorded him reading it. There were several versions.

I first showed our project in 1991, long before 9/11. The morning of 9/11 the people who had bought the series called me on the phone because they couldn’t believe it, it was as if the imagery in *Legend* prefigured what we were living through. Some years ago I was asked to rebuild the installation for a 9/11 remembrance—at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in Connecticut. They requested that I speak, but I found a poet who had been a friend of Bob’s who lived in the area and had him come read some of Bob’s funny poems. I loved that at Lax’s memorial his friends read mostly funny poems, which was great because he was rarely melancholy, maybe serious sometimes. I am sure I laughed more with Bob than any person I have known. He was incredibly funny. ☺

NANCY GOLDRING is an artist living in New York. A founding member of SITE, Inc. an experimental architectural group in the seventies; she has received two Fulbright grants, one to Italy and another to Southeast Asia. A professor at Montclair State University, her most recent exhibitions include Galleria Martini Ronchetti in Genoa and the Architectural Association of Rome.

Robert Lax “Legend”

There are no facts
Only events

THE BEGINNING
OF THE JOURNEY
THE END MOVE

THE BEGINNING
OF THE JOURNEY STOP
MOVE

LIGHT IS
LIGHT IS NOT

LIGHT IS
AND IS NOT

THIS THAT

IS LAND IS LAND

HERE THERE

THE FAR THE FAR THERE
HERE

THE NEAR THE NEAR THERE
THERE

ASPECT
OF
CITY

ASPECT
OF
SKY

SUN ON HORIZON SUN
ON WAVE

RE FLECTS RE FLECTS

ON ON

WAVE HORIZON

TANGIBLE
VISIBLE

INTANGIBLE
INVISIBLE

LESS THAN
TANGIBLE

LESS THAN
VISIBLE

BARELY

THERE
AND

NOT
THERE

THIS THAT

MO MENT MO MENT

THIS PLACE THAT PLACE

MARBLE
FLAME

GRANITE
FLAME

THE ROCK
THE ROCK
THE ROCK

WATCHING
NOT WATCHING

THIS
MO MENT

THAT
FIRE BURNING
FIRE

BLAZE
WITHIN
BLAZE

STILL
THE
ROCK

STILL
THE
ROCK

MOVE
STOP
MOVE

There are not facts
Only events

march 28/ 81
lipsos
Dear Nancy,
spring in air ho ho, and landladies on rampage.
the soul returns from long voyage to sing on branch
of almond tree. i have your card somewhere in these
fluttering papers, from far-flung island, and i was happy
to get it; now it's in hiding. i trust and believe you
are back in n y by now and able to wander around by one
or the other river in i hope spring light: there used
to be a great chicken dock near west eighth or twelfth,
not much of a walk from perry street that we used to hang
around on on spring days; but it may have been torn down
or carried away by fleets of wild chickens since then.
landladies on ramp: hard to describe just how,
but you'd recognize the scene: no word, no buckets, just
a shadow crossing her brow (about nothing) but i have a
feeling it's time to look for new quarters. maybe just
spring.
best address: i think kalymnos is best; i move from
there to here, to patmos. but the postos in kalymnos are
wide awake and always know where to find me.
i'm so glad we got together, even for just a second
in n y; keep wondering what you're doing; what thinking for
summer-- samothraki, patmos, pantelleria? (or one i couldn't
guess) and what else is happening: love for example, art;

how's your family, how do you feel? it would be great to
think of swimming with you somewhere (in not too cold water)
this summer. but i'm way beyond making plans, & you probably
are too.
things you could do (if at any sort of loss)--call
emil antonucci (just once more) & see if he's ever planning to
show those films again
& call richard dresselhuys (pronounce dresselhouse--like
house-detective) at 2 tudor city place, and tell him hello for
me from me, and that i just got his letter. he's nice, and will
know even over the phone that you're beautiful.
i've been holding three pencils in not little fist
& making lines like these enclosed.
Love,
Bob

WISH YOU WERE
HERE. THINK OF
YOU ALL THE TIME
THINK OF YOU WORKING
AT UPSTAIRS WINDOW
HERE LOVE,
Bob

I know how you artists
love little things to
put in your collages
& so I send you
these

please throw them
away if you're not making
collages at the moment
or send them to the
Juan Ois Memorial
Library, at Caynes-sur-
mer if I mistake not.

Love,
Bob



that sounds good
sitting quietly
read my writing
moving quietly

in on
ove
shad ow
-
you've got so
many
talents
it must be hard

to pull them all
through a
needle's eye
but I'll bet
you can.

Love,
Bob

you send me
beautiful things

The Buddha, the
Buddha, the
Buddha

is great.

Love,
Bob

the turn
ing earth
the burn
ing sun
the turn
ing earth
the burn
ing sun

the
si
lent
moon
the
si
lent
moon
the
turn
ing
earth
the
burn
ing
sun

Dear Nancy, it's good, very good to get these
to Patmos, but taking a while to get post
on the ground. I send you some light &
dash probes with very soon. Am
Crazy mad about "Falling into a
doubt."

Love,
Bob

Selected correspondence, postcards from Robert Lax to Nancy Goldring.

"re lat tion ships	"but the work re quires pa tience	"& in fin ite tact,"	I mean, it's a lot to ask of a hu man be ing"
can im prove	& good will,"	said a third, "but that's a lot to ask;	
ad in fin i tum."	said an oth er		
said one of my cats,			

NUNS AT AN
EXHIBITION

ROBERT LAX (1951–2000) was an American poet who lived the majority of his life on the island of Patmos, Greece. The handsome volume *Poems (1962–1997)* was recently published by Wave Books, and *Pure Act: the uncommon life of Robert Lax* by Michael McGregor will appear September 2015 by Fordham University Press.

DOLLY PARTON'S SONGS BY DAVE HICKEY

After a stint as director of Reese Palley Gallery and editor of *Art in America* in early '70s New York City, Dave Hickey moved to Nashville to write songs and music criticism. This newly revised and expanded essay on Dolly Parton originally appeared in *Country Music* magazine in 1974. Its insights and concerns relate to a series of conversations I had with Hickey about language, the first of which is published this month in the *San Francisco Art Quarterly*. —JE

The instruments have been moved out. We are lying on the carpet in Porter Waggoner's studio looking up at the speakers in the ceiling. I am on the left. Dolly Parton is beside me, then Emmylou Harris, then Linda Ronstadt. We are listening to playbacks of Dolly singing Emmylou's song "Boulder to Birmingham" with Linda singing back up. Between takes, the women chatter about the problems of managing a band on the road, of keeping the band sober and out of custody, of accommodating the exotic menu preferences that musicians are prone to, of running a corporate business in Nashville from some highway in North Dakota. Part of Dolly's solution to this problem is to take her friend and accountant, Judy Ogle, on the road with her.

I asked Dolly how Judy is doing. Dolly says fine, but she shakes her head. "Bad boyfriend?" I asked. "Oh no," Dolly said, "He's fine. He's a real 'go getter.'" "Go getter?" I asked. "Yeah, when she gets off from work, he'll go getter." Everybody laughed, and I said, "That's a song." Dolly said of course it's a song, unless your whole band is go-getters. With this I began to understand the delicate job of being a woman artist singing country songs on the road, although Dolly handles it with ease. Face-to-face she is the sheer embodiment of gaudy adolescent desire. (Those hugs! Those boobs!) Unfortunately, Dolly's jokey openness and friendliness completely defuse the erotic dazzle, and you are left befuddled, fully aware that Dolly Parton is smarter than you are. That she is a freer spirit, a better songwriter, and a better business-person, too.

It's no secret that beautiful, talented women put West Texas boys on the defensive. Even when we praise their achievements, we tend to come down awfully hard on the "God given talent" part. That's the tradition, anyway, but when I started writing about Dolly Parton's songs, I soon discovered I was going to have to abandon that particular part of my heritage. When you begin to realize just how much Miss Parton has done, and how well she has done it, it doesn't take long to decide that she has the right to take a two-by-four to the next cowboy who pats her on the head and says, "My, my, Puddin." By any standards, the range of subject, language, and musical form in Dolly Parton's songs are incredible. Within the canon of country music she has tried literally everything and has usually succeeded gracefully enough to hide the difficulty of what she has attempted. When the resources of country music seemed too narrow she has borrowed and mixed from other sources. Take, for instance, a country lyric, a modal Appalachian melody, and a rock bass line with a syncopated bridge, and combine them into songs like "Early Morning Breeze" and "Greatest Days of All."

It's not rocket science, but it's close to revelation. Country music is like good grammar. You know it when you hear it, and you know what it's *not*. When you start talking about Dolly Parton's songs, however, they are at once so various and so rooted in the country idiom that you can't help making distinctions between country songs and the other kinds of music you hear. Country music shares qualities with folk, rock, and pop, and like any good songwriter, Miss Parton takes what she needs where she finds it. So the things her songs have in common with other types of songs make it easier to see how they are special.

Musically, for instance, country songs have the same tight musical format, and the same limited set of harmonic options that pop songs do, but lyrically pop songs present the world as it *ought* to be, as it exists in the dreams of various record executives and adolescents. Country lyrics are about the world

as it is; they are made by adults and for adults—not rich and famous ones, just grown-up people making it from day to day. Even when country songs do their special kind of dreaming about life “In The Good Old Days,” there is always that realistic parenthesis in the title—“(When Times Were Bad)”:

*No amount of money could buy from me,
The memories that I have of then.
No amount of money could pay me to
Go back and live through it again.*

Although pop music and soul music use much more complicated musical forms and harmonic structures, sophisticated country lyrics by artists like Miss Parton, Roger Miller, or Willie Nelson are easily as complex and as subtle as their pop and soul counterparts. Most professional lyrics, however, are made from literary, written English while country lyrics are made from the language as it is spoken. So what a country lyricist gives up in vocabulary, she gains by being more sensitive to the interplay between the sound and meaning of the language. Miss Parton, for instance, within eight lines of lyric, plays off six shades of meaning from the verb “will,” in the song “Will He Be Waiting For Me.”

This sensitivity to the spoken language allows Miss Parton to do what she does best: to capture the complexities of life as it is lived in the ambiguities of language as it is spoken. People who say that country songs are made of clichés don’t realize that clichés are dead language that a writer like Dolly Parton takes, slaps on the bottom and brings back to life. In “I’m Doing This For Your Sake,” Miss Parton tells the story of an unwed mother placing her child in an orphanage. Into four lines of lyric, she fits three clichés and breathes new life into each of them:

*In this home so far away from home,
I leave my heart today,
‘Cause home is where the heart is/
And with you my heart will stay,
Because I love you so much,
Why, I can’t make you pay/
So I’m doing this for your sake/
I’m giving you away.*

If you are going to write about life as it is, in the language as it is spoken, you are going to come up with some fairly unsavory examples of both. Miss Parton’s ability to deal with this kind of material goes back to the basic distinction between pop songs and country songs, simply: pop songs are “you” songs; rock songs are “me” songs; country songs are “we” songs. The difference is real. I remember a good pop singer singing Dolly Parton’s “Just The Way I Am,” and she sang it all right, hit all the notes, etc., but she used the song to dramatize herself on stage, and she sang it *to* the men in the audience:

*Even though you may not understand me,
I hope that you’ll accept me like I am,
For there are many sides of me,
My mind and spirit must be free.
I might smile when other folks would frown,
I don’t know why, it’s just the way I am.*

When Miss Parton sings the song, the difference is enormous. However much the song may express the way she feels, ultimately it is a “we” song. She is singing it *for* the other women in the audience. You get the impression that she has made the song out of her feelings, but that she has made it because she thinks other women might feel the same way.

This sensitivity, I believe, allows Miss Parton to write sympathetically about subject matter that is considered taboo in the world of pop music. Just off the top of my head I can think of songs she has written about suicide, adultery, madness, drugs, betrayal, illegitimacy, incestuous desire, and worst of all (in the pop music land of plenty) poverty. Down on the page those words look pretty wicked—more like the synopsis of a Faulkner novel than the repertoire of a young lady who sings. But if you are going to look straight at the world, you are going to see the things that Faulkner saw; and if through your talent and skill you can make them into music, you might give someone a song who only had words before. ☞

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DAVE HICKEY is a writer currently living in Santa Fe, NM. His many books of criticism include *Air Guitar* (1997) and the recent *Pirates and Farmers* (2013). His forthcoming collection *25 Women: Essays on the Work of Women Artists* will be published later this year by the University of Chicago Press.

THE LAND WHERE YOU WANTED TO BE Paul Bowles, Mohammed Mrabet, and 17-year-old Me

BY THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE

for Bernadine

Dear Thyrsa,

I was happy to have your letter, and much pleased by its contents. If all you say is exact, that Tangier proves to be a gateway through which you went into the land where you wanted to be, then one can only say that it is one of those inexplicable happy accidents that do now and then occur. I smiled at your tenuous self-introduction; obviously I remembered you, and should have even without the epistolary services I rendered after you left.

Paul Bowles
2117 Tanger Socco,
Tangier Morocco
12/xi/76.
[excerpt]

“Don’t forget. You are the best first chapter Mrabet has.”
Mohammed Mrabet
Casa Zugari, Calle Ajdir,
Merstakhoche,
Tangier, Morocco
17/iii/75
[excerpt]

THESE QUOTES ARE TAKEN FROM LETTERS written to a teenager who had met and bonded briefly with these storied figures; an encounter of life-changing dimensions for her, but not a rare or even uncommon experience for them. Paul Bowles met and corresponded with countless people over the course of the 20th century, becoming in the end a kind of tourist destination for the literati. In other words, there is a minor memoir-phenomenon out there of “Bowles and I” so this story is hardly exceptional, except for the fact that the young girl had no idea who Paul Bowles nor Mohammed Mrabet was, and certainly knew nothing of Jane Bowles who died two years before she arrived, nor anything about what the Beats, William Burroughs, and *Naked Lunch* even meant to Tangier.

At its simplest then, it is the story of a remarkable inter-generational and cross-cultural romance between some bigger than life figures and a sheltered 17-year-old self; friendships enabled, as suggested above, by the very ignorance and unknowingness of that 17-year-old. At its most complex it is a story of a girl who would most likely never have become who she is had she not known, been affected by, and spent many years writing back and forth first with one, then the other. Maybe this is the story of the power of the letter, its sensibility and care. Would a print-out of email exchanges have any of the same effect? Because so much of this story is about what happens in the time in between the writing and the sending and the receiving of a letter, an ontological experience that is nearly impossible to recreate today.

I never returned to Tangier after that winter of 1975, and fell out of touch with both men by 1985. Others might have stayed or returned the next year after graduating from high school, heading full-on into an affair with Mrabet that could have only ended disastrously. Thankfully I was aware of the folly of taking myself too seriously, confirmed as I met and read of the countless people who met and corresponded with Bowles. Anyway, it was an experience so personal that to open it to the world or try to revisit it would only have ruined it.

I knew then not to trust or take seriously Mrabet’s affections. He undoubtedly met and got involved with numerous women, and men. His infatuation was with an archetype of some kind. And yet, reading the letters over, and based on experiences I heard through friends (years later, Mrabet called a young woman with whom he was involved “Tir’za” by mistake), it is hard not to wonder



Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve in Tangier 1975. Courtesy the author.

what kind of authenticity might have been there. What was this blond American girl to the 35-year-old Moroccan and he to her (along with Paul Bowles)? Is there a larger story in here?

I PUT OFF GOING FOR WEEKS UNTIL LITERALLY pushed out of the school by my teacher Booker Nevius. Paul Bowles had no phone at that point but his apartment was within walking distance of The American School of Tangier, a walk of 20 minutes, along dirt roads high above the outer reaches of Tangier, which glimmered and sang in the voice of the muezzin below.

The apartment building, Immeuble Itesa, was of that remarkably unappealing, bland, modernist architecture of mid-century European modernism, a colorless watered-down style that depresses me now but was then merely a fact.

Knock, knock.

The door opened and a slender, smiley-eyed white-haired man in his 60s, his face covered with shaving cream, peered at me through a half-open door. I was taken aback by his warmth and complete lack of self-consciousness. He just smiled, opened the door and said,

“Come in. You’ll have to excuse me I am about to go out for dinner but please, you are welcome, come in.”

After leading me through a doorway of beads, he gestured to a row of Moroccan cushions lined along the wall and around a low-set glass table, the same formation I had seen in many a middle-class Moroccan’s home. I sat down on the cushions, and crossed my sneakered feet and blue-jeaned legs under me.

“I’ll only be a moment and then I’ll get you some tea.”

Full of unease I twisted the taped and worn rubber of my beat up Nikes and looked around the room. There was a fireplace, lit, a few paintings or were they drawings on the walls. It was all very sparse, but Moroccan, not self-consciously so, just basic in decor and function.

When he handed her the tea with lemon, I spooned four teaspoons of sugar into the cup.

“Your name again?”

He took it in, eyes twinkling, cigarette holder in mouth, and looked off into some distant memory, “Ah, there is a name Gertrude Stein would have adored.”

The phrase *a rose is a rose is a rose* was vaguely familiar but that was the extent of my recognition, until I returned to the States and, split open with curiosity by my Tangier experience, began a new identity as a compulsive reader. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* I discovered that Bowles was the last name mentioned in the book (as “Freddy”) and that it was Gertrude Stein who suggested to the 19-year-old American he to go to Morocco.

I explained why I was there and he said, “Although I have to go out, Mohammed Mrabet will be coming by soon and he is one of the foremost Moroccan authors. He is certainly who you should speak with.”

When Mrabet entered he was wearing a wool poncho and carrying a *sebsi*. His hands were tan and muscled from years of fishing. There was an elegance and brutal beauty to him. Paul left us alone sitting side by side on the cushions.



Mohammed Mrabet in Tangier 1975. Courtesy the author.

Mrabet filled his *sebsi* with *kif* from a small bag, inhaled, and then, as the smoke left his mouth, turned to me and asked in French where I was from. I told him I was from the Northfield Mount Hermon School on a term abroad at the American School. I asked him about a woman student from N.M.H. who had been to Tangier the year before and had told me about Mrabet. Something was very wrong with my French for god knows what I said, but he looked very insulted. “No, we will not speak French.”

The evening continued as a comedy of errors. We pantomimed our way through his photograph album, which he had brought out with great fanfare, sifting through the many snapshots of him standing on the beach, his stunning physique and pearly white smile paraded before the camera, doing handstands, or dancing dressed in a *djellaba* in a room full of drums, his expression that of a man in a trance (which he was). But the photo he was most proud of, and wanted to make sure I saw was the one of him shaking the hand of Muhammed Ali.

“He, a great friend of mine, Muhammed Ali.”

After we finished looking at all the pictures he got up and returned with a pile of intricate pen and ink drawings on parchment—spindly, wiry lines of geometric patterns and psychedelic dimensions. Some were creatures with eyes and claws colored with what looked like magic marker. There was one that was not quite finished of two entwined snake-like creatures set inside a background of serial orange and pink magic marker patterns. When I left a few months later, he presented it to me as a gift, finished, along with a ring he had when he was 17, and a necklace of tiny seashells strung on nylon fishing wire he had picked up from the beach we used to walk along, near a tiny out of the way café at the northernmost tip of Tangier. As he gave me the drawing he announced, “This is Mrabet and this, Tir’za” and laughed.

There was a red plastic bead, somewhat heart-shaped but abstract, in the center of the line of seashells. It was white and red, colors he had brought up again and again as a riddle to test me, and later, when I read his stories, I found were used symbolically throughout his books, particularly *The Big Mirror*.

I have no memory of how the evening ended except that he insisted he drive me back to the school. When I got out of his powder blue Carmengia, he held the hand I’d extended in thanks and looked at me with great seriousness. “Thank you, Tir’za” he said, confessing all at once how he will now learn English in order to speak with me. (Of course he had known it all along, not well, but he was perfectly capable of conversing. The pretense of not knowing, I realized later, was his way of saying fuck you to the “Nazarene”—American and British—exploitation that made Mrabet both more and less of who he was because of it.)

“You have given me a gift tonight,” he said with a reverence that made no sense. I smiled and stood awkwardly while he stared at me with that smoky-eyed stare. “I would like to come by and pick you up tomorrow.”

Such is the scenario that led to her going to Bowles’s apartment with Mrabet almost every night until I left. Not a terribly long time, but its effect was satorial¹ as Bowles called it, as in the Zen Buddhist tradition of *kenshō*, “seeing into one’s true nature,”—the land where you wanted to be.

Mrabet, who was Paul’s long-time companion and was married to a Moroccan woman with many children, claimed to have fallen in love with me. I am pretty certain it was my

2117 TANGER SOCCO
TANGIER, MOROCCO
12/xi/76

Dear Thyrza Goodeve:

I was happy to have your letter, and much pleased by its contents. If all you say is exact, that Tangier proved to be a gateway through which you went into the land where you wanted to be, then one can only say that it was one of those inexplicable happy accidents that do now and then occur. I smiled at your tenuous self-introduction; obviously I remembered you, and should have even without the epistolatory services I rendered after you left.

When I was nineteen I wrote poems. One of them contained the lines: It's only that it seems so long/ and isn't./ It's only that it seems so many years,/ and perhaps it's one./ Its poetic value is very dubious, but it tells something about the way time seemed then, at that particular point in life. Could everything really have changed that much in so little time, could I myself have been that person, when I'm so completely different now? And of course the answer was yes, but it was still a mystery.

Mrabet has been very ill with his liver and gallbladder, once again, only this time the after-effects are heavier. One good result of the illness is that he no longer smokes kif. (I say "good" because of the excessive manner in which he smoked it; I doubt that anyone could remain healthy smoking as he did.) An advance copy of his new book *HARMLESS POISONS* came the other day. This one has drawings in it.

You make no mention of what you're doing these days, but in my ignorance I imagine you writing. Incidentally, please forgive me for never having returned your manuscript to you with commentaries, as I promised to do. If you still want it back, I'll send it, of course. It's a question of letting me know. There will be no remarks from me on it, however. I appreciate your letter, and hope it's not the last.

All best,
Paul B.

robust and clueless virginity that fueled much of his fantasy. He spent the next few months whispering “Je t’aime, Tir’za” in my ear while I would neither kiss him fervently or at any great length and certainly would not have sex. In hindsight I look at the photographs of his astonishing beauty (no wonder Tennessee Williams and Henry Miller were taken with him²), and am amazed, really dumbfounded by how little effect his sexuality and beauty had on me.

Mrabet spent several years after I left sending beautiful if surprisingly attached letters to me although he could not write. Since he was 25, consumed by huge amounts of *kif*, he had been telling stories of immense violence and magic to Bowles either in Moroccan Arabic or Spanish that Bowles transcribed, edited, and published, which was how Mrabet communicated with me. Paul translated and typed each letter, leaving room at the end of the page for Mrabet’s Arabic signature (his real name: Mohammed ben Chaib el Hajjem).

While Mrabet’s mark on me was the impact of an older man finding more in my head than I ever thought possible, the effect of Bowles the writer came slowly. In fact it was not until two years after I left that I decided to reintroduce myself to him in a letter. Not yet aware of the deep narcissistic wound of romantic triangulation that had already set into my psyche, my relationship with Paul and Mrabet was of course amusingly that (and the subject of Paul’s late wife Jane Bowles’s fiction). Only after the fact did I realize

they were then, or at some point in the past, lovers and this process of communication itself was symptomatic of that strange configuration of the romantic triangle: the pact of invisibility, if not utter erasure, that one point of the triangle must always agree to. Paul had been the invisible spectator of this funny Mrabetian obsession with the American girl, transcribing and sending letters as though “written” by Mrabet. Participating effortlessly in the charade as only one shaped by triangulation can, I never addressed Paul’s presence until two years into the correspondence with Mrabet when I wrote to Paul directly, reintroducing myself as if Paul hadn’t been there in Mrabet’s letters all along.

Paul’s influence emerged via these letters, as I came to understand who he was, and felt the impact of knowing someone personally who had spent his life in fiction. It was not that I had not written fiction before meeting Mrabet and Bowles, and fiction was even the voice I used to write my final research project, but knowing Bowles and Mrabet, the proximity and writing of letters, gave me the context to be a writer—in other words, live through words as a way of being. Previously, writing was just a part of my existence, a part of me like art, more craft, hobby, or way of passing the time, but afterwards it became a mission, a possibility, a way of coping, exploring, and learning. In other words, the world had shifted from a place to pass through into one to make from.

Unfortunately or not (it is a waste and illusion to regret where one did not go), the last letter I received from Bowles was in 1985, when I had already completed a master's in Cinema Studies at New York University and entered a new Ph.D. program in California. This academic universe was of course part of my destiny, although hardly its fulfillment, (the fatalism of Moroccan "Incha'Allah" having taken root in my psyche), for it was where I grew a critical mind, which shaped me into a different kind of writer. Innocence gone, I knew too much at that point to write to Paul or Mrabet with any of the ease and care of my 17-year-old self. My experience with them would now be framed through the discourses of feminism, postcolonial studies, and queer theory, not to mention cultish literary history. I had lost what had made it all possible, and yet I became only what I am because of what continued to linger and hover. After finishing my dissertation I exited the inelegant confines of academic writing and culture, and stumbled upon my own land where I wanted to be, a land of art and writing (Mrabet: "I'd like to see you do two things. Paint and write, both." 11/ii/77), where all the voices and agencies and fantasies of making are possible, whether word or doodle; fiction or nonfiction; critical or creative.

Dear Thyrza,

You make no mention of what you're doing these days, but in my ignorance, I imagine you writing.

Paul Bowles
2117 Tanger Socco,
Tangier Morocco
12/xi/76.

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THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE is a writer living in New York. She received her PhD from the University of California in Santa Cruz under Donna Haraway and James Clifford. She is faculty and thesis director of the MFA in Art Practice at the School of Visual Arts, and Program Coordinator for the MICA summer intensive in DUMBO.

Endnotes

1. From the Japanese Buddhist idea of *satori*
2. And whom he held dear like that phantom he wrote to: "Dear Thyrza, I haven't forgotten anything. Sometimes at midnight or at one in the morning when I've smoked a lot, I stare at some photographs—of Henry Miller and one of Tennessee Williams and one of Paul and one of a blond girl between Henry Miller and Tennessee."

Casa Zugari, Calle Ajdir,
Merstakhoche, Tangier, Morocco.
17/iii/75

Dear Thyrza:

Many greetings, hugs and kisses. I'd like to know how you landed, in good condition. Give the snake my best. And if you can, please give him my address. I am not going to forget anything. Everything that happened was fantastic. All my friends asked me about you. I said: She has gone on a trip. Is she coming back? they asked me. I told them I didn't think so. They all stared at me, and said: Too bad. I told them that life was long and that there was time; even though winter has come now, summer will come later. Dear Thyrza, I'm going to keep my word. More books, more stories. I'll do everything I can. I spent the night last night without sleeping. I was thinking very deeply. In the morning my face looked like the face of someone who had come out of a grave. During the day I couldn't do anything; I spent it in the cafe saying nothing and smoking. It's nothing, because I'm used to suffering, and I intend to go on suffering until the day I die. Dear Thyrza, I'm going to try and do something interesting here in Tangier. I hope very much that you will come back here to visit me. If they give me my passport, then some day, if you want, I'll come and see you. Mrabet is sad, the ocean is sad, the friends are sad. When the friends see Mrabet sad, they become sad too, of course. Don't forget. You are the best first chapter Mrabet has. An emerald at the bottom of the sea. The most beautiful things are those you find at the bottom of the sea. The best stones and shells are from there. A fine life on the sea. Today I'm very tired. I've written you this letter, full of 'kif and so tired I can't speak. All the veins that live in my body had to work to get this letter written, but it has much love in it. Adios, hasta Dios quiere, Thyrza.

Mrabet

Ch. 1, 1/1/80

P.S. The show of Mrabet's drawings is scheduled for some time during the spring at the Gotham Book Mart Gallery. They're busy now with a show of Zelda Fitzgerald's paintings. (I didn't even know she painted.) This ties in with Tennessee Williams's new play, naturally.

Dear Thyrza:

Reading your letter with its lower-case typography, I wondered if e.e.cummings ever happened to indulge in disco roller-skating. It's bad luck, to have it happen at this point, seven papers away from what you call "the end". But I doubt that it will make a grave difference. And as you say, it may be a tonic for an obsessive note-taker! Since when I went to college we didn't take notes, I found it surprising to see everyone assiduously scribbling during the classes. ^{in California.} The first note-taker I ever saw was William Saroyan, who carried a notebook everywhere with him, and astonished me by writing in it every few minutes during lunch. I could never fathom his reasons; I told my friends about it, and they all found it peculiar. So you see how the world has changed, and only since 1959.

I remember that Gilbert Sorrentino used to write for a magazine called Kulchur in the early 'sixties. He was a poet, wasn't he? Is he still?

The editor at Black Sparrow writes me that it's ten times as difficult to bring out a book this year as it was two years ago. Surely an exaggeration: perhaps only five times. But The Beach Café is still held up there, awaiting a shipment of paper on which to print it.

The School of Visual Arts has hired the American School here for six weeks during the coming summer; for some reason they asked me if I'd conduct a class in "creative" writing, and for no reason I said yes. (I tried to get out of it later, but they were very sorry; they'd advertised it, and I'd have to go through with it.) So you can imagine me fretting over solecisms which will be of no interest to the students, since what they'll want is the shortest path to instant success. That is, they won't believe that the means of expression must be perfected before any expression can be conveyed. If the war escalates, the Visual Arts people may alter their plans. I say this because Algeria announced last night that she was now going to carry her attacks into Morocco itself, and slowly cripple the country. (This because she hasn't had much success in the Sahara, and Gaddafi, who pays for Algeria, is eager to finish off Morocco and make a slave-state of it.)

Enough for now. All my best,

Paul B.

2117 Tanger Socco,
Tangier, Morocco.
15/iii/80

MARGRIT LEWCZUK *Me, We*

THE GALLERY@1GAP, RICHARD MEIER ON PROSPECT PARK | JANUARY 17 – APRIL 23, 2015

BY TYLER AKERS

Painter Margrit Lewczuk's career was marred in 1999 by a fire that destroyed the contents of her Chelsea studio. 16 years later, she has assembled a new oeuvre of vibrant paintings, drawings, and cut-outs while living and working in her Brooklyn home with her husband, fellow impassioned artist and professor Bill Jensen. The artist's influences are not easily identifiable; in her work one might sense the organic symmetry of Ukrainian or Mexican folk art, the vibrating illusions of '60s Op art or Islamic textiles, the expressively abstracted mathematics of Agnes Martin, the macro focus and whimsy of Hilma af Klint, or the playfully curved shapes and lively palettes of Henri Matisse or Yayoi Kusama. In devotion to the theme of her own transformation and renewal after disaster, her new work features symbols of rebirth such as eggs, angels, crosses, and the chrysalis. With these hopeful themes, she doesn't mourn the past; she celebrates the potential of the present and future, affirming the power of long change, in gestation, incubation, and meditation.

The paintings on view in *Me, We* are combinations of neon, jewel-tone, and neutral acrylics arranged in organic, symmetrical patterns charted over fluid grids, flat shapes with visible brushstrokes. Lewczuk applies paint in thick layers and rarely uses more than five or six colors. "Untitled" (2009), for example, is a giant red egg with luminous sky blue margins penetrated by four smaller white and pink eggs from the corners of the frame, forming the double image of a cross within the egg. Many of the other canvases also feature rounded shapes both at the center and blooming inward from the corners, establishing an amusing figure-ground shift of focus. A process of extended looking reveals the impact of this optical dance.

"Metamorphosis" (2011), a large abstract painting hung across from a conference table and chairs in the exhibition, centers on a golden yellow hourglass shape pinched between a pair of pea-green ovals, all surrounded by radiating concentric circles and shapes. The twin ovals appear to be on the edge of merging or at the end of separation, vibrating and shifting as if through the stages of cellular mitosis. Perhaps as a reference to Gregor Samsa's tragic and terrifying fate

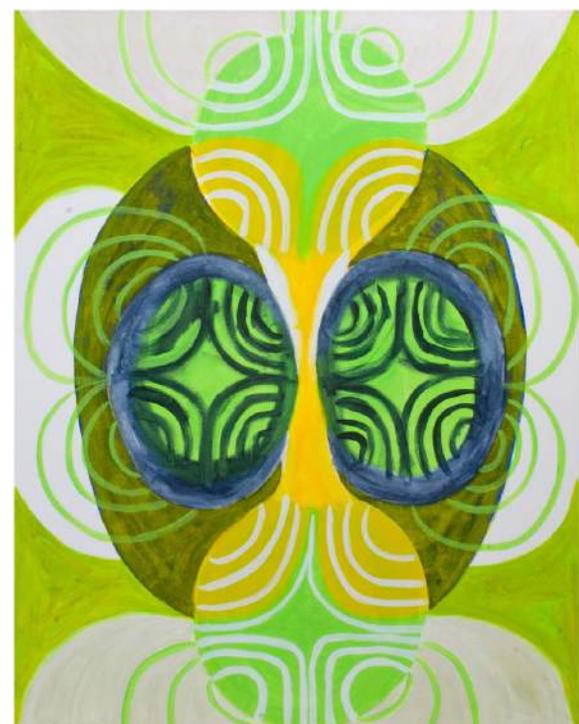
in Franz Kafka's tale, the green ovals of the painting become menacing, insect-like eyes, a reminder of the more grievous, alienating, and unrelenting aspects of change.

The title of Lewczuk's show, *Me, We*, refers to a short poem delivered by boxer Muhammed Ali at a Harvard graduation address in 1975. Much like the exhibition, the words were meant as a simple statement of togetherness, a quick gesture toward intimacy. Fitting, as the venue for the show, the ground floor of a lavish apartment building designed by Richard Meier on Prospect Park, offers more in the way of close observations that come from living with a work of art than the average white box gallery. The space features a lobby and three small gallery lounges filled with TVs, couches, and cafe tables, all connected by a long narrow hallway. As the building is residential, the show can only be visited by appointment, which gives it an exclusivity that may seem contrary to its all-embracing title. But the cozy setting allows visitors to hide away with Lewczuk's paintings, offering a space to sit and spend time, to look, to take a lunch break or a nap, and then look again, readjusted.

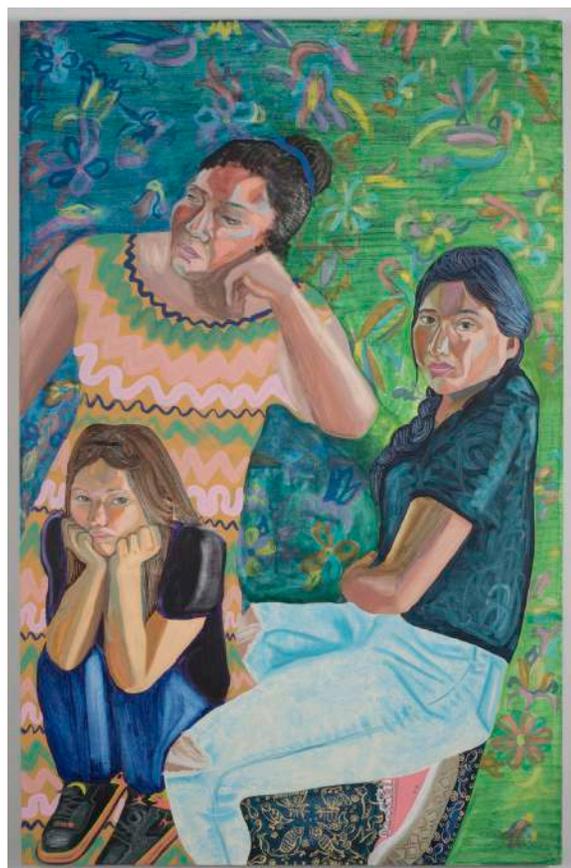
The two unisex bathrooms deliver perhaps the most intimate experience with Lewczuk's work. In each, a mid-sized canvas painted with glow-in-the-dark acrylics creates a figure-ground reversal as the light is flipped on and off. In one painting, black squares form a wobbly grid over a neon orange and greenish-white background—until the overhead light is turned off to reveal the silhouette of a dancing figure glowing in luminous green. "Angel" (2014), a larger version of this painting, which hangs in the second gallery space, also boasts the trickery of this phosphorescent acrylic. Unfortunately, due to building policies, the light in the lobby and connected galleries must stay on continuously. Most of the work is visible from the sidewalk outside the building; it's a shame the passerby doesn't get to see the show glow with new imagery after sunset. Why worry though? Relaxing with Lewczuk's work in this lounge setting enables the soothing details of her work to emerge and wash your cares away. ☺



Margrit Lewczuk, "Untitled," 2009. Acrylic on linen. Courtesy of the artist.



Margrit Lewczuk, "Metamorphosis," 2011. Acrylic on linen. Courtesy of the artist.



Aliza Nisenbaum, "Gloria, Angelica, Jessica," 2014, oil on linen, 51 x 33". Courtesy of artist and gallery.

ALIZA NISENBAUM

WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK | NOVEMBER 8 – DECEMBER 20, 2014

BY ERIN YERBY

The body gives itself to the visible, to presence, making it something too easily objectified, idolatized—a tension embedded in the portrait. In her recent exhibition at White Columns, Mexican-born, New York-based painter Aliza Nisenbaum utilizes portraiture to draw out this excessive visibility of the body and what this visibility obscures: namely, the body as place of torsion—a twisting convergence of presence and absence, actuality and dream, thought and flesh. Painted during long visits, meals, and conversations between the artist and her subjects, Nisenbaum's portraits of undocumented immigrant families from Mexico and Central America living in New York recall Emmanuel Levinas's concept of "encounter," wherein a subject's relation to an object—the variant appearances of the external world—is already contained in the subject. As portraits of encounter, these paintings manifest the imperceptible horizons, at once internal and external, that permeate and surround a body. They embody the intensities of other worlds—places, pasts, and dreams—not present and yet somehow as much a part of the substance of a body as the flesh itself.

Nisenbaum's artwork prioritizes this encounter over the distinction of subject and object, artist and sitter, both in her practice and, remarkably, in the paintings themselves. Although the viewer is presented with a figure whose biographical specificity permeates and adds weight to every aspect of body and face, the surrounding space suspends narrative in a dreamy juncture of vividly colored intersecting planes. In this regard, the paintings play with the formal heaviness of the indigenous body often seen in Mexican mural painting, which privileges the body as the drama of social history—the laboring body, the classed and politicized body, the body in resistance. Nisenbaum frees her figures from the mural's social symbolism and instead confronts the singularity of the face. It is the social from a different vantage, the political drawn from the intimate. The monumentality of the modernist mural tradition is reduced to a more personal encounter with the displaced body, that of the immigrant.

The immigrants depicted here are pensive and day-dreaming, figures at rest whose gaze is directed at

something, somewhere, beyond the present. The story of the sitter unfolds in words spoken and unspoken, an encounter articulated in color and form, drawn from the space between. “Gustavo” (2014) captures a man in a red and white soccer jersey, sitting and looking off beyond the canvas. While Nisenbaum painted, Gustavo talked—he described to her an elsewhere so vividly detailed that it became reality: “I felt he was helping me while I painted him.” Gustavo has been sending what he earns working here in a T-shirt factory home to Mexico since he was 15. He is now a landowner there: owns a horse, a tractor, and some cattle. This land, *his* land, is land he has never seen, yet he is able to describe the colors, smells, what it is like to be there. The place is a dream more real than the reality of the New York in which he labors. In the crouching figure—“the thinker,” but dressed for action—there is a latent potency. The bright colors of these portraits translate presence while calling attention to an absence revealed in the dream-life of the face and the fatigued weight of the bodies.

In the still-life paintings, the resonance between the weight or consistency of the body and its sonorous diffusion by pattern takes on a new form. The body and face are substituted for material objects, as in “Vero’s T-shirt” (2014). The T-shirt, which belongs to Veronica (who appears in “Veronica, Marissa, and Gustavo” (2013)), shows a plasticized print of a skull, a Day of the Dead motif, laid out against a flat psychedelic geometric black-and-white background. Alongside it sit a Barnett Newman book and flowers in a vase. The substitution of T-shirt for sitter is magnified by the vase of flowers, a remnant of the auratic which pushes against the mass reproducibility of the “dead” T-shirt as displaced tradition. This remnant recalls Nisenbaum’s previous miniature series of flowers and letters, painted as small remembrances of her mother, pasts that do not wilt.



Aliza Nisenbaum, “Vero’s T-shirt,” 2014, oil on linen, 20 × 18”.

The immigrant is a figure of gaps in the present—of other lives and places that continue to live in and through the viewer. These are also inter-generational gaps: in “Gloria, Angelica, Jessica” (2014) Nisenbaum depicts three women from three generations whose gazes reach in three directions at once. The perspective is flattened and the figures are layered: the mother floats behind her two daughters, as if belonging to another place and time. Her traditional dress is a patterned horizon that spreads out behind them, holding the youngest girl in place; she sits in sneakers and blue jeans, knees drawn up to her chin, absent and bored but looking directly at the viewer. It is the older daughter, however, also in jeans (sign of the contemporary, the “American”), who makes the distance between generations feel acute. She holds the place of tension between past and present, between the mother of the old home, and the youngest, native of the new. These three positions embody the place of the immigrant as body-between, revealing that the flesh alone does not make a body, a place, or a home. The body is composed, like a painting, by its absences—by the intensities that permeate it, like the textures and patterns of a fabric—this is what composes the place of the body. ☞

STUART SHILS *because i have no interest in these questions...*

STEVEN HARVEY FINE ARTS PROJECTS | NOVEMBER 19 – DECEMBER 21, 2014

BY HEARNE PARDEE

After years as a landscape painter, Stuart Shils has assembled a wide-ranging show at Steven Harvey, integrating painting, photography, and sculpture, often in the same piece. Connecting the works is his ongoing investigation of visual perception. With references to the Renaissance and Classical Antiquity, Shils takes up the long Western preoccupation with visual truth, which painting has largely conceded to photography. But Shils takes his paintings in a direction more consistent with recent theories, like those of perceptual psychologist Alva Noë, which understand the visual field less as a photographic image than as a framework of activity for both eyes, a virtual space, within which we explore and focus at will.

A master of luminous surfaces, Shils interprets landscapes with irregular patches of paint, often in the form of foliage against buildings, lending his modestly scaled paintings a fine-tuned resonance. Resisting the impulse to sharpen his focus, to achieve uniform high resolution, he holds his subjects at a contemplative remove. Paintings from Italy capture the sun-baked architecture of Morandi, while works from Ireland take on rain and fog—the atmospheric turbulence of Turner—as though to test the limits of vision. His 2012 show moved further from sharp focus, as he simplified the light-infused envelopes of his landscapes into densely layered, near-monochrome veils—handheld Color Field abstractions that situate Greenberg’s picture plane within the plein-air, pictorial tradition.

When he inherited a camera in 2007, Shils found photographic equivalents to his recent paintings in relics of demolition and reconstruction, and indulged in high-resolution renderings of urban surfaces. There’s a startling clarity to the digital prints exhibited here for the first time, accompanied by a book with an essay by David Cohen. In “Interior on Germantown Avenue, Near Washington Lane” (2012), with its collage-like deconstruction of ruptured walls and peeling wallpaper, Shils rips open the delicately woven veils of his paintings, as though to examine the world without his customary aesthetic filters. Shils’s colors can evoke the lush photographs of William Eggleston, or seem like photographic translations of Josephine Halvorson’s painterly renderings of industrial walls. They can also put focus itself in question with images deliberately obscured, like his photos through airplane windows of cloud-shrouded fields.

Shils extends his play with photography from its rendition of surfaces into the third dimension, with a composition of small colored blocks (made by a student, Greg Biché), perched on a shelf before a mirror that reflects its hidden side. Whether or not Shils subscribes to Alva Noë’s suggestion that we “actively see” the hidden sides of objects, he shows us the occluded view of the blocks on the mirror’s flat, luminous surface, where its crystalline reflection links it to nearby photographs. Brunelleschi is said to have displayed his first perspectival painting through a pinhole, reflected in a mirror, and here the blocks reappear in a photo, digitally collaged onto a Giotto fresco, combining the Renaissance artist’s pioneering construction of depth with its magical compression in the camera. Elsewhere, Shils photographs the blocks along with pieces of cut paper, in what might be described as *trompe l’oeil* digital prints, recalling the collage-like paintings of Harnett or Peto, but with the camera taking on the traditional role of oil paint in rendering the material surface of things.



Stuart Shils, “interior on germantown avenue, near washington lane,” 2014. Archival inkjet photograph, 7 × 7”. Courtesy of the artist.

Shils literally reincorporates photography into painting by covering prints with pigment. In “his angels surrounded by fields of crimsons” (2014), he works over a Giotto with red paint, using the densely layered colors of his monochrome paintings to suggest the urban walls of his high-resolution prints. He’s compared his monochrome paintings to memory filters, and there’s a visionary aspect to this evocation of a graffiti-scarred wall, from which images emerge, as with Rimbaud’s “seeing a mosque in place of a factory.”

These layered images recall Robert Rauschenberg’s “transfer” drawings, but Shils, with his base in observation, takes them elsewhere; the blocks inspire a new investigation of still life, and his most interesting new works are those in which he paints freely over the printed blocks, less interested in their material texture than in their mass. Under baths of red and purple pigment, Shils endows the objects with substantial form. Titled with reference to the *Aeneid* and *Odyssey*, but without literal pictures showing through, they approach the monumental intimacy of Giorgio Morandi (who also worked with painted objects) or of Philip Guston in his small still lifes. Shils reminds us that what’s lost in photography is the work of the hand; photographers can create soft focus within the camera, but not the coordination of eye and hand, the literal “touching” to which Alva Noë compares vision itself. Shils suggests that painting, within a fluid visual field, can maintain its access to a world of stable, monumental forms and reassert its traditional claim to truth. ☞



Stuart Shils, “telemachus’s hesitation before dawn,” 2014. Acrylic paint on archival inkjet photograph, 9.5 × 7”. Courtesy of the artist.

WANG JIANWEI *Time Temple*

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM | OCTOBER 31, 2014 – FEBRUARY 16, 2015

BY TATIANA ISTOMINA

Wang Jianwei is one of China's most important conceptual artists investigating the themes of knowledge, society, and ideology. Born in 1958, he trained as a painter in the academic style of Russian Realism, and from the early 1990s moved to work in video, theater, and socially engaged projects. Wang's major concern is epistemological: he views art not as a tool for personal expression via material manipulation, but as a structure of knowledge, a cognitive attitude that starts with materials but has to eventually transcend them. *Time Temple* is a convincing proposition for this kind of art practice. Its success lies, first of all, in the power of individual art works, their aesthetic and poetic potency produced by the artist's skills, experience, and sheer manual labor—and then in the exhibition's overall structure connecting the multiple works and ideas into a meaningful constellation. The result is a system of conceptual and emotive relationships, which resist any straightforward interpretation but open up new possibilities for understanding and knowledge.

Wang's solo exhibition, consisting of several sculptures and paintings, a 55-minute-long film, and a piece-in-progress, which began with a live performance on the opening night and will culminate in the last week of the show with a new theater production, is carefully orchestrated in time and space. The multiple artworks have been made specifically for this exhibition, and despite the differences in form and style, they exist in a precarious equilibrium, like segments of a four-dimensional Chinese puzzle.

At the core of the show's conceptual architecture is a densely packed gallery containing two paintings and a series of hand-crafted wooden sculptures; each work is also titled "Time Temple" (2014). Of the two paintings, one appears to be an abstract composition showing a bright yellow rectangular shape outlined in black, on an orange background; according to the wall text, the imagery represents a microscopic view of human skin. The other painting, although unquestionably figurative, is no less ambiguous. Painted in a photo-realist style with impressive economy and precision, the four-panel canvas depicts grave-looking men and women in official dark suits sitting around a long empty table, with three attendants standing nearby. Slightly away from the group, a man sits in a chair by himself, his hands on his knees, his whole posture tense and subdued. The room is lit with a harsh white light; the atmosphere is strange and slightly menacing. What at first glance seems a realistic depiction of a physical space on close inspection turns out to be a composite image made of four partially overlapping frames—some of the figures are doubled, others cropped. These ruptures are made more apparent by the variable thickness of the framework enclosing the individual panels. The painting's fragmentation is echoed in the series of sculptures that take up the rest of the gallery. They are modular constructions sitting directly on the floor, their bulks built out of wood and a few selected details made in brass, steel, or rubber. With their geometric shapes and polished surfaces, the objects might be taken for pieces of extravagant modernist furniture, if not for the air of complete purposelessness and self-sufficiency they exude. They are arranged roughly along a straight line running diagonally across the gallery, with the tallest piece standing against the far wall—which makes them look like fragments of a tall obelisk or perhaps a monument of a roughly human shape, which had been toppled and broken apart.

Some keys to this mysterious installation might be found in Wang's experimental film "The Morning



Installation view: Wang Jianwei: *Time Temple*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 31, 2014–February 16, 2015. Wang Jianwei: *Time Temple* is made possible by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. All works by Wang Jianwei © 2014 Wang Jianwei, used by permission. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Time Disappeared" (2014), screened daily at a vaguely significant hour of 1 p.m. The script, based on Franz Kafka's famous short story, "Metamorphosis" (1915), is close to the original text except for some minor modifications: its action takes place in present-day China, and the protagonist's body is transformed into a large fish instead of an insect. Multiple visual and symbolic links connect the film with various parts of the installation. The four-panel painting, although based on images from a different video, restages the film's psychological drama: a tragic confrontation between a group and one of its former members, who is inexplicably singled out and set apart from the others to wait for their decision on his future fate. The other painting's image of an epidermis is echoed in the film's close-up shots of the protagonist's human face and fish-like body. These and other parallels multiply and reinforce each other, weaving a flexible network of connections.

More clues to the overall meaning of the exhibition might be found in Wang's elaborate opening-night performance. In this work, a number of people selected through an open call were gathered in the museum theater to expatiate on one of the topics selected by the artist such as "the universe," "Frank Lloyd Wright," or "Jorge Luis Borges." They spoke simultaneously, and their voices were projected into the museum rotunda, where they mixed together and reverberated through the ascending tiers of the spiral ramp. The strange poetry of this piece was created through an elegant conflation of several concepts: the tower of Babel and its traditional image as a spiral-shaped construction, Frank Lloyd Wright's design of the Guggenheim museum reproducing the same shape on the inside, the notion of a museum as a repository of culture, and Borges's metaphor of "The Library of Babel" (1941)—the vision of the universe as a giant repository of texts, some of which contain all the conceivable information about the world, while billions of others are filled with pure gibberish. The performance will be used as a starting point for the upcoming theater production, "Spiral Ramp Library," which is to be presented in the exhibit's last week. As



Wang Jianwei, "The Morning Time Disappeared," 2014. Digital color video with sound, 55 min., 8 sec., edition 1/5. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection. This film was produced on the occasion of the commission Wang Jianwei: *Time Temple*, presented at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and made possible by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. All works by Wang Jianwei © 2014 Wang Jianwei, used by permission.

any architectural construction, *Time Temple* changes its appearance depending on the perspective from which it is observed, and will undoubtedly reshape itself somewhat when seen from this new aspect.

Wang is known as a cerebral artist with a strong interest in philosophy and literature. His publications and interviews are filled with references to many thinkers and writers, and his works contain allusions to diverse philosophical texts and ideas. It might be tempting to suppose that a careful exploration of these conceptual underpinnings might yield some kind of unequivocal meaning behind Wang's works. This would be a false notion. As Wang Jianwei noted in his interview with Emily Wasik, "What I say cannot be used to interpret my work." What he probably means is that the artist's thoughts or conceits, and the various sources that might inspire his practice, cannot alone explain his art. Each artwork is a fragment of a new reality that comes about through an unaccountable metamorphosis of materials, processes, and ideas. ☞

STURTEVANT: DOUBLE TROUBLE

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART | NOVEMBER 9, 2014 – FEBRUARY 22, 2015

BY CHRISTOPHER GREEN

A cynic might point out how convenient it is for the Museum of Modern Art to have an exhibition that essentially doubles the narrative of modern art enshrined in neighboring galleries and on the floor below. Or he might point out how unsurprising it is that the museum's permanent collection doesn't contain a single work of art by that female artist whose retrospective seems to depend on, or at least point to, the art by the men next door. But MoMA is to be commended, for *Sturtevant: Double Trouble*, the long overdue retrospective of Elaine Sturtevant's career, brings attention to an artist who, as the palpable tremors of semantic anxiety surrounding the show demonstrate, threatens the core foundations of this cathedral of modernism even as it attempts to subsume her.

This anxiety around Sturtevant's work is rooted in a fear of what to call her, perhaps most evident in the catalogue where Peter Eleey makes an abundantly clear list of what Elaine Sturtevant is *not*. She is “not a copyist, plagiarist, parodist, forger, or imitator”; instead she is an “actionist,” a maker who circulates, consumes, and canonizes (thereby doubling the basic operations of the museum). Eleey attempts to make Sturtevant digestible by showing that she isn't a faker *per se*, rather she is “faking faking.” The history of modern art relies on the idea that art moves forward through originality, and Eleey attempts to show that there is true originality in Sturtevant's work, despite its appearance. These aren't copies; these are something else.

This avoidance of the “copy” is felt throughout the show, in the press, and sometimes even in Sturtevant's own words. But why does a copyist have to be opposed to an actionist? Why can copying not also be an act of making? The negative connotation which “copying” has acquired in the last century runs contrary to the large extent of the history of art—one need only look to the widespread copying amongst the masters of Renaissance Europe, or the copying of venerated icons and religious images to multiply their spiritual powers, to know this.

One of the great lessons of Duchamp's readymade is that this prohibition against the copy is utterly unsustainable. And if the exhibition makes anything clear, it is the undeniable influence of Duchamp's work on Sturtevant. She chose no other artist as her subject more (seven times over in the case of “Duchamp Fresh Widow,” [1992/2012]), and her work is rooted in the readymade as practice. Sturtevant's work is an opportunity not to find originality in the fake, as Eleey would suggest, but to see how one artist cast down the needless opposition of copy and original. The copy of the readymade is not simply a replication but rather a

reiteration, a continuation. And while Duchamp begat the readymade from objects, Sturtevant takes the entirety of another artist's work as her readymade. This is a step beyond “adopting style as her medium,” as Eleey describes it. Rather, Sturtevant enters another's work into a discourse—that is into a circulation of sayable and knowable meanings—on their behalf.

Take one of the most consequential works in the retrospective, “Oldenburg Store Object Slip” (1967). Hanging high on a wall, “Slip” is one of the only remaining objects from Sturtevant's 1967 repetition (Eleey uses the word “variation”) of Oldenburg's famous studio-cum-installation “The Store.” It was one of many sculptures that Sturtevant produced and offered for sale in a vacant East Village storefront on East 9th Street, only a few blocks away from where Oldenburg had opened his “Store” six years prior. Sturtevant's “Store” was filled with enameled and plastered forms copied from Oldenburg's, down to a large bridge sculpture tucked away in the back. Though recent critics and historians of her work have fetishized the minute differences between a “Sturtevant” and its “original,” Sturtevant's iteration of “The Store” and its objects can only be differentiated from Oldenburg's by direct photo comparison.

The slippage already created in just a few sentences discussing “The Store,” the constant need to verify *whose store* or *which store*, is central to the anxiety Sturtevant's work can produce. Rather than lose ourselves in the endless variations of terms to describe Sturtevant's work as repetition, variation, or copy, we ought to ground “The Store”



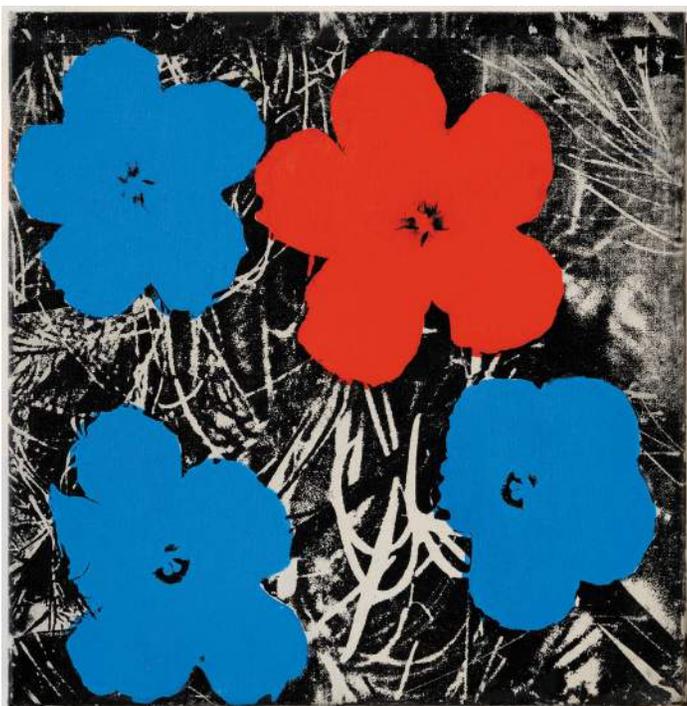
“Sturtevant, Duchamp Wanted,” 1969. Photograph collage. 11 7/16 × 9” (29 × 22.8 cm). Kolodny Family Collection. Photo: Peter Butler. © Estate Sturtevant, Paris.

then, that Oldenburg felt immense anxiety when what he undoubtedly considered *his* work escaped him as it emerged into discourse, the artist losing his hold on the “by” as it became “of.” Sturtevant's work makes visible this potential for a future of iterations removed from any singular notion of original, authorship, or control.

Sturtevant's challenge is not to originality altogether, but rather a challenge to the preconceptions that the original



Installation view of *Sturtevant: Double Trouble*, The Museum of Modern Art, November 9, 2014 – February 22, 2015. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel. All works by Sturtevant © Estate Sturtevant, Paris.



Sturtevant, “Warhol Flowers,” 1964–65. Synthetic polymer screenprint on canvas. 22 1/16 × 22 1/16”. Estate Sturtevant, Paris. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris–Salzburg. © Estate Sturtevant, Paris.

of 1967 in a term that makes Sturtevant's connection to a readymade strategy explicit: we are discussing an *iteration* of “The Store.” The object MoMA hangs on its wall is a material record of the particular 1967 iteration, done by Sturtevant of the Oldenburg work. It is “The Store” of Oldenburg, but an iteration *by* Sturtevant rather than Oldenburg himself.

Eleey notes that Sturtevant admired the “traps” of discourse that surround Duchamp's work. This discourse circulates independently of a work's materiality, as is clearly visible in “Fountain,” which lost its “original” 1917 iteration yet continued as a sequence, from urinal to photo to full replication by Arturo Schwarz. This narrative is one of constant changes of state through a discursive circuit in which the readymade is caught: a trap. Prior to Sturtevant's 1967 choice, “The Store” of Oldenburg was only “The Store” by Oldenburg, a discrete event and series of objects constituting a work of art. But Sturtevant, by reiterating “The Store” in its entirety, enters it into the trap of discourse. By engaging the entirety of a work rather than a single object (also see the publicity material Sturtevant copied from Oldenburg), Sturtevant shows that the discourse of the readymade need not be produced by a single object. It is no surprise,

and the copy need be opposed. In creating “The Store,” she enters as a progenitor into that artwork's particular sustaining iteration as a readymade. This insertion is how we can describe any work from Sturtevant's oeuvre as a “Sturtevant,” as current writers insist on doing, rather than another “Oldenburg” or “Warhol.” Warhol certainly relished this aspect of Sturtevant's work, saying several years before she famously asked to borrow the silkscreen for his “Flowers” series: “I think it would be so great if more people took up silkscreens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's.” Indeed by taking the silkscreen to produce “Warhol Flowers” (1964–65) Sturtevant made “a Sturtevant” out of Warhol's original, producing a copy which threatened Warhol's ownership while simultaneously inserting Sturtevant into its discourse as an author. Unlike Oldenburg, Warhol had little anxiety over losing singular authorship. When asked particulars about his printing method, he said, “I don't know. Ask Elaine.” Sturtevant shows us that we should not fear the copy, for her work points not to any original but only to the potential past and future of any art as an iteration of the readymade. ☺

ALL PORES OPEN

REGINA REX | JANUARY 11 – FEBRUARY 22, 2015

BY MOLLY ELIZALDE

All *Pores Open* showcases four seemingly very different artists, Shirley Gorelick (1924 – 2000), Ted Partin (born 1977), and artist duo Dit-Cilinn (born 1983) and David Ohlsson (born 1985), all of whom engage with the problem of portraying identities. While unusual to have a small show with works made more than 50 years apart, the gallery, owned and run by artists, grasps at a particular struggle amongst artists: How can they access genuine humanity when individuals increasingly hide themselves behind public personas? How do they portray human relationships in this culture of individuals obsessed with portraying a perfect version of their true selves?

Gorelick was an artist interested in humanism and psychology. Although she counted Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism as early influences, her works became largely realist as she matured. On view are “Large Dark Figure” (1962 – 63), a shadowy, abstract painting, and “Two Sisters” (1976), a highly realistic work of two female nudes, both of which reveal the range of her exploration into how best to capture her subjects. Gorelick’s shifting styles act as a framework for the show. Her earlier abstract works examine the effect of a human on the artist—a general feeling of the individual suggested through color and form—whereas later realist works focus more on the psychology of her subjects through representation of human features. Each of the artists play with form to study its success in capturing their subjects.

The title “Large Dark Figure” gives the viewer little to identify of the individual. Abstract figures necessarily leave the true emotion behind the subject to interpretation. Here, Gorelick studies how to render humanistic sentiments through form. In contrast, “Two Sisters” focuses on realist expressions of the subject, being more specific to the individuality of the models. Gorelick switches styles, as any artist might, to question the formal success of certain techniques: Is the effect of an abstract form in color and shape more genuine to the human? Or can truth only be rendered through the details of the individual? The answer lies in how the viewer engages with the subjects to understand the intimate moment shared by Gorelick and her models. Over time, Gorelick concluded that form is a more genuine portrayal of an individual’s psychology.

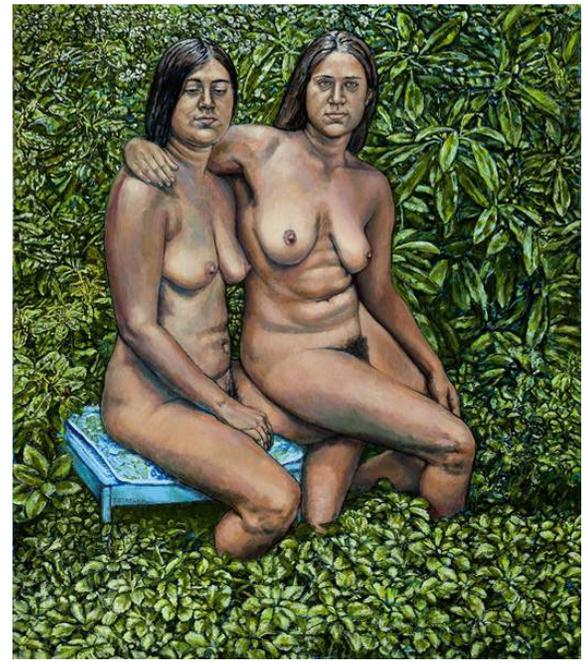
Like Gorelick, Ted Partin investigates the formal qualities of obscuring the model in his photographic “dark prints.” In “Untitled I” (2011) and “Untitled II” (2012), Partin’s subjects are barely visible, requiring the viewer to scrutinize figures that are almost indistinguishable from

the space around them. Looking closely at the faint shapes, the viewer can distinguish body position and facial expression, but a lack of color renders the works less emotionally specific in their abstraction.

Partin’s three other photographs in the show feature women who engage with him in some way: The subject of “Bushwick II” (2010) stands topless, looking straight at the camera, her face half in shadow and her skin marked harshly by the sun; in contrast, the figure in “Bushwick I” (2012) sits folded over her knees, her body positioned away from the camera; and finally, “Ulster Park” (2012) captures a woman in a red leotard standing in the woods with a camera. Clearly posed, the individuals engage with Partin as he attempts to arrest a human moment. Here, the artist studies the effect of color and light on the portrayal of the subject: The dark prints make the idea of a hidden individual clear—hidden to the viewer who has no way to access the intimacy of the artist-subject relationship. But even with more distinguishable features, the clearly-lit prints don’t reveal much more to the viewer. Partin uncovers the problem of truly exhibiting intimate knowledge of an individual. A viewer can understand that genuineness only through what they perceive or judge to be true. By investigating the expressive potential of both abstraction and realism, obscure and clear renderings, Gorelick and Partin both grapple with the viewer’s ability to grasp the intimacy behind a portrait or access the true consciousness of the moment.

Artist duo Dit-Cilinn and Ohlsson’s style differs from those of Gorelick and Partin, yet they also question the true nature of human relationships. Again, we see the inquiry into how to capture genuine reality, but Dit-Cilinn and Ohlsson bring into question the individual’s reluctance to be perceived as a human with all the inevitable imperfections.

Dit-Cilinn and Ohlsson take direct engagement with the viewer as their subject. “Synchronizing Lamp” (2013) is a composition of soil, birch bark, and weeds assembled on the floor of the gallery; in the center stands a two-sided lamp with bulbs on both ends flashing in a synchronized pattern. The premise is that two viewers would sit on either side and experience the same rhythm of light. Without actually engaging with each other, the viewers share an experience. The work calls to mind ideas first raised by Minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd, questioning the position of works in the gallery and the problem of their delicacy. While the work is not actually minimalist, it does confront the viewer with those themes. The soil spreads out onto the gallery floor and the height of the lamp sits below



Shirley Gorelick, “Two Sisters I,” 1976. Acrylic on canvas. 80 × 69”.

hip height, positioning the work awkwardly. To sit on the floor with another person across from the lamp would seem to break established rules of public behavior. This kind of Minimalist approach, creating discomfort in the gallery space, tries to access that aspect of our humanity that is otherwise not available in a traditional gallery setting. The consciousness elicited by interacting with the lamp rather than the other individual highlights the artists’ difficulty with increasingly closed relationships and the struggle to communicate with someone in a truly intimate manner.

The show’s titular work, “All Pores Open” (2013), also by Dit-Cilinn and Ohlsson, is a suspended plank covered in moss. Positioned in a corner of the gallery where viewers can circulate around it, “All Pores Open” also makes the viewer the subject of the work. Rather than the artist capturing the likeness of an individual, each individual captures his or her own relationship to the work. Unlike Gorelick and Partin, Dit-Cilinn and Ohlsson rely on human curiosity to elicit awareness. By eschewing portraiture to depict individuals, the duo avoids the problem of how to approach a hidden individual. Instead, viewer engagement is the principal access point to human experience because consciousness lies most prominently within the self.

Working to reveal genuine consciousness through varying styles, the four artists in *All Pores Open* question the ability of artistic practice to truly capture their subjects for a viewer outside the intimate artist-subject relationship. The title of the show suggests vulnerability and a deep consideration of humanity: Where is the genuine self if it’s hidden in obscurity and abstraction? Can it be extracted by realism or only through viewer engagement? Projecting the artists’ experience onto the viewer, the smart curators at Regina Rex will leave you with no definitive answers. ☞



Dit-Cilinn and David Ohlsson, detail from *All Pores Open*, 2014 – 15. Thermohydrometer, moss, steel, wood, rubber, clay, birch bark, metal wire, acrylic. Dimensions variable.



Ted Partin, “Bushwick I,” 2012. Ilfochrome Print, 11” × 13.75”.

JOE FYFE *make me one with everything*

LONGHOUSE PROJECTS | DECEMBER 12, 2014–FEBRUARY 7, 2015

BY DAVID RHODES

In Joe Fyfe's work, the inherent characteristics of any given material are presented foremost and combined with a sense of highly nuanced formal invention. Materials and objects are sewn, glued, tied, or left leaning together; there is no idealization or "neutral ground" sought for painting—and painting and its possibilities is the subject of this exhibition—as medium specific. Displacement is regarded as a normal state—wood, fabric, and paint gestures are rehomed as fragments of a precise composition. Moving around the exhibition, everything here can be seen as having already existed somewhere else out in the world—be it a banner or a gestural mark, it can also be seen as interchangeable and capable of surprising and unexpected reconfiguration. There are stretched rectangular paintings of different sizes, objects placed against a wall or on the floor. One piece is suspended from the ceiling and several are pinned to the wall, the fabric suspended above or reaching the floor. Framed collages use found elements as well as photographs from Fyfe's travels. A national flag can be a pictorial support, a coat of paint on a fence, a pictorial invention. The idea of the

found object, as Duchamp would have it, is turned on its head, as it becomes one more resource for painting. Though Fyfe is primarily an artist, he has also written on art and curated exhibitions.

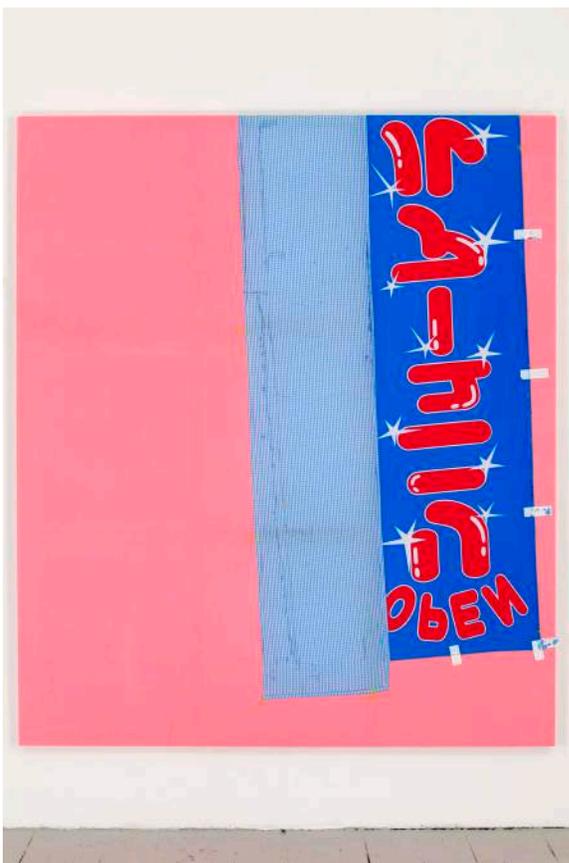
There is no high and low in Fyfe's work, everything is, one senses, fair game. Though having said this, it is clear that in the particular selection of materials, often objects or fabrics found out of doors and many from his travels in Vietnam and Cambodia, indicates an interest in the way quotidian forms of urban or rural improvisation—the building of dwellings or fences, decorative and practical use of material—reflect socio-economic realities of local people. Fyfe resourcefully makes use of obdurate materials, whether patching a wall or using collage in a painting. Improvisation, re-use, and reconfiguration are all at play. "Cradle" (2013), a black broken car fender containing a piece of black fabric and an incomplete sign with the letters, "k-i-n," is situated high on a wall. What the piece is materially is clear, as is the connotation of the title. However, in considering the piece formally and conceptually there is as much humor or gravitas as the viewer decides, given the fractured quality of the constituent parts and the Beckett-like deftness of their piecing together.

In response to a question from Keith Sonnier published in a catalog in 2012—the text of which consisted of 20 questions from artists and writers invited by Matthew Higgs—about the relation of material and concept to form, Fyfe quoted the British architectural critic Reyner Banham, who had defined Brutalist architecture as having three main qualities: formal legibility of plan, clear exhibition of structure, and valuation of materials for their inherent qualities as "found." Fyfe identified with these qualities to such an extent that he said it closely approximated his artistic program of the last 20 years. Fyfe clearly brings about results very dissimilar to the Brutalist buildings themselves: it is only in the use of materials for their individual qualities together with the clarity of their combination that any aims are shared. Visiting the Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel exhibition at Dia Foundation in 1988 proved crucial for Fyfe, and it's not difficult to see the connections in this current exhibition—in the directness, lightness of touch, and willingness to work paintings' formal elements beyond a simple geometric frame.

Returning to the rectangle in some cases, take "Bull" (2014), or "Large Kappabashi Painting II" (2014), Fyfe resolves compositional issues within a shape that he has shown to be optional rather than a given in his own painting, as well as in so doing aligning himself with a tradition of post-1945 French painting, namely



Joe Fyfe, "Cradle," 2013. Objects and cloth. Courtesy of the artist and Longhouse Projects, New York.



Joe Fyfe, "Large Kappabashi Painting II," 2014. Felt, gingham, and cotton banner. Courtesy of the artist and Longhouse Projects, New York.

the Supports/Surfaces movement, that he has played a part in bringing to the attention of a North American audience. Overlooked in comparison to developments in painting this side of the Atlantic, artists such as André-Pierre Arnal and Claude Viallat—both included in Canada's 2014 *Supports/Surfaces* exhibition, for which Fyfe provided one of the catalog texts—are beginning to finally get their due.

In terms of assemblage or collage, Fyfe tends to recall the lyrical abstractions of Serge Poliakoff rather than Rauschenberg, say; the fact that they are freestanding objects and wall-based three-dimensional pieces notwithstanding. This could have to do with Fyfe and Poliakoff's pictorial and compositional affinities, rather than an interest in the extension of sculptural forms per se, and an insistence on abstraction despite the many text fragments or photo images incorporated into a piece. In shifting registers between formal precision and street reclaimed material, Fyfe is in fact recasting aspects of abstraction. There is a lightness of touch evident throughout the exhibition that results in a formal balance devoid of overworking. It is in Fyfe's willingness to present found materials for what they are and place them in new configurations that he succeeds in extending ideas about painting beyond the necessity of a rectangular window of space—to its limits, but no further, as painting remains his key subject. To go further would be to forego this. ☞

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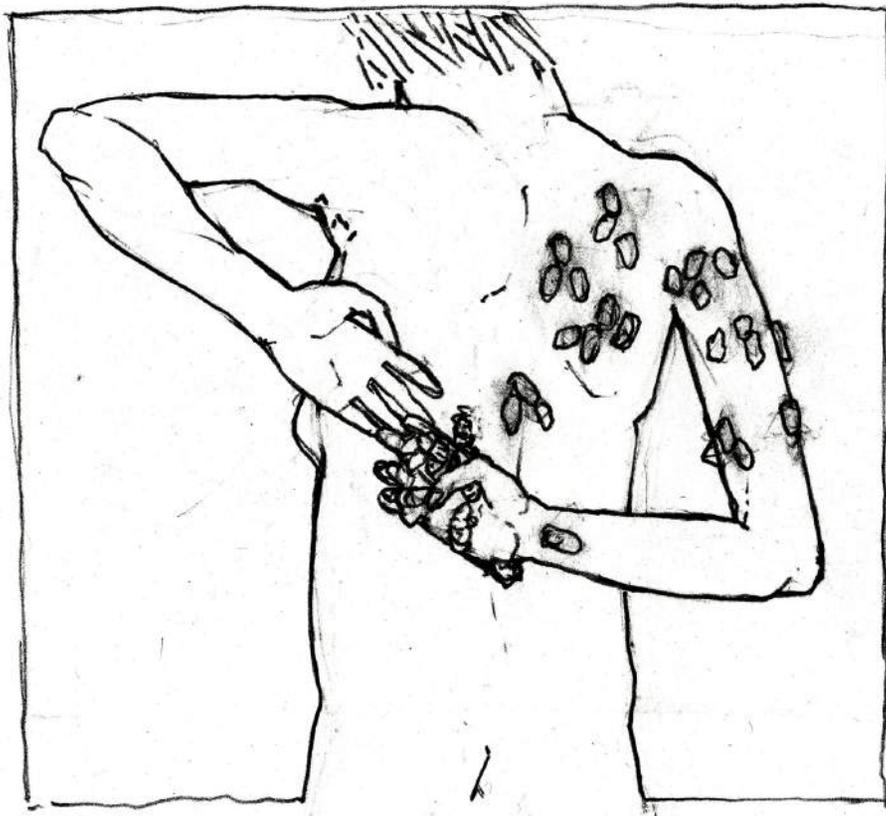
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SPEAKING OF PEOPLE: EBONY, JET AND CONTEMPORARY ART

STUDIO MUSEUM OF HARLEM | NOVEMBER 13, 2014 – MARCH 8, 2015

BY CHARLIE SCHULTZ

Speaking of People is a powerful group exhibition that focuses on the many ways contemporary artists have taken inspiration from the pages of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. For more than a few, the actual pages themselves serve as a point of departure. For others, the socially coded messages of the magazines are revived, examined, and at times completely transformed. Issues of race, identity, the impact of the media on self-perception, and sexuality comprise the sinews of this politically engaged exhibition.

The show's curator, Lauren Haynes, has put together a smart collection of essays in an accompanying catalog that describe the historical relevance of these two magazines as organs of black speech, thought, and community. As Thelma Golden writes in an introductory essay, "*Ebony* and *Jet* provided and shaped a history—our history, my history, black history." Hank Willis Thomas, who has several works in the exhibition, corroborates Golden's perspective. He writes that "[*Ebony* and *Jet*] created the greatest living archive of the African-American experience over the past seventy years." Thomas quotes the comedian Redd Foxx, who called these magazines "the bible for black people." Without a doubt, they are cultural icons—though none of the artists make any effort to place them on a pedestal.

The first work one sees upon entering the exhibition is a painting by Jeremy Okai Davis, "Makes the Man" (2012), that exemplifies the type of media-oriented identity issues explored in the show. The painting features two cans of pomade on either side of a skinless face. A large black Afro, clear eyes, and broadly smiling mouth appear to float on a field of splotchy pink paint above the phrase "MAKES THE MAN." The painting references popular advertisements that ran in *Jet* and *Ebony* with a critical eye towards the commodification of a person's appearance as a marker of worth or manhood.

From deeper in the exhibition one hears the phrase, "My complexion is political," being repeated several times. Following the voice leads to "On Black Foundations" (2012), a compact installation with a video component created by Theaster Gates. The installation is comprised of a vitrine with a range of Fashion Fair cosmetics on display. (Fashion Fair Cosmetics is a sister company of *Jet* and *Ebony* that designs skin products for black women.) In the video above the vitrine a dark-skinned woman—without any makeup—proclaims her beauty and self worth. The title of the work plays on the notion of foundations, co-mingling a sense of one's heritage with a base layer of facial makeup.

The woman's voice echoes around the exhibition and imbues other work with its message, much of which extends a critical perspective on concepts of beauty, women, and their skin. Hank Willis Thomas and Mickalene Thomas have both created work based on *Jet* magazine's "Beauty of the Week" series, in which young black bikini-clad women are pictured beside a list of their hobbies, jobs, educational backgrounds, and often dress sizes. However, each artist uses the material to different ends. Mickalene's collages reassert a sense of feminine empowerment, while Hank's installation, "Black is Beautiful" (2008) wallpapers a room with thousands of "Beauty of the Week" pictures. The former trades raw sexuality for a sense of intellectual astuteness while the latter shifts the focus from the female body to an analysis of how the female body is represented in the media.

There are many astute pieces that turn from beauty back to beauty products, such as Ellen Gallagher's "Deluxe" (2004–05) which features 60 unique etchings, each of which is based on a magazine page advertising hair pomades, wigs, or skin lightening creams. Like Davis's depiction of a face in "Makes the Man," Gallagher remodels afros, eyeballs, and lips with astonishing variety, transforming commercial representations into fantastic

images that verge on supernatural. Elsewhere a suite of Glenn Ligon's early drawings from the mid-'80s juxtaposes famous modernist sculpture, like Brancusi's "Endless Column," with hair pomades in a sly move that suggests the influence of African culture on European modernists.

One can hardly move through a show that is so saturated with notions of beauty without pushing into the realm of outright sexuality. Ayanah Moor's installation "Good News" (2011) moves in exactly that direction. Her work quotes from a 1980s article in *Ebony*, "What They Say About the Men in Their Towns," except she substitutes the word "women" for "men," shifting the gender politics into a queer dimension. It is the only work in the show that brings in a homosexual perspective, and in doing so it upends the traditional notion of women aspiring to beauty to attract men. Furthermore, the piece recognizes a community that has been largely ostracized from *Jet* and *Ebony*.

What is absent from this exhibition is just as notable as what's present. There is no work that addresses issues of outright violence, injustice, or poverty. There are no images of guns, gold, or flashy vehicles. In this sense, the exhibition does not pander in the least to contemporary events or media trends. There is no sense of victimization. If anything there is a quiet sense of racial pride that pulses through the show. This may be on account of the temper of the magazines, but just as likely it emerges from the artists willful embrace and reinvigoration of important historical touchstones. ☞

SADIE BENNING *Fuzzy Math*

SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS | JANUARY 10 – FEBRUARY 14, 2015

BY TERRY R. MYERS

Sadie Benning's recent works fit together beautifully while resisting fitting in completely with other things to which they could be compared. The complexity of their situation as such is what gives them their eye-catching personality, an attitude provided mainly by the disarming procedures of their production. Each work starts intact before being cut into pieces that are individually covered with aqua-resin, sanded, molded, and painted with casein and sometimes acrylic, and then put back together as a complete work. Without a doubt, they are

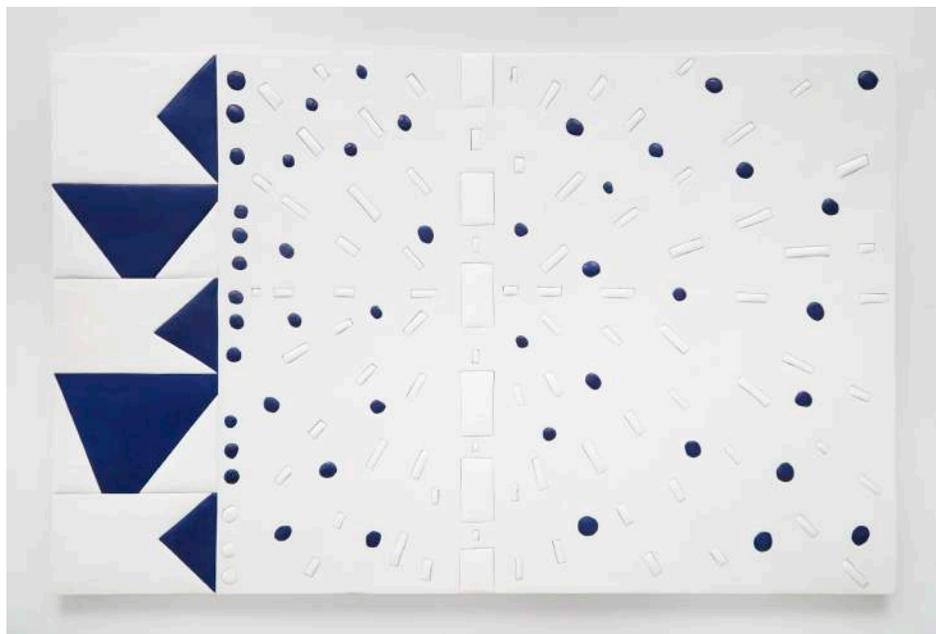
paintings as well as sculptural reliefs, well-traveled territory since at least the early work (and philosophy) of Donald Judd. On the other hand, categories like painting and sculpture are no longer enough to keep Benning's work from also being classified as some kind of arguably sophisticated craft project. As far as I'm concerned, such identification would be far from wrong or, even worse, a put-down. This work shows us in no uncertain terms that leaving boundaries intact is a misuse, or better yet, a waste. That this substantial exhibition takes on uncertain terms themselves as an

overall theme makes Benning's work all the more delicious in the aggregate, while giving me the opportunity to figure out why I've been obsessed with them from the onset: they are real and they are honest.

Residing, at first, within the realm of set theory, the term "fuzzy math" has been co-opted by the likes of journalism, politics, economics, and financial markets, including that of art. For Benning, it's pulling double duty as a reclamation of its original use value (to account for uncertainty in algebraic functions) for the open-ended making and meaning of art, and as a reminder of how much it is being misused to deceive and manipulate. Such is a delicate yet almost boisterous balancing act. The first work in the first room, "Hanging Chads" (all works 2014), makes clear just how adept Benning is at holding competing contradictions together without shutting any of them down. Comprised of 16 small white and red panels, the work is an impossible-to-pin-down representation of an abstraction (and vice versa) as both an artwork and politically motivated point of view. Parading under the guise of a rock solid figure/ground puzzle, the way in which Benning fits the pieces of these works back together is funny and charming, even loving. "Pie Chart," for example, stands out because its segments make it the most multi-colored work in the exhibition, as is the case in most of the rest of the works, poignantly tempered by the caressed quality of the burnished casein paint.

Some of the other works are either a combination of red and white, or blue and white, or red, white, and blue, so that the symbolism of patriotism is crystal clear but surprisingly neutralized. Benning's titles, of the blue and white works, for example—"Tanks," "Blue and White Zig Zag," "Blue and White Dashes," "Explosion," and "Target"—repeatedly reinforce the breadth of Benning's agility. "Explosion" is particularly variable. The large panel that makes up most of its surface is matte, its white paint pitted and suede-like, while the blue dots and white dashes that are pushed into their corresponding holes are shinier, inset like jewels. The left side of this work interrupts the cohesion of the "explosion" on the right with a set of white rectangles with blue triangles of varying sizes that could be taken as a nod to stop-motion animation.

The same colors become far more visceral in other, less graphic, works: first in "Irritation Painting" and "Irritation S," both of which remain stubbornly inscrutable, then in "Red Maze Monochrome," the most body-like work in the show (it's a painting with an intestinal tract), and ultimately, in five all-white works. Smaller than most of the rest, they gather mind and body completing Benning's ambition to complicate, if not eliminate, the binary. Four of them are presented in pairs ("Graph 3" and "Graph 4" representing the mind, "Untitled Lines (Nerves)" and "Untitled Lines (Body)," the body), while the fifth brings the entire exhibition together. Made from a rectangular support cut into triangles that all pointed towards the center of the piece once reassembled, "Smash" speaks volumes through a small hole created by that irregular configuration. It is an exquisite reminder, once again, of what has been said many times before—that the center cannot hold. ☞



Sadie Benning, "Explosion," 2014. Medite, aqua-resin, and casein, 56×89". Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Chris Austin.

RUDY BURCKHARDT

Subterranean Monuments: A Centenary Celebration

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY | NOVEMBER 29, 2014 – JANUARY 17, 2015

BY ROBERT BERLIND

This elegant installation celebrating the centenary of Rudy Burckhardt's birth was a good introduction to his work for anyone coming to it for the first time. The photographs for which he is perhaps best known were intermixed with his paintings, an arrangement he did not favor during his lifetime, but which here demonstrates the continuity of his interests. His films and a documentary by Vincent Katz and Vivien Bittencourt of he and others talking about his work were shown in the projects room. The exhibition also included a table holding the books he wrote, some in collaboration with Katz or Simon Pettet—both poets—a few postcard collages, and pages from his journals.

The installation highlighted Burckhardt's attraction to offbeat subjects. A cluster of eight photos, five paintings on canvas, and one painted polyphore mushroom, all done in Maine, occupied one wall. Another sparsely hung wall showed two city paintings and a photo looking down at manhole covers. His photos and films often crop all but the lower legs and feet of passersby, everyday details to which most people pay no attention. Other sequences show hurrying pedestrians, interweaving along sidewalks and streets, hardly noticing one another, yet never colliding. This downward look and interest in anonymous, ordinary people, unbothered by rush hour traffic suggest a particular temperament. Overall, there is a downbeat quality in much of Burckhardt's work and, as in his personal manner, a complete lack of ostentation. (In fact, it feels awkward, as one who knew him

over the years, to refer to him by his august Swiss surname, "Burckhardt," rather than as "Rudy.")

Throughout the exhibition a sort of radical innocence commingles with distinctive visual sophistication, and often a subtle, humorous wit. The common concern of the paintings and photos is always for some particular element: textures and portrait-like configurations on tree trunks that nearly fill the picture plane, ferns at one's feet, manhole covers on city streets, cast shadows, or random bits of debris. Burckhardt's keen formal sense carries the pictures so well that you may miss the telling detail that prompted them. His straightforwardly descriptive paintings have the look of an untrained amateur, as though he simply wanted to "do" the photographs in paint. His technical capacities often seem just equal to the task, and yet the paintings' incidental, ad hoc inventions are so often just right as to be painters' paintings.

Burckhardt's art was in the tradition of the bohemian *flâneur* whose daily observations and responses took precedence over any agenda. If you were to ask what interested him most—taking photos, shooting films, or writing his memoirs—the answer might be: whatever he happened to be doing at the time. Nowhere is there evidence of professionally strategic thinking or any concern for a career.

Burckhardt was at the center of the world of New York art and poetry virtually from his arrival. He arrived in the city in 1935 with the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, who may have induced him to leave his staunchly conservative



"Untitled (Bird's-Eye, Still life)," 1945, gelatin-silver print, 11 x 9". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

family and city, Basel, Switzerland. He made many iconic photographs of now legendary artists, their work, and their studios: Pollock, Guston, Rothko, and de Kooning among them. Included in his oeuvre is a series of antic, improvised short films featuring the artists and poets who were his friends.

A wonderful, asymmetric 1937 photo depicts Denby seated on the roof of his 21st Street Chelsea apartment, the left portion showing the street, cars, and people below. Not included in the exhibition, it shows two subjects: a world of personal affections and the look of the disorderly city Burckhardt made his home. 

THANKS TO APPLE, AMAZON, AND THE MALL

KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY | JANUARY 6 – FEBRUARY 8, 2015

BY MAYA HAKAWA

The digital and its potential are at the heart of *Thanks to Apple, Amazon, and the Mall* at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. Curated by critic Brian Droitcour, the show is an extension of the gallery's digital publishing venture, Klaus_eBooks. Since 2013, the series—also edited by Droitcour—has produced digital books that experiment with the possibilities of the still-nascent medium. *Thanks to Apple* includes nine artists, and all them have made, or are in the process of making, books for the gallery. However, the exhibition does not strictly represent or display these digital projects. Instead, it is a holistic consideration of the digital and how it might facilitate ways of thinking that are not beholden to its specificities.

The emphasis of this small group show isn't how the digital formally functions as an artistic medium. Rather, having identified an interest in technology's effect on feeling and embodied experience throughout the eBooks, Droitcour centralizes this theme. Of the 16 works on view, only one is specifically computer-based. In *Thanks to Apple* the eBook is a metonym for art making in a digital age: in both, media—visual, linguistic, or otherwise—are utilized indiscriminately and the boundaries that

might otherwise separate practices are actively transgressed to express the complexity of lived, rather than digital, reality.

Text is prevalent throughout, and an interest in the possibilities of language is particularly evident. In "Regrind (1-4)" (2014) by Deanna Havas, brief de-contextualized phrases that suggest the truncated language of Twitter or text messaging are papier mâché over a pulpy ground along with images of hearts and suns with smiley faces whose graphic simplicity recall emojis. The juxtaposition reflects a style of online communication that is increasingly cryptic, even if it betrays its linguistic roots. Body by Body's "TG-30" (2013–15) are haikus of bodily transformation drawn from an eBook of the same title and pasted on the gallery walls in large, vinyl serif. Inspired by posts on DiviantArt message boards, these haikus conflate multiple forms of expression and mirror the metamorphosis of the fantasies they portray. Michael Hessel-Mial's "postcards from VITA NUOVA II" (2015) are would-be poems in the form of collage. With text such as: "masturbating, I learned to summon images," Hessel-Mial posits a theory of the digital that can produce new concepts of thought, emotion, and desire.

Assemblage also looms large. Recalling its Surrealist history from the early 20th century, assemblage in a digital context also asks how different modes of existence or consciousness can productively commingle. In James Deusing's video "End of Code" (2009), codes that comprise D.N.A. and computer programs are conflated to comedic ends. Made up of elements including a ham, a bust of George Washington, and a brain, Deusing's digitally animated exquisite corpses speak phrases such as "expectation is premeditated resentment," with an absurdity that evokes the Surrealist desire to find revolution in the irrational. The work of Isaac Richard Pool is a nice sculptural complement to these digital assemblages. "Ddad" (2015) is a portrait of stitched together Carhartt jeans that rest on the gallery floor directly in front of Deusing's animation. These pieces formally work in dialogue to ask how objects can craft stories or represent individuals. In "Field Visits for Chelsea Manning" (2014) Lance Wakeling assembles objects together on two slender glass tables crafting a portrait of someone who publically negotiated a reworked relationship to her body. The archive displayed in the gallery is a sparse collection of items—an international driver's license, a Rubik's cube, a mug—that represent the places where the former Army intelligence analyst was imprisoned. Wakeling visited these sites and documented his travels for a film that asks questions about identity, sexuality, surveillance, and their circulation.

Each of the individual works in *Thanks to Apple* is an evocative exploration of the digital's lived effects. But their cumulative effect is also compelling. It's possible to see the entire exhibition, a group of separate yet still interacting parts, as a physical eBook of sorts. The title draws parallels between the commercial enterprise of the gallery and the mechanisms for eBook distribution, asking how a relationship with the digital reconfigures existing modes of circulation. Works in different media are productively juxtaposed, enacting the possibilities of a platform where video, photography, and drawing can easily co-exist. And text enlarged on the gallery walls interacts with the rest of the exhibition's visual content, reflecting the basic formal properties that all books share but the eBook can re-conceptualize.

These digital books do not approximate their physical predecessor. Instead, curating becomes an exploration of how physical space might perform what makes eBooks unique. In a refreshing reversal, the physical strives to represent the digital, however approximately. Rethinking the dynamics of digital and print, the exhibition evokes a history of artists' books where the medium became an opportunity to experiment with the practical, formal, and conceptual underpinnings of art. As books and technology continue to develop, *Thanks to Apple* suggests that the ramifications of these experimentations will continue to remain constructively elusive. 

ROUGH CUT

MORGAN LEGMAN | JANUARY 8 – FEBRUARY 7, 2015.

BY KATE LIEBMAN

Rough Cut attempts to offer a new look at how eight emerging and mid-career artists incorporate collage into the process of making abstract art. The show's premise arises from one of curator Jennifer Samet's overriding intellectual pursuits: understanding the artistic process. In her popular column, "Beer with a Painter" (*Hyperallergic*), Samet interviews artists, often asking concrete questions like "How long do you work on your paintings?" or "So you begin your paintings abstractly..." to elucidate the creative process. Throughout the exhibit, the curators rework these questions by hanging studies next to finished paintings. But with over 20 pieces included, *Rough Cut* asks too much of its viewer. It is impossible to understand an artist's practice from one example, and given the range and abundance of artistic concerns, it is exhausting to appreciate and sort these various interests both within each painting and in the show as a whole.

Though the eight artists in *Rough Cut* all use collage and all make abstract work, they do not share conceptual concerns. The tedious press release lists these artists' divergent—and manifold—interests. For example, Bryan Osburn's paintings use "folkloristic textures, ranging from Far Eastern to Latin American, Caspar David Friedrich's romantic landscapes, Surrealism, as well as the work of the 1950s," whereas Alexi Worth's paintings quote "absurdist figurative distortions, the language of

the comic book, and, occasionally, citations of historic paintings." The range of references that can be included in a single piece is both collage's strength and its defect. The paintings are dense. Furthermore, showing eight artists with such disparate concerns makes for a disjointed show.

Moreover, each painting featured in the show cannot possibly contain the range of the artist's interests. For example, in two passages of his "Walking Shirt" (2014), Osburn alludes to 1950s abstraction with three gestural brush marks and seems to quote different textures, especially of wood. Yet if he intends to refer to Friedrich's landscapes in this painting, the reference is too oblique to be noticed. Likewise, Worth's "Leaf 1" (2015) contains two distorted shapes, one that might resemble Matisse's cut-out leaves and one that approximates a hand, but the language of the comic book—the drawings that suggest a narrative or the close-up boxes that emphasize an action through strange cropping—is not present.

For six of the eight artists, the curators have included the collages that precede the paintings. In displaying the final work next to its antecedent studies, the curators have attempted to let the viewer into the artists' respective processes. Yet this organization is too didactic. It fails to provide any insights beyond the rather obvious observation that artists use collage differently: compositional studies (Amy Park, Elizabeth Hazan, Alexi Worth),

color studies (Bryan Osburn), and close, if not nearly perfect, facsimiles of their paintings (Sangram Majumdar, Trevor Winkfield). This presentation also makes for a rather crowded show; the paintings are not given enough wall space, making it difficult to evaluate their visual merit because it is impossible not to compare the paintings to their predecessors.

This predictable approach, however, is not completely without its merits. It actually enhances the experience of the individuals' work when the exhibited collages were made after the painting, as is the case for Jennifer Sirey and Carrie Moyer. Rather than planning the work, their collages reflect on it. They hint at what continues to intrigue them, helping the viewer understand why Sirey's sculpture, "Fisher Loves Eggs" (2014), and Moyer's painting "Yes Rays (aka Sister's Stamen)" (2013), are visually compelling.

Sirey's sculpture, "Fisher Loves Eggs," is the only three-dimensional work in *Rough Cut*. To make this sculpture, Sirey filled the glass tank with bacteria and vinegar to grow organic, semi-opaque shapes. She then made "Scrape Yeller" (2014), a mixed-media collage on paper that describes the ovoid shape of the bacteria's growth. Sirey's sculpture is more interesting precisely because we do not see the preparatory, schematic collages. Instead we see her interpreting her reaction to the evolution of her own process.

In the large painting "Yes Rays (aka Sister's Stamen)," Moyer handles paint with remarkable facility. She separates hard-edge shapes with painterly passages of carefully modulated markings, and she uses subtle tonal shifts to create an illusion of overlapping planes of transparent

color. Yet Moyer does not bring these techniques into her paper collages. Instead, she uses a similar orchestration of shapes to create the same tension apparent in the beautiful painting. Her *ex post facto* collage isolates what still remains interesting to her after the painting is finished: the centripetal composition. By looking and then making, Moyer has uncovered why her painting succeeds.

Beyond using collage, three of the painters (Moyer, Winkfield, and Worth) share another passion: they write about art. In collaging, the artist can move the elements around repeatedly and endlessly, testing new shapes and different arrangements until she fixes its form with glue. Likewise, words can be deleted, sentences written and rewritten, or paragraphs moved up or down. Both can remain unfixed for a long period of time and are suggestive, additive modes of working. Just as a single sentence can prefigure the next ones, a shape suggests another should be cut, placed, and glued. As Winkfield says of his collages: "It's like a Chinese box puzzle; one thing leads to another."

Hazan's "Study for Parklands" (2014), one of the sparest pieces in the show, further reinforces the relationship between collage and writing, a relationship that dates back at least to the early Cubist projects. Slightly right of center, Hazan has included a trapezoid of text, an excerpt from a newspaper article that reflects on the writing process. The text is covered on the left side, but we can still read phrases that show how writing is suggestive. These excerpts could also apply to collage, and how it fits into the artistic practices of these eight artists: "begin a first verse," "work downwards," "then loop back up." ☞

TAL R *Altstadt Girl*

CHEIM & READ | JANUARY 15 – FEBRUARY 14, 2015

BY MARGARET GRAHAM

"It's an expression of the idea that nothing occurring in time gets completely lost: even dreams and fantasies are salvageable, though only in decaying pieces."

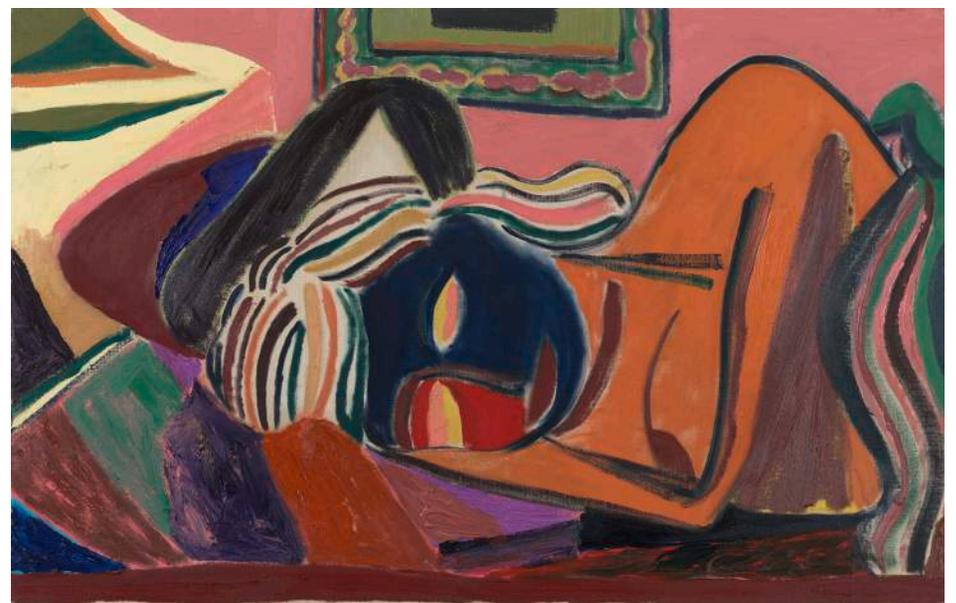
—Gary Indiana

Some of the most striking colors to be found in the natural world exist solely as counterparts to death and decay. Here and there, the lately living or slowly fading are ushered beyond the pale by richly-hued molds and parasites that unfurl in balloons and waves of radiant rot. In such cases, the act of passing away generates its own kind of beauty. The same, it would seem, applies to the less tangible but no less real memories and fantasies of Copenhagen-based artist Tal R. When recalled, a moment imperfectly remembered becomes an occasion for something new to bloom; when translated from sketch to painting, details fade, happily consumed by riots of color. The images that comprise *Altstadt Girl* are testament to this, and together stage a display as luminous and engrossing as they come.

For this, his second exhibition at Cheim & Read, Tal R has peeled out a series of paintings that are bizarre but can be relied upon: dreamy depictions of ripe, bright interior spaces inhabited by female figures rendered in simple strokes and rounded tones. The works are completed either in oil, for a more physical effect, or raw pigment and fast-drying rabbit skin glue, which retains an airy transparency that

boasts a slight, subtle sparkle. Leaning heavily on the pillars of his high-modernist forebearers (Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and Modigliani), Tal R employs these media to explore the inherent awkwardness of the ingénue, furnishing the viewer with yet another opportunity to observe her in the domestic habitat, in various states of undress and repose. But to suppose the work is only excavating an obsolete aesthetic style is to miss its cheeky thrust. The sitters—mostly strangers and casual acquaintances the artist encountered while living in the Altstadt ("old town") district of Dusseldorf—are less the focal point than they are merely the byproducts of their total environment. They stand and smoke and recline alongside pots, pans, picture frames, knickknacks, and textiles that all carry the same weight, each constituted and held in place by some frenzied internal logic of stripes, patterns, and planes. It is difficult to tell if this is more of a dis or a liberation.

The strongest image, and the most mature, is the title piece "Altstadt Girl" (2014). Lying on her side, one hand under her cheek and the other curled up behind her head to hold back thick multi-colored ribbons of hair, she reminds you of Picasso's "Girl Before a Mirror" (1932) but without the vanity. Her face is a mask of navy modeled with strokes of vermillion, dusty yellow, and Tal R's signature pink; her bare chest and left arm are deep orange rimmed in ruddy brown, while the arm and hand above her head are black. The variables in the equation that is her body do not match up, but manage



Tal R, "Altstadt Girl," 2014. Oil on canvas, 30 3/4 × 48". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

to solve themselves nicely. What looks like her right arm could just as easily be a pillow, or nothing at all. Pseudo-geometric segments of lilac, indigo, burgundy, and buttercream float around the girl, wedging her into place. The sense of confinement, combined with the bulky flatness and severe tilt of the scene, push the viewer back outside the frame. This is a painting about the inwardness of the body, one that outsiders are not privileged to occupy for very long (though that does not mean you won't want to try).

Moving around the room, the images swing from the weird and carnivalesque to the stiff and mannered, often falling somewhere in between. Favorite moments include the vertical raccoon's tail of pink cigarette smoke that commands "Rosa Smoke" (2013) like an abstracted vulva; the absence of a line to delineate the

figure's face in "The Yellow" (2014), letting the lumpy mauve of her skin merge directly with the acid yolk of the background; the tender interplay of bold aquamarine and earthy teal on the bed that supports the prostrate "Train Drivers Daughter" (2014); and the thin, raw band of drips left uncovered at the base of "The Shower" (2014). Also notable is the delightfully goofy convolution of lowercase "t" and capital "R" that demarcate the artist's signature on each of his sketches. These moments of unmediated gaucheness are what keep the art, and especially the 27 preparatory sketches, from tipping too far toward either tradition or twee. Instead of fading into black, they reveal a breaking down of and burrowing into reality, an imagined space alive with color where nothing is quite correct but everything feels just right even so. ☞

SAUL MELMAN *Central Governor*

MOMA PS1 | LONG-TERM INSTALLATION

BY SHANA BETH MASON

In the Basement Boiler Room of MoMA PS1, an installation known as *Central Governor* quietly resides in the form of a glimmering, gilded furnace. The current state of the machine is the result of an extended performance—168 days from preparation to completion—executed in 2010 by Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary artist Saul Melman. His practice encompasses photography, sculpture, and printmaking bundled up in high-endurance performance. Often, his active gestures within the boundaries of a project will last up to six hours at a time. What distinguishes Melman from peers such as Marina Abramović or Bruce Nauman is that Melman possesses significant esoteric and practical knowledge of medicine. His experiences in the studio and the emergency room



Saul Melman, "Central Governor" (2010). Performance and mixed media (gold, salt, saliva). Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tim Hyde.

have congealed into a refreshingly new kind of activity—one where the imagined borders between science and art are fluid, unstable, and often invisible.

Apart from Melman himself, the main character of *Central Governor* is the furnace built in 1902 by engineers Williams & Gerstle in the underbelly of Long Island City's first schoolhouse. At the time of the museum's re-opening, following a massive renovation in 1997, the boiler had gone practically unnoticed. The largest single element in the subterranean room is the double furnace, with the names of the contractors and the date stamped into the face of the iron. At its foot are two relief sculptures set into the brick floor created by artist Matt Mullican. Set within a small access point is the arterial network of piping and gauges connected to the furnace, at its heart.

The title *Central Governor* references an automatic reaction thought to be triggered by the human brain in instances of great stress or exertion, whereupon the body is "rescued" from a potential state of collapse. An example used to support the theory was observed in Swiss marathoner Gabriela Andersen-Schiess's dramatic physical breakdown as she entered the L.A. Coliseum during the 1984 Olympics; she was medically cleared less than two hours after the incident, possibly as a result of her body automatically retaining some amount of fluid to prohibit complete anoxic damage to her heart.

Melman's performance—itself a lengthened, strenuous act—permits a reading of the furnace as a living, breathing being. To bring this "body" back to life, he first entered a nearly three-week-long process of sandblasting the surfaces of the Boiler Room down to the bare skin of the iron machinery. He also stripped away a century's worth of grime and

rust that coated the glazed glass windows. With natural light now piercing the room, Melman entered the second phase of his performance as a character resembling a caretaker, who would patiently chip away at a 5,000-pound monolith made of salt stationed beside a massive brick oven (he kept pieces of the salt for later use). This figure would spend hours meticulously cleaning the floors and surrounding areas near the boiler. Intermittently, he'd place some of the salt blocks within the previously-made vessels Mullican had fashioned. The final phase saw Melman inhabiting the role of a traditional gilder (he received tutelage from an actual master artisan based in Red Hook, Brooklyn), dressed in an oversized white apron, wielding magnetized brushes and tools that he could attach to the face of the boiler as he worked. Melman would stroke his brushes against the back of his neck, dabbed with vegetable oil and sweat, allowing his own body to supply the simple adhesive used to attach each square of gold leafing. Melman, in a sense, anthropomorphized the boiler, which opened it up to carrying bodily terminologies, particularly the two-pronged furnace that carries two sets of identical doors opening in opposing directions. The larger doors above, the smaller doors below where the

coal was inserted; the heat of this body was generated from below, from inside, as it would be with a person. This hermaphroditic core is fused in such a way that its purpose is its pleasure, and vice versa. Gold, as a chemical entity with a far-reaching range of practical and spiritual qualities, is both decorative and transformative in this scenario: Melman's treatment of the boiler as something already beautiful now becomes elevated to the point of sanctity with the careful application of the gold leafing.



Saul Melman, "Central Governor" (2010). Performance and mixed media (gold, salt, saliva). Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Curiously, the gilding of the furnace and piping appears to be incomplete. The process may have been halted, interrupted, or abandoned; not knowing which allows the entire apparatus to remain in flux. Has this 112-year-old machine ended its journey? Has it just commenced? Even more incomplete narratives color the work. The ancient disciplines of alchemy and proto-medicine all posit their traces here. Salt and gold, sweat and saliva, sunlight and darkness are all present in *Central Governor*. Under Melman's direction, these become more than just elements: they are thrust, invariably, into the realm of magic. ☞



"The Sound of Sleat," 1980, Oil on canvas, 50 × 79".

JON SCHUELER 1975 – 1981, *The New York Years*

DAVID FINDLAY JR. GALLERY | JANUARY 8 – 31, 2015

BY MARY ANN CAWS

After studying with the great and eccentric Clyfford Still at the California School of the Arts, exhibiting with the Abstract Expressionists in New York, and having endured stints of teaching on the East Coast and in the Midwest, Jon Schueler left New York in 1970 for the isolation and particular weather of the Scottish Highlands. Painting and musing in a place as remote as remote gets, Mallaig, a fishing village near the Isle of Skye (where my ancestors lived in other times), gave him—and now gives us—a remarkable view of his sky, his sea, his land. Back in his New York Studios, on Jones Street, and then in Chelsea, he remembered what he has now, retrospectively, offered us.

Let me say before venturing further, it wasn't that I had not seen skyscapes and waterscapes and landscapes of Jon Schueler before. Indeed, I had first fallen in love with them—after several viewings, over a space of years—in catalogues and in his New York gallery in Chelsea, where I had felt surrounded and drawn in by the paintings. And then, previously at this same David Findlay Jr. Gallery, during a 2010 showing of his work of *The Castelli Years 1955–1959*, I remember quite clearly two of his yellow paintings, one called "La Mer" (1958), a painting made during a brief stay in France, merging sky and sea, and the other, a blazing "Indian Yellow" (1958), about illumination, pure and simple, this one sent to Castelli for Schueler's one-person exhibition in 1959.

Indeed, they were in my mind and I was preparing to write about them (for a publication Lindsay Blair and I are preparing, on "Signing the Sky," and hoping to publish in 2016...). Ah, but this time, upon our first venture into the gallery, we saw, my husband and I—just behind a wall, a part of a painting, whose entirety then became a miraculous entity. This was "North to Ornsay" (1979), with its extraordinary orange rushing across the middle of the painting from the middle to the right side, as if it weren't cut off, but wanted to be continuing. Above it, the grey melts or melds into the greenish-grey at the top, echoing a small swath of green on the left and the expansive swath of green supporting that orange rush. At the bottom of this canvas, how moving to see a tiny drip of paint, never removed. The remains of making are everywhere, if you know how to look: one hair from a paintbrush here, one mark of a strong

brush thrust there—these ongoing works speak to observers as if to include them.

Everywhere here, we are included. In the various layers so clear in "Desert Blues" of 1978, the reds deep and light and the green somewhat murky are surrounded by a brighter green above and below it, with the dullish red holding it all up.

The loveliest layering imaginable in all shades of lavender spills from side to side laterally dividing the canvas in "Grey Sound" (1976), while separate hues of grey float from side to side, with light cloudiness backing it all up in "To Paula: The New Year's Grey," also from 1976.

We stayed.

The longer you look at "Over Skye" of 1979 with its remarkable pinkish-red curves and curls, the more the top and right side take over from the calmer rest, and suggest—as Magda Salvesen put it—"something you can't quite see."

But much is complicatedly visible, particularly in "A Point Just Outside the Range of One's Vision" of 1980, with its great surge of colors here and there in a sort of rolling of cloudbursts—on the right a pink traveling toward a yellow-orange, a bright yellow splotch taking over the scene on the left side, echoing a fainter one in the upper right. All of a sudden, a purple patch in the lower corner just beneath appears, one that you might not have noticed before.

Of all the engrossing paintings here, the one that really knocks you over if you look long enough—and perhaps long before that, is "The Sound of Sleat" (1980), the title also given to Schueler's autobiography/biography edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau in 1999. The Sleat is the body of water between Mallaig and the Isle of Skye, and the painting has its own kind of magic, watery and full, with its upper light of active clouds drawing up the layers below in drifts of cloudy white bursting up from the mauve grounding, with its little puffs of yellow, with a pink smudge here and there, and small bits of blue darting in. Sea and sky and land are present here, at once merging and separate, like life and art. This masterpiece says all that could be said or painted to represent Schueler's extraordinary vision, of Scotland. He painted there to enter into nature, and now, with him, we enter also. ☞

BY KARA L. ROONEY

Much has been said of late about the status of so-called “post-Internet” art. Detractors, like *Art in America*’s Brian Droitcour, see the movement as “the art of a cargo cult, made in awe at the way brands thrive in networks.” He contends that when exhibited in the gallery setting, the work either falls flat as estimable objets d’art, or worse still, reinforces institutional power by emphasizing the value of the white cube as a showroom for mass produced consumerism. Glossy, slick, and historically narrow in content—either brandishing the veneer of ’90s-era relational aesthetics or buffeted by the artworld’s fanatical debate surrounding

exhibited leotards and silkscreened clothing, which either take the shape of flat, two-dimensional collage materials or parade as ghostly hollowed-out shells.

In “Misty Malarky Ying Yang” (2014), McNamara’s prior performance by the same name constitutes the conceptual backbone of the work. The original piece featured a troupe of dancers in unitards silkscreened with images of former President Jimmy Carter’s daughter, Amy Carter, as a pre-adolescent girl with her childhood cat, Misty Malarky Ying Yang, and dated ’70s-era eyeglasses. (Ms. Carter would later become known for her political activism, echoing, in some respects, the work of her father

iron frames. While the freestanding structure attempts to recreate the essence of movement—the costumes’ limbs bent and folded at right angles—the deflated bodies only reiterate a sense of performative absence, the leftovers of a potentially radical moment.

Professional stage lights set against the gallery’s central support pillar cast a theatrical glow onto otherwise static works like “Untitled” (2014), a 72-by-48-inch painting rendered in monochromatic lavender. The austere executed ground acts as a sterile backdrop for another high-keyed unitard, stretched diagonally across the surface of the canvas. At the work’s bottom right edge, a cast plaster hand extends from the two-dimensional “screen” holding a fuchsia-cased iPhone. Brand loyalty or connective offering, it’s anyone’s guess which of the two McNamara aims to proselytize.

This interplay between sculptural object and lack of bodily form comprises one of the show’s more compelling statements, for it’s here that McNamara stakes his claim for the post-Internet condition as well as transcends typical p.I.A. pastiche. In the shadow of the “MEEM” and High Line performances (or rather because of them), absence—as opposed to themes of technology, art, or branding—emerges as the real subject of the work. *Gently Used* reminds us, with dystopic playfulness, that we’ve officially devolved into our own avatars. The problem is that what’s left in that wake is a brightly colored, energetic endgame, but at the expense of anything tangible.

This same type of post-Internet caginess is woven throughout *No entrance, no exit*, the aptly titled three-woman show curated by

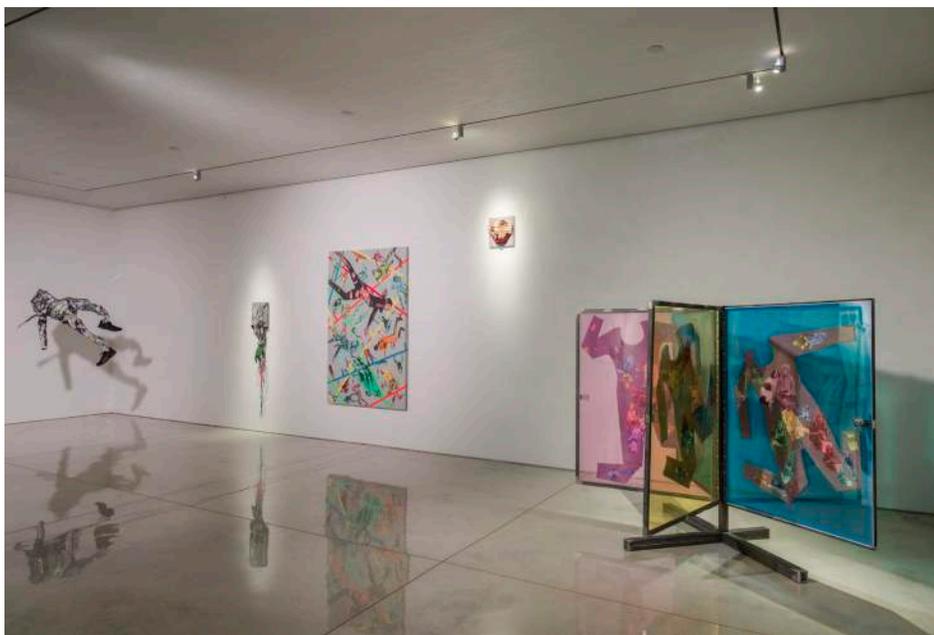


Alina Tenser, “Magnet Matching,” 2014. Foam, acqua-resin, headliner fabric, furniture gliders, aluminum coating, pigments, 62 × 37 × 21 inches. Courtesy of the artist, photography by Jason Mandella.

ballerina, twists and bends her silhouetted body into abstract shapes that echo, in turns, the lithe calligraphic forms of 19th-century manuscripts and Modernism’s formal tenets. Undeniably poetic, the absurdity of K.E.’s performance is only fully revealed in the context of her other works: a slick, 3D rendered video projection of a swimming pool (“Unfinished Smile” (2014)) and that same object, constructed in the space as a real but waterless tiled vessel.

Alina Tenser and Viola Yeşiltaş also contribute to this dialogue of the transitional with multi-media installation, sound works, and photography, all of which reference the import of previous actions. Yeşiltaş’s idiosyncratic assemblages draw upon the complex boundary lines between personal and private as in “The Lift Operator III,” (2015) in which the artist compares her chosen profession to the cloistered world of an elevator lift operator striving to make contact. Tenser’s video works, on the other hand, concern themselves more with the performative potentiality of sculptural objects within gaming and logic systems, erasing the body through invisibly edited gestures in which the objects appear to move of their own accord.

In the end, each of these exhibitions suffers and succeeds in equal measure. The doubled sense of separation, enacted first between object and viewer, and again between viewer and past performance, fails to resolve the movement’s contentious state, not due to any lack of intellectual effort but as a direct result of corporeal distance. The exclusion of the body, rather than bridge the gap between communicative expression and post-Internet art’s base standard of consumerist “cool,” merely acts to reinforce the dialectical debates that have haunted post-Internet art from the beginning. Surprisingly, this is both the works’ strong suit and their shortcoming. At the same time that these artists deny us much in the way of aesthetic engagement, the implication of sentient interaction holds more radical potential for challenging the status quo—one that might actually be realized if we could see ourselves in the face of post-Internet’s mirrored surfaces. For now, we may be left with neither entrance nor exit to the question at hand but we are least that much closer to *something*. What that something is, however, remains to be seen. ☞



Ryan McNamara, *Gently Used*, Installation view. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

issues of presentation—post-Internet art, for Droitcour, often boils down not to questions about art, but rather about the market. Those in favor flip the aforementioned argument on its head, praising p.I.A.’s penchant for neo-capitalist subversion (use the system to critique the system, often via the platform of branding), its predisposition for social interfacing, and its emphasis on the debunking of old-fashioned power structures: replace the art world’s mystical aura with the mass appeal of mainstream entertainment. Two exhibitions, currently on view, speak to the complicated nature of post-Internet art: Ryan McNamara’s *Gently Used* at Mary Boone’s uptown location and *No entrance, no exit* at The Kitchen. Both utilize recognizable p.I.A. motifs—the deconstruction of the body, fluorescently hued palettes, advertising speak, technology, and sleek stationary objects—while drawing heavily upon the medium of performance. This human element, or at the very least its inference, is where these artists separate themselves from the rest of the post-Internet pack, though not without faults of their own.

Curated by Piper Marshall, McNamara’s *Gently Used* features assembled objects, paintings, and sculptural reliefs based upon his recent forays into performance art, most notably “MEEM: A Story Ballet About the Internet” (2013), “MEEM 4 Miami” (2014), and “Misty Malarky Ying Yang” (2014), respectively commissioned by Performa, Art Basel Miami, and High Line Art. Signifying each are the performers’ “gently used” but pristinely



No Entrance, No Exit, Installation view. Courtesy of The Kitchen, photography by Jason Mandella.

who in 1979 took on the controversial subject of American energy consumption in his now infamous “Malaise” speech.) The High Line piece sought to elicit Ms. Carter’s same spirit of communal activism, incorporating park visitors into various aspects of the performance through movement, spoken word, and staged public interactions. Within Mary Boone’s 5th Avenue space, however, this message is unfortunately lost. Here, the same leotards are lifelessly sandwiched between a windmill formation of eight panes of tinted plexiglass and

Lumi Tan at The Kitchen. As in *Gently Used*, the works here refuse to take any sort of committed stance, aiming instead to expose the detached ambivalence of the contemporary moment through the relationship between performance and object. Twenty-eight-year-old Anna K.E. is the most well known of the group, and indeed, her works prevail as some of the more persuasive examples of post-Internet art’s critical potential. In “Multiple Keyholes” (2014), shot against the large industrial windows of her New York studio, Anna, classically trained as a

LUCY SKAER

Random House PETER FREEMAN, INC. | JANUARY 8 – FEBRUARY 21, 2015

Sticks & Stones MURRAY GUY | JANUARY 10 – FEBRUARY 21, 2015

BY ANN MCCOY

Two stunning simultaneous exhibitions by the Scottish artist Lucy Skaer give New Yorkers their most comprehensive view of the artist's range to date. Skaer represented Scotland in the 52nd Venice Biennale, was a finalist for the Turner Prize in 2009, and has had solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna, the Kunsthalle Basel, and the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. Her films were part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Spies in the House of Art: Photography, Film, and Video*, and her work was shown at the Sculpture Center, both in 2012.

Her second exhibition with Murray Guy, *Sticks & Stones*, draws on Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation" (1925) lecture given at the Cambridge Literary Club at Oxford:

"Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series."

"Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same."

Skaer begins the series with an immense slab of mahogany reclaimed from a river bottom in Belize where it had resided for 100 years. She hoped that the mysterious slab would "emanate that darkness back." The timbered plank, bisected into two parts, retains its natural shape and is embedded with what the artist calls "bits and bobs" from her former New York studio. These mementos—a litho stone, carnelian, tigers eye, and coins—are inlaid with a jeweler's precision.

Using different materials, the exact shapes of the first mahogany piece are each hand reproduced from its predecessor over the course of five successive works. The second version is made of ceramic tiles with ceramic inserts; the third with Blue Savoy marble and malachite; the fourth, aluminum and gunmetal; and the fifth uses maple, oak, pine, yew, cedar, and fir.

Though the artist says these inlaid pieces have "been emptied of meaning," the materials have an internalized history that calls forth

a process of free association in the viewer. Savoy marble conjures up French châteaux, the malachite, the room in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg; yew wood boot trees, cedar chests, etc. The diverse combinations induce a version of "observer shift" where even though the forms are identical, the results are varied. Skaer is like the alchemists who performed the same experiment many times with varying results. The level of craft combined with her extraordinary feeling for materials is the most masterful this critic has seen in any contemporary work. The viewer squats on the floor taking in the jewel-like fitting of shapes, suspended in a dialogue with pieces of wood and stone that seem to speak for themselves.

The companion exhibition at Peter Freeman is larger in scale, and includes works from Skaer's 2013 Tramway Glasgow exhibition. "My Steps as My Terrace" (2013) features three sandstone steps from the artist's childhood terrace home in Cambridge; a bronze Roman mirror is inset into step one, representing the artist's house. Mounted on step two is a reproduction of an ancient golden Greek oak leaf (Skaer's grandfather, who lived next door, located the tomb of Philip of Macedon). The third step has a teacup nestled under one end. Skaer's neighbor in number six collected Lucie Rie pottery. The steps contain the terrace's collective history, what critic Max Andrews called the *acheiropoietic*—mass production and the artisanal coming together as if the materials had their own mystical accord.

"My Terracotta Army, my Red Studio, my Amber Room II" (2013), is a reference to the terracotta army of Quin Shi Huang. Ceramic lozenges resembling cut emeralds are arranged in a linear formation that mimics the army's trench burial. Their glaze comes from the St. Ives Cornwall atelier of Bernard Leach, master of glazes *ancienne* and *Oriental*. Viewers, of a certain age, may find this pottery reference a wonderful blast from the past. The lineup of the beautiful beetle forms lovingly laid out has a touching quality quite the reverse of the Quin Shi Huang's rather menacing soldiers.



Lucy Skaer, "My Terracotta Army, my Red Studio, my Amber Room II," 2013. 530 tenmuko-glazed stoneware lozenges (374 on view), overall dimensions variable each approximately 1½ × 11 × 7¼".

The artist's parents were molecular biologists, and the lozenges' emerald cut reflects Skaer's inherited interest in molecular structure and scientific observation.

The Hogarth Press (publishers of Gertrude Stein's lectures) is the subject of "My Terracotta Army, my Red Studio, my Amber Room I"



Lucy Skaer, "Sticks & Stones I," 2013–2015. Sinker mahogany, Burmese blackwood, tin, coins, lithographic stone, ceramic opper, American walnut, tiger's eye, carnelian, 151 × 29½ × 2½, 141¼ × 21½ × 2½".

(2013), a 58-foot paper scroll. Vuillard's "The Dressmaking Studio" (1892) forms an underlayer. Book covers from Virginia and Leonard Woolf press, which were often hand-made with abstract designs, are overlaid with a variety of printing techniques. The obsession with book covers is very English, beginning with the poets of the '90s and extending through R. B. Kitaj. Skaer says she is attracted to things "not classified as art," the book covers being "parasitic to the book, appear in a raw state not yet interpreted." The long scroll feels like a densely layered skin over a mysterious body of writing we are not able to read.

Two works in the exhibition reference lithography: "8.4.13. – 22.4.13" and "13.08.13. – 04.10.13" (both 2013) are printed from the *Guardian* newspaper plates. This was the first time the paper had been printed on metal plates in a smaller format. The images have been almost wiped away, perhaps an unintended commentary on the papers' fading status as a Labour Party standard. Here, the

plates' pale terracotta hues and the blurred floating images suggest dreamscapes more than journalism.

"American Images" (2013) consists of three boulders of lithographic limestone from Lithograph City, Iowa, quarried by the artist. The town, now long gone, sprang up when America needed a source for the stones during the World War I embargo on German Solnhofen limestone. A synchronicity unknown to Skaer was that the Iowa Print Workshop founded by Mauricio Lasansky—the dean of American lithography—still uses these stones. They rest on the gallery floor suspended between a utilitarian past and an uncertain future.

Lucy Skaer's work occupies a luminal space, a gap, beyond the literal and the symbolic. Skaer said her visit with and film of Leonora Carrington had to do with forging a path of her own beyond Surrealism. This highly intelligent artist has developed her inquiry and subject matter with an originality that is rare in today's art world. Like the piece of Belize mahogany brought up from the depths, Skaer has dredged the deepest archetypal layers. Skaer's direct observation of nature is apparent. Her shows remind me of the title of an old art history book, *The Mute Stones Speak*. Some of Skaer's works, like the terrace steps, occupy that space between art and artifact; perhaps George Kubler might have been the best choice to review her exhibitions. 



Lucy Skaer, installation view of "Sticks & Stones I," 2013–2015.



"Sticks & Stones IV," 2013–2015. Aluminum, gunmetal, 148½ × 28 × 2½, 141¼ × 24 × 2½".



Jane Freilicher in her New York City apartment, 1984 © Kathleen Eckles.
 Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Nostalgia

for Jane Freilicher
 (1924 – 2014)

To you, muse who
 rocked the brains of
 so many of my heroes
 You a hero too
 for wise quip bon mot and
 panoramic eye
 And stand up all around beauty
 enters the room
 our own Barbara Stanwyck
 glamorous, slender, assured,
 Always gracious if not a bit impatient
 Why aren't these people wittier?
 Perky word monger wonder
 Figure of a liberated tongue
 Not miss a beat
 Voice distinct in the ear
 It was your classy parties,
 with drink and din

Kinetics of best talk in town
 Morris, Barbara, John,
 Yvonne
 Alex, Joe le Sueur, Kynaston
 Rudy, Red, Ada, Ned,
 Larry, Harry, Mimi, Maxine
 Kenneth's smile,
 hubby Joe's hospitality
 But always a bit of intimidation
 'round you
 with your aura,
 Those staggeringly great poems
 writ in your honor
 bunkering the head
 You turn crazy Jane of poetic trope into
 upscale glowing modish madcap Jane
 Legendary gossip's elegance
 mounting around you, star,
 La Freilicher
 formidable and by contrast
 although you were never loud
 the quietest paintings
 as if noise forever absent
 or transmuted into
 compressed tension
 And arrangement-transfer
 was perfectly natural
 John Ashbery calls "tentative"?
 Could we dare say "egoless"
 in this tribute?
 Spaces between objects
 come onto this window ledge
 this table, center of the world,
 a hearth to mute a button on the roar
 Hush here before your
 stroke and palette
 Can't thank you enough
 ingenious painter
 for these and continuity
 But back back come back again
 Can't get enough of the parties
 of yesteryear
 Terrific 5th Ave apartment's readiness,
 gleam, of us shining too
 Happy to be in your realm
 a moment and
 Jimmy showing up in what
 Kenward called
 his Lub period
 with bikerchains around his neck
 and Joe Brainard lanky
 innocently louche
 and people still smoked
 I remember being haunted indelibly:
 how get so lucky to be here?
 High tone and that inimitable
 talk again
 will never be the same
 in purgatorial New York
 Caught on time spiral, Jane
 helping many of us late arrivistes enter
 the Academy of the New York School future
 which opened its doors to us

—Anne Waldman



Last afternoon with Jake, 12/28/14 by Sam Messer.

A Tribute to
Jake Berthot
1939 - 2014

LEARN TO READ ART: A Surviving History of Printed Matter

IN CONVERSATION MAX SCHUMANN with Maya Harakawa

Printed Matter is an art world institution in the best sense of the word. Founded in 1976 to support the then-fledgling medium of artists' books, the organization has since become a mainstay of all things art and publishing. Historically linked to artistic figures such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Lucy Lippard and now responsible for the ever-growing Art Book Fairs in New York and Los Angeles, Printed Matter has been symbiotically involved in the artistic, political, and social movements alongside which it has developed. To give the organization its proper historical due, *Learn to Read Art: A Surviving History of Printed Matter* opened at NYU's 80WSE gallery this past December and will remain on view until February 14. Curated by gallery director Jonathan Berger and Printed Matter's Associate Director Max Schumann, the exhibition traces the organization's history with ephemera, books, and art objects and includes a satellite bookstore as well as publishing residencies by artists who made their own books over the course of the exhibition. On the occasion of *Learn to Read Art*, Maya Harakawa visited Schumann at 80WSE gallery to discuss the exhibition, the economics and politics of artists' publishing, and the medium's unpredictable future.

MAYA HARAKAWA (RAIL): How did this show at 80WSE come about?

MAX SCHUMANN: There have been a whole bunch of different iterations of a Printed Matter exhibition called *Learn to Read Art*. The first one was in 1991 at Art Basel. It was a collaboration between Art Metropole and Printed Matter coordinated by AA Bronson, one of the founders of Art Metropole who later was director of Printed Matter, and John Goodwin, a former director of Art Metropole who was the director of Printed Matter at that time. They collaborated on this first exhibit at Art Basel and used the text piece by Lawrence Weiner "Learn to Read Art" as the exhibition title. Over the years, that name has kind of stuck.

The exhibition format went dormant for a long time, but in 2010 AA put together a kind of "survey" of the different fundraising editions that Printed Matter has done over the years, and that show was also called *Learn to Read Art*. We premiered it at the New York Art Book Fair at PS1. It was a very dramatic and wonderful exhibit. We started putting out the fundraising editions in 1986, so there was a lot to show. But the thing about the fundraising editions is they're not part of Printed Matter's programming, really; they support our programming. So it was basically a survey of our fundraising editions, but not our real true history or programming history. I also did a version of it in Portland at Pacific Northwest College of Art. And when I did it I supplemented the show with more material from the archives with more mostly programming materials from different events and things like that.

And then the flood happened—

RAIL: You mean Sandy.

SCHUMANN: Yes, Sandy. Sandy became a whole new element that played a big role in this current project. When Sandy happened, our basement—which was where all our archives were—was flooded. After the storm, there was this very dramatic rescue where we scrambled to try and save everything down there. The archive, it's not books really. The archive is our administrative and programming history, but all of these things—books, archives—were living together

in one place, in the basement that was now completely flooded. So initially we were rescuing books, but then we started pulling out the archive stuff and were like, "Oh, my God." We realized that the books were replaceable—they also exist in other places, upstairs in the store, and stuff like that. The archive, however, was irreplaceable. So we had to shift our priorities and focus on rescuing the archive.

There were something like 60 boxes. Over his tenure, AA had developed a really nice archive organization and a bulk of the archive was in one place. Everything ultimately got all jumbled and totally mixed together, and as we were hauling it all out we were trying to separate archive material from inventory stuff, but then at the same time we were madly calling people to help us save these soaked materials. It was ridiculously flooded with foul water. There were bricks of paper that had been soaking for two days and nights in water before we could get to them.

So after we had gone through this whole ordeal of having to confront all of the archival material, and losing most of it, we were invited to make a proposal for a show at Art Basel from the archive. This was in 2013. But it was on a super short timeline, and I threw it together in two weeks inside of the storage space where we were keeping these materials. I was able to identify a lot of really great stuff, and the show was very well received. But it was about a fifth of the size of what we've done here at 80WSE, and it was put together hastily. That experience made me realize that this show needed to be done in a proper way with a full scale and the proper preparation, identifications, selection, and all that kind of stuff.

So I floated the idea to Jonathan Berger, the director of 80WSE, and he was interested. Ultimately, he invited us, and that's how the show ended up being here. This exhibition is really distinct from the other *Learn to Read Art* exhibitions. Although they did have some other programming and material, the focus was on the fundraising editions we've done, and this show is really on the history of our programming, services, and administration.

RAIL: And how did the publishing residencies become a part of the story that you wanted the exhibition to tell?

SCHUMANN: I think that was an agreed-on thing between me and Jonathan from the very beginning. Many of the exhibitions that Jonathan has done have these engagements and processes: they're not static exhibitions, there tends to be something happening within them. For example, when they did the Bob Mizer show here, they turned the exhibition into an archive process where they had students and other people actually archiving the material. So knowing that curatorial history, I was kind of thinking of something like that, and when Jonathan brought it up I thought, "Totally, we should totally do that."

Also, I really wanted to have a bookstore in the show because a really important part of artists' books is the economic model that they propose and the bookstore, as a *store*, is the best way to demonstrate that. The reason that artists make them, or have made them, is to have an independent economic model of production and distribution, and so the actual selling of the book in a way fulfills part of a concept of the book as a piece of art. Artists' books take art out into the world, outside of the gallery through other paths. So even though university galleries are kind of like, "What? You want to sell stuff? That's not

what we do!" [Laughs.] Even though they're wary of that, for me the bookstore is a really important part.

So we framed the exhibit with these two critical aspects of it: the production on one end, and then the distribution on the other. When artists were making books in the '60s and '70s, there was this interest in engaging in the industrial production of artworks as a way of being more engaged in historical and social realities, instead of being sequestered in their studio and painting masterpieces that are given monetary values which have no relationship to social-use value. The model of books happening in reproducible, industrial forms place them into real social-historical economic relations and the artist then really becomes a producer as opposed to someone who's checked out of history and hovering above everything.

RAIL: I'm really interested in the question of production as a way to talk about the artists' book practice. Part of what makes artists' books so compelling is that they really straddle a line, constantly fluctuating between the two poles of commodity on the one hand and art object on the other, right? I mean, we can argue that any artwork does this, but because artists' books are often so much more attainable, they do so very explicitly. So returning to the popularity of the word production and the connection to art workers—and you brought up this Marxist economic framework—I often struggle with how to deal with two conflicting ideas: Even as artists' books try to propose a potentially different economic model, if you think about these works as commodities in a Marxist context and production in a Marxist context, then one might argue that they still contribute to capitalism. You definitely see this in the show: that throughout its history, Printed Matter is asking how it can stay true to the idea that art can be an alternative economic model while still making money as a legitimate business. It isn't something that the show shies away from.

SCHUMANN: It's very problematic. It's an ideal and it has not been achieved yet, and this idea of an independent economic model is still something that we're trying to figure out.

When Printed Matter was founded in 1976, it was founded as a for-profit company, and it wasn't because anyone thought they were going to make money or anything like that, but it was because they wanted to have an independent, sustainable economic model for artists' book production and distribution. But the problem was that it just wasn't. Lucy Lippard wrote an essay on the eve of Printed Matter's opening talking with this real enthusiasm and idealism. And shortly after, maybe one or two years into Printed Matter, she did a follow-up article that was very pessimistic. She said that the problem with artists' books is that they're god-damn art. They're part of the esoteric, the conceptual, and art that is completely inaccessible except to a very educated, middle- and upper-class audience.

It's interesting to see that very early on, it became obvious that most of what Printed Matter was doing was marketing; that education and the circulation and distribution of these books goes hand in hand with marketing. In one of the vitrines in the show, you can see lots and lots of ads that we've taken out in different local and New York newspapers and art magazines, and you can see that there's an immediate investigation of market research and strategies, and things like that.

And the question becomes: How do you reconcile the desire to have an alternative model with the realization that sometimes it's really just the same model? I mean I think the difference is that it's micro; it's small grass-roots capitalist [laughs]—I don't know what you would call that. It's not corporate capitalism.

What I find really exciting about the current time is that I see people seeking alternative models to corporate capitalism in everything—not just in cultural production but in all kinds of other things. Since the crash of 2007/2008, there's this realization that growth, progress, and economic growth aren't givens anymore. And at the same time, there are people who are projecting that we are in a 500-year phase of major a geopolitical paradigm shift from capitalism to something else, and that we don't know what that's going to be yet. As I see a new interest in artists' books in this current generation, I see an attempt to find sustainable economic models that are controlled, self-controlled, that are not being imposed from above, but that are being built from below, and this is really a continuation of the ideals that started Printed Matter.

RAIL: This leads me to a question about the show, which is the way in which stories get told through objects. With the exhibition, you are creating a story, but it's done through objects—invoices, letters, and things like that—and there are many other narratives that get left out when you rely only on ephemera. I did notice that the political and historical context Printed Matter came out of isn't made that explicit.

In bringing this up, I'm particularly thinking about Lucy Lippard and her role in founding Printed Matter. How everything that she did—or at least now that's how we think of her; maybe it's been hyperbolized, but I want to believe it's true—everything she did was influenced by a sense of political justice, and that was very tied to the historical moment that pushed her to found Printed Matter. Obviously, there isn't one perfect way to tell one story, but I'm wondering if you were conscious of what *kind* of story you wanted to tell when you were putting the exhibition together.

SCHUMANN: I think some of these things we've been talking about are actually implied, referenced, or suggested within the different narrative threads that are happening in the materials. Probably the most relevant or the most legible narrative thread is the financial struggle of keeping this place going, which immediately references the idealism of independent publishing as an alternative form of distribution. And the materials are very explicit about it, about the beginning, where there is desire for art that isn't meant to be shown in galleries and museums. It's a different way for people to encounter art, within the context of their lived realities, which is very much a part of the idea that personal is political and also the avant-garde impulse, or political impulse, to engage art in social and political reality.

And then to me the whole realization that it isn't really possible to be self-sustaining and that the struggle going forward really has culminated in this new generation of young people who are really interested in artists' books who continue to experiment with that original vision. I mean the book fairs that we do now, like the last one in New York, there were 35,000 people there; it was like a freaking rock concert. When you go to the book

fair, for most of those publishers it's labor of love, and it's out of pocket, or the small presses there are also subsidized by a commercial design outfit or by some other commercial publishing thing. But the ones that are truly independent really struggle. That being said, I think in this time of big historical shifts and change it's the best chance we'll have of making these models succeed.

There's an underlying problem that at Printed Matter we are dependent on art audiences; we are in the art world and our audience is mostly art-educated and such. But these moments where you can see it reaching beyond that, that is really exciting. And that happens at the book fairs, and that's happening with the raised profile we enjoy from them. The art world isn't this monolithic closed box. It's many, many different communities, and there's a lot of really interesting and important things that are happening within it. It's not negative or bad to have a relationship with the art world, but I think that part of the project—to take it outside of that and reach audiences outside of that—is really important to continue to pursue, and that this is this moment where Lucy Lippard's vision is almost palpable. Maybe we can make this into a self-sustaining thing.

That being said, publishing Printed Matter connotes physical publishing. But from the very beginning we've taken on other media forms, not only books. Artists' audio and video entered our inventory very early on. And we even still have completely out-of-date floppy disks and stuff like that.

RAIL: Well, artists have always been thinking about how new media could be thought of as a publishing platform as well, so it makes sense that that would be incorporated. I'm thinking about something like *Tellus*, which was an artists' magazine that was a cassette, but it was still a magazine.

SCHUMANN: Right and that's something that I think categorizes the new generation of publishers. There is still an interest in the physical book, which continues to play an important role. But it's being deployed within a wider range of communication forms as well, or media forms I should say. I definitely want us to stay current in other publishing forms including digital and Internet platforms.

RAIL: Printed Matter's history is a perfect place to engage this push and pull with materialism. It was founded by Sol LeWitt, who is known as the Conceptual artist who led the path towards dematerialization. But at the same time, as a founder of Printed Matter, he clearly had this investment in artists' books—a medium that was, at that time, inherently material. So that it shows that there is this more complex story, that as much as we might like to think otherwise, even Conceptual art didn't completely vanquish the object.

SCHUMANN: Not at all. That's the thing, even as Lucy Lippard is idolized in the art world, notably for being the first historian to trace conceptual art practice, she is actually incredibly critical of the art world. She shows that the story can never be unequivocally told. She's incredibly wary of Conceptual art and she also sees the way that market trumps concept—that's for sure. [Laughs.] Conceptual artists are now completely fetishized and are in play with those inherent contradictions of the art world, or the culture industry. Sometimes it is intentional and sometimes it's not.

RAIL: How do you deal with that when you function as a storefront? Have you had to re-think how you present yourself to the public if you want to distribute and sell artists' books that are in forms that aren't physical books? If someone comes to you says, "I want to market a digital work, I'm an artist and I make artists' books that are digital," does Printed Matter have a role there? You've already touched upon this a little, but the digital seems to add a whole new level of urgency to what we've already been talking about.

SCHUMANN: We need to figure this out. We just switched over to a new website and computer administration system and one of the goals was to make it more multimedia and also to educate ourselves about interesting internet projects. I often wonder if Lawrence Weiner, and maybe Sol LeWitt, if they were kids today, would they be doing books or would they be doing digital works?

So the idea was both that our website would be a resource as well as a distribution platform with links and other kinds of things to Internet projects. This is definitely an important thing that we have to keep working on.

RAIL: It's interesting to me that on the one hand the book fair is becoming such a popular model where people physically come, sit down, set up a table and put all of their work on a table, and the public comes through, they flip through the pages and they handle the actual physical objects. But at the same time here is this huge surge to the digital. The question of whether these two experiences really are that antithetical, if the digital is truly "de-materialized," this is really a whole other conversation. But that being said, as we see these two models are expanding at the same time, it seems that people are really going to have to think very specifically how to integrate them.

SCHUMANN: There already are a lot of what I would call more "inter-media" projects, where there's a book form of a project that is also happening in social media, or through other digital means as well. And then the production of the books is often done collaboratively, so they're kind of embedded in digital communication forms even as physical objects. As people are sourcing their material from the Internet, they're collaborating via email and things like that, they're creating an integrated practice that is more complex than just traditional cut-and-paste on the one hand and the digital on the other. It can be this hybrid form. Books might have a print form as well as some digital distribution form, too. So to me that's an interesting thing, and it's exciting to see.

I do need to educate myself more on the publishing or artists' projects that are happening purely in virtual space. We haven't had any e-book submissions yet, but I am totally curious to see some interesting e-books. I remember when CD-ROMs came on the scene. There were a few books in that medium. Louise Lawler did a cool project once, I remember. But I don't think artists really figured out how to make interesting CD-ROM projects. So at Printed Matter, we are definitely interested in these other forms of publishing, distribution, and circulation and art as a communication form that doesn't need big huge markets and things like that.

RAIL: I guess another question that comes out of what we're talking about is one of history. We've moved towards the contemporary, with the digital as a manifestation of that. But doing so brings out

one of Printed Matter's complexities, which is that it is constantly looking forward as it embraces contemporary practice but, as an institution with so much historical significance, it is simultaneously looking back. Like here within the exhibition even, we're getting this historical framework, we're being told a historical story, but then with the publishing residencies there are actual people working in real time, making contemporary work. I'm wondering how you see Printed Matter dealing with those two things, or how they work in tandem?

SCHUMANN: The pushing and pulling with history I think is a very good thing, especially in this culture where the amnesia is pretty bad. [Laughs.] Historical amnesia is not good, you need to have context. But I do see many exciting things in this regard. For example, I'm on the board of Primary Information, a contemporary publisher. They started doing PDFs of the Art Workers Coalition and the Seth Siegelau books, and then re-printing facsimiles of *Avalanche*, and they've been hugely successful. To see the amount of interest there is from this newer generation about learning that history is really, really exciting.

But then I think about something like zines and the way that the terminology has changed. Zines now mean anything that looks like it's Xeroxed, looks like it has a cut-and-paste aesthetic. It's about a look. But I was introduced to zines through punk rock when it was all a part of D.I.Y. media. It was basically the idea that if you don't get represented by the mainstream culture, if you're an outcast and you're part of some sub-cultural group, then you make your own media, you make your own band you make your own record label, you book your own tours, you play in all the teen centers and you make your own zines. It was more of an alternative news media in a way, as opposed to just cohering to a visual profile. There was great design and aesthetics, but the primary objective was not to make an artists' book, it was to make your own medium. I don't know if that's the case today. Zines have shifted into either an artists' book or more likely a place for artists to showcase their work. Because if you want to do alternative news media, you do blogs and things like that; now there are mediums other than zines that can serve that purpose.

RAIL: Are you pretty adamant that this is a history of Printed Matter versus the artists' book medium as a whole?

SCHUMANN: I think that Printed Matter is really caught up in that history. We have the reading library in the tables in the middle of each room in the exhibition with artists' books from that time that are actually still available and in print, even though they were produced as far back as the '70s or '60s. Some of them are re-prints, but the goal was to show a sample of the books that were being done at the time.

Also a big part of the show is both the print catalogues that Printed Matter produced, as well as other kind of thematic books lists, and they have a strong presence in all of the vitrines. Those objects really trace the evolution of artists' books within them and then they tie that history right in to the history of Printed Matter. If you look at those details, those documents are a real representation of the activity happening, of the publishing that was happening. What's more, a lot of the programming is for book launches and exhibitions about books, so that's represented in the materials too. I think the history of artists' books has a presence in there as well. And I hope that that continues to be the case. ☺

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Nick Cave: Epitome (PRESTEL, 2014)

by Holly Gavin

As the title suggests, *Nick Cave: Epitome* is a carefully selected array of works showcased as exemplary pieces of his oeuvre. The book is heavy with a hardcover and thick, glossy pages—by volume alone, it may seem intimidating. But upon further looking and reading, *Epitome* is simply enthralling, a beautiful object that captures the essence of Cave's work in image and text.

In cataloguing Cave's work, the book is divided into four series: the Soundsuits, *HEARD*, *Rescue*, and *Made by Whites for Whites*, all documented in stunning photographs. These are accompanied by three main texts: "Out of a Riot Comes a Dream: The Public and Private Iterations of Nick Cave," by Nato Thompson, "The Right to the City: Urban Appropriation in Nick Cave's Work," by Elvira Dyangani Ose, and an interview with Andrew Bolton. Thompson's and Ose's essays provide comprehensive socio-historical contextual backdrops for Cave's work, while Bolton's interview offers the book's only direct words from the artist himself.

Flipping through the pages is an engulfing experience: beautiful photographs are periodically supplemented by texts placing Cave's work within a larger framework of contemporary influences and relevance. Contrary to those first impressions, *Epitome* is quite inviting: the work is vibrant, and there is lots of it—perhaps even too much. Little explanatory text accompanies the reproductions of Cave's empire, allowing viewers to come to their own conclusions while gracing the extensive photographic catalogue—the book's most impressive feature. Cave's work is neither singular in subject, media, nor influences spanning from Rio's Carnival and East London's Pearly Kings and Queens for the Soundsuits. Even within the texts, numerous stimuli are listed; the work is layered, providing greater opportunity for readers to connect with the work on a non-prescribed personal level.

Epitome is a beautiful object, providing a valuable demonstration of Cave's many talents, but it merits slow consideration; its breathless inclusion of four distinct bodies of work leaves the book feeling oversaturated. This is not merely a result of Cave's pulsating rainbow color palette, although certainly his prodigiousness has presented the book's editors with a formidable task: one of Cave's largest accomplishments is his creation of an impressive oeuvre, which is distinctly, and obviously his own. Cave works in a visual language that is easily recognizable: a niche production technique I am coining "sculptural collage," which fetishizes the handmade: the work is made by hand with collectible handmade objects. Cave's sculptural collages are odes to the found object; he started building his first Twig Soundsuit in 1992 with a discarded branch found in a park, and the *Rescue* series began after he spotted a ceramic Doberman at a flea market. For Cave, the object is a holder of memory; it carries its own history, which the artist reappropriates in his own work. This practice, developed during his childhood, is part of the artist's personal narrative. In Bolton's interview, Cave recalls customizing hand-me-downs as the youngest of several brothers; breathing new life into vintage manufactured objects by implanting them into new performative or sculptural frameworks is second nature to Cave.

The work, in other words, is distinct and identifiable, but this book is a testament to how it can suffer from excessive photographic reproductions. Cave's skill risks



getting lost in the abundance of bright colors, sparkle, and shine. Cave's "sculptural collage" is excessive by nature, but the work needs space to breathe, and it isn't given much within these pages. The viewer is in danger of being overindulged: the Soundsuits are nearly too easy to wolf down. Details of different works are essential pauses to combat this gluttony; moreover, they remind the viewer that Cave's work can be valued even on the page, solely in its immaculate intricacy of craft and beyond the in-person experience or performance of which readers are deprived. Different angles, as well as the rare shots of a work during a performance or in a different setting, provide welcomed breaks.

The works presented here can be divided into two. His Soundsuits and *HEARD* are performative, while the pieces from *Rescue* and *Made by Whites for Whites* are sculptural. The performative works originate from Cave's profession as a dancer. Thompson explains that this work is both physically and conceptually loaded. "Counter-intuitive as it might seem," his essay begins, "the fantastic beauty and bewildering sensibilities of Nick Cave's Soundsuits were born in reaction to stark brutality." Cave's work comes from haunting personal experience. Rodney King's 1991 assault, captured on video, marks Cave's eureka moment in his art practice. The incident sparked several reactions in Cave about his identity as an African-American within the urban community and his growing desire for protection; he made his first Twig Soundsuit a year later. The question of identity and protection arose as a personal issue, but applies to universal concerns and practices on a wider scale. The *HEARD* performances and Soundsuits live in an exotic mythology borrowing from tribal subcultures, but are created as tools of social interaction and change. *HEARD* is about provoking social change in the urban landscape through unity against the status quo. The Soundsuits are about the relation of the individual within the community. They are armor, shields that protect their wearers and hide their genders, sexualities, and racial identities. The Soundsuits exist on a dividing line separating hidden mysteries from eye-catching, tell-all flamboyance.

April Gornik Drawings (FIGUREGROUND PRESS, 2014)

by Robert Berlind

Cave's Soundsuits are introduced as beautiful, intriguing art objects alive in an alternate reality. They are photographed in a stark white space, maximizing their splendor. Not unlike a green screen, readers see exotic characters, static or in motion, part of a wider narrative, but devoid of context clues. Thompson's text and Bolton's interview shed light on the moral agenda of the Soundsuits. Cave defines his role as a messenger. By creating metaphorical staged happenings in an urban jungle, he instigates a model environment for change. Although visually appealing, the white-ground Soundsuits photographs suggest neutrality and universality: uncommon characteristics in today's urban milieu. Cave's work is flattened to a sculptural costume, to a dynamic photograph, to a page in a book; the Soundsuits and *HEARD*'s dynamics of social mutiny are lost in translation.

This collapse into a state of stagnation is not an issue for the second body of work: sculptures from *Rescue* and *Made by Whites for Whites*, Cave's most recent Chelsea exhibitions at Jack Shainman gallery. Apart from a few rectangular wall pieces resembling 3D paintings, the *Rescue* pieces comprise on a ceramic dog figure on a settee under an opulent arch. A majestic Doberman figure inspired Cave's series: a role reversal between dogs and their housemasters adding onto the art historical tradition of the dog as a symbol of loyalty. The work on display at *Made by Whites for Whites* is large and bold in iconography, with a vintage artifact of Black memorabilia surrounded by objects from Cave's familiar collection of flea market finds. The prefabricated collectible items sculpturally collaged in excess recall the Soundsuits, but unlike them, this newer work is more explicitly racially and historically charged. The Soundsuits are subtler in personality; they are about the identity of the wearer rather than a race, and the romanticism of exoticism acts as their saving grace. *Made by Whites for Whites* is high on shock value. Placing a spotlight on worn collectibles created out of racism successfully creates a sense of unease. Unlike the Soundsuits however, they do not provide a temporary solution for a critical issue, but rather spread awareness of it. They are paramount in function, but are not as directly engaged with our urban reality as their protective counterparts. These pieces exist within the white cube model, but not beyond. Nonetheless, *Made by Whites for Whites* remains relevant: the tattered appearance of Cave's reappropriated flea market finds is misleading; Cave is tackling an issue of the present day, and not of a nostalgic past. His works have never been more significant as benchmarks of racial brutality. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner render the protective shield-like aspect of the Soundsuits disturbing; their relevance moves toward urgency and necessity amid these instances of horrifying police brutality.

Cave's world, existing on the borderline between fashion, performance, and fine art, is multi-faceted—"counter-intuitive" according to Thompson; it is playful and grave, but remains cohesive in its visual language. *Nick Cave: Epitome* offers an outpouring of gorgeous visual material and presents interesting cross-disciplinary links drawing from the personal and the socio (not so)-historical. The book is informative, yummy, and dynamic, but with four series of works, it is also over-glutted; moreover, the Soundsuits appear much more frequently than the other series, which emerge outshone. *Nick Cave: Epitome* is a beautiful, confident object, but could be more successful subdivided into two volumes, compiled by media, or even four separate catalogues, one for each autonomous series. ☞

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This elegant book contains superb reproductions of no fewer than 204 April Gornik drawings from the 1980s, '90s and aughts. All of them, many as large as 38 by 50 inches, are given a full page or double facing pages. There are short introductory essays by Steve Martin and Archie Rand as well as a long, informative conversation with Lawrence Weschler that explores Gornik's process, subject matter, and aesthetic disposition. Weschler is an ideal interviewer. He not only probes Gornik's early development and responds deeply to the work in question but also aptly introduces poetry by Kay Ryan, Seamus Heaney, Eamon Grennan, James Wright, and Lao Tzu. These excerpts implicitly make the case for poetry, rather than theory or art history, as the most fruitful resource for discussing visual art. Also included is an eight page, handwritten score for a sonorous cello and piano composition, "For April," by Bruce Wolosoff, which is also offered via a digital download card.

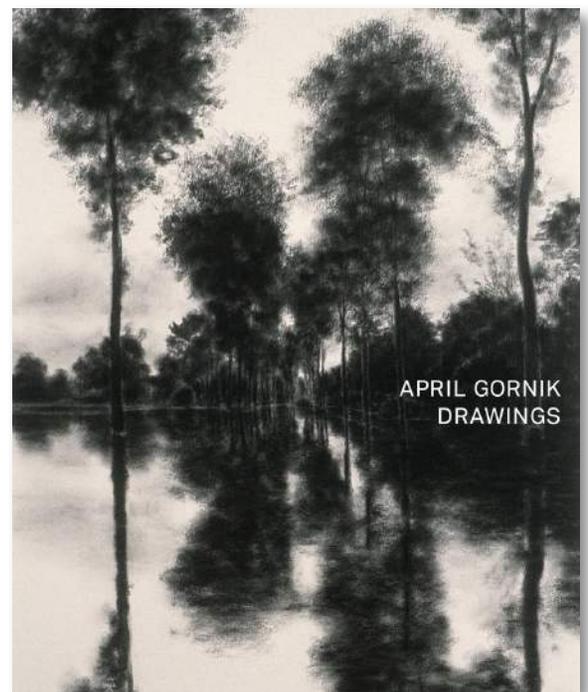
Since her SoHo debut in 1981, water and light have been central to Gornik's work. In her drawings, water takes the form of the placid reflecting surfaces of lakes and rivers, mists and clouds, unaccountable spouts erupting skyward or mysteriously plunging down. Tumultuous surf and waterfalls cascade forward as though addressing you directly. A wide range of blacks and grays negotiate precise tonal relations against the white of her ground. She sustains representational clarity and nuanced visual transitions by contrasting textures of the dry, granular mediums of charcoal and, in many cases, pastels. This oxymoronic interplay of materials and illusion—dryness signaling water—suggests the metaphorical character of Gornik's art. I am reminded of the passage in *Swann's Way* where the narrator is visiting his bed-ridden Aunt Léonie and describes the onset of a downpour:

A little tap at the window, as though some missile had struck it, followed by a plentiful, falling sound, as light, though, as if a shower of sand were being sprinkled from a window overhead; then the fall spread, took on an order, a rhythm, became liquid, loud, drumming, musical, innumerable, universal. It was the rain.

(Beyond the amazing acuity of Proust's description, the flow of his language, even in translation, itself creates the sensation he is recalling many years later.)

The drawings evoke responses to unsettling moments of challenge. The earlier works, especially those of the 1980's and 1990's, are simultaneously elegant and fraught with danger. There is often an aura of menace as storms gather, blacken the sky or deluge the land. In a number of drawings, black smoke billows up from unseen sources.

Light in Gornik's drawings gives life to seas, lakes, rivers, and flooded allées. It shines through woods and dapples forest floors, skipping forward toward the viewer while the remaining white of the paper is transformed into sheer luminosity. The viewer travels optically against the current. Drawings of the past two decades, on the whole, are less charged with dramas of weather, more with the viewer's implied circumstance in the dark spaces of woodlands. Tree trunks and foliage amid forests are silhouetted against the light. Close-up vertical forms may function as repoussoirs or even prosceniums, accentuating a certain theatricality of her presentations. The viewer's eye traverses from foreground to horizon and towards the initially blank page now a source of light. It absorbs a spectacle orchestrated to produce a lucid visual drama. The only human presence in Gornik's oneiric images is you, the viewer, who is integral to their structure and meaning.



Light-filled landscapes may suggest to urban sensibilities a connection to the organic wholeness conventionally ascribed to "nature." Because some of Gornik's paintings and drawings resemble at a glance romantic scenes of unspoiled nature, you could fail to notice their peculiar psychological charge. Jaded contemporary tastes may read irony into her intentions where there is none. The risk she takes is in allowing her imagination, poetic vision, and her demanding procedures to direct and inform her art while not directly addressing pressing issues, such as global warming, the assault by oil and coal corporations on the environment, and populations living near drilling sites. Her abstaining from such political concerns is considered unforgivable to many in these times, but it may also be salutary in creating a zone of finely wrought pleasures.

This generous book is the next best thing to spending time with the drawings themselves. ☞

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He writes regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail* and has written for *Art in America* since the late '70s as well as writing many catalog essays for various museums. He is a Professor Emeritus of the School of Art+Design, Purchase College, SUNY.

**Passing the midpoint of our lives
we Spoonbillians found ourselves
in a darker Williamsburg, for the straight way was lost
amid the new towers & changing demographic. It is
a most difficult thing to sing of, comparing what once was –
we admit nostalgia – to what the town looks like now.**

**The intelligentsia flees – thither & yon, the rents are high & the artists
are gone, & from foreign shores now come foreign investors,
Asian & Anglo-Saxon, Apple, Whole Foods & McNally Jackson.
Nevertheless for the moment we're still here, purveyors of manna
for those who seek the freedom which books afford.**

**And so to keep the shelves well-stocked but constantly changing,
sell us your Art Books, Theory, & Novels aplenty.**

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FEARING THE FERAL CAROUSELS NO MORE

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHEL

Amy Fusselman, *Savage Park: A Meditation on Play, Space, and Risk for Americans Who Are Nervous, Distracted, and Afraid to Die* (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 2015)

There's risk in picking up a book by an unfamiliar author, especially if the topic is not clearly utilitarian (how to succeed at success) or dramatic (lost in the woods; learning to kill). The risk is largely related to voice: are you going to like the author? Will you find her ideas relevant, or at least interesting? Will what she writes engage or will, halfway through, it turn out she's overstayed her welcome? In short: is this worth your time?

Regarding Amy Fusselman the answer, thankfully, is an unequivocal yes. *Savage Park* reads like an amazing, late-night, nearly life-changing conversation with a too-perceptive friend—one who so succinctly expresses existential problems that it helps you to envision an entirely new (and possibly happier) way of living. Everyone should have a friend like that. Fusselman's prose is, in fact, so genuinely reachable, so friendly and open, even while she appears to be rearranging her (and our) sense of self and the universe, that I'm going to go ahead and call her Amy for the rest of the review.

Amy also has friend like that: Yelena, a "USSR-born, New-York-City bred, Theater-direct[or]" living in Japan. The book begins when Yelena invites Amy, her two boys (5 and 2), and her husband, who live in New York, to visit "for at least a month." This sets off in Amy the natural but-how-would-we-even-do-that kind of hand-wringing typical of people who are, as the book's subtitle states, nervous, distracted, and afraid to die: "The distance was just space, for her. And she did not view space as an enemy. She was not worried, as I was, about what it would be like to fly 13 hours with small children."

The book is, in part, a tale of Amy's struggles to be less nervous, more present, and perhaps less afraid to die. So she goes to Japan. It's difficult and uncomfortable. She never really adjusts to the time difference. She remains awash in a sea of language she cannot even hope to comprehend. Yelena, who also has a young boy, takes Amy's family to places for kids, one of which ends up being the "Savage Park" of the book's title. The park is essentially a large patch of semi-tended dirt. There are a few trees and rolling hills. But instead of having playground equipment built by professional engineers, the park's structures are made entirely of scrap wood by the children, who avidly nail things together high up in the trees, build small fires, and tear old furniture apart for more wood. The park, as it turns out, is

an "Adventure Playground": a type of purposely junk-filled creative space popular in Scandinavia and northern Europe, but almost unheard of in America. Amy is initially horrified, but her sons (as well as Yelena's boy) are enraptured, and end up staying at the park for hours.

This experience becomes the foundation for the book's three interrelated topics: space, and the way different spaces accommodate, estrange, coddle, or threaten inhabitants (which Amy posits it's easier to focus on when you're entirely undistracted by language); danger and death, and the way Americans in particular organize public areas and social conventions in order to deny, as much as possible, that being hurt and dying are inevitable, even typical events; and the state of creativity and play, the most serious and involved activities for young children, which (to Amy's astonishment) Yelena appears to be able to access at will even as an adult. This accessible state of creativity is something that Amy yearns to achieve herself and preserve in her children.

Topics like these have historically fallen under the purview of certain French thinkers (Roland Barthes, Gaston Bachelard) and a book like this easily could have winged its way into the atmosphere of rarified philosophy. But Amy is so engaging and grounded, her concerns rooted in such specific, well-detailed experiences, that the prose instead remains as vital and present as if she were grabbing your wrist across your kitchen table. In a passage where she tries to understand what she loves about the Savage Park, she writes:

It wasn't just that the children were flying in the air there, it wasn't just that they were making insanely great structures, it wasn't just that the play-park hut was a junk-lover's dream. It was because the entire place existed, at all, for just this reason: this full and complete allowance of a self, including all the ineptness, failure, and possibility of death, because it is understood that only with this allowance can we have the capacity to be great.

Amy's experiences in Japan, and her consideration of these ideas, necessarily remind her of other experiences, and she weaves them deftly into the book. She writes about a class with Philippe Petit, the high-wire walker famous for his 1974 stroll between the World Trade Center's twin

towers. She writes about finding help for a pedestrian with a broken leg on 72nd Street and Central Park West. She remembers an interview she did with Ettore Sottsass, the well-known architect and designer. All of these recollections give her room to consider intersections of creativity, space, and danger. But mostly she thinks about that dangerous playground.

[B]ulldozing a space, padding and disinfecting it, and then congratulating ourselves on how we can sit back with our handhelds to leave our babies and children alone to "explore" is one approach. It has its drawbacks, however, including the one that babies and children, who quickly become young adults, do not learn how to take risks in space, a process which ultimately makes them less safe in space, not more.

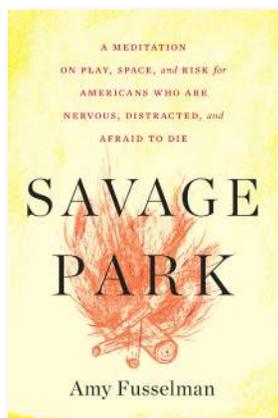
Allowing babies, children, and young adults to spend as much time as possible with the lowest level of interference in the highest-quality environment we can provide for them, that is, an environment which we have not engineered [...] this is another approach. It also has drawbacks, the major one being the pain of our own uncertainty and vulnerability [...]

But it would be worth it, if we could do this. Americans, I beseech you, it is not as impossible as it seems.

But here's the thing about life-changing conversations: they rarely change our lives the way we hope. Conceiving of an entirely new and more perceptive (and happier) way of living often just reminds us, in the harsh light of morning, how far that is from how we live. We wake up and fall back into our old routines. Amy writes not only about how much her time in Japan changed her, but also how difficult it's been to make those changes stick. The difficulty, however, doesn't make the experience any less precious.

And a book like this is precious. Amy tries to get the nervous, distracted, death-fearing reader in all of us to reconsider our aversions to danger, our unconscious approaches to public space, and our prizing of work and responsibility over creativity and play: in short, to rethink our lives. What could be more worth our time than that? 

CHRISTOPHER MICHEL is a freelance writer, poet, runner, father, and Brooklyn transplant currently living in the small-town wilds of Eastern Pennsylvania.



THE LONG WAY AROUND

BY JILL DEHNERT

Michael Hofmann, *Where Have You Been?: Selected Essays* (FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 2014)

In today's world, which Michael Hofmann describes as "blogal and instant and on demand," where it seems we are all trying to consume as much content as quickly as possible, *Where Have You Been?* feels almost novel. These 30 essays—which focus mainly on 20th-century poets, but also visual art, film, prose writers, and some thoughts on translation—can in no way be read quickly or easily. Rather, Hofmann, who cares deeply about poetry, has created highly intelligent and passionate essays that are thoughtful, methodical, and intense investigations of art.

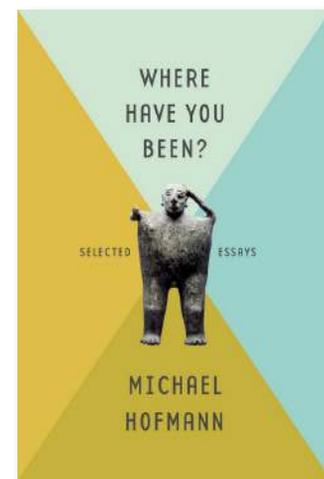
In his introduction, Hofmann offers up this collection as "a baroque convenience, a vade mecum, a few more connections, a few more lines, a further wrinkle of mapping." This book certainly is baroque, most essays running much longer than anything you might find published online for breezy reading. In fact, some of Hofmann's sentences run longer than your average blog post. But this seems to be his goal—to give us an essay we have to chew on for a while, his multi-clause sentences and obscure and antiquated diction all in the service of thought. That is, you have to work a little.

And that's okay. Actually, it is beautifully fitting. Poetry, after all, should take some time, so why not also writing about poetry? Hofmann is a poet himself, as well as a translator and critic. It is safe to say that he has spent and spends most of his time thinking about, writing about, or creating literature. The prose in these essays is rich with image-laden similes. For example, he brilliantly likens the ordinariness and predictability of other poets, in comparison to Elizabeth Bishop, to "cellophane packs of cigarettes from a vending machine." Although, occasionally you find a sentence that would hit harder and clearer without the added clause(s), or a sentiment or opinion that would feel less precious without the exclamation point. (All of the exclamation points seem to insist on an inscrutable inside joke.)

The first half of the essays, which begin mostly as reviews of poets or books of correspondence exchanged between poets, do much more than critique. Rather, they expound upon the current state of poetry. Hofmann's disdain for the genre's contemporaneity is evident throughout the collection, from his mostly 20th-century subjects to his content.

For instance, he says that during Robert Lowell's time, "poetry still belonged in every well-stocked library and mind." In some ways, this book seems to be a kind of formal complaint, a plea for more "well-stocked minds" to return to the form. Although, he does identify one saving grace in the contemporary poet Karen Solie, who according to Hofmann "is indeed the one by whom language lives." Even Hofmann's writing seems somehow livelier throughout this essay; it makes me want to rush out and buy her collections immediately.

And yet, despite the lovely language and interesting commentary, after the seventh or tenth or fifteenth essay, Hofmann's style begins to feel somewhat formulaic. He is a great user of lists, for example, and tends to begin each essay by spending a paragraph introducing the writer, and



RECOVERING CHURCHILL

BY ALLEN GUY WILCOX

Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 2014)

then another paragraph or two (or three or four) accounting for that writer's every literary accomplishment, often in one long, multi-clause sentence. While he is thorough, this formula becomes a bit tiresome over the course of the book. But this simply reinforces Hofmann's purpose in the first place—this book as a tool, something a scholar of John Berryman or a lover of Bishop might turn to in a time of need. In other words, perhaps *Where Have You Been?* isn't the best choice for recreational reading, but rather for the serious student of poetry. Although, even this has a caveat.

While the essays collected here are fervently written, there is something about them—perhaps once they are all stacked on top of one another in a collection—that is unsettling. The problem I have is that the majority of the essays collected here focus on white male writers. While I don't generally investigate every book I read for racial or gender bias, I think in the current literary (and political) climate, it is impossible *not* to notice. Hofmann's subjects, it should be noted, do span the globe. But I think this book is an example of how the critic can at times create the canon. And this canon happens to be, perhaps unwittingly, whitewashed.

I was talking to a friend about the book and my problem with it and he said, "But aren't the majority of 20th-century poets white guys?" While this is anecdotal evidence, I think his comment proves my point. The relationship between critic and writer is cyclical, meaning a critic can make (or break) a writer, who then becomes more (or less) critically acclaimed. Beyond that, a critic can even, as we see here, create a perception of an entire period of writing. So whom a critic chooses to write about becomes very important. And it isn't that Berryman or Lowell or Hughes aren't great poets. They obviously are. But when they are collected into a book like this, a book written by a white male poet, it becomes a kind of echo chamber. It makes you ponder the critic's authority, perhaps unnecessarily. Throughout the course of this book I found myself asking: why should I take *your* word for it? You have a clear bias. It seems to me that any critic writing today has a responsibility to explore diverse voices, no matter what period they are writing about.

All this to say that yes, I have some qualms with Hofmann's roster, but this book does offer really interesting commentary about poetry. (For me, the two best essays here are on Bishop and Solie, the two women who do make the cut, so perhaps I am the biased one. As Hofmann says, "We are all contaminated.") He consistently makes valuable, apt observations. Of Bishop's poetry he writes, "She seems to be continually revising for a closer approach to the truth." And Hofmann also seems to be writing toward a sort of truth, in his case a truth that has to do with the value of art. He takes the time to understand not only the poem but also the poet, and after 30 essays, one thing is clear: his goal is seemingly to explicate the poem's existence in the first place. And though these essays may take some work to get through, it is a refreshing return to thoughtful, analytical reading. ☞

JILL DEHNERT is a writer living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is in the M.F.A. program at the University of New Mexico, where she is completing a novel.

"Character is destiny, said the Greeks, and I agree."

—Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson, conservative politician and Mayor of London, has penned his ninth book, *The Churchill Factor*, about that great figure of British resilience, defender of democracy in Europe, Sir Winston Churchill. Recent utterers of conventional wisdom, from *Vanity Fair* magazine to talk show host Charlie Rose, have asserted that Johnson must certainly wish to benefit politically from the associative property here—and who could blame him? While the book will undoubtedly serve to advance Johnson's political rise, *The Churchill Factor* also operates as a concise, cogent overview of Churchill's leadership arc and political rise, told in a witty style, which manages (if just barely) to refrain from hagiography. This work is done, says Johnson, to recover Churchill, the man of flesh and blood, from the enshrined and symbolic Churchill, man of myth, whose very cigar-stubbed visage has become legend, whose sayings have been appropriated by left, right, and center—often erroneously—and whose namesake serves for all and sundry, from streets and bridges, to insurance companies, to baby names, barbers, barrooms, and, yes, as Johnson tells us, even escort services.

Mr. Johnson is a writer's politician, to be sure. His previous efforts include a volume of poetry and a comic novel, *Seventy-Two Virgins* (2005), though most of his work is non-fiction. This literary attitude is a first step towards Churchill, who himself was a Nobel Prize winner in literature (1953), and who, as Johnson notes, "had written five books, become a Member of Parliament, and reported from multiple war zones, and written innumerable articles, and given many well-paid lectures, by the time he was twenty-five." For Johnson, who clearly adores his subject, it is magnificent company, indeed.

The Churchill Factor, timed nicely for the 50th anniversary of its subject's death in January 1965, is a ranging examination of the personal and professional elements of a career, which reached its zenith in the prosecution and victory of World War II. Importantly, the book goes out of its way tallying Churchill's many failures as well as his triumphs, ranking them, evaluating them for consistency-of-position, and drawing a through-line regarding his evolving thought. Churchill appears to have had a well-researched stance on virtually every issue under the sun: political, aesthetic, military, moral, or otherwise. Ultimately, Johnson describes the vast reach of Churchill's political and social legacy, from the European Commission to the carving of the fault lines of the modern "Middle East," a term—like many others, including "iron curtain" and "summit" (in a geo-political context)—Churchill is credited with coining.

As with many prominent figures, Churchill suffered an agon with his parents, in particular with his late father Randolph, himself a writer and politician. Churchill's mother, an American aristocrat, achieved notoriety for extravagant spending and a long list of extramarital affairs. She was also known for her charm—a charm she

passed on to her son in spades. The book vividly details the psychological and material elements in Churchill's life which not only brought his civic waters to a boil, but which enabled him to turn history to his advantage through invention, charisma, and a ready command of the issues.

The young Churchill, whose family was from the elite aristocracy, embarked on a dual career in journalism and politics, in the end far surpassing his father (who himself had been the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1886) in both endeavors. Churchill began to level the playing field, building on the "Tory Democracy" brand of politics that his father had championed. He worked to guarantee rights for working-class British. Though it is an oft-forgotten fact, Johnson reminds us that Churchill lays claim, with his mentor David Lloyd George, to the creation of the British welfare state. This grew out of the "grinding poverty" he witnessed in his youth, before such protection had been ratified. Much more than an imperialist war marshal cast in bronze, Johnson aims to recover the workaday Churchill, the superlative human being. As he writes:

Of all the politicians of his generation, Churchill was not just the best speaker, the best writer, the best joke-maker, the bravest, the boldest and most original. It was crucial to the Churchill Factor that he was also the biggest policy wonk you ever saw.

England badly needed a John Bull, the dogged personification of British resistance, to rile the body populace and wrest the national conversation from the appeasers of Hitler, Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax among them. Rife in late-1930s England was the unsettling belief that Nazi Germany and Great Britain might very well coexist side by side—that a lasting peace could be achieved between the two powers through negotiations with Hitler. Johnson demonstrates how Churchill, through personal charisma, fortitude, and clarity-of-vision, changed prevailing sentiments, and bent the British will towards war with Hitler.

The author's many ribald, eccentric, action-packed anecdotes bring Churchill to life so vividly, as such an august character, that the reader is enticed to acknowledge, but finally to cast away negative judgments of him. For example, it is true that Churchill pioneered the use of mustard gas and area bombing in World War I, despicable practices. While Johnson clearly acknowledges these war crimes as abhorrent, it is as if Churchill's improbable success in World War II as Prime Minister (and simultaneously as Minister of Defense) exonerates his character permanently. Johnson certainly does his part to catalogue Churchill's faults—he devotes an entire chapter to Churchill's major blunders, and stuffs the whole book with Churchill's avowedly politically incorrect utterances, yet these faults are finally excused in the grand scheme of his career. Churchill, as Johnson portrays him, always bounced back. The reason for this—the core of his likeability and untarnished character, when put against virtually all other politicians—as Johnson states it, is thus:

THE CHURCHILL FACTOR

HOW ONE MAN MADE HISTORY



BORIS JOHNSON

Never was there the faintest whiff of scandal. None of his disasters came close to touching his integrity [...] He took his positions because (a) they seemed to him to be right and (b) because he conceived that they would serve to advance his career; and there was no disgrace in making both calculations at once, after all: he thought they would be politically useful because they were right.

The more cad-like aspects of Churchill's nature are also blended into the hero's narrative. This was a man who had a personal bathtub sent to the front during World War I. (That being said, there is evidence he shared it, non-concurrently, with others.) Yet the eccentric trappings almost reach apotheosis, in Johnson's estimation, in Churchill's figure:

With his ludicrous hats and rompers and cigars and excess alcohol, he contrived physically to represent the central idea of his own political philosophy: the inalienable right of British people to live their lives in freedom, to do their own thing.

More than a description of Churchill—who turned *himself* from flesh to myth—this is the beginning of Johnson's political credo.

Johnson's writing is florid and funny, and he truly loves his subject. This makes for a great read. His work here is to recover an image of doggedness, intelligence, and resilience for his country's uncertain future. Churchill is the central star in his political constellation. "History will be kind to me," Sir Winston famously said, "for I will write it." In *The Churchill Factor*, Boris Johnson, who like Churchill was born to an American mother, has gone to great lengths in helping pay that notion forward into the 21st century. ☞

ALLEN GUY WILCOX was born in Cooperstown, NY, and grew up on his parents' farm in the Mohawk Valley. He has lived in Brooklyn since 2005.

THE MORALITY OF LANDSCAPE

BY CHRISTOPHER X. SHADE

Stanley Crawford, *Travel Notes* (CALAMARI PRESS, REPRINT EDITION, MARCH 1, 2014)

Reading Stanley Crawford's *Travel Notes* is like being in a tailspin. A safe one, perhaps, but a tailspin nonetheless. Everything is not as it should be; you feel disoriented. You go up in the air, then plummet; then you are safe on the ground. But you don't stay grounded. Before you know it, you're up in the air again, and have no idea how high you are or how much higher you might go.

Inviting comparisons with airplanes seems appropriate: The book opens with one. But it's a Stanley Crawford airplane—more specifically, it's an invention of Crawford's narrator. It does not get off the ground. It travels by rolling on a runway all the way to its destination, for seven hours and 45 minutes, with the pilot "judiciously raising whichever landing gear was threatened by an obstacle."

A little further into the book, there is another airplane, a vintage biplane. This one is a means of escape. The definition of the word escape, in this world, is to keep traveling. What needs escape is stagnancy, immobility. But the aforementioned rolling airplane is not the answer. A series of bizarre events have led the narrator to be among some people in transit who are at a standstill, and so our narrator's journey is also stalled.

But he meets an aviator among them, and discovers an airplane under a tarp on top of a bus. Then, one night, he and the aviator steal the airplane, intending to fly away in it. But they do not fly. Instead they sit in the airplane on a dirt road for some time while the aviator works the instruments as if they are in flight. But they go nowhere until finally the narrator, with his journey again stalled, slips away from the biplane, back again to the open road. Such are the events

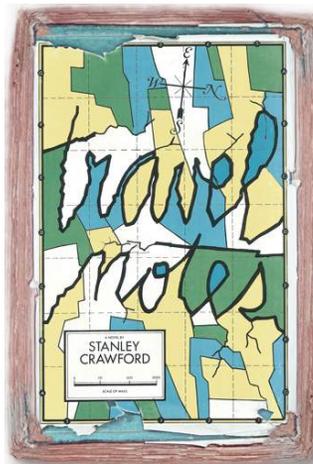
as they are written down in his journal. Crawford's book, *Travel Notes*, is his journal. Nothing is as it seems. The first line of the book: "The airport was a shack." It is all absurd and entertaining.

This book, originally published in 1967 and now by Calamari Press (with captivating cover design), is prefaced with: "All landscape is moral," unattributed. Travel, then, is concerned with charting our human character, the good and the bad of it. The tone of this, as brief as the line is, implies that the narrator believes the aim of visiting new landscapes is a moral imperative. Crawford masterfully posits this at the outset. But it is then turned inside-out and undone. Like many absurdist works, this book is, in its refusal to be a morality lesson, a morality lesson.

The irony is not easily missed here in the narrator's act of experiencing cultures while missing them entirely, even dismissing them. Early in the book, the narrator walks through a "dull provincial town" at the Famôus Lake, encounters a crowd, and yells at them, "Does anyone speak English here?" Someone behind him replies in a low voice, "We all speak English, you fool." This must have seemed to speak too directly to the irony at hand, because promptly the narrator undermines meaning with a comedic turn: "But then I was suffering from indigestion. Incredible flatulations!" In another scene, at the center of a crowd's heated discussion, the narrator keeps experience at arm's length:

I stood and smiled. When one understands nothing it is best to feign the idiot, both easy and foolproof. [...] My interpreter waved his hands, shouted everyone into silence with a verbal torrent, now went on towards a softly worded conclusion. That is, there seemed to be words in here, though when you listen to a foreign language you can never be certain.

Though much of the book is about language, this—the narrator's writing exercise—is often consciously aware of and distracted by the form (it changes at times), the tools (the notebook, the recorder), the act of jotting travel notes, and the meaning of it all. In one instance on the train: "The jostling of the train makes writing difficult, even those quick little jabs I make and which are indecipherable except by my closest of former friends." Another time, on the meaning of this writing exercise: "No, the only new fact that I can communicate in all humility to the armchair traveler is that the Ruiñs are now being visited by myself, a unique historical event whose significance is not for me to comment upon, far from it." Though, of course, the narrator here is making a comment. And much of these are delightful asides.



Especially one found on the last page, a kind of summit in this journey: a clever, entertaining, and moving description of a new notebook—a new means of escape.

In journaling, the narrator reveals his obsession with the work of it and its meaning. All of this evokes a vulnerability. The quicksilver of vulnerability makes him seem more an everyday person, one who can be hurt in a way that seems believable, even familiar, to the reader. In one instance after his notebook is taken, he writes on

found paper, "Man is most vulnerable through his manuscripts." In another instance, in a mood of regret and ultimately loss, he says: "the train will always go faster than I write."

He goes in circles. He encounters himself again and again. Early on, at a hotel, he falls into a room that is a duplicate of his own: "Under the floor which collapsed was a room identical in every respect, down to the last detail, including my traveling things, to the room I am lying in right now." In another place, while walking through a "silly town" he discovers "a cast iron manikin of myself sitting on a bench." It is as if the reader is attached to a spinning wheel of his tape recorder, something he has had with him since the opening of the book and which he describes as "my expensive tape-recording system which takes up half one wall of my bedroom" (in a rented suburban villa). Late in the story he plays his recordings to entertain some policemen with "the latest results of my travels." The sound that issues is quiet and cacophonous and clattering at times. All in, it is analogous to the *Travel Note*—bits of recordings that are "not too coherent." But, like the interpreter, there are words in there, of which you can never be quite certain. ☞

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FICTION AS MAGIC, LANGUAGE AS SPELL

IN CONVERSATION

PETER MARKUS

WITH LILY HOANG

Peter Markus, *The Fish and the Not Fish* (Dzanc, 2014)

The way the fairy tale goes, my parents really wanted a boy. I have an older brother, but they still wanted me to be a boy, but when I was lifted from the cut in my mother's stomach, I wasn't a boy at all. Disappointed, my father left the hospital without so much as looking at me.

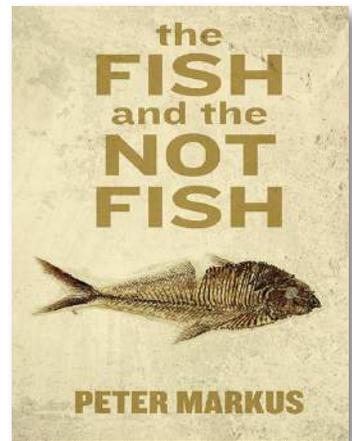
I've always yearned for boyhood, except, I guess, in its actuality. I didn't—and don't—like dirt or physical play, or climbing trees, and I really hate sweat. These are things I've associated—my younger, less feminist self at least—with boyhood, with what I wanted but could not make myself embrace. Peter Markus gives us the gifts of boyhood and brotherhood,

its violence and camaraderie, its magical enchantment. Markus's books share similar concerns—brothers, mud, fish, river, girl, moon—and these words cycle through his lyric prose like a chant that washes us into an elasticized imagination accessible only in childhood. There is a deceptive simplicity to Markus's writing. In his newest book, however, he leaves his brothers behind for a new constraint: *The Fish and the Not Fish* contains only monosyllabic words. Although his diction is conscientiously simple and vernacular, his sentences display syntactic virtuosity. As elegant as a Bach *partita*, his words repeat and syncopate, and his sentences usher the reader into an almost religious trance. Markus gives his readers the permission to access Bachelard's reverie: one of childhood wonder and imagination and hope and dirt, a whole lot of dirt.

Over the past two months, Markus and I exchanged emails about his powerful and enigmatic books.

LILY HOANG (RAIL): The first time I came across your writing, Peter, I was in graduate school, and my immediate reaction was: I can't believe fiction can do that! Wait: can fiction do that? Of course, years have passed and fiction can—in fact—do that, whatever the *that* of your writing is. For me, the *that* of Peter Markus was tri-fold: your threading of magic into the real; the cyclicity of your language and the rhythm it creates; and the weight of your brevity. So, let's start with magic. Can you talk about how you use magic in your fiction and what urged you in that direction? To complexify things further, the brothers in your fiction are incredibly real, so real in fact that the reader feels empathetic pain—as nails are driven into their palms, as their worlds are stripped of mud, and on and on. And we feel their joy, the brutality of boyhood, the bond that only brothers can access, one which is foreign to me and yet you so gracefully project into my consciousness. Can you talk about the relationship between the real and the magic in your writing?

PETER MARKUS: Where to begin? What to say to such saying? Let me begin by saying thank you for saying that my fiction came at you in this way, or had that kind of effect on you as the reader you used to be, or were back then when you first encountered it. I suppose there is magic there as you say, but I like to think of it—that magic—as being made in the saying. That said, we are as writers making things up, and there is magic, I imagine, in the conjuring up of what isn't already here. We must be under some kind of spell, as writers, to come to the page this way and to play like children in the land of the make-believe. So it just makes sense to me that we wouldn't be limited by or governed by only what is possible in the world that is not the world of our invention. I suppose too I try to look at the making of fiction like this: I try to approach the page and the possibilities of the page and to make out of the limitations of the page and of language the way a child must experience the world when what he or she sees of that world is brand new. The moon for the first time, for instance, or the rain as it falls from the sky, the mud that the rain makes out of the ground, the things that rise up green and flowering out of the dirt. I still remember the day when my daughter Helena dropped to her knees when she first saw a tulip and was able to point to what she saw with the word "flower" breaking into blossom, as James Wright might say, from her lips. Or the time on a subway car in Brooklyn and the moon was big and full and hovering the way only moon can, and on her knees on her subway seat with her face gazing out the window she turned back to face me and to tell me with awe and urgency in her voice, "Daddy, look, the moon!" The 50-some adults sitting



in that subway car turned and looked and saw as if for the first time a noun, moon, and its word, moon, and its image, moon, and maybe even its song, moon, as it was born again through the eyes and tongue of the child. I suppose I try to replicate the spirit of that moment when I take my language and my word-playing and the gaze of my eyes and the inner drum of my ears to the page that I am trying to make a world with. Can fiction do that, make a world that is its own, a world that isn't anchored down by the world in which it is actually written in? Of course it can. In the fiction that I write, maybe because it takes up such a small and marginalized place in the real world, it has no limits other than what I might choose to bring to it. So to get back to your question about the relation between the real and the magic, there is nothing but magic, there is nothing but the spell that I hope to cast, nothing but the incantation that I hope a sentence or a sequence of such sentences might make once they enter into the ear of a reader (though in my mind, of course, the reader doesn't even exist). Let me say this, too: that there is nothing in my fiction that is real, other than the language that I'm working with. I might write "river" but it is only the word itself that I write and see and so there is no real river behind it. I write "brother" or "boy" but all I see there that is in any way real are the letters that form these words and the sounds of these words themselves. This might sound naïve or I can even see how others might not believe me when I say this, but I say this because it's true to the way that I write and to the way that I look at the writing that I write. There are words and then there are other words and in the end if the words make somebody other than me feel a particular feeling, then maybe the making of that singular sensation is the thing that makes the make-believe thing—what we call the fiction—the thing that is most real of all.

Or, if you want the nuts and bolts response: fiction is magic, language is spell, it is the music of enchantment. I've said it to my students, this dare: "Be a shaman, or don't be at all." I believe this and believe in this. Come to the page with your sacred objects in hand and place them together in such a way so that those who take up into their own hands your pages find themselves lost in a kind of trance and can only gaze at what is being offered by you and not by the static distractions of the real world. Therein lies the magic of the imaginative act, the making method, the speaking that leads to our becoming.

And when I say "objects," what I am really saying is nouns: mud, fish, river, brother, boat, bird, dog, moon, mother, father, man, girl, tree. And here to quote Rilke: "to say them in such a way so that the Things themselves never dreamed of existing." The language of things can take us to that place, what I sometimes hear myself call the trapdoor to the eternal, what some might call the sublime, or beauty, or truth, or as Jack Gilbert says, a "kind of lying, necessarily..." so that "truth may be told only so."

So yeah, magic, real, truth, lying, language, nouns, the spell that wraps it all up in its ways of saying which of course is its own way of seeing.

RAIL: What kinds of revelation do you dream your reader might see in your books? I am ready for the *ayahuasca*, dear Shaman, guide me.

MARKUS: I'm not sure if revelation can be promised by the words that I've so far been able to conjure up as fiction, though I do hope that some sense of reverie might be enacted in whoever might be tuning in to the musicality of my work. I might also hope for some pleasures that might be found in terms of the enchanted, or if nothing else I am hopeful that the careful listener/reader might experience, at the most basic of core levels, a sense of what I like to call the hum. The hum is what I'm ultimately and unfailingly chasing after in all of this: when I bring my gaze to a painting, when I lean my ears to any acoustical sound, when I hold in my hands the pages that belong to others, when I enter into whatever kind of church or other kind of cave that I seek to climb and hide inside. Some

might call this a search for the primal, or the sublime, or the spiritual, or an encounter with the otherworldly, or better yet the hunting down for that thing itself which hasn't yet been named. For me that's what it all boils down to: the wish to tap into the never before. That's the best way for me to try to say it with words. I want to be transported to a place where words no longer mean what we think they mean. Maybe this is the revelation behind it all, the magic herb for us to place beneath our tongues.

RAIL: I'm actually quite obsessed with the concept of the sublime, Peter, and in your work, I see that quality: precarious beauty and awe. Your characters—both human and otherwise—seem to balance between inexhaustible innocence and a dangerous violence. Can you talk about your process of character building? Something that I have always admired about your writing is how the characters seem built in such a way that they are reliant on another, not as foil but as completion. Here, I'm thinking of the brothers—their relationship to each other and their relationship to Girl—or even the fish's relation to the man as he becomes not fish. In my own writing, I have a difficult enough time building just one character, and yet, here you are, building two at a time!

MARKUS: Maybe awe is the revelation that I am on the hunt for when you ask about revelation. Maybe awe is the trigger into reverie, into dream, that which opens up the trapdoor to the sublime, quicksand or mud that swallows us down into the eternal. It's all precarious, this source and sense of beauty, these words, our conversation, our breath. Our time here on earth. Or not. What do I know? Maybe that's why we lean on the bodies and the bones and the voices of others to see and say what we don't. Of course it pleases me more than just a little that you see the characters in my fiction as being well built and that they seem to be written in ways that there is a need for some other—some other character, or some other word—to make them singularly or dually whole. I can't say that was my conscious intention when I sat down and conjured up and onto the page the world that is the brothers, or the world of multiple Bobs in my novel *Bob, or Man on Boat*, or the sets of boys who show up in the three longer fictions in my most recent book *The Fish and the Not Fish*. I do see it now, now that you say it, though again I'm not sure I have much to do or say about this occurrence that takes place in my work. Even in the project that I'm presently working on—*In a House In a Woods*—there is the dualism of two boys at the heart of this book-to-be too. I don't even know if the world will ever see it, this book, though some parts of it have made their way out into the world thanks to the editors of the *Iowa Review* and *BOMB* and you at *Fairy Tale Review* and my other brother Derek White who puts out *Sleepingfish*.

But back to your question, about characters, what else about this might I wish to say? I will say this: that I do feel that hummy feeling that I mentioned earlier in this conversation when I came upon the phrase "us brothers" which in and of itself is the major dramatic event of my brothers stories that make up my books *Good, Brother*; *The Singing Fish*; *The Moon is a Lighthouse*; and *We Make Mud*. The seed of everything else that happens has already happened in that "us" that makes the word "brother" more than just a single boy, more than just a single set of eyes and four hands now instead of just two.

Back when my own two kids were just kids, they formed a make-believe band between the two of them that they named The Us and I suppose there's that sibling or kindred kind of connection that any of us are looking for when we seek out another to make the best out of this world. I mean who among us, if given the chance, would want to die alone? I know for my own final act, I want to look my gaze up into the eyes of my wife and son and daughter, those real world others who make me whole.

I see now that I've dodged my way around the core question here, but I don't know that I can speak with much authority about the way that I go about building characters in my fiction. I can't say that I can see any

faces behind the names and the words that I am calling forth out of the alphabet. I can see and hear the words on the page but not much more than that. I don't think too much about the who—the characters—who move in and around these landscapes. I don't bother to think too much, either, about the what. I tend to pay closest attention to how the telling of what is being told is being shaped, the contours and textures of the sentence, and I have an unflinching level of trust that story will emerge organically by subverting character and causality and plot in favor of style and musicality and voice. Language, for me, in my hands, is raw and elemental and ornamental and if you play around with it long enough or hold it tenderly and reverently in your hands and look and listen to it close enough it's only a matter of time before good things start to take shape around it.

RAIL: I look at any one of your sentences through a high-powered telescope and I see a spiral galaxy. I have never seen a real spiral galaxy, not with my own eyes at least. I have only seen pictures and I know scientists can account for their creation, but I just want to believe it's all magic. Or, I live in the desert and I don't have an air-conditioner. I have a swamp cooler, and no matter how many times someone explains the science of how it works, I hear only *sponge* and so I know only *that* it works, and in willing ignorance, I prefer to think it's simple magic. But to focus again: to me, the act of writing is some balance of science (craft) and magic (magic). Balance does not mean an even division. How would you number your proportion?

MARKUS: I'm a failed musician. As a kid I used to punk around with pals and find objects along our riverbank to bang on, bought pawnshop guitars and drums and broken-keyed organs and made music out of our not knowing what we were doing. It was pure accident, those moments when we found ourselves in the middle of some sound spell. We knew it when we came out of it, the times that we went there, the times we were somehow taken. I can count the times on one hand, but I hold those times in my hand still like stones or fossils that somehow manage to float, have found a way to displace space and gravity and have pushed back against the failings of memory and the thinning out of time. Those moments stopped occurring, it seemed, even then, once our hands seemed to know where they ought to go, what chords they ought to be playing, and it was this sense of knowing (or thinking that we knew what we were doing) that killed the magic of our song. The same might be said about the writing that I write, that my hands sometimes travel to dead spaces, dead water so to speak, and I am at my best when I go to the page as if going there for the first time. I think it's good to forget what you think you know about the act or the craft of writing fiction and poetry and I'm sure this might be true too of most any other art-making process. Here I'll reach out to familiar ground and make use of a line from Jack Gilbert: "We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars." I mean, why see and say what's already been seen and said, right? To gaze up at the sky at night should be a wordless act, a moment that is only reduced by knowing or naming what the eye sees and what the mind can't contain. Why put anything in a container? What's the use of a beautiful frame if what is framed is the same old photograph we've all posed for before? In the end, if I had to say it straight up, I don't look for meaning in much of anything that I pick up to press my face against, though I'm constantly on the make or prowl for that which will place me closer in touch with that sense of being in a state of awe which can leave us with its own kind of silence. I'm also not much for numbers, so if I had to break it down, that proportion between craft and magic, I'd say it like this: mud + brother = fish. Or fish + brother = mud. Somewhere in there, this equation, there is a river there, and a man on a boat. Maybe I'm the man on the boat and language is a river and each word is its own kind of fish. Or to make use of my own words already written, from the book I call *Bob, or Man on Boat*:

There is no such fish that is just a fish.
 Every fish is a beautiful fish.
 Every thing that is beautiful in this world is a fish.
 The moon is a fish.
 The river is a fish.
 The stars in the sky.
 The stones in the river.
 The mud on the river's bank.
 Fish.
 Fish.
 Fish.

RAIL: And so we begin our endings—so sad, so mournful—but we must, we must, we must turn to those treacherous wonderful standard questions: what excites you in literature being published today? Will you provide us a few reading nudges?

MARKUS: I would say that there are more writers doing interesting new work these days than in days when there were perhaps less people wishing or willing to commit their lives to the act of writing fiction. I can flip open most any lit-mag these days and find writing that I wouldn't have been able to find there 10 or 15 years ago. I'm not sure how so much good writing gets done these days when there is too much already out there to pull at our habits and attentions. I miss those days when there wasn't so much at the near and ready to steal our gazes away from the page. I'm going to resist the temptation to fashion here a list of writers whose pages offer me the singular pleasures that authenticity seems to be able to bring with it. That said, I am looking forward to the publication of the collected poems of Frank Stanford that I'm told Copper Canyon is bringing out in April of 2015. As for the writers whose words keep me company and offer me both solace and companionship for the long haul, I'd be remiss if I didn't cite here the names of such poets as Dan Beachy-Quick, Robert Fanning, John Rybicki, Sean Thomas Dougherty, the fictions of Robert Lopez, Pamela Ryder, Dawn Raffel, Yannick Murphy, Victoria Redel, Sheila Kohler, Noy Holland (most especially her long story "Orbit"), the books of image and text by Derek White, "The Pedersen Kid" by William Gass, *The Red Truck* by Rudy Wilson, *The Nick Adams Stories* of Hemingway and *The Old Man and the Sea, Peru* by Gordon Lish, Faulkner's Benjy and Vardaman, the shorter books of Samuel Beckett, the sentences of Gary Lutz and Gertrude Stein, Blake Butler's *There Is No Year, Airships* and *Ray and Boomerang* by Barry Hannah, Michael Kimball's *The Way the Family Got Away*, William Tester's *Darling*, the novels of Norman Lock, "The Weather Killer" by Ben Marcus, "Landscape and Dream" by Nancy Krusoe, "The Caretaker" by Anthony Doerr, Stuart Dybek, Matt Bell, Brian Evenson, Lynn Crawford, John Yau, David McLendon's *UNSAID*. Can't forget Cormac McCarthy, especially his *Suttree* and *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*. William Goyen's *The House of Breath* changed the way that I read, as did Mark Richard's *The Ice at the Bottom of the World*. Can't forget James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a book that makes the daring claim: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here." The essays and notebooks of Charles Simić. Edmond Jabès. Jack Gilbert. Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack, and Honey*. There is too much good not to praise. Forgive me, I've just done what I made the claim I was going to do my best to resist. I've failed again and will continue to fail some more. Here's to poets who make and play with guitars: Chris Moore, Elliott Smith, Bill Callahan, Sufjan Stevens, Jeff Mangum, early Cat Power, the first four records of Echo and the Bunnymen. The young poets of Detroit, I praise them too for furnishing me their sweet nourishment. There is so much good going on in the world it is almost too much good going on in the world. Maybe it's time I myself go. I am going. I am tired of my own voice.

RAIL: Do you have any last words of wisdom or advice, especially for writers who are at the early stages of their career?

MARKUS: Be open. Listen. See with your ears. Find your sound and follow it. Go where it tells you to go. Keep going. If the going is good, dig in, anchor down. Stay where the fish are. If the going isn't going, if the water is dead beneath you, pull up anchor, keep going. Go, go, go! 🐟

LILY HOANG is the author of four books, including *Changing*, recipient of a PEN Open Books Award. With Joshua Marie Wilkinson, she edited the anthology *The Force of What's Possible: Writers on the Avant-Garde and Accessibility*. She teaches in the M.F.A. program at New Mexico State University, where she is Associate Department Head and Prose Editor for *Puerto del Sol*.

THE ELEMENT OF ESCAPE

IN CONVERSATION ATTICUS LISH

WITH DAN OSTLUND

Atticus Lish, *Preparation for The Next Life* (TYRANT BOOKS, 2014)

To go into what might be regarded as the family business without the advantage of familial tutelage or connection is to prefer hard labor over easy pedigree, but Atticus Lish, son of the famed writer and Knopf editor Gordon Lish, didn't seek out his father's help, didn't even mention he was writing a novel until it was done. Certainly this was the harder, lonelier road, but as Lish says, "Growing up with Arnold Palmer won't teach you golf."

Lish's first novel, *Preparation for The Next Life* (Tyrant Books) chronicles the story of Zou Lei, a Chinese immigrant, and Skinner, an Iraq War veteran groping their way through the broken margins of American existence.

Lish, who is 43 and lives in Brooklyn, has the appearance of a tough guy—the austere, martial haircut reminiscent of his time in the Marines; the fighter's ear from his time in mixed martial arts; and the evident commitment to working out. But when he speaks the tough appearance gives way to his gentleness and self-deprecation. He is polite and solicitous in answering questions—he nods his head and puts his hands together as if in prayer when asking for your pardon. In the café where we met, the waitress dropped an armful of flattened boxes and he jumped up to help saying, "I can't bear to see you struggling."

Preparation for The Next Life has been lavishly praised in the *New York Times* and the *Nation*. *The New York Review of Books* called it "beautiful" and "astounding," and has been named by *Flavorwire*, *Book Riot*, and *Buzzfeed* to their lists of best independent books of 2014.

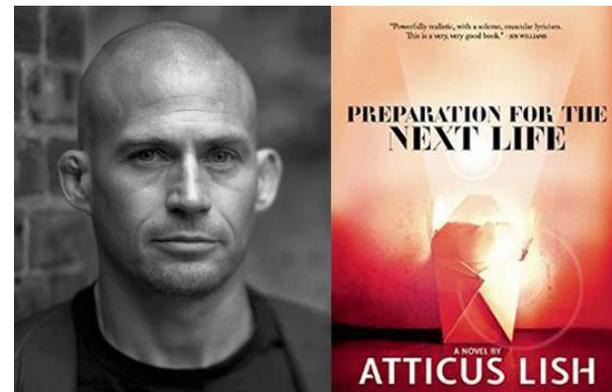
DAN OSTLUND (RAIL): You're the son of Gordon Lish, you went to Andover and Harvard, you had an unusual, even privileged background. But you dropped out of Harvard, and then worked as a mover, as a bottle washer, and so on. It seems almost as if you turned your back on the privilege. Would you say that's true?

ATTICUS LISH: Part of that later in life was really accidental. After a certain point it was pretty much: I needed a job. Of course if I'd set my mind to it, it's America, I have opportunities. I could have done other things, but it was partly my temperament too. I didn't really want to commit to a career that my heart wasn't in, and I liked the kind of work I was doing. Deep down I knew I hadn't really found what I wanted to do yet. So, there were reasons for that other than an attempt to simply reject my background.

When I was younger though, it would be fair to say that I felt like maybe I didn't completely feel at home wherever I found myself. I was aware that I was fortunate, but I think my temperament leads me in another direction. I'm not really an indoor cat. I enjoy doing. I enjoy getting outside, and running around. Growing up in New York City the way I did, it's more like being a veal, where you're covered in butter and lodged in a small little case or something.

Also, the most conscious thing for me is that while I was a privileged kid I think I had a strong awareness of how being privileged could lead to being a bully if you weren't careful. If you have a lot of money and opportunity, you don't want to be a jerk to anyone else, and so you're a step away from guilt all the time. So for that reason I was never entirely comfortable with the things I was given. That's probably why I thought I should go and earn whatever I was going to get in life on my own.

RAIL: So the search to find something your heart was in led to the different jobs, the move to California to train mixed martial arts?



LISH: I think I've always wanted to be able to disconnect when I need to. If I see a movie like *Revolutionary Road* for example, a movie where the woman has a lot of obligations that lock her into a marriage, I feel like I'm strangling. It bothers me, and I want to see her pull a Lizzie Borden on her husband. I love movies about jailbreaks. I love *Escape from New York*. I love the idea of getting out of whatever obligations you're stuck in.

One of my favorite books is by Eddie Bunker. It's got prison breaks and armed robberies and people on the run from the cops. I mean real-life things. Obviously it's not nice stuff, but the escape element of it appeals to me.

RAIL: You learned Chinese, joined the Marines, went back to Harvard and finished, trained intensely in mixed martial arts—you seem to be drawn to difficult things.

LISH: It would certainly look like that from the outside. I don't know if I set out to do any of these things, except the Marine Corps, because they were difficult. The Marine Corps attracted me, especially at the age I was, because they were supposed to be the toughest thing around. The other stuff I probably did for other reasons. They may have turned out to be difficult things, and they were, but I probably went after them just because they were fantasies, they were dreams, and I said: it was a little bit of an adventure, give it a shot, see what happens. It wasn't just to take on the toughest thing I can do. It looks cooler than it is. It's a nice list.

But I didn't get into Chinese because it was hard; I did it because it was easy. I had taken French and Latin in elementary school and I found them very difficult because of the conjugations and the declensions, and when I got to high school I also had to fulfill a foreign language requirement, and Chinese doesn't have that stuff, plus I was interested in it.

RAIL: Why did you start writing?

LISH: I don't know why. I think I started to get inspired and fascinated by Hemingway in the early 2000s. And Robert Stone. It would just blow me away how change would take place in a novel. You'd see the same themes return but they would have evolved. I was running a lot at the time, and in my mind, I really felt this connection to running, where you see the road and the road is always with you but the road changes. You feel different at the end than at the beginning.

RAIL: And how did you decide on the subject, on the life of Zou Lei and Skinner?

LISH: I was highly disturbed by Bush and our country's reaction to 9/11. I felt from the beginning that the Patriot Act and our new policies on torture and detention were chilling and Orwellian. I was deeply dismayed by the invasion of Iraq and all the horrors that Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Powell, Rice,

Rumsfeld, Yoo—war criminals all—unleashed. I was appalled by the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal and by Guantanamo Bay. I was alienated from my country. I couldn't understand the people who would go along with this. The dragnet approach was used both in Afghanistan, Iraq, and here at home to scoop up large numbers of people on the flimsiest evidence. In detention, they were subject to abuse. Here at home, immigration violation provided the grounds for arresting people on immigration sweeps, such as at the meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado. Illegal immigrants are a vulnerable population. I found no shortage of well-documented, disturbing news stories about what has happened to people in immigration detention. Sadistic guards, justified by notions of patriotism in time of war, can do anything they want to someone they regard as a "terrorist," whether in Guantanamo Bay or the Passaic County Jail. The novel was a chance to deal with this.

RAIL: You and your wife got jobs in China, gave your car away, and went. Tell me about that.

LISH: This was late 2004 and I was working as a moving man in Boston. I loved my job, but it wasn't going to be the future and I wanted to see the world, which was especially important for my wife Beth—she wanted to see the world. I spoke Chinese so we felt we could survive in China. We got online and found jobs teaching. The easiest jobs to find were teaching English. They flew us over, and we just taught English.

It was a year contract. Neither of us was really up for another year. There was a downside to everything there. The people in China had a pretty hard life. It was an economically depressed area. We weren't suffering or anything—by contrast to them we were living better—all I'm saying is that it's a very foreign experience, you end up missing home—you end up missing cheeseburgers.

So we were ready to move on at the end. We're not born expatriates.

RAIL: Are you glad you did it?

LISH: Oh hell yeah. It played a major role in being able to write this book. I visited the area in the northwest of China where, in the book, Zou Lei comes from, but I also incorporated things from the area we lived in—Hubei. Hubei is in south central China, it's a very Han Chinese area. It's like Chinese Chinese, as opposed to the northwest which is like Central Asia, Muslims. And so in this Han area I became friends with this woman named Mrs. Li who collected garbage. The convention was we took our garbage outside the building and women from the fields would come in and tear apart the garbage and take out the recycling. The garbage, by the way, would include our sanitary products because you can't flush them in the toilets there, so this was a very uncomfortable situation at first to see people going through your private trash, but that's the way it was; they'd tear it open, they'd look for anything they could recycle. Now one of these women I ended up speaking to. She was a woman about 60 years old. She was wearing a rice hat, she had a shoulder pole, and a burlap sack she put plastic bottles in. Her name is Mrs. Li, and here's the crazy thing: this woman who's

living by recycling—you can imagine how little money she's making doing this, I mean fractions of a Chinese dollar—has a daughter going to the school we were teaching at. Go figure that. These were extremely poor people; they were peasants. I'd say they had to be living below the global poverty line. You know, people who look much older than they really are. Mrs. Li was the one person I really felt I made friends with during that year, and so I used her experience collecting those bottles, I used that for Zou Lei who collects cans and bottles in the south of China.

RAIL: You've mentioned using Flaubert as inspiration at one point because you were wrestling with some parts of the novel.

LISH: My goal was to write a book that my wife and I would like to read. My source of feedback was my wife: I'd write a section, give it to her to read, and she'd tell me if she thought it was on-target or not. I had a lot of trouble with the middle section of my book during which the relationship between Zou Lei and Skinner evolves. I didn't know how to approach this. I kept thinking it would be boring. I was bored just thinking about it, and I thought, if I'm bored, the reader's going to be doubly bored. I was the opposite of inspired.

I knew that *Madame Bovary* was a famous love story so I wanted to take a look at it. I looked at how Flaubert handled this type of process, and this helped me see that it could be done. I also had a writing teacher, my one writing teacher, and she was always talking about Flaubert. She talked about Flaubert and Flannery O'Connor especially. She mentioned that quote about Flaubert putting slippers on clerks. It's kind of a famous quote. It's about how one of the writer's jobs is to give you a little extra detail so you can picture something. That was why Flaubert was on my brain, so I checked him out.

RAIL: You can get a little obsessive about your endeavors like your martial arts training, and you've hinted at it with your writing habits. Are you drawn to routine and habit? Is the routine important to you?

LISH: I'm a complex man, so I have to give this a two-part answer. Basically I'm going in two directions at once. A big part of me just wants to fuck off out of here right now. I'd like to go jump on a bus. I'd like to wake up in a trashcan in Tijuana. I mean, I just love the idea of not knowing what tomorrow will bring. I love seeing a new place. I love being totally free, just me and my backpack and maybe like a can of pork and beans.

At the same time, though, what I've found with writing is that, if I miss a day I get so stressed out by it. I've got like a little internal governor that punishes me, and if it wasn't writing, it would be something else. If I'm not doing what I feel like I should do, it's not good. It's not good. Everything just shuts down. Like say I'm going along pretty well and then I decide to take Saturday off, I get some bad Sunday mornings because of that. It's like, oh, I disrespected myself. I screwed up.

I feel like I always want to be in that groove where writing feels easy. I feel that's so key due to the anxiety that can crop up when you worry about results. But you

have to worry about results too, so getting between those two different mindsets—that is an M.F.-er. And so what I try to do—I say, "That's your basic state there" the state of intuitive, relaxed, natural writing, you have to be able to come back to that, so I make that my first thing in the morning. And then I go over it and I try to edit on paper and not get stuck in staring at it online where you can move it around forever. That's a death trap and then the anxiety over perfection crops up. I sort of deadlocked myself over a couple of days on a recent section I'm writing now, and I thought, "Okay, that's a lesson. Try to stay out of that vortex."

RAIL: You mentioned Hemingway and Robert Stone. We talked about Thom Jones and Sebastian Junger. All very masculine writers on masculine subjects I would say. Is that representative of what you like?

LISH: Well, I also like Taylor Swift and I'm not joking. Is she the one with the song that goes "Trouble, trouble, trouble?" You don't even know! I love that song. But I like Camille Paglia; she's excellent. I like a lot of female authors. I love Jeannette Walls, Joan Didion. I mentioned those other authors, Stone, for example, because they write about subjects I'm interested in, but there are women who write about the subjects I like also. Paglia might be one of the top ones. I just read Lynn Lurie's *Quick Kills*. It's tough stuff. Very poetic, but it made me nervous when I read it.

RAIL: You were inspired by Tom Wolfe's advice to be a journalist. Tell me more about that.

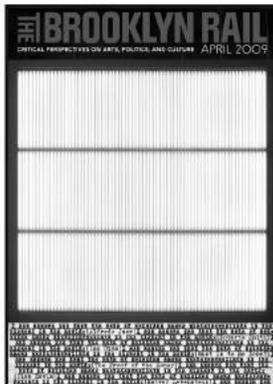
LISH: I read an essay by him in a collection, I think it was *Hooking Up*, but there is an essay in there called "My Three Stooges" and it's a response to a criticism of his novel *A Man in Full* by Norman Mailer and two other authors who attacked his book for not being literary. They complained that it was too journalistic. Wolfe was talking about people's actual lives and Wolfe's response was that this was exactly what a novelist should be doing, and he brought in the example of Dickens and Tolstoy—writers who were popular. The idea that you're only good if no one reads you is something he had to defend himself against. And Wolfe said, in their day Dickens and Tolstoy sold massively; they were popular authors. Giving people what they want doesn't make it bad. And an author can open up a world to you. What could be more fascinating than opening a window to another world that people aren't normally seeing? Readers love that. I love it. That's what gets me to open a book in the first place.

That really clicked for me. When I read that I said, that's the way to go. Give the people what they want to read. I'm giving myself something I want to read. I want a story that's fun to read written in a plain accessible style that reads like a movie. I mean all I want to do is see a fun movie, you know, with a pizza. That's where I'm coming from. I wanted to write a book that would do that for me. If the book could turn into a pizza after I'm done reading it that would be even better. ☺

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DAN OSTLUND is a writer. He lives in Brooklyn.

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THE REAL FOLK BLUES

*in*conversation **FERAL FOSTER** with *Stephanie Joy Del Rosso*



Feral Foster. Photo by Horatio Baltz.

Walking into the Jalopy Theatre and School of Music feels a little like walking into a time capsule. Christmas lights and a red velvet curtain frame the stage. A barman sells cheap beer from behind an old-fashioned cash register. Patrons swap jokes beneath rows of dangling fiddles. But the Jalopy isn't trying to be trendy or kitschy—there's nothing pretentious about this little enclave perched on the edge of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. The place feels more like a tribute to some earlier, mythical age, when everyone left their backdoors open and called each other by nicknames. A man begins to play an accordion and I wonder: am I still in New York?

Every Wednesday at 9:30 p.m., Feral Foster takes the Jalopy stage for *Roots & Ruckus*, an evening of folk, old-time, and blues that he founded. Cradling his guitar directly beneath his chin, Feral might mumble some disclaimers or remind audience members about the tipping policy. It's a paltry introduction for what's to come; the first time I hear Feral, I find myself entirely unprepared. His voice is a singular boom of mournfulness and soul, paired with captivating guitar gymnastics and songwriting that is often devastating. Feral howls, "Mercy great God, I cry!" and we are rapt, leaning forward in the church pews that Jalopy uses for seats. It's fitting: there's something a little holy about this man spinning us stories with such ferocious beauty. I text a friend I haven't seen in over a year: "I'm listening to this musician who makes me miss you. Can't put my finger on why."

Two weeks before the *Village Voice* names him New York's Best Folk Artist of 2014, Feral and I meet to discuss the Jalopy, folk's evolution, and how he manages making a career in this impossible city.

STEPHANIE JOY DEL ROSSO (RAIL): Back in 2011, you told *New York* magazine that folk music "feels subversive now." Last December, the *Village Voice* made a nod to the term "folk-punk." I'm curious how these contemporary classifications push against or complement folk music's tradition as a storytelling genre of the working class, often with a political bent.

FERAL FOSTER: I was misquoted a little bit. I was trying to say that there are, and there always have been, people mixing folk music with ideology—way before Woody Guthrie. Folk music was tied to the

labor movement in America. However, it's been used for nationalist movements, fascism. I mean, people have co-opted folk music for a lot of purposes. It's supposed to make people feel empowered in tradition and empowered in simplicity. And I feel that the subversive vibe comes from folk musicians rejecting a lot of things that they don't want to take part in, in society. It's reactionary.

RAIL: What do you think you're rejecting?

FOSTER: I think musically I'm making more of a statement than a rejection. Things happen in the world that scare me or make an impression on me—everything from vapid consumerism to religious fundamentalism to the futility of a lot of political causes. I make statements, but I purposefully don't always connect all the dots. I leave things a little open-ended, because anybody who is that sure of himself when he's making a statement is often not thinking enough.

Toward the end of my song "Black Friday Blues," I'm addressing some people I met involved in Occupy. I'm not trying to discredit political action in any way, but I am asking people to question and maybe recognize their personal role in injustice. My friend Stephanie has a song that, to paraphrase, goes, "You can live in society and you can live outside of society, but you can't live in between." A lot of people feel like they're totally detached from the system that they're revolting against, even though it's so intrinsic to every part of their lives.

RAIL: Is there a certain degree of authenticity that's necessary in order to call yourself a folk musician? If an inherent political or social statement is still critical to the form, do you ever get frustrated with, say, the kid who moved to Brooklyn on his parents' dime, who's learning the banjo, writing what he deems "folk" songs, and becoming a so-called "folk musician"?

FOSTER: That's the world. There's a lot of bad pop music with banjos and mandolins. It's accessible. I think there are people jumping onto folk music and thinking, "Oh, this is a thing now. Overalls, banjos, mason jars, that's good." Folk is very apolitical today. There are so many people writing about nothing. Or themselves. In some ways, a lot of people can't reconcile how insane the world is, so they're "folky" in this spiritual way: "Good vibes," but there's very little social conscience. It's remarkable how many people who are in a position privileged enough to do this kind of thing use it to romanticize poverty or sing about their girlfriend. There is a vapidness. And honestly, the vast majority of really bad stuff now is incredibly male-dominated.

RAIL: What is causing this vapidness and what do we do about it?

FOSTER: I think it's a little bit of the Internet age. People automatically want to be a product. People want to be a brand. People's descriptions of themselves read like, "His songs sound like ghosts, dusty Victrolas, and old, rugged jeans."

It's easy to make music that doesn't make people think, because people don't want to think. People want to go out and have fun. I understand this. I do what I do because I have this weird need. I try to make music that is deep and meaningful, but I'm not trying to lift peoples' spirits—which is kind of shooting myself in the foot. But if you can't make

them feel good, you can at least freak them out, or make an impression on them somehow. There has to be something. You've got to give me one of the things!

And that's not to say that I am or anybody else is "an authentic folk musician." Some of the greatest folk musicians are the biggest bullshitters. I sometimes think to myself: God, isn't it selfish what I do? I just go up there and scream for hours, and people listen to me. It's kind of ridiculous.

RAIL: You recently finished a hugely successful Kickstarter campaign for your first album. Whether it means raising funds, landing gigs, or just making a living, how do you personally manage the more mundane practicalities of a career as a musician?

FOSTER: I've always had all sorts of odd jobs: going door-to-door, being a bus boy, a carpenter's assistant. I supported myself busking for years and years, which was much easier while living in a sardine can flophouse in the Bronx. After a while you resent the hustle. Especially on the subway. Most people just don't give a crap, some people are really into what you're doing, and some people just vehemently hate you. I understand that mentality.

If you're a jazz musician, or a great stand-up bass player, or a great guitarist who can play many styles, you can really just gig for a living. I know many people who do. Doing what I do you really can't. People will pay to have background music in their restaurant, but nobody's gonna pay me to do what I do in a bar four nights a week. I could if I was touring, which I want to do more of, but it's just logistically difficult for me because I don't have a vehicle and I don't know how to drive. But I really want to be back on the road. It's a lot of fun.

RAIL: Do you ever think about leaving New York?

FOSTER: I was born here, my parents were born here, my grandparents were born here. I'm so ingrained. It's hard. Although I do notice that my anxiety goes down a lot when I leave the city. I'll be out of town for a few days and say to myself: I just feel fine! How do I just feel fine? But then I get intensely bored, even in New Orleans. It's a wonderful city, it's my second favorite city, but after living there for two months the pace just killed me. I was like, come on, let's just run around and have things to do and be busy. Even fake busy—we'll just pretend to give each other packages and go to work at jobs we don't have. There's that thing where I kind of get antsy everywhere else I am.

RAIL: Even though Red Hook remains in a sense your artistic home, you have performed all over the city—from Williamsburg, to the East and West Village, to Governor's Island, to the Upper West Side. Have you noticed marked differences in audience responses to your work, neighborhood to neighborhood?

FOSTER: My first gig was in Bay Ridge at the Wicked Monk—which was a disaster. The Sidewalk Café in the East Village is New York City's most famous open mic. So many people gravitate toward that stage, but I didn't identify with the anti-folk scene going on there. I used to hang out in Tompkins Square Park with a lot of punks, playing there like everyday before I really started busking.

Things change—that neighborhood changed so immensely. When I was a kid, Avenue C was not flooded with people with so much money. By the time I took over Eli Smith's show at Banjo Jim's, it was. That can be an awful crowd to play to: people

going out on the Lower East Side on a Saturday night, being loud and obnoxious. Jalopy filled the void for a lot of people who lost the folk coffee houses. It's a very, very pro-musician atmosphere. They're not concerned with making money off the door. And they've created one of New York's greatest cultural institutions. There's very little like it anywhere in the country, let alone just here.

RAIL: Last year, the *Rail* interviewed folk musician Bruce Molsky, who hesitated to support the claim that old-timey music is primarily "white music."

FOSTER: It's not. The Carolina Chocolate Drops are a band that continues that tradition. The banjo is an instrument with roots in Africa.

RAIL: Yes, he said that too. He then went on to describe how, despite the obvious persistence of racism and suppression of black culture during its beginnings, folk music was a platform for synthesis between the races—including but not limited to a number of integrated bands. How do you see this playing into current folk music culture, if at all? Is there a sense of a missed opportunity?

FOSTER: There is more and more diversity, but it tends to be a white-, male-dominated thing. And incredibly heteronormative. At least in New York. Because those are people in society who are usually in the position where they can say, "No, I don't have to support anybody. I can just go out and do my thing." Our culture encourages certain people to go out and "be individuals" as much as possible. My high school in Brooklyn was the most unbelievably diverse place. It's weird for me when I look around at a show or folk event and realize, "Oh, everyone's the same color and vaguely of the same demographic." It's disheartening.

There are a lot of privileged, young, white guys coming around and saying: "Look at me. I'm interesting!" And that's kind of what I do to an extent. I'm not going to live in a bubble and not understand that. But I at least try to keep my mind out of that split space of complacency, and celebrate diversity within musical communities as much as I can. I hope more and more people from all different backgrounds explore traditional music from all over the globe. Unfortunately, however, music scenes tend to find their way into certain demographics. It's hard to say.

RAIL: We talked about dealing with logistical struggles, but how do you cope with just the plain impossibility of being a musician in New York? How do you handle the sheer difficulty of what you're pursuing?

FOSTER: I don't. I think people should spend a lot more time trying to be good at what they do. And I don't do it enough. Practicing is one thing, learning the licks or the movements, a certain riff, is one side of it. To write, constantly, that's—I have to drink coffee, and smoke, and think. And then it kind of builds up in a ball. It's very hard to sit there and be like: I'm going to be creative now. Here I go! I'm of the mind that you can't force yourself to be creative. Some people don't think that's true. I force myself to sit there and try to be.

It is important for people to express themselves. I feel that if some people in my life had a way to relieve their neuroses and hysteria, or if they had a way to make that white static noise in their brains into something outside of their bodies, then they would be less self-destructive. I think it's important for people who are wrought with anxiety to find venues, or ways, to relieve themselves. It's very important to have some sort of goal. It's like a discipline, almost. And a way to take care of all the extra crap going on in your head, all the time.

RAIL: Is that how you handle the self-doubt of being "just another guy on stage"?

FOSTER: I'm too self-critical all the time, but I think it's important that the stuff you're writing comes from a very real, very sincere place. That a lot of thought and effort is put into any given thing. And then when you go up there, your mentality has to change a little bit. You have to perform. I think the duality of writing material from a very sincere place and then making it a show is a good balance. My job overall is to entertain people. Because you can't enlighten people without entertaining them as well. ☺

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STEPHANIE JOY DEL ROSSO is the dance editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.



Gabriel Kahane in *The Ambassador*. Photo by Max Gordon.

A CONCERT, WITH FOOTNOTES GABRIEL KAHANE, *THE AMBASSADOR*

BY MARSHALL YARBROUGH

DECEMBER 10 – 13, 2014 | BAM

Gabriel Kahane's song cycle/musical theater/pop concert hybrid *The Ambassador* premiered locally in December at BAM. Kahane led a seven-piece band through renditions of songs found on his two 2014 releases, the full-length *The Ambassador* and the *Haircuts & Airports EP*. The songs, each attached to a different Los Angeles street address, form a collective portrait of the city. The players occupied a set designed by Christine Jones that called to mind the apartment of a shut-in screenwriter, with stacks of books and screenplays dwarfing the musicians, and TVs and tape cassettes scattered around a floor strewn with torn-out pages.

It may be a conservative impulse, but I feel the need to nail down a genre here. Kahane's position as an artist straddling pop culture and the classical art song tradition is evident in the title of his breakthrough 2006 composition *Craig'slistlieder*. He has a background in musical theater, having co-written, with Seth Bockley, the musical *February House*. *The New Yorker* calls Kahane a "post-classical singer-songwriter," and Ben Brantley, reviewing *The Ambassador* in the *Times*, talks about the performance approaching "the Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*."

Overtures to Bayreuth aside, what I hear in *The Ambassador* is great conceptual pop music. Kahane's treatment of Los Angeles calls to mind The Hold Steady's mythologized Twin Cities on *Boys and Girls in America*, Randy Newman's grotesque portrait of the South (and Louisiana in particular) on *Good Old Boys*, and—the most clear antecedents here—Sufjan Stevens's state portrait albums *Illinois* and *Michigan*. In pure musical terms, the songs featured in the stage performance *The Ambassador* owe more to the album-centered pop tradition than any other. Kahane distinguishes himself from these other examples not by injecting classical or musical theater conventions into the work, but rather by surpassing all of them in the rigorous attention he pays to his subject.

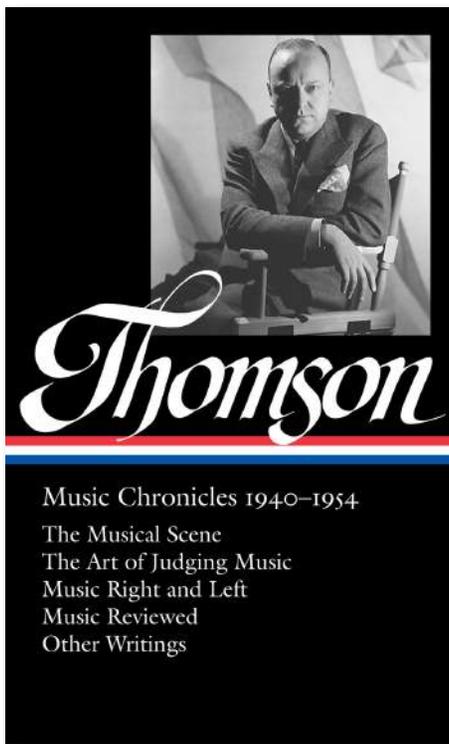
I admit I would be much happier reviewing *The Ambassador* as a concept album and ignoring all the theater stuff. To do so, however, would be to ignore key elements in the work's emergence. The piece was commissioned by BAM, and was always intended for the stage. Director John Tiffany was involved from the beginning, helping to guide Kahane's composition process; the idea of pegging each song to an L.A. street address was his. With this in mind, I don't want to dismiss the theater element, but I would like to discuss it separately from the music. Because while the music was superb, the rest of the performance was flawed.

The extra-musical elements of *The Ambassador* can be divided into two components: the use of various media between songs—movie clips, slide projections of L.A. architecture, excerpts read aloud from books about L.A.—and Kahane and the other players' acting. As to the latter, admittedly a minor part of the performance, I didn't find much to like. Most of Kahane's acting consisted of his staring with a rapt expression at a prop on stage during the media interludes—though there was one charming moment when, listening to a clip of Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe, he bobbed up and down with childlike glee, then did his own impression of Bogart's mugging. When the other musicians were called on to participate, they gingerly slid out from behind their stations to take part in stilted spectacles like the shadow puppet-style choreography during "Empire Liquor Mart (9127 S. Figueroa St.)," an awkward display that took me out of what was otherwise a very poignant song.

I feel more ambivalent about the way the different media were used. On the one hand, the material fit in perfectly with the show's themes, especially Kahane's idea of L.A. being two cities, "the mythological L.A."—the city as it appears in literature and film—"and then the vulnerable, physical city." The excerpt read aloud from Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* that preceded "Slumlord Crocodile (115 E. 3rd St.)," or the clips of Bogart as Raymond Chandler's private eye that introduced "Musso and Frank (6667 Hollywood Blvd.)," helped frame the songs and give the listener context. But Kahane's lyrics are themselves rich with reference, and at times the added context seemed like too much of a good thing. The slide show of modernist houses used by movie villains was a too-perfect set up for "Villains (4616 Dundee Dr.)." The song's clever opening line, "Why do villains / always live in houses / built by modernist masters," came off as a gimmicky punch-line; the audience's laughter seemed trained.

My objection to the added theatrics is mainly this: however well thought-out, these elements still seemed tacked on to what was, at bottom, a pop concert. Instead of an interesting hybrid of forms, what we got was something like a concert with footnotes; or to try a more apt analogy, something akin to watching a DVD of a movie with the commentary on, rather than the movie itself. This might not be a fair assessment, given *The Ambassador's* origins. Then again, perhaps the question bears asking: If a piece of music is originally conceived for the stage, does that necessarily mean that the stage is the best context for it? ☺

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MARSHALL YARBROUGH is the *Rail's* assistant music editor.



ABOUT LAST NIGHT

BY JEFF TOMPKINS

VIRGIL THOMSON, *MUSIC CHRONICLES 1940 – 1954* (LIBRARY OF AMERICA, 2014)

The first pages of the Library of America’s new collection make it clear that when Virgil Thomson was named head music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune* in the fall of 1940, he came in spoiling for a fight. At that time, New York’s staid musical establishment was still in thrall to the 19th century and the Austro-German tradition, whereas Thomson was not only an ardent Francophile—he lived in Paris from 1925 to 1940, fleeing one step ahead of the Nazis in June of that year—but a composer of avant-garde tendencies whose opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* boasted a libretto by Gertrude Stein.

His opening salvos aimed at fat targets: Brahms’s music, Thomson informed his readers, is “timid and over-respectful of the past,” devotion to it “the mark of a quite definite musical conservatism”; Sibelius was “vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description”; the violinist Jascha Heifetz produced “silk-underwear music”; and the playing of the New York Philharmonic (in Thomson’s inaugural review, no less) was “dull and brutal.”

The Library of America volume, *Music Chronicles 1940–1954*, restores to print four collections of Thomson’s criticism from the years indicated, along with a miscellany of previously uncollected pieces. These four books have been out of print for decades, and Thomson’s own compositions now hover just outside the repertory, so I came to the new book knowing almost nothing of the author save for his reputation as one of the reigning eminences at the Hotel Chelsea, where he presided from 1940 until his death in 1989. But I quickly felt as if that ignorance made my reading experience all the richer. To encounter a critical voice of this authority, for the first time, in bulk, is an event. Well before I’d finished the new volume, Thomson’s wit, his intellectual omnivorousness, and the lucidity of his prose had me feeling as though I’d discovered another Edmund Wilson.

That wit is probably the first thing a reader notices, and indeed the temptation to quote Thomson’s spicier *aperçus* is irresistible—from his praise for a performance of Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in which “the orchestra actually sounded as if it were accompanying a pianoforte instead of spanking it,” to his declaration that “Wagner’s music dramas are conceived for a theater of whales.” And it may be impossible to look at the portrait of Philharmonic conductor John Barbirolli in Avery Fisher Hall the same way again

after reading how that podium worthy “gets frantic and conducts with his hair, always the first refuge of an Italian when he can’t think of the next right move.”

It’s important to recognize, though, that for all their entertainment value Thomson’s pans are always at the service of an attractively direct and plainspoken personal aesthetic. This is what gives him a claim on our attention today, and what allows a 21st-century reader like this Sibelius fan to overlook the inevitable biases and blind spots (which every critic has). Because for Thomson, even the most routine night at the concert hall is an opportunity to argue for expressivity—for what he likes to call interpretations as opposed to mere readings. As he puts it in 1944, after a disappointing turn from one blue-chip ensemble:

The Boston Symphony Orchestra is overtrained and has been for several years. Its form is perfect, but it does not communicate. The music it plays never seems to be about anything, except how beautifully the Boston Symphony Orchestra can play. Perfection of execution that oversteps its purpose is a familiar phenomenon in art. That way lies superficiality and monotony.

Again, in 1947, a so-so outing from the Baltimore Symphony allows him to make the case even more aphoristically: “The readings are clean, but they are only readings. They are not in any sense interpretations. [...] In music making it is always better to be wrong than reserved.” For that last sentence alone, Thomson’s criticism needed to be back in print.

He was ready to apply his precepts to an exceptionally wide range of sounds. Anything but a musical snob, this big-city sophisticate writes respectfully about swing, pops concerts, military bands, and glee clubs in between trips to Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera. It’s telling that of all the performers he evokes in these pages, few come to life more vividly than Brother Utah Smith, “The One-Man Band,” an itinerant African-American evangelist whose electric guitar sends a Newark church into transports in a Thomson column from 1941. (An all-black staging of *Four Saints in Three Acts* had been a *succès de scandale* for Thomson in 1934, and his interest in black artists is a gratifying sub-thread in *Music Chronicles*.)

About half a decade into his *Herald Tribune* tenure, Thomson began training his faculties, as he notes in a 1950 preface, less on standard repertory and “nationally

advertised brands” than on emerging trends, outliers, “everything that might be preparing the second half of our century for being different from the first.” This helps account for the kind of you-are-there fascination that deepens as we proceed with him further into the ’40s, and to events like the New York premiere of Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* at a Martha Graham program, or a New School concert of John Cage’s works for prepared piano.

This sense of our own world coming into being doesn’t end with these cameos, though. The reader of 2015 is regularly struck by how many of Thomson’s causes continue to resonate more than 60 years later. In 1940, he laments that the Philharmonic is “not a part of New York’s intellectual life,” but in 1952—railing, as it happens, against the artistic conservatism of the Metropolitan Opera—he concedes: “Today that remark would not be true. [...] It took a new conductor to make the change, and the change is not yet complete.” Sound familiar? Meanwhile, a withering 1953 dispatch about picketers protesting in front of the Met for what they perceive as anti-Catholic bias in Verdi’s *Don Carlos* is almost embarrassingly pertinent after last fall’s *Klinghoffer* fracas.

Not everyone is likely to want to consume nearly a thousand pages of music criticism from start to finish—although I looked forward to picking up this companionable volume again every day for several weeks. If you’re daunted, another rewarding way to approach the new collection is through the index: Pick out a performer or composer who interests you, and then follow the thread of Thomson’s reactions through the years.

I want to make a special recommendation to other writers, too. With so much arts journalism having had to migrate online in recent years, the compact efficiency of these pieces should be a model to those of us who strive to marshal our thoughts into web-ready formats. And at a time when so much criticism has devolved into the routine assigning of letter or numerical grades, it’s bracing to be reminded, as we are here, that “The poorest performance does not justify a poorly written review or any assumption of the right to grant or withhold degrees. Writing a review is not giving an examination; it is taking one.” That’s a test Thomson passes over and over again in the pages of this book. ☞

JEFF TOMPKINS is a writer and comics artist in New York City.



Vito Ricci in the stacks. Illustration by Megan Piontkowski.

OUTTAKES

“I wasted my life on you
because I thought you were a loser.”

—my wife

“You have to be a very principled person to care
about the truth rather than getting ahead.”

—Paul Auster

“You can hide the shit but you can’t hide the smell.”

—from the film *Story of My Death*

The following is a fairy tale about a musician and a record label:

You might say that I’ve taken a personal interest in Vito Ricci. Why? Is it because he’s a friend? Collaborator? Mensch? Original? Consummate artist? Writer? Vietnam vet? Wonderful musician/composer? Well-kept secret deserving of wider recognition? If you guessed “all of the above,” you’d be correct.

Canadian-born and adopted by Italian-American parents, 67-year-old Ricci, who grew up a street-savvy doo-wopper, is one of the most honest, humble, and prolific artists I’ve encountered, quietly doing his work for some 40 years now. He is “a composer of moody and elegant scores” as well as pop and cabaret tunes, an innovative wrench guitarist on the cutting edge of the downtown music scene since 1979, going almost virtually unnoticed due to his pursuit of music rather than career. But his accomplishments have been numerous. He has made over 50 scores, including concert music, theater, film, video, and ballet—*Philosophies* for the Complexions Contemporary Ballet Company. And he has composed an electronic chamber opera, *HELP*. He’s collaborated with the likes of Jackie Curtis, Bob Holman, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, Johnny Reinhard (curator of the American Festival of Microtonal Music), Tony Nunziata, Martin Goldray, Rashied Ali, Byard Lancaster, the Flux Quartet, Jacob Burkhardt, poet/painter Yuko Otomo, vocalist Christine Donnelly, writer Ann Rower, Creation Theatre Company, the

Wooster Group, Canadian singer and Ricci’s long time companion, Lise Vachon, etc. His work has appeared at the Skirball Center, the Bowery Poetry Club, Cornelia Street Café, the Public Theater, Greenwich House Music, Cooper Union, Roulette, the Knitting Factory, the Poetry Project, the Performing Garage, the Walker Art Center, and the Sedgwick Cultural Center in Philadelphia.

Ricci studied with Ornette Coleman, Mario Davidovsky, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Milton Babbitt, and Ursula Mamlok, and has released many CDs of solo piano music, electronic works, song cycles, improvisations, and string quartets. He’s received numerous grants and had entire radio shows devoted to his music. Ricci’s instinct and creativity have made him a vital and honest composer.

In 1985, Ricci recorded a solo electronic record, for early drum machine and MIDI sequencing, called *Music from Memory* on the Creation label. It never sold. He had boxes of it in his then loft in SoHo. After we became friends he gave me copies to sell on the street when I was out there selling books and LPs. Occasionally I’d sell one and give him \$5. When he moved to Maspeth, the remaining boxes went with him, and unbeknownst to either of us the value of the LP has increased to \$100.

Ricci has recently been “discovered” by DJs in Amsterdam who own the store Red Lights Records and the label Into The Light which releases Greek electronic music from the ’70s and ’80s. They buy 25 copies of Ricci’s LPs from him a week and sell them just as fast as they acquire them. Here’s how the story plays out in Tako’s, store/label owner’s, words:

Our label is run by three people. A mutual friend of ours introduced us to Vito’s *Music From Memory*, many years ago. He had bought it on eBay and at that time we were starting our second label and looking for a good name for it. We started going through our record collections to find some interesting words or titles. Vito’s album struck us very much so we decided to use it for our label name. Then somewhere around our third release I got a letter from a good friend in Canada who I had introduced Vito’s music to. He had

gotten in touch with Vito to buy some copies of the album. He told Vito about our naming our label “Music from Memory” and after a while Vito contacted us to say he was very happy to hear this. We started talking and quickly felt that we wanted to do a release together. As a label we started out wanting to do something with all this music we had discovered over the years—a lot of obscure and unknown music across the board—we all are very heavily into music and long-time collectors. And we also started a small second-hand record store in Amsterdam, basically making our record fetish into our jobs and in combination with the label this is working well. All our releases are more like overviews of what artists have done, curated, with their/our own tastes, rather than doing a straight reissue of an album. And in Vito’s case there is a lot of amazing unreleased material. We think he is a talented, interesting, and versatile artist with a distinguished musical handwriting and personal musical universe. He has sent us deep meditative drone-like pieces lasting up to 45 minutes but also shorter electronic and rhythmic stuff, beautiful ambient pieces and dance music ... it’s all there! We had already finished a playlist for a single album but after getting more material from cassette tapes he had put out, and reassessing the music we already had. We are now moving toward a double album of his works that should be out early in the next year.

I will, as Ricci always puts it, say no more (the name of his publishing company) and end by saying buy his CDs and the vinyl when it is released and listen to his music whenever you get a chance.

I dedicate this piece to reed player, composer, copyist (Ornette’s *Skies of America*) Will Connell, who passed recently and who, like Vito, always remained self-effacing and humble, while fiercely yet quietly creating his art. ☺

Poet/collagist **STEVE DALACHINSKY** was born in Brooklyn after the last big war and has managed to survive lots of little wars. His book, *The Final Nite* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2006), won the PEN Oakland National Book Award. His most recent books are *Fool’s Gold* (feral press, 2014) and *A Superintendent’s Eyes* (revised and expanded 2013—Unbearable Books/ Autonomedia). His latest CD is *The Fallout of Dreams with Dave Liebman and Richie Beirach* (RogueArt 2014). He is a 2014 recipient of a Chevalier D’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

THEME AND VARIATIONS

THE ROYAL ROAD, PHOENIX, AND THE DRAGON IS THE FRAME BY MAX GOLDBERG

D.A. Miller begins his 2008 *Film Quarterly* essay on Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) by confessing that his initial experience of the film was not a happy one. "I was disappointed at not finding the Hitchcock thriller I already knew," he recalls, "and incapable of appreciating the modernist art film that without warning had stolen its identity." Rather than disavowing his early response, however, Miller uses it to pry open the film's fundamentally elusive character. "Even when I most doggedly concentrate on the images before me," he writes of subsequent screenings, "I find myself sidetracked—staring at peripheral details, fixated on private, incommunicable nuances, or held in the grip of a camera movement much too long after it passed." This would seem a textbook case of cinephilia, albeit one negatively construed as missing the forest for the trees. Miller's reasons for this admission of an ostensibly "bad spectatorship" becomes clearer when, following a guided tour of *Vertigo* sites in San Francisco (his own native city), he realizes that the film acts as a screen for his own childhood memories: "No wonder I can



The Royal Road

never find Hitchcock's San Francisco in any fullness; I am too busy, in my reveries, looking for my own, as if *Vertigo* were, of all things, a documentary."

This might well seem to overshoot the mark of the audience's troubled identification with Jimmy Stewart's detective and the film's corresponding unraveling of male desire, and yet Miller touches on something essential here about the way Hitchcock's film offers itself as both a parable and a form for approaching loss. Three recent films made under the sign of *Vertigo* use the film as a tool for plotting their own particular coordinates of mourning and melancholia: one, an essay (Jenni Olson's *The Royal Road*), another, a narrative (Christian Petzold's *Phoenix*), and the last, a lyric (Mary Helena Clark's *The Dragon is the Frame*). Even sitting atop the BFI's most recent poll of the greatest films of all time, *Vertigo* remains a curious kind of beacon—the light that reveals the surrounding darkness.

Jenni Olson's earlier essay film, *The Joy of Life* (2005), is the rare contemporary work that might conceivably reshape one's sense of Hitchcock's original. At least I now find it difficult to watch the famous scene of Madeleine throwing herself into San Francisco Bay—a scene so indelibly composed that it defies all retrospective knowledge that this attempted suicide is a feint—without thinking of Olson's eloquent plea for a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. Olson remains a standout in the increasingly crowded field of the essay genre, not least because of the quality of her writing. In *The Royal Road*, as in *The Joy of Life*, her voiceover narration takes advantage of the element of time to weave its reflections on autobiography, local history, and film poetics.

Vertigo isn't mentioned by name until the second half of *The Royal Road*, and yet Olson is nibbling at its edges even as she refers to *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Summertime* (1955). It's there in the broad outlines of the narrator's recollections of her failed pursuits of two women—a story of impossible love played against the backdrop of Junipero Serra's Royal Road, the route linking the California Missions and emblematic of the repressed history supplying *Vertigo*'s subtext. Olson's narrator relates to both Madeleine's wayward attraction to the past and Scottie's desire for unavailable women. "Emulating the actors in my favorite classic Hollywood films, I happily acquired a new borrowed masculine persona," she recalls of her adolescence. "Experiencing myself as a fictional character has been a mode of survival for me ever since." Indeed, *The Royal Road* reminds us that a romantic identification with the movies is no less intense for cutting against the grain.

More specifically, *The Royal Road* overlaps with *Vertigo* in its visual depiction of a San Francisco marked not so much by its landmarks as their emptiness. "They are little pockets of silence and solitude, another world," Robin Wood observed of *Vertigo*'s locations, and Olson's stationary camera setups follow suit. The film's plaintive images do not illustrate the narration so much as amplify its preoccupation with absence—the point of intersection between the film's twinned themes of unrequited love and forgotten history. "It's only on leaving her that I'm able to wallow in the details of our interactions," the narrator says of her second love (both women are referred to as an unspecific if still intimate "she," as in Natalia Ginzburg's essay "He and I"). "I cherish these aftermaths, the immediate reminiscing monologue where I tell myself everything that just happened." *The Royal Road*'s form testifies not to the past but rather to the solitary moods in which it is experienced—the fine-grained sensitivity produced by Madeleine and Scottie's favorite pastime in the city, "wandering about."

If Olson's film interacts with *Vertigo*'s backdrops, Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* directly incorporates its most outré plot elements—specifically, Scottie's obsessive reconstruction of Madeleine in the person of Judy. No matter how many times you watch *Vertigo*, these scenes don't get any easier. The late revelation of Judy's flashback means that we approach her subsequent makeover from both points of view, with Scottie's increasingly cruel behavior playing against Judy's abject self-denial. *Phoenix* transplants this drama of mistaken identity to Berlin just after the war. American soldiers still wander the streets, and "returnees" are trickling back from the camps. One of these, a singer named Nelly (Nina Hoss), begins the film without a face. Her friend Lena (Nina Kunzendorf), herself a Jew collecting evidence of the still unnamed genocide, brings Nelly to a hospital for reconstructive surgery and warns against her deceitful husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld, who also played Hoss's opposite in Petzold's previous film, *Barbara*). The lure of a golden past proves irresistible, though, and Nelly finds her man bussing dishes in a nightclub. He doesn't recognize her—not quite anyway. Pulling her aside, Johnny proposes that she looks enough like his wife to impersonate her in order to claim inheritance money, simultaneously confirming his treachery and

opening a backdoor into her old life. Stunned, she follows Johnny back to his cramped apartment, telling him her name is Esther ("There aren't many Esthers left," he responds, a line characteristic of Petzold and Harun Farocki's honed screenwriting).

Outlandish as its plotting may be—equally true of *Vertigo*, of course—*Phoenix* is scrupulous in its depiction of Nelly's alienation and denial. "[The] opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis," Freud wrote of the early stages of mourning. In Nelly's case, her narcissistic attachment to a romantic past is exacerbated by the fact that it was precisely this vision that gave her the strength to endure her ordeal; the loss of the dream makes her survival seem pointless. It isn't easy to watch a protagonist acting against her own interests, still less so when she is a Holocaust survivor who maintains that she isn't Jewish and flatly refuses her friend's overtures to immigrate to Palestine (Lene functions similarly to Midge in *Vertigo* as a doomed voice of reason)—but then this is precisely the point of Petzold and Farocki's characterization. The idea is not to ennoble Nelly but rather to illustrate the groundlessness of her situation. Contrary to the many empty calls to "never forget" littering film history, *Phoenix* challenges us to imagine how difficult it might have been to remember.

As in *Vertigo*, however, the dream of the past cannot hold. Cracks begin to show as Nelly and Johnny prepare to stage their phony reunion. When he brings a fancy pair of shoes for her grand entrance, she chides him for the implausibility of a woman returning from a concentration camp in heels. Masked by the frame of creating a hypothetical backstory, she begins to divulge details of her all too real trauma. His indifference is devastating. "I assure you, none of this lot will ask," he says of their friends, and indeed they don't. More damningly, he suggests that the romantic flourish is necessary to sustain the illusion: "They want Nelly, not a ragged returnee." That "they" prods uncomfortably at the movie audience, especially as Johnny, more opportunistic than evil, is handsome enough to sweep us up in the beautiful lie.



Phoenix

Phoenix's case of vertigo climaxes when Nelly emerges from Johnny's bathroom as her old self, her hair dyed a dark shade of brown. It takes guts to quote the time-stopping moment in *Vertigo* when Judy, freshly blonde and back in the same grey suit, appears before Scottie in a bewitching shade of green. Johnny is equally dumbfounded by his vision from the past, but unlike Scottie he is predisposed *against* accepting illusion as reality. He recoils from Nelly's embrace, telling her to save her performance for its intended audience. It's only when Johnny is cast in the familiar position of accompanying Nelly on piano that he is shocked into full recognition. She reveals the terrible mark of

DIRTY PRETTY THINGS BY GLENN HEATH JR.

DAVID CRONENBERG'S MAPS TO THE STARS

the past and in so doing breaks the spell of the film's stifling depth of field. Nelly exits the frame under her own power, grabbing at the open ending that was closed to Judy.

As a lyrical short, *The Dragon is the Frame* has little use for the heavy furniture of Hitchcock's plot. Instead, Mary Helena Clark evokes *Vertigo* with a few scattered landmarks, phrases from Bernard Herrmann's score, and the detection motif that draws itself like a heavy cloak over the film's second movement (all it takes is a fleeting glimpse of the back of a blonde head riding the bus). Where Scottie pursues a spectral presence, Clark's camera trails an actual absence: the film is an elegy for her friend, the artist Mark Aguhar. We see Aguhar's doubled face in excerpts from their YouTube videos (*Glamour, Why Be Ugly When U Can Be Beautiful?, Gay Gaze*), *memento mori* about which Clark's private visions revolve.



The Dragon is the Frame

Freud noted "a loss of interest in the outside world" as being characteristic of mourning, and yet it seems more particularly to be a loss of interest in the *social* world that can in turn result in a sharp awareness of those "pockets of silence" Wood ascribes to *Vertigo*. While the logic linking Clark's images remains necessarily oblique—such is grief—I am astonished by the concision with which she evokes my own sense of place in the Bay Area: a single shot of the sea and a few of the hills; the crown of a red flowering gum and a lone oak; the sound of a MUNI bus accelerating and a curve of neon. The subjects are common as pennies shining on the sidewalk and as rarely remarked upon.

When Clark does turn to a familiar landmark, like the Golden Gate Bridge, the view is radically simplified (red lines in fog and an unnerving buckling sound). The shots of *Vertigo*'s locations embrace imperfection as a given: the Mission Dolores cemetery as seen through a fence, the Hotel Vertigo (formerly the Empire) interrupted by streetlights. The point isn't to approximate *Vertigo* so much as its spell. Once stricken with grief, after all, *everything* becomes a possible token for loss—a shop window as sure as a cemetery. This would seem to suggest the same sense of *Vertigo* driving Miller's essay: that we may actually be closest to the film's essence when we feel ourselves pulling away from it. He writes, "Irresistibly, my mind wanders, falls into daydreams or spins off into reminiscences related to the film by only the most finely customized tangents." In such tangents one finds material for a thousand other films—a lineage reaching from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) to as yet unrealized quests for tomorrow's yesterday. ☞

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"... On all the flesh that says yes
 On the forehead of my friends
 On every hand held out
 I write your name ..."

Elegiac passages from Paul Éluard's *Liberté* haunt David Cronenberg's nutty *Maps to the Stars*, as if the Surrealist writer's transformative prose was another of the film's many ghostly manifestations. In a film that deftly normalizes the toxic repetition of pop culture references and celebrity name-dropping, Éluard's dreamy influence feels alien, like an extraterrestrial marking imprinted upon an earthly idol. Only Agatha, a mysterious burn victim who returns home to Los Angeles after spending her teenage years in a mental ward, understands the freeing nature of his poem; the tinsel town tyrants she encounters don't speak the same language.

Herein lies a key disconnect between the world views of those outside Hollywood's bubble and characters connected to its life-sucking process. Living separate from her media-obsessed family has allowed Agatha to experience both perspectives, which makes her the most dangerous character in the film. Look at one of the opening scenes where she both constructs an identity and subverts it while playfully interacting with a limousine driver and budding actor named Jerome. "Where did you come from?" he asks. "Jupiter," she replies. Later, Agatha drops the theatrics and corrects herself, stating that she's spent nearly the last decade in Florida, but the implication of her otherness has already been solidified. Although, some familiar with the Sunshine State might suggest the two places are one and the same.

Many critics have labeled *Maps to the Stars* a satire, but to do so diminishes the film's genuine interest in the poisonous processes at work in both the film industry and the family. Cronenberg's inquisitive camera slowly sleeks through rooms of modernist design and along streets like Hollywood Boulevard and Rodeo Drive, observing with curiosity a species of devils in perpetual misery. Yet, as in *A History of Violence*, there's a sense of unfamiliarity in the warped performances and blunt dialogue, as if an outsider produced the content. So, is the film a nightmarish creation of Agatha's mind? *Maps to the Stars* certainly understands the power of otherworldly visions and ghosts, specifically in line with the horror genre; the last act contains not one but two desecrations of the female body. But the film's closing ascent into the sky complicates this notion, using suicide as a means to a hopeful end for a fairy tale perverted from the first frame.

On that point, we must go back to the beginning. In many Cronenberg films the opening credits sequence sets the rules of the game, and *Maps to the Stars* is no different. As Howard Shore's drowsy score plays over the soundtrack, a mosaic of twirling constellations and road markings are superimposed over each other. Hypnotic in design and animation, the images appear like a crib mobile rocking an off-screen baby to sleep. These same markings appear at the end of the film too, immediately after Agatha and her estranged brother Benjie, a child star and recovering drug addict with a taste for Cobalt energy drink, take a lethal dosage of painkillers on the grounds of their former home. At multiple other points ghosts of dead children return to haunt the aging actress Havana Segrand, who like Agatha and Benjie is a product of adolescent trauma. Each phantasm speaks in the same kind of code as Éluard's poem, suggesting that *Maps to the Stars* might be best described as a tormenting nursery rhyme constructed to save the innocents from a life of artificial adulthood. Except the only escape hatch is death.



Maps to the Stars

Such finality often comes in the form of fire, water, and blood. Agatha's arms were burned in a blaze she set many years before, the young child of an actress dies in a pool, and Benjie's mother seems to spontaneously combust—poolside, no less—as if her body can no longer stand the guilt eating away at its insides. A similar irruption comes when Agatha pummels Havana with the blunt end of her lone acting award. Cronenberg cuts from the victim's shocked face (her most honest expression in the film) to a point of view of the murderer, brain matter colliding with her skin after each blow.

These visceral images mesh with the calculated and serpentine dialogue, making *Maps to the Stars* another in a long line of Cronenberg oddities. Yet the film's lack of connective tissue marks it as an especially weird product: scenes often jump from one to the next without establishing shots. It's best to not think of them as scenes at all but different enclosures in one big open zoo of demented folly and happenstance. The static low angles and measured pacing are quietly disarming, calling attention to the plastic nature of this staged reality. It's a type of faux-naturalism, like something produced by an Alien Sensory Ethnography Lab.

If Hollywood and all of its immoral ideologies have produced a warped place where "hell is a world without narcotics" and "everything is stunt casting" then Éluard's poem provides a window into another version of things. Whether this is Jupiter, Florida, or heaven above never becomes clear, as Cronenberg leaves this ambiguity stewing in the film's final act. At this point in *Maps to the Stars*, all of the cultural riddles and layered reference points fade away, leaving Agatha and Benjie exposed from the camouflage of their traumatic upbringing, ready for a next chapter separate from the So-Cal viper pit from which they were born.

As the final high-angle shot rises up to the constellations with spirits in tow, *Maps to the Stars* realigns a perspective that has been out of balance for so long. All of the children in Cronenberg's film are given a level of morbid grace. Some are even allowed clear refuge from the incest that has infiltrated their youth. Éluard's poem inspires this new way of thinking by challenging the Hollywood model of self-destructive art-making, returning the power of creation to the innocent outlier. Doing so ultimately snuffs out the stranglehold that ego has placed on familial living, providing Agatha and Benjie an opportunity to move beyond the ashes of their suffering and toward a new flesh. ☞

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GLENN HEATH JR. is the film critic for the alternative weekly *San Diego CityBeat* and managing director of the San Diego Asian Film Festival. He is also contributes to *Slant Magazine*, *Fandor*, *Little White Lies*, *MUBI's Notebook*, and *The L Magazine*.

SURVEILLANCE AESTHETICS ON LAURA POITRAS'S 9/11 TRILOGY

BY AVA KOFMAN

ON VIEW AT ARTISTS SPACE THROUGH FEBRUARY 15, 2015

Following the attacks of 9/11, documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, like many of her contemporaries, trained her lens on the government's response at home and abroad.

She traveled first to Iraq, where she filmed the al-Adhath family, whose patriarch, the Sunni doctor Riyadh al-Adhath, was running for office in the contentious 2005 Iraqi election. In tracing al-Adhath's daily routine, and his fluctuating hopes and fears leading up to the election, *My Country, My Country* revealed the stakes and spectacle of the geopolitical moment and earned Poitras an Academy nomination. Her next film, *The Oath*, followed Abu Jandal, a Yemeni taxi driver and the brother-in-law to Bin Laden's former driver, Salim Ahmed Hamdan. Hamdan was imprisoned in Guantanamo for five years



My Country, My Country at Artists Space. Image courtesy of Artists Space

before being tried and cleared of charges. The mood of Hamdan's homecoming, like that of the al-Adhath family following the elections, is tense rather than joyous; for both parties, these occasions mark but a temporary reprieve from an existence dominated by tension and uncertainty.

The final film in Poitras's 9/11 trilogy, *Citizenfour*, tells of the sweeping rise of the U.S. surveillance state and the government's war on its whistleblowers, using Edward Snowden's story as its centerpiece. While demonstrating how the details from the N.S.A.'s program unfolded on the world stage, *Citizenfour* shows journalists and activists grappling with the startling news and Snowden navigating a precarious fate in exile.

As in a historical play, the films show the deliberations, calculations, and supplications of men on the eve of life-changing events. The events in each are important not only to the protagonists' personal lives in the past but to the political currents still unfolding in the present. This makes the presentation of Poitras's work at Artists Space, continuously and with free admission, a pressing public service. Coinciding with the release of *Citizenfour* in theaters, the SoHo gallery is screening *My Country, My Country* and *The Oath*, three times daily, as well as three related short documentaries—*Death of a Prisoner*, *PRISM Whistleblower*, and *The Program*—on loop. For those in need of a refresher on the details of the U.S. government's invasion of Iraq, abuses at Guantanamo, legalization of torture, and unprecedented surveillance apparatus, Poitras's short films provide a poignant, urgent reminder.

PRISM Whistleblower introduced Snowden and his motivations to the world for the first time when it was posted on the *Guardian's* website in 2013. In *The Program*, Poitras interviews another N.S.A. whistleblower, William Binney, one of the best crypto-mathematicians in

the agency's history and one of Snowden's inspirations. When Binney realized that the N.S.A.'s Stellar Wind program, which he originally helped create for foreign intelligence gathering, was being used domestically to collect the data of American citizens, he resigned in 2001. He began speaking out publicly in 2011, putting his livelihood and life at risk.

Death of a Prisoner tells the story of Adnan Farhan Abdul Latif's imprisonment in Guantanamo via his letters to his family, read to them by his lawyer. He died there after nearly 11 years of imprisonment, though he was never charged with a crime. Out of the 127 detainees currently held at Guantanamo, 35 have been designated for indefinite detention, meaning they will be subject to its substandard procedures without charge or trial. Since 2002, nine detainees of Guantanamo, including Latif, have died.

In light of the exhibition's immediate salience, the presentation format of these documentaries is a bit puzzling. The films are left to speak for themselves, displayed without supporting historical or evidential materials, or even photographs from a shoot. The features are projected in black rooms, and the short films play on small screens with headphones against a white wall. This seems like a missed opportunity on the part of the organizers to emphasize the contexts and contents of our foreign and domestic policies.

A leaflet, or wall text, for instance, outlining the extent to which the government's unchecked human rights violations abroad would begin to severely undermine civil liberties at home—including Poitras's own freedom to travel for work—would have helped to turn passive viewers into potentially politicized, and implicated, subjects. Realistically speaking, it is unlikely that anyone will spend more than one hour with the films—especially considering that two are feature length. But without any substantive mediation or materials shown alongside the work—save for the title, date, and identifying credits of the crew—the slick exhibit leaves you wondering to what end this work is being shown in the first place.

When viewed together in the gallery setting, Poitras's work emerges less as a pressing testament to unchecked state power and more as an aesthetic object. This is not necessarily unwarranted; Poitras, by her own account, understands herself as much as an artist as she does a journalist. If her deft and unobtrusive camera becomes the subject of the show, then the venue succeeds in foregrounding the efficacy of its unadorned gaze. Poitras's films are not like many other "issue documentaries" in the conventional sense of the genre. There are few talking heads and animated infographics. As a rule, she does not interview her feature subjects directly, preferring instead to patiently track their everyday movements and momentous actions. Her camera focuses on lives scarred by the War on Terror better than any diegetic commentary could. If there is something to be gained by seeing the work in this venue, it is this focus on Poitras's aesthetic of intimacy in an age of mass surveillance. ☞

AVA KOFMAN is a writer based in Brooklyn.

PLENTY OF CAUSES FOR CONCERN: BAM'S MIGRATING FORMS BY BEN MENDELSON

"You can bet that the rest of the world is looking at America and trying to assess our sincerity when we talk about brotherhood and equality."

This line marks the final moments of William Greaves's deeply affecting 1968 television documentary, *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*. The film, a portrait of black political and economic aspiration during some of the most dramatic moments of the civil rights movement, screened as part of a Greaves retrospective at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Migrating Forms festival in December. The screening's timing could not have been more appropriate. Amid a swelling national conversation about the tensions between communities of color and urban police departments, it was no surprise that the post-screening discussion turned into a passionate community forum exploring links between then and now. "What I see on the screen is exactly what I'm experiencing today," remarked one young woman, pointing out the film's emphasis on the stratification of black communities.

Watching Greaves's film during the height of protests over the role of police officers in the deaths of unarmed black men—Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and others—was harrowing. But so too was the news later that week that two N. Y. P. D. officers were shockingly murdered on the job at point-blank range. These events recontextualized the indignation that is fueled by the film and on display in American streets. They provided a reminder that the clarity of any political mission can be fleeting if not outright spectral.

The remainder of Migrating Forms echoed that lack of clarity. Its curators described the eclectic exhibition as "a broad spectrum of contemporary film and video practices," and you'd be forgiven for finding the curatorial vision a bit distractible in its variety. But the result was a provocative sample: not only of a wide range of film and video practices, but the wide range of thorny political concerns that film and video can document, explore, and deconstruct. Topically, race in America met with other headline-worthy issues, from North Korean national identity, to disaster preparedness, to surveillance and military culture. And the Greaves retrospective collided with several contemporary essay documentaries, as well as a sampling of video art produced more for the gallery than the cinema.

In terms of this latter category, the marquee was Cory Arcangel's *Freshbuzz* (2013–14), a full-hour screen capture of his wanderings around the Subway sandwiches website and social media properties. There was also Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe's short *The Floating Chain* (2014), described by the artists as "a semiotic Rube Goldberg machine." In this 20-minute piece, a steady stream of tracking shots is filled with meticulously staged, psychedelically colorful product displays. *The Floating Chain* is built from the excesses and discards of consumer society, but it doesn't express much anxiety about the consequences of throwaway culture. Rather, it seems exuberant about the manic carnival of stuff that we can all enjoy: all is well, just so long as we take the right drugs, put on the right soundtrack, and smile behind a pair of Ray-Bans.

Among the documentaries, the tone was more deliberative, but Migrating Forms still spotlighted plenty of aesthetic experimentation. John Reilly and Stefan Moore's *The Irish Tapes* (1975) explores Northern Ireland's volatile ethno-religious conflict through a quite early, and deliriously glitchy use of Sony Portapak video cameras. Heinz Emigholz's *The Airstrip: Decampment of Modernism, Part III* (2014) is a quiet and contemplative global travelogue exploring modernist architectural monuments.

He photographs these buildings from a variety of partially skewed angles, sometimes subtly, but often quite dramatically. Emigholz's framings make it feel as if the buildings are falling into the sea, suggesting that the entire built fabric of "Western modernity" is a house of cards.

Two films in particular, however, cemented the sense of Migrating Forms as an incisive portrait of contemporary political concerns. Lance Wakeling's wistful first-person essay, *Field Visits for Chelsea Manning* (2014), finds him traveling the world in pursuit of Manning's irrecoverable biography. Wakeling introduced the film as "an omni-directional narrative," following the director's whims from Kuwait to Quantico, Virginia. He combines a patchwork of text from Manning's Article 32 military hearings with brief interviews, and long stretches of the landscapes through which Manning transited.



Field Visits for Chelsea Manning

This oblique exploration of Manning's character helps Wakeling to graze a range of anxieties tied to American ideology, iconography, and geopolitics.

Wakeling's tone was sharply contrasted with the video artist Stanya Kahn's *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014). In this featurette, several bands of ill-trained first responders, all wearing blue medical scrubs, weather the post-apocalypse by squatting in the gauche McMansions of exurban Kansas City. Make no mistake: regardless of the disaster, interior design elements like recessed lighting and tray ceilings will live on. And as long as there is a cellular signal nothing can save you from the hell of customer service representatives.

Despite these tropes, it would be a true mistake to dismiss *Don't Go Back to Sleep* as a tired rehashing of suburban anomie. Much of Kahn's vision is embedded in the dialogue, which spans the romantic advice of a jaded divorcee to the mansplaining of a bearded twentysomething—the most insufferable brand of emotionally stunted philosophy major. There's also a lot of talk of invasive species and disturbed soil, particularly agriculture and the finer points of the food supply. We hear endless chatter about cow's milk, which the team bottles, ferments, and pours on wounds to stave off the alien infection or invasion.

Who are these misfits? Are they a community of science or of religion? Is it a cult, a random band of survivors, or a group of professionally trained first responders? Who knows, and who cares? The bottom line is we're all idiots, and we don't stand a chance.

What happens if we put *Don't Go Back to Sleep* and *Field Visits for Chelsea Manning* into conversation with *Still a Brother*? The earnestness of Greaves's social documentary is a far cry from Kahn's carnivalesque satire, but all three films suggest a common question: is an inclusive, just, or sustainable American future possible? To this question, Migrating Forms offers a truly tragic suggestion—that we're mired in so many problems of our own making, and there's little cause for hope that we can turn the corner when disaster strikes. ☞

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ON REFLECTION: WHEN EVENING FALLS ON BUCHAREST OR METABOLISM BY DAVID GREGORY LAWSON

“To be good, you must work on your own feelings. It is perhaps impossible to really know yourself, but when you direct an actor, when you have an actor in front of you, you can only work with feelings.”

—Pedro Costa, from a lecture published in *Rouge*.

“I think filmmakers should be aware that they don’t know anything.”

—John Cassavetes, from *I’m Almost Not Crazy*, a documentary on the making of *Love Streams*.

An “Unnatural Relationship” Between a Director and His Actor

In the final scene, which is also the final shot, of Corneliu Porumboiu’s *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (2013) a doctor examines video footage of an endoscopy in order to determine whether or not Paul, a film director, requires additional insurance coverage for a condition he did not previously admit having. The



When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism

doctor watches this footage on a laptop in a trailer at the beginning of another day of shooting on a movie that has something to do with Romanian parliamentary politics and everything to do with Paul’s reason for being. “You said something was missing from the frame,” the movie’s producer comments when no sign of an ulcer is found. “If there was anything interesting I’m sure it would be in the center,” the doctor responds. “When filming you put what interests you in the center, not on the margin.”

The ulcer is “missing” because Paul lied so as to get time off for romancing and rehearsing privately with Alina, a neophyte supporting actor on his film. *Metabolism* occurs largely over a single day of this, bookended by a night scene beforehand and that aforementioned morning, as shooting resumes. This narrative of downtime consists of 17 sequence shots of predominately frontal compositions. Porumboiu makes considerable use of blocking that shifts attention throughout the frame, especially between foreground and background. It’s a formal choice that deepens our understanding of his film’s central thematic preoccupation: the complex planning involved in attempting a more-or-less responsible/accurate view of the world via the example of a director and his ensemble—of simultaneously portraying the self and the subjectivities of others through this means.

For Porumboiu these sequence shots are of importance primarily in how they use real time as on-screen time, for instance the moments when dinner conversation stalls on its course to a change of topic, a man smokes out of boredom, or an actor thinks of how to respond to a piece of direction, her filmmaker waiting and watching in judgment. This exacting demonstration of lived time as narrative time, a common enough hallmark of art-house and festival fare, is distinguished in Porumboiu’s films, as he employs it in concert with abundant narrative ellipses, created from suggested social demands and contextual details always hovering just off screen.

But these ellipses are not cheaply and cynically deployed in order to move the story along or avoid dealing with the various end points of a narrative premise.¹ Porumboiu’s ellipses, though certainly clever, have substance. Few filmmakers experiment so knowingly with the possibilities of off-screen space, maybe better to say off-screen *action*, an experimentation largely carried by Porumboiu’s subversive wit and a tonal consistency that gives ironic shadings to otherwise innocuous juxtapositions. These are not frames with something “missing” from them, but instead are purposefully withholding compositions, their borders meticulously delineated, that contain an abundance of material (thematic, aesthetic, political) hidden within those spaces and relationships that *are* shown.

This formal strategy, which is something like a philosophical disposition, applies to each of Porumboiu’s films and in each case arises from the character’s situations and environments, how these inform the rhythm of their speech, their agendas and ways of communicating and the jobs they hold: a small town television crew in *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006), a detective on a surveillance assignment in *Police, Adjective* (2009). Looked at this way, Porumboiu is a master of the workplace comedy, with an emphasis on how the grind and output of different types of work shapes the subjectivities of those people doing it. This is in part why Porumboiu’s cinema is such a knotty proposition. Its minimalism contorts itself in lean and aggressive conceptual frameworks: these are films that represent the subjectivities of their characters, and mirror those subjectivities (to a degree) through form, while remaining otherwise flat-footedly against conventional psychologizing.²

Or A Matter of Art and Commerce

The making of a film is marked by the hard won, gradual accumulation of sounds and images that, with varying correspondence to the director’s, writer’s, actor’s, and crew’s intentions at the start, become the raw material for later shaping into a finished piece. This is a constantly evolving process, by nature resistant to theorizing and best laid plans in ways that both correspond and diverge strikingly from all those mundane, pleasant, nerve-wracking, or simply unavoidable matters of daily life.

Being on set lends itself to any number of evocative and fanciful metaphors that, however accurate, can’t help but deny certain facets of equal importance to the ones highlighted by said fancifulness: so it’s a celebration, veering from the ramshackle to the ballroom-precise, an island off the coast of routine and home life, a droning 9 to 5, hours spent secluded in the artist’s studio and a war of attrition. And, of course, one or a number of those things more true than others depending on who you are, who you have to answer to (or don’t), the terms of your relationship to those around you, on your “position”: gaffer or starlet, old friend and work colleague, or merely paid employee.³

Porumboiu’s aesthetic, his self-imposed limitations, and the single-minded narrowness of his perspective give *Metabolism* a unique kind of expansiveness. They allow the filmmaking process to deepen and project outward in the viewer’s mind, both as Paul and Alina’s many ambiguous silences play out on-screen and even, maybe especially, in the hours, days, and months after experiencing them. The viewer is invited as a seeker, an off-screen confidant to the characters’ on-screen decisions of what “goes into” a film, of who gets to control a cinematic experience and to what degree. It brings to mind another quote from Costa’s lecture: “It’s work to make films, a kind of work very comparable to the work of seeing films. It’s as difficult to see a film as it is to make one properly.” Or at least it can, and should, be. ☞

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1. This tactic lies at the heart of *Interstellar*, *Ain’t Them Bodies Saints*; *Beasts of the Southern Wild*; *Martha, Marcy, May, Marlene*; *Shame*; and *For Ellen*, to name a few of the more suspect and refined examples in recent years. Each of these films use carefully arranged narrative ellipses so as to, simply put, avoid doing the structuring and conceptual work necessary to engage meaningfully with the ideas and thematic concerns they raise. It also allows for both the bypassing of any material deemed too messy, anything that can’t be tidied up for easy consumption, and the elevation of that which would otherwise appear as thin or underdeveloped as it is. This creates movies that feel variously prepackaged, emotionally stunted, and self-satisfied.
2. Nowhere is this more the case than in Porumboiu’s most recent movie, *The Second Game* (2014): the worker this time is Porumboiu’s own father; the job is soccer refereeing in the time of Ceausescu, and the environment is a blustery match in 1988, field blanketed in snow, between the Romanian Army and the secret police. Seldom has there been a more apt origin story of artistic voice.
3. This synopsis/evaluation is itself almost as flawed as spouting a pat and tidy “filmmaking is managed chaos” or “filmmaking stress tests the human ability to cooperate and march in lockstep to a single purpose/frame-of-mind.” But it’s most true, if I may, concerning a narrative film produced in the mode perfected and cemented by the Hollywood “dream factory” at some point during its adolescence. I mean “Hollywood” as an idea, as a diagrammatic way of thinking and as bookkeeping.

Coil 2015

The *Rail* responds to the 10th iteration of one of New York’s most eclectic & daring performance festivals.

DANCE



Bachzetsis, Schenker, and Pajunen stripped down to their musculature. Photo: Arion Doerr.

Reflections on Seeing and Saying

BY LESLIE ALLISON

FROM A TO B VIA C BY ALEXANDRA BACHZETSIS
JANUARY 11 – 14, 2015 | THE SWISS INSTITUTE

Swiss choreographer Alexandra Bachzetsis’s *From A to B via C* orbits around a brief reconstruction of the 17th-century Diego Velazquez painting *Venus at her Mirror*. The original painting depicts Venus lying nude on a bed, her body turned away, while Cupid holds up a mirror to her face revealing her reflection to the viewer. In Bachzetsis’s version, the dancers (Bachzetsis joined by the highly charismatic Anne Pajunen and Gabriel Schenker) become Venus (Schenker) on an exercise mat, a nude Cupid (Pajunen), and a Reflection in a Mirror (Bachzetsis’s face captured by a live feed camera and displayed on a flatscreen).

Bachzetsis’s use of the *Venus* tableau is not just an aesthetic reference, but an interpretation of the subject/object matrix inherent in performance. It may also be an extension of the feminist conversation kicked off by suffragette Mary Richardson’s vandalizing of the Velazquez painting in 1914, when she broke into the National Gallery in London and hacked away at Venus’s back with a meat cleaver. She stated, “If there is an outcry against my deed, let every one remember that such an outcry is a hypocrisy so long as they allow the destruction of [fellow suffragette] Mrs. Pankhurst and other beautiful living women.” Richardson’s act of art destruction attempted to redirect the societal gaze away from the mythological women represented in visual culture and onto the very real oppressed women among us. Bachzetsis also takes an interest in both real and mythologized bodies, and in mediating or interrupting gazes. In examining perception, Bachzetsis’s work clearly prioritizes the “*via C*” of the title.

The movement sequences begin with a silent and meditative period of athletic gesture (wrestling, stretching, playing squash), which is then jolted into a higher gear with a unison dance sequence accompanied by a loud metronome. All three performers fluidly transition through movement forms:

jazzercise becomes jig becomes hip-hop music video becomes abstract modern. The blending and decontextualizing of these culturally disparate genres seems to highlight the changes in how the viewer perceives them. “How are these forms different?” is less the question than, “How are they made different by the viewer’s gaze?”

Throughout the piece, the dancers remove layer after layer of white and beige skin-tight shirts and bodysuits, ending in a final layer of anatomically accurate musculature suits. Thusly clad, the performers devolve together into an amoebic, primordial goop of bloody tendons, fat, and muscle, lolling on top of each other on the floor. Following a moment

of stillness, the piece literally rewinds, and the dancers perform an exact palindrome of the previous segment—down to counting 3-2-1 instead of 1-2-3. This balletic “remix” is certainly lovely to behold, but one wonders what it shows in the conceptual framework besides their virtuosity.

Reoccurring motifs (the mythology of balletic body type, the incessant rhythm counts, the barked mantras of a frantic fitness guru) focus on challenging the traditions of the dance academy—a conversation that is not exactly current, or perhaps is simply more relevant in the Swiss dance scene than at the COIL Festival, where this piece was performed. The work could also have been

stronger had it leaned less on certain hollow technological elements like the LED light box and the live feed camera and screen, which, aside from their role as Venus’s mirror, added little.

In the oddly moving final sequence, each dancer takes their turn before the camera to sing and simultaneously sign ASL versions of alterna-hit songs accompanied by piano arrangements: No Doubt’s “Don’t Speak,” Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly,” and Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the Silence.” The overall effect is tenderly wrought awareness of sign language’s place in the movement context, and of the complexities and pitfalls of verbal communication—or more broadly,

the necessary translation and mitigation of any message in the act of its transmitting. In both their singing and signing, the performers strike a satisfying balance between sincerity and self-consciousness. Due to the lyrical overlap in these songs, (“don’t speak,” “stop explaining,” “singing my life with his words, killing me softly with his song,” “words are very unnecessary; they can only do harm,” “words are trivial”), this segment had the pleasing side effect of teaching the viewer basic sign language vocabulary, a generous and complex conveyance. ☞

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ELEMENTS OF ERASURE

MOLLY LIEBER AND ELEANOR SMITH’S *RUDE WORLD*

BY CASSIE PETERSON

Iwalk into what looks like a small black box theater with risers on either side of the floor and a cool black marley under foot. Thick, black curtains and dim lights line the entire room, creating an ominous sense of depth and mystery. Molly Lieber and Eleanor Smith have completely transformed the Chocolate Factory’s industrial, all-white space, rendering it a barely recognizable version of its former self.

To begin the piece, Lieber sits alongside the audience in a chair on a riser while Smith stands above, straddling her. They are both completely nude. For many fully silent minutes, Lieber swipes at Smith’s naked body, gently, like an energy worker dusting off the residue of some karmic knot. Lieber and Smith continue this subtle gesture for a long, quiet duration, making the space feel buffered and eerily intimate. I hear nothing but the low rumbles of someone’s stomach digesting an early dinner. The audience doesn’t move and barely breathes. I become afraid of the sound of my pen on paper and cease my own small note-taking gestures so as not to disrupt this total stillness. I feel self-conscious, as if it is I who is naked.

Then in an instant, Smith propels herself onto the black marley and begins a solo composed of strange, almost tentative movements. Lieber pensively watches from her seat in the audience while Smith works tirelessly to hold tension and angst in her body, appearing to excavate some very dark, internal material. There is a stark simplicity to all of this, and at the same time, a voyeuristic charge arises. It feels as though we might be watching something that is not fully meant for us to see.



Molly Lieber and Eleanor Smith in *Rude World*. Photo: Maria Baranova.

When Lieber enters the stage, her face hidden behind her shaggy, dark mane, she goes to the curtained wall and starts to slowly slide down it. Bending her knees, she holds, slips, holds—her mouth the only thing making contact with the wall as her arms hang limp at her sides. Smith sidles up beside her and replicates the pained gesture over and over again, faces chaffing against the black curtain. Their mutual movements are imbued with a kind of repressed agony, a kind of masochism. This is an apology, an erasure, and a giving up on the agency of the self to fully represent its own totality. We can only see their bare backs.

Rude World climaxes as Lieber and Smith’s muscular bodies join together in

order to roll around on the floor, entangled, and ultimately merge into one organism. While this joining produces extraordinary images of two bodies becoming one beastly presence, its meaning and intention is not clear. What does their merge achieve? And why is it not moving me?

Perhaps it is because there appears to be no palpable relationship between these two bodies. They feel like two stripped down objects functioning side by side, forming a new mechanical process once combined. But, it is difficult to decipher what lives inside of the exchange between them. Maybe they have become so perfectly merged that they no longer encounter one another as “an other,” instead relating as parts of the

same whole. Regardless, there is a loud emptiness and a pervasive flatness that passes between them as they occupy space together. They themselves appear unmoved, unchanged, and resistant to the alchemy of intimacy. Their “oneness” produces a nearly flawless physical design, but it lacks any evidence of process or insight into its own formation. Rather, their “togetherness” feels like a kind of dissociative, loveless (non)connection.

I no longer feel self-conscious. I am now lonely and alienated.

Rude World is chock full of intimate images without sentiment or affect. These are bodies seemingly devoid of personhoods. How can two nude bodies roll around on top of one another on the floor, repeatedly, intimately, exploring every part of each other’s body, without any relational residue? I keep looking for places to enter the dance, to understand it on some level, but it remains elusive. I am unable to find the frequency with which they are moving, relating, being.

Perhaps their intention and connection is not accessible to me because it is engineered for the *male gaze*. I cannot find a recognizable way that women relate to one another except for the emptiness that is inherently borne of their objectification. Does the male gaze know this piece better than I? Am I utterly limited by my own subject position in relation to this piece? As I exited the theater, I felt nothing lost. But also, sadly, nothing gained. ☞

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Age & Beauty Part 2; Left to Right: Miguel Gutierrez, Ben Pryor, Michelle Boulé. Photo: Ian Douglas.



Laurel Atwell in *OTRO TEATRO: The Pleasure Project*. Photo: Ian Douglas.



Keith Hennessy in *Bear/Skin*. Photo: Ian Douglas.

THE BODY IN PIECES

ZOE | JUNIPER EXAMINES MYTHS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY BY MADISON MAINWARING

In *BeginAgain*, wizard art team Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey set the stage with a woman on the ground in a full-body cast. She isn't alone for long. As soon as the dancing starts, she's joined by a dizzying array of doubles and simulacra. Two women appear in matching gray shifts, their hair in girlish plaits on top of their heads. Each imitates the movement of the other. Figures appear in projected videos, and the twins occasionally dance with their shadows. The backdrop, a giant cutout featuring profiles of women amidst leaves and flowers, is perfectly symmetrical, a mirrored image. Even the woman in the cast has a counterpart; when the lights come on, another supine body becomes visible behind the scrim.

On which side of the looking glass do we find ourselves? Which dancer is real and which one is an image made in the likeness of her twin? This thought-provoking work suggests there is no authentic or "original" self. Coherence gives way to fractured discord. When together, the twins' movements draw extensively from ballet vocabulary, their steps clear and controlled. After they part ways for their individual solos, both seem to lose agency over their bodies. Their limbs lunge and lash out as if possessed by an outside force, as if a double lingers in the form of a manipulative ghost.

The stage design is wild. Videos show a flock of birds, a laughing girl, a boy looking shyly at the camera. Lighting shifts between conventional spotlights and the soft dappplings of a forest floor. The music is that

of a soundscape featuring the folk trills of Morgan Henderson (from the band *Fleet Foxes*), birdsong, and electric guitar. The stage is divided in half (another doubling), the front covered in a dark, powdery mulch; when the dancers touch it, they kick up clouds of dust shining gold in the light.

Within this immersive atmosphere the dancers move slowly at first, hesitant to press their feet to the floor. The effect of so many dramatic elements on the stage might have been too much. In this case the manifold details pair with the unsteadiness of the dancing in order to suggest an immersion into a new environment. The sensory overload works to tell a story, one of discovery and disorientation. It's a little overwhelming, but I think that's the point.

One of the dramatic highlights of the piece happens when the frame around the mulch pile lights up. The woman, having slipped out of her full-body cast, takes one of the twins and manhandles her into touching the edge of the bright strip. Whatever lesson she's trying to convey, she doesn't seem to think it registers. She drags the twin to the back of the stage before leading her to the light again. The urgency of her gestures remind me of what used to be a common practice among mothers: that of forcing children to touch flame in order to teach them not to play with fire.

Halfway through the performance, a white-haired man in a gray business suit brings out two bowls and starts covering the woman on the floor with strips of papier mâché. I can't tell if he's a doctor



Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey in *BeginAgain*. Photo: Maria Baranova.

or a sculptor, if he does this in order to set broken bones or to reproduce the physical contours of her body. The slow touches of his fingers on her glistening white legs are deeply unsettling, especially given her inevitable paralysis. When the cast dries she won't be able to move.

At the end of *BeginAgain*, the female dancers and their doubles disappear. The man enters into the spotlight of an otherwise darkened stage, singing a variation from "*Vois sur ton chemin*," or "Look to Your Path" (you might know it from the movie *Les Choristes*). He turns over his palms as if in awe of their capability. His fingers are sullied with dirt and plaster, the spotlight on

his hands suggesting his role as some kind of god/creator. "Childish happiness is too quickly forgotten, erased," he says in French. After such interesting exchanges between the various sets of twins, this melodramatic monologue undermines the power of the performance. The finale leaves me wanting to return to the much stronger beginning of the duets, which—given the title of the piece—is perhaps what we're supposed to wish for after all. 

MADISON MAINWARING trained with the Rock School of the Pennsylvania Ballet. She has contributed to *Lapham's Quarterly* and *The American Reader*, and lives in Manhattan.

AMERICAN REALNESS: Move You/Move Me

NEW WORKS BY MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, JACK FERVER, KEITH HENNESSY, AND LUCIANA ACHUGAR BY JAIME SHEARN COAN

At American Realness, it's not rare to experience a feeling of *déjà vu*: whether you are watching new versions of shows you have seen before, or new shows by artists you know well, or new shows in familiar theater spaces. Although I try to meet each show on its own terms, in this festival setting I have a hard time not comparing and revisiting. The four works that I have selected below are all made by mid-career artists who are no strangers to New York stages. I am considering how each artist positions him or herself in relationship to the audience. As an audience member, I interrogated my own trajectories of desire—trying to determine what moved me and what did not.

Part I: Dancer from the Dance

Both Miguel Gutierrez and Jack Ferver have been criticized for creating works in the festival that are self-referential. Yes, both artists have presented works in American Realness about making work, and especially the emotional costs and context of that work. But the autobiographical mode only added more possibility for intimacy between the artist and the audience; mixed with spectacle, it becomes theater.

Miguel Gutierrez's presence onstage is minimal in *Age & Beauty Part 2: Asian Beauty @ the Werq Meeting or The Choreographer & Her Muse* or *@&*—his primary function is orchestrating the live sound environment

for the piece. This decentering of the choreographer is a fitting gesture for a piece that attempts to deconstruct the myth of the muse (delightfully rendered *à la* a Broadway tune, replete with a lit-up and fake-smiling Michelle Boulé, who blinks like a beauty pageant contestant), as well as to expose the working conditions and relationships between Gutierrez and Ben Pryor (his manager and the founder and producer of American Realness). Juxtaposing the long conversations recited by Pryor and Sean Donovan—who plays Gutierrez—Michelle Boulé delivers solo after solo, all of which she has originated and performed in Gutierrez's earlier works. While we hear about Gutierrez's struggle with the hold that the administrative realm places on him, Boulé's dances literally push the real "work" front and center as she throws herself between the two men's computers. The conversations become a backdrop as we marvel at her stamina and virtuosity. Even taken out of context, Boulé's monologues from *Last Meadow* (2009), in which she personifies a sped-up and deranged James Dean, and *Everyone* (2007), in which she stands on a table and yells: "I needed you to



Jack Ferver in *Night Light Bright Light*. Photo: Ian Douglas.

know before you left!" leave me breathless. Her presence is so commanding it is hard to remember to look elsewhere. The conversations definitely have a place, especially the "fight" between Gutierrez and Pryor that raises really crucial issues about autonomy and capitalism, but by occupying more of the background, they avoid coming across as myopic. There is also something

very humble about Gutierrez's watching of Boulé and the short exchanges between them. At one point, Gutierrez replaces Donovan to dance a duet with Boulé, and you can see the closeness in their bodies, a tenderness borne of years of knowing each other. This quiet camaraderie is counterbalanced by playful forays into the genres of musical theater and even salsa. It was exhilarating to watch the four performers traipse around the stage to a disco song, engaging with the audience as well as their inner divas, calling out the moves: "It's a lasso!" Gutierrez still knows how to work a crowd.

Making work about making work is more familiar terrain for Jack Ferver. His *All of a Sudden* (American Realness, 2013) also dealt with the relationships between performer and collaborators. In *Night Light Bright Light*, he works with his longtime friend and collaborator, Reid Bartelme, who also happens to be a gorgeous ballet dancer turned costume designer. I was a little skeptical about a work that was framed as a response to the suicide of Judson Dance Theater's wayward Fred Herko, but he was only there as a benevolent ghost. Ferver begins with his back to the audience, holding a small mirror in front of his face (how's that for self-referential?), his voice coming out of the speakers in a non-semantic representation of each movement. He then shifts and establishes a confessional relationship to the audience, explaining, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, his process for making the work we are about to see, and advocating on behalf of his recent work *Chambre*. Moving from his research of Herko's suicide ("It's been so much fun ruminating on despair") he describes his own childhood obsession with torture ("Eat that fucking pudding!"). Ferver describes himself as not-the-best dancer and not-the-best singer, his small stature and high-drama affect contrasting with Bartelme's balletic and blank-faced movements. Reenacting the performance of a "sexy dance" for his therapist, Ferver makes the audience complicit. Our watching him becomes inappropriate and we take pleasure in his acting out. The highlight of the piece, and the most direct homage to Herko, comes when Reid appears in a black silk dress and veil and pointe shoes. As Ferver stands on stage reciting: "I'm not afraid. I'm not

afraid. I *am* afraid. I'm not afraid" into a mirror, holding a red candle, the audience is terrorized with delight by Bartelme, who tears up and down the aisles grabbing at us in our chairs.

Part II: Ritual as Proposition

Keith Hennessy's *Bear/Skin* and Luciana Achugar's *OTRO TEATRO: The Pleasure Project* both engage with ritual—Hennessy through his improvisational blend of lecture, dance, and props and Achugar with a large group of performers mixed together in the dark with the audience and several bottles of whiskey. Although I admired the conceptualization of both pieces, and the challenges they placed on the audience, I was left feeling unsure—aware of myself and the distance I had not travelled.

I saw Hennessy's *Crotch (all the Joseph Beuys references in the world cannot heal the pain, confusion, regret, cruelty, betrayal, or trauma...)* (2008) at American Realness in 2010. Seated on the stage in front of Hennessy as he sang in a warbly voice and sank a needle and thread into and out of his skin, I felt warbly myself, in the best way. I saw *Turbulence (a dance about the economy)* at New York Live Arts in 2012 and felt first cold and then actually angry—trapped in a world that I had nothing to do with and feeling like Hennessy was occupying a role of power that felt anything but liberatory. *Bear/Skin* sinks somewhere between these two works.

Hennessy begins by passing out a book (*Wilder Mann: Images of the Savage*, by Charles Fréger), offering a brief history of the making of *The Rite of Spring*, and explaining the additional material he has incorporated into the piece in light of the publicized shootings of black men and women by police. It is in action movies, he tells us, that he has found a "safe place to imagine that everything is fucked up and should be destroyed." He recites a fast-paced poem in the satiric perspective of a young white man that may or may not be an action hero, culminating in the chant "shoot to kill / save the white girl." He then proceeds to sing, dressed as a teddy bear, four "Bear Songs," describe his four-directional map, and lecture about suicide communities (soldiers, seniors, and middle-aged white men, a demographic which he acknowledges he fits into). While he changes his costume, he passes out silver Mylar space blankets,

and encourages us to get under them with our neighbors and create a rain dance. While I didn't necessarily connect with my neighbors, the visual and tactile shifts in the environment were exciting. At this point I felt a lot of potential and momentum. The new costume he emerges wearing could be described as New-Age Wild Man, including floral leggings, a wig and mask, rainbow suspenders, and a sash made out of credit cards. He performs a version of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* that is quite beautiful and shows the exertion it requires of him, which he prolongs by ending in a boat pose. The final dance evokes trance and club culture, and seems intended to be a performance of ritual while also a critique of appropriation. I wasn't able to find a way in. It didn't seem ironic but it was also hard to take seriously; if it was meant as a reparative gesture and not just critique, it seemed to be lacking in vulnerability, in intimacy. It didn't seem to involve us. Is he the one to be sacrificed, or is he the hero, or—? Either way, I felt a contradiction between his centrality and his emphasis on the historical appropriation of and violence against indigenous and black Americans. As he whirled around, I wasn't sure where he stood.

I saw Achugar's first iteration of *OTRO TEATRO* at New York Live Arts last spring. I found the performers' writhing in their seats, disguised as audience members, to be a little gimmicky and also unbelievable in terms of an experience of actual pleasure. Once the group was on stage, there were some beautiful movement sequences, notably performed by Achugar and Gillian Walsh, but, like *Turbulence*, I was not able to observe that the group transformed itself or the audience. The Playhouse stage at Abrons made for a much more appropriate setting for this second iteration of *OTRO TEATRO—The Pleasure Project*—more punk, more rough.

The audience gathers into a circle around the perimeter and bottles of whiskey are passed around (many bottles, big ones). The performers are also seated among us, and start to curl and bend, kick, take off their clothes, and rock. The lights go off and the performers create sounds—humming, moaning, burping. Achugar is face-down near me, circling her lower right leg, landing with a slap on the floor over and

over again. Audience members choose whether to get toppled on or to move. The curtain is open just a few inches—seeing the flash of red that is the house reminds me of where we are, and conjures up a feeling of complicity and camaraderie, a sense that this is a secret gathering. Eventually, the performers open the curtain and move into the empty house. (The sense of surprise I might feel here is undercut by having witnessed a similar use of the space in Miguel Gutierrez's 2009 work *Everyone*). The audience moves closer to the edge of the stage to watch what happens, and a few people even move into the house themselves and take a seat. Although there is a sense of escalation, of momentum, no structure emerges, only a traveling of bodies through the dark, a shift of rhythms as these bodies meet with the surfaces of the space and other bodies. There is no collective breaking point. A few performers reach ecstatic states individually—there is proximity and proxy but ultimately the transformation that Achugar seems to be in search of ("a utopian body, a sensational body, [...] an anarchic body") still seems far away. However, there are compelling moments, such as when Michael Mahalchick, a longtime collaborator of Achugar's, rolls across the stage until he encounters a member of the audience (everyone else has moved out of the way) and then peacefully rests with his arm flung across him. Gradually, the breathing slows, the movements get more controlled, and the performers exit one by one out of the front doors of the theater.

Can pleasure be contagious? Can ritual be simultaneously deconstructed and produced? Are you talking at me or to me? Are you moving with me or near me? Why am I not moved when others are? What does it take? I'm still not sure. I guess I want a performance to remind me that I am capable of feeling more. I want to be lifted; I want to be giddy; I want to be devastated; I want to be surprised. I want to find my vulnerability, and let it stay just where it is. I want to be emotionally topped, to let go of my critical lens for a moment, to forget where and who I am, to exist in the potential tense. ☺

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SIX MONTHS LATER: Reflecting on Ferguson

BY RYAN KELLY

In August, the musician Lauryn Hill dropped a raw, unedited version of her track “Black Rage” as a free download on SoundCloud. Hill wrote the song in 2012 and has been performing it at concerts ever since. On Twitter, Hill dedicated the song to “peace for MO,” a reference to the eruption of street protests and their violent suppression following the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson.

I played it back right away, standing still in the hallway and holding my phone up to my ear. Minutes earlier, I had been staring wide-eyed at the fiasco of the MTV Video Music Awards, in which Beyoncé delivered a 20-minute mash-up of every song on her eponymously titled album, including an extended sequence on a conveyor belt in front of a massive, LED-illuminated “FEMINIST” sign. This was the political message: Beyoncé is a feminist, didn’t you know? The disaster reached its pinnacle when Jay-Z came onstage with their child Blue Ivy and delivered a lifetime achievement award to his wife, “the greatest living entertainer.” Beyoncé thanked God, her child, her husband, and MTV.

It has been reported—and touted by the star herself in recent performances—that Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s combined net worth has broken the billion-dollar mark. In concerts, merchandise, and appearances alone, they earn more than \$100 million annually. On her most recent tour, Beyoncé was pulling in around \$2.5 million per tour stop. By contrast, in 2013 Lauryn Hill went to jail for tax evasion. She served in Danbury, Connecticut, at the same federal women’s prison made famous by Piper Kerman, the creator of “Orange is the New Black.” The track Hill dropped last August sounds like it was recorded in a living room; there’s the banter of children running around and her unmistakable voice, un-mixed, fading in and out of comprehensibility on top of the drum beat.

In the lyrics to “Black Rage,” Hill questions “the myth or illusion” of free enterprise and challenges how these narratives are used to confuse the many black people for whom business ownership and entrepreneurship are terribly unlikely, despite any amount of aspiration. These working-class people of color, to whom Hill addresses her song, are not pillars of wealth, fame, and family like Jay-Z and Beyoncé. The Carters’ is a different kind of black power than the sort Hill conjures in a soulful performance of “Black Rage” in Atlanta in 2012. Hill, dressed in baggy pants and a baseball cap pulled over a tight curl, delivers a fast-paced iteration of the track, her voice skipping over the adopted melody of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “My Favorite Things” like a stone flicked across a pond. After working her way through this virtuosic performance, Hill quiets the band and the back-up singers and begs the audience to listen closely as she sets out on a clearly articulated recitation of the lyrics.

In her unaccompanied speech, Hill’s finely enunciated voice strains to keep an even temper as it continually drives toward insistence, lifting on certain words she

wishes to emphasize, like “beatings,” and “ceiling,” and “fear,” and the “is” in “life out of context is living ungodly.” At first listeners are hushed, but as the lyrical recitation goes on, the crowd begins to echo her with roaring agreement, call-backs, and shouts of encouragement. “Poison your water while they say it is raining / Then call you mad for complaining, complaining” draws out a heaving response. At the mention of children, a solitary female voice cries out, “You better teach Lauryn!” After the second of three verses, the crowd is intent on ending her soliloquy with shouts of their own. But Hill does not relent. “Wait, wait,” she persists, “and then it says—”

For a long while I would listen to Nina Simone on my headphones while bicycling to work in my studio. My playlist almost always included a live recording of “Mississippi Goddam” from the Legends collection, 1972. The song still makes me weep, a combination of sentiments mixed up in tears, the coordinates of an awkward identification I experience as a gay white man listening to anthems of the Civil Rights movement. When I listened intently to the song, I felt an unexpected grief, a strange longing for a revolutionary moment I had only ever imagined.

Not just longing—I felt an oblique sense of understanding. I am not talking about what was in my head—my thinking mind worked well to remind me that the American experience has always been extraordinarily different between the races, and that the treatment of black people in pre-Civil Rights Act America is not so different from the bigotry and hatred gay people face today. I *knew* these differences, but I *felt* something much closer. So close, in fact, that I could crawl into the crevices of Simone’s voice and hide away in its acrid corners. Sheltered, I could sing along to the words only she could write and harmonize my queer chords with her African ones. I felt protected by Simone’s voice and reflected in her raw emotion. Her songs gave me courage and a sense of purpose. I wanted to work in a way that lived up to the standards she embodied—a relentless commitment to anger. The rage of injustice. The willful spirit at the back of every freedom bus that thrusts the rest forward, beyond their best expectations, obligated to history and to progeny never to be met.

In 1996, after appearing on the Howard Stern show, it was widely rumored that Lauryn Hill made a disparaging statement against white people in her audience. The details differed somewhat, but the gist of the rumor was that Hill said she’d rather her children starve than have white people buy her albums. I remember hearing about Hill’s statement when I was 20 or 21 years old and feeling pretty angry about it. I wondered what I had done to deserve such a blanket disavowal. My understanding of history was weak then, and as someone less than 26 years old, I was also helplessly narcissistic, immune to the possibility that

there were others on the planet. I took these rumored statements personally. I felt cut out and told to stay home. I wasn’t needed for the revolution.

These many voices rang out a discordant chorus in my head when I listened to Hill’s track play back through the tiny speakers of my phone. But behind these voices, I felt my body relax into her song. After a week of devastating news from the frontlines of racism in this country, somebody had said something I knew I could trust.

Why didn’t I go to Ferguson? After following the news religiously for days, around the time the tanks rolled in, I did seriously consider it—as I imagine a lot of people like me did, too. By “considered it,” I mean that you might have searched online for the names of any organizers in Ferguson, groups that were leading the protest or managing press relations and communications and telling far-flung advocates where to send pizzas. You found nothing, except the St. Louis chapter of Occupy and an illegitimate group that called itself the New Black Panthers. By “like me,” I mean New Yorkers and Angelenos, people who live on the liberal coasts, professionals with full-time jobs or freelancers who, by that definition, never have any time. I mean highly educated people, well-traveled liberals, black and white alike, who voted for Obama twice, the second time begrudgingly, and participated in some Occupy actions in 2011, or at least cheered when others did, signed countless online petitions, and ordered pizzas when pizzas were called for. Why didn’t you go?

I didn’t go because I was afraid I would be rejected by the people of Ferguson as a white, middle-class thrill-seeker, more interested in the admiration of his fellow artists and intellectuals than in the reality of this struggle, too careful to get really involved, to go to jail and jeopardize his precarious employment back on the coast. I was afraid that I was not wanted or perhaps worse, that I was, but that I would not stick it out as long as necessary, because in the end, I did not have to. For me, Ferguson would be a weekend or a week; for its citizens, this was life.

In the end, I felt the difference of my situation was too extreme to be reconciled. At the high point of the international Occupy movement, there were so many people involved from such different contexts and for very different reasons that it seemed there was no social, economic, or cultural difference that could structure an individual as fundamentally outside the movement. Even celebrity one-percenters were welcomed. But this struggle is different. An unarmed black teenager was killed by a white cop and the largely white police force, historically antagonistic to the predominantly black population, was not moving fast enough to bring justice. This was their moment, the people of Ferguson’s, their spotlight, and I did not want to steal it away from them, not even by virtue of my best intentions to join the revolution.

That was August. After the release of the grand jury’s decision not to indict Officer

Darren Wilson, followed a week later by another court’s decision to not indict the NYPD officers involved in the killing of Eric Garner, a nationwide protest sparked. Ferguson was the shot heard round the world but no longer the only battlefield. The groundwork for a movement has now been laid, but what will bind its footmen across such incisive differences of race, class, and gender to make for an army?

This movement has recently begun to be called a “second wave” of the civil rights struggle. Second-wave feminism attempted to account for the differences among women in the movement along lines of class, race, and sexuality. What grew from this was a much broader understanding of feminism. In fact, the most cogent evidence of the success of this critique might be the shift in nomenclature from “women’s movement” to “feminism,” and a turn away from biological woman as the subject of the movement. Second-wave civil rights promises something similar. A movement made up of as many white people as black and brown in the struggle for social justice. The end to the prison-industrial complex and the militarization of the police brought about by a broad intersectional alliance. An analysis of class relations, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia even within those communities actively involved in the struggle for making black lives matter. Can we imagine a stronger, self-reflexively critical civil rights movement that addresses those issues that were overlooked in the 1960s while keeping a fidelity to this pivotal time in history?

In the 2013 documentary *Beyoncé: Life Is But a Dream*, the star likens herself to only one other singer, Nina Simone. “I think when [she] put out music, you loved her voice,” Beyoncé says in the program with no mention of Simone’s public role in the civil rights movement. “That’s what she wanted you to love. That’s what—that was her instrument.” It has been five months since Michael Brown was killed and nearly seven weeks since the non-indictments were announced. If Beyoncé wants to live up to her own words and the oversized lights of her LED “FEMINISM,” then it is time for her to speak. Simone risked everything to become a leader, and she lost much of it on the way. But look what was gained. Lauryn Hill understands what Beyoncé cannot, that a voice cracked with rage does more to build a coalition than one that has been Auto-Tuned to perfect pitch. Our second-wave movement needs a loud voice if it is to be heard. No, it needs a chorus. We all must learn to sing out. ☞

RYAN KELLY is an artist, dancer, and writer currently in residence at the New Museum in New York City. Kelly studied visual art at UCLA and comparative literature at Fordham University. He was a Van Lier Fellow at the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program and a member of New York City Ballet from 1998 to 2002. For the past 12 years, he has engaged in a unique collaborative art practice with Brennan Gerard. Their shared work can be viewed at www.gerardandkelly.com.

MAMA SAID KNOCK YOU OUT: *Bareknuckle* at Gleason's Gym *by Hannah Bos*

THEATER

On the wall above us is a huge, colorful mural depicting two boxers going at it in the ring. Next to it, hand-painted cursive script reads:

"Now, whoever has courage, and a strong and collected spirit in his breast, let him come forward, lace on the gloves and put up his hands." —Virgil

I've been to a lot of raw spaces. But not this kind of raw. It's a huge meat locker of metal, concrete, and muscles. There's sweat everywhere. I've never heard more grunting in my life. Because real work is being done. Real training is happening. And I'm getting into the ring with four other women. Crawling through the nylon covered ropes. Stepping past the giant spit buckets in the corners. Reaching back to drag in folding chairs and purses. Facing off in the middle of the ring to talk about a very risky sport: theater.

I chose to meet the women of Vertigo Theater Company "on stage" at Gleason's Gym where they'll be mounting their next production, *The Living Room Series 2015: Bareknuckle*, beginning February 20th. The historic boxing gym is located a couple of blocks away from the Dumbo waterfront in Brooklyn. It has been around since 1937, a training mecca for heavy hitters like Benny "Kid" Paret, Mike Tyson, and Cassius Clay a.k.a. Muhammad Ali. The walls are plastered with ancient, neon bumper stickers promoting positive slogans like "Wish it. Dream It. Do it." and next—

DING!!

Yikes! The loudest bell I've ever heard has just gone off. The ring timer. It will continue to sound throughout our conversation, shocking my nerves every three minutes.

Next to the mural are hundreds, maybe thousands, of framed fighter cards: small black and white headshot/résumés listing the stats and accomplishments of young up-and-comers from years past. "Snagged the Junior Metros twice", "Ranked 6th nationally", "Junior Olympic champ." I ask for Vertigo Theater Company's stats. Born in New York City. Two and a half years old. Led by co-artistic directors Pia Scala-Zankel and Tara Ricasa, along with artistic associate Alexandra Renzo. Completing the *Bareknuckle* team is actor/producer Nicol Moeller.

Pia, Tara, and Alexandra met as actors at Labyrinth Theater Company's Master Class program. Encouraged to wear all different hats in the work they were making together in the Lab, the trio adopted the Lab's "If you want to do it, just go out and do it" doctrine and decided to form a company of their own with their fellow graduates upon completing the program. They quickly grew to an ensemble of 12, and almost as quickly learned that that wasn't going to work: an early meeting yielded 12 different mission statements. There were simply too many people, at too many different stages of life, with too much variety in the time they were

able to commit. So, through trial and error, over the course of two years, Vertigo worked its way down to a leaner, meaner fighting weight: a nimble production company made up of the original threesome that can scale up to a higher weight class whenever necessary thanks to a posse of likeminded collaborators in its corner. This extended artistic family is what allows Vertigo to execute its game plan: producing unconventional works by emerging artists that reflect the urban landscape they inhabit.

Which brings us back to—

DING!!

Across the gym, past a sea of bowling ball shoulders, an 11ish-year-old boy shadow boxes, skinny arms churning the air in a gangly blur.

Pia, Brooklyn born and bred, had been searching for a site-specific space to produce Vertigo's next *Living Room Series*, the company's showcase for works-in-progress. She looked out her apartment window and there it was across the street: Gleason's.

World famous for training amateur fighters (male and female) for the Golden Gloves and pros for bouts at Madison Square Garden and beyond, there's also a smaller contingent of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighters, WWE wrestlers, and kickboxers honing their craft in the gym. Adding playwrights, choreographers, and actors to the mix might have been a challenge, but owner Bruce Silverglade welcomed the troupe into his gym with the open arms of a warm neighbor, allowing the women to write, rehearse, perform—whatever they needed. If the gym is open, it's theirs to use.

Gleason's affords a new opportunity for *The Living Room Series*. Last year's inaugural *Living Room Series*, co-created by Moeller and Renzo, was presented in a Chinatown art gallery and consisted of three unproduced works by a single playwright. This time around, the producers decided to maintain the intimacy but heighten the stakes by commissioning new works by three playwrights created specifically in and for Gleason's Gym. And so *The Living Room Series 2015: Bareknuckle* was born. "But we didn't want to come in here like, 'We're gonna take over and this has nothing to do with you,'" Pia explains. "We wanted to involve the boxing community."

As the run approaches, Vertigo has been working with Bruce to brainstorm more ways to involve the boxing community in the event. A portion of ticket sales are going to Give A Kid A Dream, Bruce's charity that provides mentorship to disadvantaged youths through the sport of boxing. And Bruce is helping coordinate real three-minute warm up fights with female boxers from the gym to set the tone and lead into the plays. The women are particularly excited to see four-time Golden Gloves champion and two-time amateur World Champion Keisher "Fire" McLeod-Wells in action.

DING!!

In the ring next to us, a short, husky man is doing some kind of MMA move. He is thrusting his pelvis back and forth. It looks like an acting warm-up designed to release tension, but much more violent.

Upon the invitation of Vertigo, playwrights Lindsay Joy and Obie Award-winner Lucy Thurber were introduced to Gleason's last July at one of Bruce's charity boxing exhibitions. The company's own Pia Scala-Zankel rounded out the team of writers, who were given full access to the gym and no parameters other than to conceive the play for the space, keep it around 30 minutes, and have at least two characters. Ideas for the plays were pitched, feedback was given, and then the writers were off.

Long-time Vertigo target Laura Savia was brought in to direct and has shepherded the plays through the process of workshopping. As we chat on this early January afternoon, the scripts are in the final days of polishing and the company is gearing up for rehearsals to start in a matter of days.

The more time we spend in here, the more my eye gets drawn to different areas of the gym. I can't help but think about the potential for theatricalizing every nook and cranny. The rings themselves are the most obvious place to stage something, but every corner of the gym looks like a set: the locker rooms, the forest of different sized and colored punching bags, the snack shop displaying peanuts, Cheez-Its, and hundreds of VHS tapes of old tournaments, the ancient, not-so ancient, and kind of new exercise machines lined up against the wall. I mention this, and the women smile and point, setting up imaginary scenarios of where and how the night could unfold.

When I ask if the plays will have actual punching in them, I'm surprised to see the women dance around the question like new foes feeling each other out at the beginning of a match. They're being coy about spoilers and it's working. These ladies have some Don King in them. They concede *some* kind of sparring is at the core of all of their stories, and that the plays are all snapshots of the inner struggles of ordinary people. And that Lucy Thurber's play *The Sentinels* will involve actual fighters. But is *real* blood going to be spilled? Gonna have to be at ringside to find out.

**DING!!
BOOOOM!!**

A man to our right just bodyslammed the shit out of his partner.

There's definitely a buzz in here. Rehearsals are about to start and the *Bareknuckle* performance schedule coincides with the boxers' build-up to the National Golden Gloves tournament, the most important time of the year for amateur boxing. It feels pretty real in here. Whatever that means in life. Whatever that means in fighting. Whatever that means in theater.

We finish our chat and shake hands like good sports. As I pick up my bag and fold up my chair, I notice the speckles of brown everywhere around me on the floor of the ring. Dried blood. Layers and layers of little droplets.

Now that's pretty real.

Clinch by Lindsay Joy

On their wedding day, a couple goes head-to-head, exchanging blows and exposing years of dirty laundry, unearthing truths that force them both to confront whether they can walk down the aisle.

Lights Out by Pia Scala-Zankel

In the wake of his father's death, a "prodigal son" returns home to forever alter the fate of his family's once venerable gym. Reuniting with his sisters and latch-key daughter, this ne'er-do-well is determined to win at all costs.

The Sentinels by Lucy Thurber

Struggling to convey her true desires, a woman combats her turbulent past, which is manifested in ferocious ancient warriors who attempt to stifle her good intentions at every turn. 📖

Vertigo Theater Company presents *The Living Room Series 2015: Bareknuckle*, running Feb 20 – 22, 27, 28 & March 1, 6 – 8 Friday and Saturdays 8 pm, Sundays 7 pm. For tickets and more information go to thelivingroomseries.org.

HANNAH BOS is a writer, performer, and a founder of The Debate Society, co-writing and starring in all of the company's plays. thedebatesociety.org



Tara Ricasa, Pia Scala-Zankel, Alexandra Renzo, and Nicol Moeller. Photo: Ted Alcorn.

Laundromat-Theater: *Where Every Fold Matters* by Ginny Mohler

A woman folds clothes by rote, eyes fixed to a soap opera muted on the laundromat's TV. As she weeps over a tragic plot twist, her hands never stop folding, pounding the table in an unceasing metronome of productivity.

This moment, lifted from life and transcribed to performance by playwright/director Lizzie Olesker and experimental filmmaker Lynne Sachs, becomes one of many striking, reality-based images in *Every Fold Matters*, a new site specific performance with film that premieres in a Clinton Hill, Brooklyn laundromat this month.

Exploring the intimacies that emerge between strangers through their clothes, the 40-minute theater piece is based on interviews conducted by Olesker and Sachs with laundromat workers throughout NYC during the past year. Originally intending to film the interviews for a hybrid documentary-theater piece, the work is now a compilation of fiction and reality, the script drawing largely on true anecdotes which they heard but were not permitted to record.

The project began nearly two years ago, when Olesker was commissioned by producer Emily Rubin to create what would become *Every Fold Matters* as part of the 10 year anniversary of Emily Rubin's reading series "Dirty Laundry: Loads of Prose" by Wash and Dry Productions. Originally inspired by Rubin's desire to find a non-traditional public space for creative workshops, the series has now successfully hosted more than 30 readings in laundromats, showcasing more than 100 writers over the past 10 years. In 2014, Olesker received a grant from the Brooklyn Arts Council to further develop and produce *Every Fold Matters*.

It wasn't long before the hybrid documentary partnership with Sachs organically emerged; the two women live within a block of each other and have a number of mutual friends in the arts, but had never collaborated before. Sachs, currently a Guggenheim Fellow, usually works as an adjunct professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, where Olesker also teaches. The piece now incorporates elements of documentary film, contemporary dance and movement, and sound design by musician and aural artist Stephen Vitiello.

Although its form—as well as content—is still evolving, the play has already come far from the initial conception of basing the script on documentary interviews with laundry workers. "Initially we hoped to record video interviews with them, all over the city," remarked Olesker. But this quickly proved difficult. Many workers refused to speak to them at all—adding a camera into the equation was even more off-putting. There was a language barrier, too. Many of the workers they spoke with had limited English vocabularies, often restricted to terminology surrounding laundry. A conversation about a broken machine is more possible than candid conversations about their past, their most bizarre experiences on the job, and general reflections on the work they do and the people whose clothes they wash. Bringing in a Chinese translator allowed Olesker and Sachs new levels of access at some laundromats, establishing trust and eliciting stories. But it still wasn't enough to get more than a handful of laundry workers to go on tape.

Even with full communication possible, the majority of the workers were tight lipped. Whether for fear of repercussions from management, mistrust of how their stories would be used, or reticence as a code of conduct, the reluctance was so widespread it was itself indicative of something about the job. This spirit of refusal is wound throughout the piece in recurring sequences of chaos, in which the denials are spoken simultaneously by multiple actors, in three languages; one doesn't need a translator to understand they're saying no.

Olesker and Sachs decided to continue pursuing the interviews, but without the camera. "We couldn't record the interviews, but we could listen," said Sachs. Their notes and impressions fueled the hybrid documentary-fiction nature of the script—a visceral compilation of the human



Laundress Ching Valdes Aran in *Every Fold Matters*. Photo: Lizzie Olesker.

stories which unfold during the minutiae of domestic work, in which there is no shortage of conflict.

Customers are displeased with a worker's ability to get out a tough stain. They make a scene and refuse to pay. Others accuse the laundress of theft. And the infighting doesn't end between customer and worker. The customer versus customer interactions are equally fraught and can escalate quickly. The play opens on two customers battling over the use of a dryer: Customer ONE's clothes were removed by Customer TWO. Unacceptable. Customer ONE retakes the dryer, hauling out the offending load, still dripping wet. The dryer is still contested. "It doesn't belong to you!" cries Customer TWO. "Or you!" retorts the first.

Instead of having discrete characters, the four actors each inhabit multiple characters and are named with numbers: ONE, TWO, THREE, and FOUR, to be played by acclaimed performers Ching Valdes-Aran, Veraalba Santa, Tony Torn, and Jasmine Holloway, respectively. As co-directors, Sachs and Olesker are working with the four to build a vocabulary of movement and gesture for the work with clothing. Beginning with the routine of folding clothes, their movements swell into the theatrical—and then shrink back into realism.

As the actors inhabit the language of the piece, they bring their own experiences to it—and to the script. Jasmine Holloway, who plays FOUR, recollected during the process that her grandmother worked as a washerwoman. Encouraged by Sachs and Olesker to ask her about her experiences, and despite her grandmother's initial reluctance, Holloway learns that her grandmother is a third generation washerwoman—her great-great grandmother was a member of a groundbreaking movement in Atlanta during the summer of 1881 by African-American women to unionize the underpaid, overworked washerwomen, organizing as "The Washing Society." They wouldn't have the vote for another 40 years, but their strike was a success; it would become a seminal moment in labor history. Primary sources describing their efforts are now incorporated into the script and, as FOUR, Holloway portrays the ghost of a washerwoman past for much of the show.

The ghost of "The Washing Society" provides a historical context for the piece, balancing it against the absurd, often cruel, altercations which take place inside the present-day

laundromat. The legacy of domestic work, the issues surrounding power, and the exchange of money for services are all potent themes which rise to the surface and bubble over in dramatic, thrilling escalations of the everyday. A laundromat is a public space where something private occurs; it is the opposite of a typical theater, a private space in which a public event occurs. Nearly every element of *Every Fold Matters* pushes the boundaries of what is private and what is public, what is real and what is fiction, and where we find narrative fulfillment in any of the above.

There is an undeniable intimacy forged between strangers in the process of the clothes being cleaned, but it's not often acknowledged. "All you get is their name and their bag of dirty stuff" says TWO, in reflection. "It's a personal thing, if you think about it. [...] You can tell someone's story just by what they've worn, how it's dirty—you know?" And more revelations abound in the clothing designated as "special" by customers—endowed with emotional meaning for whatever reason. "I wonder what special really means?" TWO muses. "It's really special," they'll say. It means be careful with it or else." But the feats of the laundry workers do not always go unappreciated. "My customers count on me," says another worker. "They think we do magic."

That magic is present throughout *Every Fold Matters*, from the clothesline peppered with miniature garments, pulled out of an actor's pocket, to the collisions of printed words on clothing in a magnetic poetry-esque sequence, created by local painter Jessica Weiss. As FOUR says, no longer a ghost, but as herself remembering her grandmother's words: "Listen! I am passing this down to you. [...] Take your time. Make every fold matter." These are words to live by at the laundromat and perhaps everywhere beyond: It matters. Every single fold. ☞

Every Fold Matters, created by Lizzie Olesker and Lynne Sachs, produced by Emily Rubin, will be performed Feb 12 – 14 at 8:30 pm, at New Lucky Laundromat (323 Lafayette Ave, at Grand Ave in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn). Suggested donation \$10. Seating will be limited.

GINNY MOHLER is a Brooklyn-based filmmaker, writer and archival researcher. With creative partner Brittany Shaw, she is currently developing *Radium Girls*, a Sloan award-winning feature film about radical teenage sisters in 1925.

Tanya Barfield:

On the Space—Time Continuum *by Kathryn Walat*

Bright Half Life begins with a timeless concept: soul mates, “an idea that may or may not exist,” according to the exuberant deliberations of Erica, as she stands in a hallway, proposing marriage outside the apartment of her ex-girlfriend Vicky.

From that controvertibly romantic opening, the play uses the possibilities of *time* and *marriage*—and the shifting lives of Erica and Vicky—to argue both yes and no.

But really: “soul mates,” *do* they exist?

“I can’t really answer that question,” hedges playwright Tanya Barfield. And no, not because she’s being coy or on the spoiler-alert, but because “for each person watching, I think the answer will be different,” she explains, understanding perfectly the prismatic workings of her singular new play, and the individual theatrical experience it promises.

Bright Half Life begins performances February 17, directed by longtime collaborator Leigh Silverman, at the Women’s Project Theater (now known as the more hip “WP,” under the artistic direction of Lisa McNulty).

With just two characters, and “little to no set,” the play dramatizes a series of short (often less than a page), non-chronological flashes that together create before us a relationship that spans 45 years. Barfield describes the constant shifts forward-and-back in time as “seamless, momentarily disorienting, and without pause.”

Yep, the audience is in for quite a ride: at the tippy-top of a Ferris wheel one moment, in a tense elevator at the doctor’s office the next.

By the end, through the halting language of their overlapping dialogue, we’ve shared in the most intimate details of these two women’s life together. And we’ve also explored something larger: leaps taken, hearts broken, and that “Ritual of Commitment ... or perhaps a Ritual of Delusion” that Erica deliberates in her opening proposal.

The Rail caught up with Barfield as she was heading into the rehearsal process.

KATHRYN WALAT (RAIL): With this play you’ve created such an interesting moment-to-moment structure. How did you come to that?

TANYA BARFIELD: So, in my life: Event A leads to Event B that leads to Event C.

RAIL: Totally linear—

BARFIELD: But in my *mind*, all three events happen at the same time—or even out of sequence. Dream logic governs, and I find that pivotal events are punctuated by these quotidian moments. I remember the red rotary telephone in my childhood kitchen more clearly than I remember my college graduation.

RAIL: Was that your starting place for the piece, thinking about life, and time, and memory?

BARFIELD: When I first sit down to write a play—any play—I have no plans, I just free-write for about 20 to 30 pages to explore ideas. With *Bright Half Life* I kept writing a lot of short scenes and thinking: “These scenes are too short, it’s like they’ve been written on Twitter! I’ve got to start writing the play.”

My previous play *The Call* begins with a 20-page dinner scene, and follows a classic linear structure, and I wanted to write another play like that. (I always think I *should* be writing something very different than what I’m actually writing.) So it took awhile for me to realize that I already *was* writing the play.

From *Bright Half Life*:

VICKY
(*pissed off*) Why. Are. You. Here.
(*beat*)

ERICA
My father’s dying

VICKY
Oh oh oh no/

ERICA
Will you marry me.

VICKY
What? No You—this is grief
You should

ERICA
I am, I’m grieving *and*

VICKY
You’re not, you’re proposing

ERICA
I’m so happy to be here

VICKY
You’re experiencing loss. This is, this is [delusion], I don’t know what this is

ERICA
We’ve been together for a long time...

VICKY
I broke up with you

BARFIELD: In some ways *Bright Half Life* is a return to an earlier aesthetic. My first major play, *Blue Door*, was also a two-hander that warps time. But this play is also a creative leap forward for me. It’s the most intimate play I’ve written to date, and I find that really exciting.

RAIL: Have the time shifts and moment-to-moment structure of the play offered more challenges, or freedoms?

BARFIELD: The biggest challenge actually became a creative opportunity. I thought: How do I structure a satisfying dramatic arc with a nonlinear narrative? And how do I calibrate momentum through a series of short scenes—there are over 75, some only one sentence long—as opposed to a more traditional play, with five or ten scenes total?

Even with this structure, it was important for me to create a play that had both dramatic tension and rising action.

RAIL: Audiences need that.

BARFIELD: Right, so even though the play unfolds out of sequence, it still follows, I believe, a traditional structure in terms of a beginning, middle, and end.

The penultimate moment is chronologically the inciting incident (reflecting the start of the play), but it’s *also* the climax, as with traditional structure. We see what sparked the entire crisis of the play, just before the story ends.

From *Bright Half Life*:

ERICA
My heart really this is serious

VICKY
When he first gave us the menu, I thought don’t order a cream sauce

ERICA
Ow, this might be a heart attack

VICKY
Or heartburn

ERICA
That’s for old people

VICKY
You didn’t really chew your food

ERICA
Ow

VICKY
Do you want some Tums?

*

(Without pause, we are back in the hallway).

ERICA
The thing is: [soulmates]

VICKY
Your dad's dying, okay okay okay / I'll go

ERICA
No don't go

VICKY
I just said I'd go

ERICA
People die, it's part of life, dying

VICKY
Erica

ERICA
You don't have to go

RAIL: You create such an active experience for your audience, because we're constantly making the realization that a shift in time/place/conversation has occurred, while also piecing together bits of story with previous bits we've gotten.

As a reader, I loved that. How has that worked for audience members as you've developed the play?

BARFIELD: When the play was read this summer at the O'Neill [National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center], it was interesting to discover at what point audience members clicked into the experience and both understood and embraced the structure.

The "ah ha!" moment came for each person at a different time, so that moment of audience recognition is impossible to predict entirely. I have tried to place "markers" throughout the play, like signposts, so that audience members are able to orient themselves within the disorientation.

RAIL: The timeframe of your play is interesting too, that it stretches over so many years. How has that influenced the play in terms of the evolving identity of gay women in our country? Or the changing role of marriage?

BARFIELD: The "politics of being gay" grace notes the play, I think. When I began writing, I wasn't thinking politically. But, like it or not, historically there's always been something inherently political about being gay.

Midway through writing the first draft, I mapped the play's timeline and realized a surprising juxtaposition between the marriage proposal and national uproar over gay marriage. And the romance between Erica and Vicky goes through turbulence just when there's greater public acceptance of gay relationships.

RAIL: That's an interesting connection—or disconnection?

BARFIELD: And that dichotomy seems to reflect the play's fractured story structure—the way memory, perception, and reality all work against one another.

RAIL: The production later this month at WP will be the world premiere of the play?

BARFIELD: Right, and Rebecca Henderson and Rachel Holmes are our two amazingly talented actresses.

RAIL: And you'll be working again with Leigh Silverman (who directed *Blue Door* and *The Call*, both at Playwright's Horizons). What are some conversations that you've been having with Leigh about *Bright Half Life*, as you head into rehearsals?

BARFIELD: It's hard to say exactly *what* we talk about—but I will say that I find working with Leigh to be a magical experience. Like I walk around saying: "I can't believe this is my life." When Leigh and I first met in the mid '90s, she was an assistant director and I'd barely written half a play. Today, when it comes to talking about plays, we've developed a shorthand.

I feel like Leigh literally lives inside my creative brain—except as a smarter version of me. She can be really tough sometimes, which I like. In the end, the experience is both thrilling and rigorous.

RAIL: You specify that the play has "little to no set." How has design contributed to the process?

BARFIELD: When I saw the model for Rachel Hauck's set, I was blown away. Rachel (who also designed *The Call*) and Leigh have come up with a design concept that fits the play perfectly—yet, I never would have thought of it myself. That's my favorite kind of collaboration.

RAIL: Sounds to me something like artistic soul mates at work. I can't wait to see the result. ☺

Bright Half Life, by Tanya Barfield, directed by Leigh Silverman, runs February 17 – March 22 at Women's Project Theater (New York City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th Street, Manhattan). For tickets and further info, visit: www.wptheater.org.

.....
KATHRYN WALAT is a playwright who splits her time between New York and Savannah.

IN DIALOGUE was created by Emily DeVoti in October 2001 as a monthly forum for playwrights to engage with other playwrights in print. Since then, over 120 playwrights have been featured. If you are a playwright and would like to write a column, please contact Emily at theater@brookynrail.org.

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from Lovers in the Marquetalla Republic

by Tim VanDyke

X.

Conjure
 a lyre
 to soothe yourself

Conjure a salve

 your lips
 are bleeding
 &
 the tender points
 at your temples
 are bleeding—

 the cattle low
 on the hillside
 break into
 stampede
 &
 trample
 their young—

nothing
 troubles
 the image—

 the slope of the
 hillside
 makes
 your vision
 slip

you reframe the death
 of the young
 as a love
 that will turn
 necrotic
 in the end—

the pustules of the young
 will congeal
 around your eye
 and drool
 insects
 out of its
 lowered lid—

 they will praise
 the lyre
 that also sleeps
 with the dead

 praise the soldier
 who catches you
 at the throat
 as all

 turns ripe
 in your heart—

 the swift herald
 of their love

 the swift music
 that decays in the air

 the swift
 sun
 o angel

will steam
 hot blood

your face
 in thick binding
 will sweat
 a red milk

your chest
 in thick binding
 and red sweat

 a sigh
 at the sound
 of your arhythmia—

your heart
 pumping
 toxins
 onto the hillside
 growing red
 in the dawn
 of all beginning—

.....
TIM VANDYKE grew up in Colombia, South America, until guerilla warfare forced him back to the United States. Since then, he has worked in several insane asylums. His books include *Topographies Drawn with a Divine Chain of Birds* (Lavender Ink, 2011), *Fugue Engine* (Cannibal Books, 2012), and *Light on the Lion's Face: A Reading of Baudrillard's Seduction* (Argotist 2012). His work has most recently appeared in *Typo*, *Drunken Boat*, and elsewhere.

two

by Sophie Robinson

video

in your actress time you'd always play the rougher parts
entrance the lives of the stupid throats of ordinary people
& i'd be some posh bitch laying down the law & then
i'd go home & wank w/out cumming until i fell
asleep thinking about the echo of your laugh on a sound
stage or the curve of your swollen thigh through rippling
or bubbled water

sometimes I'm smiling like a kid in my knickers.
my spandex and my glue-gun. my hunger stripes
across me. my face of painted leather. my ruddiness
my windlashed bits // the raw earth of our home upon
the pink tough ridges of our padding heels. lifelong
softies. no messing at my sanitary sickbed. muscle
me into feeling – start up the piano –

a mirror made of flesh

hands flap & roar
never normal under wraps
& putting on events
lest we get defunded whilst
heaving on the nasty pony
of our dailiness, bruised
nail beds, visible as babies
no it DISAPPEARS (the body)
it goes away. i wish it would,
rarely, the frontal image
of my less good self

a hammer hammering a hammer!
ice buckets made of ice!
a cockroach crawling on a rat!
a triangle inside a triangle!
a chicken eating KFC!
a dog doing an impression of another dog on TV!
2x women fucking in the street -

you be the rust
& I'll be the steel
& disappear.
you be the rust
& I'll be the steel
so get on me

by the shoals on the beach
by the water in its plenty
by the sheepskin by the chill
by the trains the trains the trains
by the drowning & the hail
by the moaning by the emails
we'll cum unhooked in time

i've got such a big nose.
i should win. i should win
an oscar. pissing in it
is the least best way
to clean a swimming pool.
writing this poem must be
the least best way to say
i like you - all of you -
& even though everything
is disappointing & gross
you are all ok
the way you are.

Police Poem

by Rod Smith

Grace to be killed and die as brainlessly as political
The fiefed beasts &

\\ 'hons' unarrested in the trail pack tax. . .

*the proletariat's determining role in history stopped
with the bombing of Hiroshima*

unbest

bright

chide

light-aright of an ink-fest army-civ this weed arose from the civilian code(s) a complex
assonance the sages succeed in, weed-tested and in that brood a jolly captain's *new freedom* it has four
heads and gulps computer juice like power organized by one class to suppress another but i know as
we all know Miket and a Sergeant named Healey . . .

cops just arrest people

capitularies & helots
accentuate the sacred power of yoga.

base tame mild-mannered look-away american methologies of enchambered meriken class-struggle--
its archetype is the cursory execution of every ninth one in line-- a 64th of the needed semi-wild flock
(People all know the workings of order and chaos) People all know the map they showed us. People all
know the gravity of advancement within the strong force. Their vital spirits are guarded within

and cannot be deluded by things. Things, however, are quite deluded.

.....
ROD SMITH's latest book is *Touché* (Wave, 2015). His other books include *Deed* (U. Iowa, 2007), *Music or Honesty* (Roof, 2003), and *The Good House* (Spectacular Books, 2001). He edits the journal *Aerial*, publishes Edge Books, and manages Bridge Street Books in Washington, DC. He has taught at the The Iowa Writers' Workshop, The Maryland Institute College of Art, and The Corcoran College of Art + Design. Smith edited *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley* (U. Cal Press, 2014) with Kaplan Harris and Peter Baker.

.....
SOPHIE ROBINSON lives in London. She is the author of two books: *a* (Les Figues, 2009) and *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair* (Bad Press, 2012). She is a lecturer in Poetry at the University of East Anglia.

*warm like you**
for alicia coombes

by Erica Lewis

i am addicted and i keep thinking

that's what i'll wear to the party

move to that dance

[say] time is a little container

not a healer

i want to finish what's her face's book

and just be done with it

i have this intense need to be liked

to see the new ink

and anything else you think might help

right now "I don't believe in real life"

Memory is not real life

It's just a fact of feeling lost

something fierce

my friends are really saving me right now

hummingbirds with a little aubrey beadsley

you don't need

all the things you buy

i'd love to cross over, pretty mama

but the water's way too high

i didn't pay you to come out here

i didn't pay you for no boat rides

dancing in the shallows of the river

we hold on

to the life we aspire to

trying not to grow old

hear my train a comin'

well that's just how we roll

with the lights on

and some adult beverages

excited to hang out

to have luxury problems

we are crossing the bridge into sf now

meet there or close

the way here or here's hoping

god loves you when you're beautiful

and you are too beautiful to be a poet

i don't really want to sit in my house alone

with all this awesome booty

drinking a bottle of rose'

slapping my tattoo to stop the itch

i wouldn't mind a little fucking

reading the art of the personal essay

being held accountable for my own actions

but somehow everything you do

will be used against you

you've got too much visible shit

to keep your friends close

and your enemies closer

I am so glad

someone so beautiful

exists at all

* "for once in my life"

.....
ERICA LEWIS lives in San Francisco where she is a fine arts publicist. Her work has appeared in various anthologies and journals. Books include the *precipice of jupiter* (Queue Books) and *camera obscura* (BlazeVox Books), both collaborations with artist Mark Stephen Finein, and the solo project *murmur in the inventory* (Shearsman Books, 2013). She is currently working on completing her box set trilogy. A double chap is forthcoming from Lame House Press in fall 2015 and a chap project is forthcoming in spring 2015 from Ypolita. She was born in Cincinnati, Ohio.

seven by Noelle Kocot

Blood	Choir	Cruelty	No Witnesses	Pills	Reform
I	I	Is	Wet	Communication	In
Aired	Don't	Different	Unfetterings	Goddess	The
Out	Recognize	Nowadays	Edges	Moon	Diabolical
My	Anyone	It	Of	Husband	Good
Heart	In	Talks	Sleep	Or	Light
Like	The	In	Edges	I	A
A	Choir	Soothing	Of	Would	Mass
Scumbag	But	Voices	The	Have	Grave
That	If	And	Throat	Asked	Has
Is	You	Never	Wingspan	You	Been
Seeing	Suggest	Even	From	To	Found
The	Me	Alludes	Ankle	Stare	At
Light	For	To	To	And	A
Of	A	The	Mouth	Point	Reform
Day	Study	Rack	Unheard	Nothing	School
For	On	And	It	Chilling	And
The	Lichens	The	Is	About	Those
First	I	Screw	The	It	Nosebleeds
Time	Would	It	Absence	Anymore	And
We	Not	Will	Of	Our	Razors
All	Dream	Hush	Scene	Common	We
Lose	Of	The	And	Song	Now
The	Staying	Drum	A	Goes	Find
Edge	Dry	Of	Filched	On	Had
Of	But	A	Mushroom	And	A
Our	Would	Train	In	On	Root
Bodies'	Promise	Rewinding	A	And	But
Nakedness	To	Read	Supermarket	I	We
And	Make	A	Will	Find	Didn't
The	Myself	Manual	Neither	I	Know
Heart's	Just	For	Help	Want	Before
Inability	A	Sock	Nor	Ceaselessly	No
To	Little	Puppets	Harm		We
Field	Bit	Not	That		Didn't
Its	Green	Too	Head-on		Know
Own	For	Bad	Collision		Before
Blood	You	You			And
	And	Say			It
	Everyone	But			Wouldn't
		Then			Be
		Again			Difficult
		Living			To
		In			Say
		The			We
		Empire			Don't
		Is			Know
		Its			Now
		Own			Either
		Sorrow			

Retrograde

Half-dream of scarves on a white table,
 It's as if one of the doors I've been walking
 Through is suddenly transparent. Nothing
 Ironic in coming out of the snow. God is
 A pianist, and all the folding chairs are broken.
 Now, I walk through paint & clay. I go
 Skyward to what goads and chooses. If I
 Lay my head down, down, the stains on
 My shroud will fade. Exultant blue limit,
 Feet washed by pigments, I am ruled by
 What is drawn and rippling, deliciously
 Chuffing off to the trappings of style, shocked
 Into prosceniums in which ink dries in
 Time with the rivers. These coffins lying
 Around, no, they are benches for us to sit
 Upon. Dusk of arms, legs, no, just lines.

.....
 NOELLE KOCOT's sixth book, *Soul in Space*, was published by *Wave Books* in 2013. Originally from Brooklyn, she lives in New Jersey and teaches writing in New York.

Paranoia

by Hassouna Mosbahi

TRANSLATED FROM THE
ARABIC BY WILLIAM M. HUTCHINS

Poetical idea pink, then golden, then grey, then
black. Still true to life also. Day, then the night.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

They suddenly seized control of all the media—radio, television, and print—till I felt these men with scowling faces, long black galabias, and dusty, unkempt beards dangling down to their breasts were pursuing me nonstop, allowing me no peace of mind whatsoever. They walked the streets with me, whether these were deserted or crowded. They patrolled the public gardens and roamed through the packed stores I occasionally visit to purchase supplies. They were with me too in the depressing gray office where I work for an insurance agency. Even when I went to the shore in the evening to relax and to breathe in fresh air to help my lungs, which I exhaust by smoking, I saw them following me persistently, doggedly, and stubbornly until I would be forced to return home quickly, panting, with uncertain steps. My mind is troubled by suspicions and terrifying worries. They are like bedbugs and mosquitoes that keep me from sleeping nights during fiery summer months. I toss and turn on pins and needles till dawn, without managing to sleep a wink, while they gnaw on my flesh and drink my blood. One night, which was as desolate as a desert a traveler navigates alone, I dreamt they attacked me while I was walking down narrow, lonely streets obstructed by piles of garbage. They stripped my clothes off in a dark cul-de-sac and violated me. I lack sufficient courage to relate the details of this assault and cannot describe its psychological effects adequately. Yes, Gentlemen, they perpetrated that atrocity on me while I slept beside my beautiful wife, for whom my colleagues envy me. I was able to tell that from their looks, gestures, and whispers when she occasionally waited for me outside my office building. When I awoke from that frightening nightmare, I found that I was clinging to her and that she was a hot as a live coal. She was naked from the waist down, and my prick was rammed between her cheeks. She murmured for me to do with her whatever I wanted while releasing the shuddering moan I enjoy hearing before intercourse. My penis, however, shriveled and turned flaccid. I wasn't able to attain an erection no matter how I tried. That morning, my wife did not kiss me the way she usually did and avoided looking at me till she left the house. My little daughter, Sana', who is five, stopped rushing happily to kiss me when she woke and no longer threw herself into my arms when I returned home from work in the evening. She began to refuse outright for me to tell her bedtime stories before she fell asleep or for me to take her to the kindergarten or accompany her to the zoo—or even for me to touch her. Just the sight of me would send her running—as if I were a savage beast in a horror film. At other times, she would stand some distance away and stare at me suspiciously and cautiously—as if I were a total stranger. If I attempted to approach or converse with her, she would scream loudly in alarm, forcing me to desist immediately and remove myself as far away as possible. My relationship gradually deteriorated with my wife and my daughter Sana', who is the most precious part of my life. Then I no longer ate breakfast, lunch, or supper with them. The moment I entered the house, I would feel I was a persona non grata there. Once night fell, my daughter, her eyes clouded by dark sorrow, would flee to her room early. Shortly after that my wife would quit me too, without a word. Entering the bedroom, she would lock the door securely—underlining for me the point that sleeping next to her could now only be a memory from the distant past. So I would sit alone in the living room till late into the night. I wouldn't turn on the television for fear of seeing Islamists trekking across deserts waving black banners, slaughtering

men in the presence of their children and wives, beheading people while chanting “La illaha illa Allah” and “Allahu Akbar,” terrorizing the residents of cities and villages, issuing fatwas that legalized murder, destruction, plunder, and slavery wherever they go. I went to excruciating pains to forget them and expunge them from my brain and memory but failed miserably, because they were always in front of me and behind me, on my right and left—like my shadow, from which I can never liberate myself.

This wasn't the end of it, because my condition worsened day by day, dragging me down into dark, bottomless chasms. At work, my colleagues no longer greeted me politely and graciously as they had done throughout the ten years I had spent with them in the agency. If a colleague was forced to address me on some work-related topic, he would limit himself to such a terse, glacial sentence that I could scarcely understand what he wanted from me. Then if I requested some clarification, he would walk off, repeating something under his breath—a curse or a rebuke. When I cast a fleeting glance at my other colleagues, I would find them absorbed in their work with a phony earnestness that only doubled my rage and distress. Then I would depart, trembling and feeling like fleeing and never returning to that company. From time to time, though, I would attempt to begin a conversation on some subject with them. Then I would be rudely rebuffed. At that moment my anguish would grow even more intense, and my face would burn with shame and fury toward them and toward my psyche, which had become as despicable as that of a beggar whose pleas and plight are ignored by passersby as hunger's knives dice his innards. I often swore the weightiest oaths that I would definitely never try that again. Then the next day, I would tell myself: *Take it easy! The good times may return.* My despair might disappear, and my comrades at work might recover their fondness for me, speak amiably to me, and laugh out loud at jokes I told them. But my hope would quickly evaporate as once more I sank into suspicions and fears and my isolation grew ever more pronounced. Only when I left the office for a few minutes would my colleagues' good humor return along with their love of conversation. They would burst into noisy laughter that continued till they heard my footsteps as I returned to the office.

My nightmares began to resemble horror films then. I saw those men in black attacking the city, closing the markets, coffeehouses, and restaurants, preventing children from going to school and men from going to work, blanketing squares, streets, and public gardens with black, and spreading out along the shore till they shrouded the horizon. Then women took to the streets with their hair flying, beating their faces and breasts and weeping for their lost husbands, sons, and relatives. Yes, I saw these dreadful images in rapid succession, as if they were projected onto a screen at a cinema. I occasionally saw mountains jerk around, their peaks swaying together. The sky barraged the city with the bones of the dead and the earth split asunder, spitting out rotted corpses and severed heads. Then black clouds of locusts attacked, devouring all the crops, trees, and plants till the earth became a barren desert, devoid even of animals. I repeatedly shouted mightily and woke with a parched throat and a body so hot it was virtually on fire. My screams of terror would naturally rouse my wife and daughter. Then I would find myself cowering meekly before my wife as if I had committed some inexcusable, hideous sin. She wouldn't tolerate this and began to threaten to evict me from the house, on the grounds that I constituted a threat to her and “her” daughter.

THE DAY I TURNED THIRTY-EIGHT, I HEADED TO my place of employment through a cold, heavy downpour. I arrived there wet and feeling gloomy, because my wife had not even seen fit to wish me a happy birthday, not even icily or neutrally. When I entered the office, the phone rang. Trembling with fear for no particular reason, I picked up the receiver. Then the flirtatious secretary Siham, whom all the guys dream of shagging, informed me impassively that my boss wished to speak with me in half an hour. Putting down the receiver, I began to leaf through the folder in front of me, as a tremor spread through my entire body.

Even though I attempted to convince myself that the topic would be nothing out of the ordinary and that actually a promotion might be awaiting me, fear engulfed me till I felt I was being strangled with a coarse rope. Confronting this desperate situation, I went up to the third floor as if I were being led to the gallows. Siham's lackluster greeting, which she tossed at me while taking care not to look at me, only increased my deranged condition. My boss welcomed me amiably enough and ordered coffee for me. Then he started asking how I was and how my little family was doing. I replied tersely. After this he gazed at me for a time. Then, looking serious and stern—the way he does on official occasions and at meetings—he said, “Mr. Mansur, you've changed a lot lately—isn't that so?”

I didn't understand what he meant by this. So I didn't respond and stared at him the way a defendant stares at a judge who has disrupted his train of thought with a question he doesn't know how to answer.

As his expression grew ever more serious and stern, he added, “Yes, Mr. Mansur, you've changed a great deal. I will not conceal from you that the reports submitted to me all concur that your productivity has declined considerably. These reports also remark that you spend a great deal of time biting your fingernails, mumbling, and muttering. In fact, you occasionally utter some delirious expression your colleagues don't understand. In a single week, you have been late for work four days in a row. You have also left the office before the designated end of the workday without obtaining permission from anyone.”

He shifted in his chair and scrutinized me for some moments. Then almost amiably he asked, “Is something troubling you, Mr. Mansur?”

His question so terrified me that I wasn't able to utter a syllable!

Then his expression relaxed, and I heard him say gently and graciously, “Mr. Mansur, you've been a model employee. During the ten years I have been here, your performance has delighted and pleased us. You know full well that I've praised your qualities and diligence on numerous occasions—not in private but in your presence and before your colleagues. This time, however, I feel duty-bound to caution you before it's too late.”

I summoned all my reserves to defend myself. I told my boss, “Sir, I swear by God Almighty that what has been said about me in the reports isn't true at all. I am working as seriously and diligently as ever and have never been late for work or left before six. So I can state that these reports are merely biased slanders!”

Looking earnest and stern again, the director replied, “You know as well as everyone else, Mr. Mansur, that I ignore backbiting and slander. This has been my policy since I became head of this firm, and I shall continue to be guided by it to the end. Without going into details, Mr. Mansur, I advise you to take my warning seriously. I hope you will return to your previous level of performance!”

The director rose and shook my hand warmly. Then I returned to the office. The moment I entered, my colleagues stopped talking and became glumly silent. I buried my head in the files piled before me and knuckled down to work.

When I left the office, I walked through torrents of rain. The cold was stinging, the congestion was severe, the vehicles were honking loudly, and the anarchy was intolerable. Fleeing all this, I hastened to a bar called “The Corsair,” which was by the sea, wanting to have a drink to relieve my tension and worries, but the waiter, whose nickname was “Samson” and whose petulance was famous, blocked my entry. When I asked why, he furrowed his brow and, looking really mean, shouted, “Have you forgotten what you did two days ago?”

“What did I do?”

“Do you think I'm an idiot or have you lost your memory?”

“Neither.”

“In this case, how can you not remember what you did here two days ago?”

“What did I do?”

He continued staring at me. Then he said, “Two days ago, after a couple of drinks, you began to utter obscenities. Then you turned over the table, and I threw you out of the

bar—but only with difficulty. So that’s why you’d better never return here!”

“Brother, did I really do all that?”

“You did even more than that, but I don’t want to waste time talking to you. You’d better leave now before my blood boils and I do something you’ll never forget!”

I walked off feeling worthless and puny, wondering what had happened. *My life is ruined and putrid. My enemies are growing ever more numerous, and a wall of loathing separates me from my wife and my daughter, who is the most precious part of my life. One day I’ll find myself alone—without any support or friend, perhaps without any work or shelter. This is all possible because men wearing black galabias and waving black flags are dogging my footsteps, poisoning my blood, dumping me into dark caverns, and contaminating my spirit. I’ve become a hostile, foul-mouthed boor, who is difficult to live with. I have done my utmost, more than once, to liberate myself from them but have failed miserably, whereas they remain mighty. All indications are that they will grow in strength and force. Even the Great Powers are baffled by them and have been unable to defeat them. Now they are black phantoms that pursue me day and night. What shall I do?* Should I go home, where loathing and aversion await me? No, no, I had better wait till my wife and daughter were sound asleep. *I need to be focused and wary.* I shouldn’t cause another incident like last week when I arrived home after midnight. Without turning on a light, I groped my way through the darkness. Suddenly a fierce tremor shook the house. I froze in place, seized by intense fear. A few minutes later I turned on the light to find that our unique vase lay shattered on the floor. My wife stood at the bedroom door with disheveled hair, her eyes red with rage. She immediately began screaming and wailing—lamenting her terrible luck and miserable life. I remained nailed in place, like a thief caught red-handed.

The city quieted down, and the shops closed their doors, but the rain continued falling in torrents. I entered a bar called “al-Sa’ada” and found that it was packed with patrons who were all drinking and smoking. They were trading wisecracks in loud voices and from time to time would explode with laughter as they pounded their feet on the floor. I ordered a beer and went to drink it at the counter as I scrutinized faces that broke like waves before me. I don’t know what happened after that. All I can say is that I found myself inside a police station. Three policemen were asking me why I started a brawl at the Happiness Bar. They mentioned that I had slapped the waiter, broken some glasses, cursed the patrons, and spat at one of them. In fact, I had insulted His Excellency and uttered obscenities.

“I’m sorry, Gentlemen. But I don’t remember any of the things you’ve mentioned.”

They thrust their heads toward me and all asked as one, “Are we lying to you?”

“No, no—I don’t mean that. But believe me: I actually don’t remember any of this.”

They exchanged glances. Then the man I thought was in charge said, “I know you very well, Mr. Mansur. I know you’re a gentleman who never causes problems. That’s why I couldn’t believe that you would have committed acts like these that could land you in prison!”

“Excellent Gentlemen, I apologize to you again for whatever I have done and declare to you that this will never happen again!”

“You acknowledge then that you started a brawl . . . isn’t that so?”

“I’m sorry, Gentlemen!”

They exchanged glances once more. Then the officer I thought was in charge said to me, “Okay, Mr. Mansur. We accept your apology, and you can return home now. We counsel you not to go into bars in the future!”

“Thank you, Kind Gentlemen!”

I returned home at one in the morning. When I woke, I found myself stretched out on the sofa in my street clothes. My wife and my daughter Sana’ were nearby, staring at me with disgust as if I were a stinky, stray dog that had snuck into the house when they weren’t looking!

MY CONDITION DETERIORATED DAY BY DAY. I QUARRELED frequently with all types of people. At the agency, the secretary presented me a list that showed I had been late to work every morning, scarcely did anything at the office except bite my

finger-nails, stare at my colleagues, utter strange words no one could understand, and laugh for no reason at all. She concluded her presentation by saying the boss advised me to rest for two weeks in hopes that my condition would improve and I would become as energetic and vigorous as before.

I thanked her and left to wander the streets of the Old City. They were cluttered with piles of garbage, cats, and elderly women. Even though the sky was clear and the sun was shining, the cold was severe and penetrated to my bones. I asked myself more than once: *What am I going to do during these next two weeks? Shall I return to my village in the forests of the country’s midsection, even though I haven’t visited it in many years?* No, I wouldn’t do that. Ever since my father died, I hadn’t been able to stand the series of quarrels between my four brothers. As often as not these quarrels flared up for trivial reasons and concerned a cow, an olive tree, or even a chicken. During each quarrel they would exchange insults in loud voices as they brandished cudgels in the air. In fact they fought till blood flowed. I believe that the real reason for all this was that the blood of ancient tribesmen, who used to battle and fight each other all the time, still courses through their veins. If I went there, they would be suspicious and think I came with some ulterior motive. For that reason they would unite against me till I returned home as quickly as possible. No, no, I wouldn’t go to my village! Should I go to the capital? That idea would also bring undesirable consequences, because the bustle there was feverish, and people never stopped running around, competing with each other, and fighting. A person there could steal a bite of food from you before it reached your mouth. So it would be best for me to stay here in this northern city, where I felt at home and had sunk my roots. What was important was to prepare an excellent program to fill my days and nights so I wouldn’t feel lonely, cranky, or frustrated. It was also important for me to do my utmost to restore my affectionate relationship with my wife and daughter. Failing that, I would remain anxious and worried and the black phantoms would continue to pursue me, disturbing my life and doubling my worries and pains. Oh, how I wish I could enter the house to find my wife happy and laughing! Then I would kiss her and whisper to her sweet words that would make her even more beautiful and radiant. Then my daughter would immediately throw herself in my arms and I would hug her. I would thrust into her pocket a piece of chocolate after supper and tell her bedtime stories until sleep carried her away to a world of beautiful dreams. Then I would join my wife in the bedroom and find that she had fixed herself up just as she had done on our wedding night. Oh, how happy I would be when the blissful, happy days that had characterized my life over the course of many years returned!

The Old City discharged me to the sea. So I found myself gazing with fascination and interest at the spectacular scenery and remarkable colors that appeared before me as the sun set over the peaks of the western mountains. My soul was delighted, and the light flooded my heart and spirit. For a few moments, I sensed that the days of harsh isolation and terrifying suspicions had departed forever. Suddenly Mihub appeared before me. He wore a blue cap, a shirt the same color, jeans, and white Adidas sneakers. I wasn’t surprised to find him here, since he was someone who loved the sea, no matter the season. He was a man of few words and was always alone. I had heard people of this northern city relate strange stories about him. They said he had migrated to Europe when he was eighteen. He had spent almost thirty years there and had cut all ties with members of his family. Over the course of time, everyone forgot him and no one mentioned him. One autumn, however, he reappeared, with gray hair. Long years of exile had carved creases onto his face, and his blue eyes sparkled with the glint peculiar to solitary people. When one of his relatives sought to befriend him, Mihub fled to live in a dilapidated house in the woods near the sea. I had encountered him a number of times and discussed various topics with him, but never for long. Once, when I attempted to learn something about his private life, his expression became morose, and he walked away with deliberate steps, muttering angrily. I had to apologize to him more than once to restore my relationship with him.

Without returning my greeting, Mihub said mournfully, “Life is rotten. The whole world is rotten—isn’t that so?”

Then as he stared at the sea, which was turning dark before our eyes, he added, “Yes, life is rotten, and the whole world is rotten too. Perhaps it won’t be long till man totally loses the ability to enjoy the beauty of nature, which is methodically being destroyed. Rich and poor share responsibility for despoiling the earth. Because of all of this, forests will be eradicated, orchards and gardens will disappear, and the earth will become as bare and arid as al-Rub’ al-Khali Desert. There will be no clean air, and people will die on their feet. The rivers and lakes will dry up, and the seas and oceans will change into stinky, stagnant swamps without any fish in them. Yes, all this will happen. What makes me angry and upset is that politicians and public intellectuals in the great, rich nations keep praising what they call “scientific and technological progress,” ignoring the devastation that is occurring everywhere in the world. Now the Inquisition has returned, books are burned again, and poets are slaughtered. The Assassins whom we assumed had gone extinct have appeared once more and are armed with unprecedented levels of blind malice, villainy, and hostility. Now they are spreading death and terror everywhere on earth so that scarcely anyone escapes their evil.”

His words frightened me, and I walked away, trembling. I don’t remember what I did after that, but when I regained consciousness, I found myself stretched out on a bed wrapped in bandages. My surroundings suggested that I was in a hospital. *I wonder what’s happened? Did a car run over me? Did strangers attack me at the shore? Did I fight with someone in a pub?* These questions ran through my mind as four policemen entered the room. They greeted me coldly. Then they pulled chairs toward the bed and two sat down on either side of me. The officer who seemed to be in charge questioned me about my actions of the previous day. I said I had encountered Mihub but didn’t mention what he had told me.

This officer poked his head toward me to ask, “Mr. Mansur, do you know what you did yesterday?”

“No, Sir, I do not.”

“You attacked your wife with a knife! If the neighbors hadn’t intervened in a timely way, you would have killed her!”

I released a howl of alarm and rocked from side to side as if wanting to jump out of bed. The policemen, however, restrained me. Then I burst into tears and heard the officer tell me, “Calm down, Mr. Mansur. Please compose yourself. We merely want to help you.”

“But how could I have done this? Why?” I asked, almost choking on my tears.

“We don’t know, Mr. Mansur. All we know is that when we reached your house, you were raving, uttering obscenities, and cursing the neighbors. Your terrified daughter had fainted!”

I continued sobbing feverishly. When my weeping subsided, the officer told me, “You must calm down, Mr. Mansur. Let the doctors save you from the severe psychological crisis you’ve been experiencing for several months.”

“I’m sane!” I protested, wiping away my tears.

“No, you’re not, Mr. Mansur. Your conduct and actions show you’re not in your right mind. So we advise you to calm down. If you don’t, your life will get even worse. Now we must leave. We hope you recover as soon as possible.”

They departed, leaving me alone in that white wasteland. ☞

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HASSOUNA MOSBAHI, who was born in 1950 near Kairouan, Tunisia, is a writer, literary critic, and poet, as well as a freelance journalist for German newspapers. After studying in Paris, Madrid, and London, he settled in Munich, where he lived from 1985 and in 2000. In 2005 Mosbahi returned to Tunisia. He has published, in Arabic and German, four volumes of short stories, several novels, and some non-fiction. He has additionally made a name for himself as a travel writer and a translator into Arabic, translating Henri Michaux, René Char, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. His biography of Saint Augustine was published in Arabic in Tunisia in 2010. In 2012, he wrote and lectured in the United States.

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WILLIAM MAYNARD HUTCHINS, who is based in North Carolina, was educated at Berea, Yale, and the University of Chicago. He was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for literary translation in 2005–2006 for his translation from *Arabic of The Seven Veils of Seth* by Ibrahim al-Koni (Garnet Publishing) and again in 2011–2012 for a translation of *New Waw* by Ibrahim al-Koni (the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas). He was the co-winner of the 2013 Saif Ghobash/Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for *A Land Without Jasmine* by Wajidi al-Ahdal (Garnet).

Scheduled for release in 2015 are his translations of *French Perfume* by Amir Tag Elsir (ANTIBOOKCLUB), *Telepathy* by Amir Tag Elsir (Bloomsbury-Qatar Foundation), *The Scarecrow* by Ibrahim al-Koni (University of Texas Press), and *A Portal in Space* by Mahmoud Saeed (University of Texas Press).

from *Delusions of Being Observed* by Lewis Warsh

NOW HE'S GOING to say something, but no one's listening. Now he's going to get dressed, whatever he wore the night before. Now he's going to sit on a chair in the living room and tie his shoes. Now he's going to walk towards me, with his eyes on the pavement, as if he didn't see me. Now he's whispering in my ear, but I don't want to listen. Now he's holding my sweaty hand as we climb the steps to his fifth floor apartment. (There's an elevator, but he insists on walking.) Now I tell him he's hurting me but he doesn't stop. Now he sits in his chair and leans forward and touches his toes. Now his head is on the pillow, but his eyes are wide open. (I could walk across town to my own apartment, or take a taxi, since it's after midnight, but I don't. Instead, I open a book and begin reading, until he's ready to turn off the lights.) Now he's talking to himself in his sleep (and this time I'm listening). Now he's drinking a Campari, with ice, and it's the middle of winter, a layer of snow on the ground (3-6 inches). Now he takes my arm as we walk home, back to his apartment, which I don't think of as home, but where we spend most of our time, the streets covered with a layer of ice, and I catch him as he's about to fall. Now he's in bed with the flu, his doughy face, his long chin, his receding hairline, and I'm comforting him because he can't sleep. Now he's in the hospital talking to me on the phone in a constricted voice that sounds like it's coming from the depths of a cave as a nurse from Barbados named Georgette takes his blood pressure. Now he's sitting across the room listening to Karen Carpenter sing "We've Only Just Begun."

NOW HE'S COMPLAINING about his mother, Bertha, age ninety, suffering from dementia, in Brooklyn. She's still living at home, the same two-bedroom rent-stabilized garden apartment in Park Slope where Robert was living before he left for college in Berkeley, when his father was alive and his younger sister Francine was in high-school, but with round-the-clock care, since a few months ago she fell in the middle of the night and bruised her hip. Somehow she managed to crawl into the bedroom and call her daughter on her land-line (it's no use trying to convince her to get a cellphone), the same phone Robert used thirty years before to call his high-school girlfriends. It was then that Robert decided, along with his sister, who I've never met, to hire home care attendants to stay with his mother twenty-four hours a day, which they do, taking turns sleeping on the bed in Francine's old room, but it's Francine who organizes the schedules of the three women (Pina, Yolanda, Annette) who prepare meals (which she barely eats) and keep track of her meds, along with myriad other tasks, including taking her to the bathroom, literally waiting on her hand and foot, while Robert visits every two weeks for a few hours and sends Francine a check every month to cover expenses and assuage his guilt. Now he's going to the movies alone, or so he says, on one of the nights we don't spend together. Now he's talking on the phone to a stranger, a person he met at the movies. Now he's waiting on line at the post office, talking to the person in front of him, a young Chinese woman with a French braid hanging mid-way down her back. Now he's having coffee with the Chinese woman, who's wearing white shorts and black tights and a short-sleeve blouse with a pattern that resembles hundreds of mint postage stamps from different countries stitched together, in an outdoor restaurant across from the post office. Now he writes his phone number with a black marker on a napkin and hands it to the young woman ("Why," she asks, in broken English, her slate gray eyes staring suspiciously at the stranger across the table, "why do you want to see me? For what reason?") Now I understand how he meets people at random, and this is how we met as well, so I shouldn't be surprised or jealous, and who knows who might be sleeping in his bed when I'm not here.

NOW HE'S STANDING on the downtown 42nd Street subway platform waiting for the B train, staring at his feet. Now he leans over the edge of the platform and watches a rat fight its way out of a paper bag. Now he looks into the tunnel, as if he was staring into the abyss, for a sign that the train is going to arrive, but all he sees are flickering lights, yellow then red, and a man in an orange vest walking down the center of the tracks. He imagines the sound of the brakes as the train comes to a shuddering stop and the passengers cursing as they fall against one another in the dark. Now a woman's voice on the intercom announces that the B train has been delayed because of police action at the 59th Street station and for a moment he remembers the chase scene from *The French Connection* with Gene Hackman as a rogue cop, an important movie from his childhood, or so he says, which we watched together a few weeks ago in his living room, drinking beer and passing a joint back and forth, even though I have to teach at nine the next morning, an American literature survey course for undergraduates beginning with "Self-Reliance" by Emerson and ending with *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and the last thing I want to do is wake up with a hangover. Now he stares at the woman on the platform in front of him, bobbing her head in time to the music on her iPod, her eyes closed, oblivious, not even aware that he's standing a few feet away, staring at her legs. He imagines the police, guns drawn, chasing a man through the tunnel, while the helicopters hover overhead, and the rats in the tunnel scurry out of sight. His shoes and socks are wet from walking aimlessly in the rain. His hair is wet and his shirt, with the threadbare collar, which he insists on wearing, is matted to his skin. Now he's staring at me across the aisle on the subway—his gaze makes me uncomfortable. This is how we met, on the B train, heading downtown. I cross my legs and pretend I'm reading but whenever I look up there he is, his eyes focused on the title of the book (*Dear Theo*, the letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother) in my hands. Now he starts a conversation with me across the aisle (I wish I could see the title of the book he's reading, but I can't) and I turn away. It's not the first time, I must admit, that someone tried to pick me up on the subway. Now I say, in response, because I'm just like him: Where did you get your ring? A black onyx stone his Chinese girlfriend bought for him as a birthday gift long ago. Now I say: this is my stop—as the train pulls into the West Fourth Street station—and he says: I'm going to get off too. For a moment I think he's going to take my hand as we walk up the steps. For a moment our hands brush against one another, but I pull away. There are people coming down the steps, all in a rush, so we walk single file. Some women hold their skirts against their legs when they walk up steps in public places, but I don't. If he wants to look up my skirt—that's his problem.

NOW HE HANGS up the phone and starts weeping, for no apparent reason. ("What is it?" I ask, sitting up in bed, but he refuses to tell me.) Now he looks at his watch in the middle of a conversation as if he's bored. Now he lights a cigarette, an American Spirit Yellow, takes a few puffs, coughs, stubs it out on the side of an ashtray. (Ten minutes later, he lights it again.) Now the ashes fall from his cigarette onto the front of his shirt, but he doesn't notice. Now he opens a book of Heidegger's letters to Hannah Arendt and says: "Listen to this." Now he interrupts me mid-sentence and says he has to go back to his apartment and get to work. When I ask him what he's thinking about, he says "Heidegger—I'm working on a book about Heidegger," as if this is the most normal thing in the world, and I think to myself: I don't know anything. Wasn't Heidegger a Nazi? Now we stand on the street corner outside my building on East Ninth Street and

I say: "Do you want to come in?" Now his phone rings in the middle of the night and when I ask him who called he says: "My mother."

NOW HE SAYS that where he went last night and what he was doing and who he was with is no one's business. He offers these words as a kind of ultimatum—this is the way it is, for now and all time, like it or not. The implication is that he's free to do whatever he wants and I have to be available whenever he wants. Now he acts like he's doing me a big favor by sleeping with me, but the opposite might also be true, maybe I'm doing *him* a favor. Now he says—it's not great (meaning sex)—unless the feeling is mutual—I mean the desire, he says—meaning if one person desires the other person more—it doesn't work. Now he claims that Henry Green is a better writer than Graham Greene but I've never heard of him, Henry, and he makes me think I'm stupid, and maybe I am for spending the night with him. (The fact that I have a PhD in American literature, and a full-time teaching job, doesn't count.) Then he asks, out of the blue, what music do you like? Marvin Gaye or Sam Cooke? "Listen to this," he says, and puts on a record of Chet Baker singing "Moonlight in Vermont." He has hundreds of records, a whole bookcase of vinyl. "Look at this," he says, showing me a photo of Chet Baker as a young man. "Wasn't he beautiful?"

NOW HE'S WALKING with a limp because of something that happened to him as a child. "I fell off my bike," he said, "and broke my ankle." Now he's standing under a canopy in the rain. Now he's waiting for someone under the marquee of a movie theater but she never arrives, or she arrives late, and he's already gone. "This is the story of my life," he says, shaking his head, "waiting for someone who never shows up, who never intended to show up, who forgot she made plans to meet me—this is what happens to me all the time." (Why tell me this?) Now he walks home alone in the rain chilled to the bone and gets into bed. He has a gaunt look, like a homeless person panhandling on the subway, the bones of his face visible beneath his skin. A homeless veteran limping to a shelter in the rain. He could have bought an umbrella almost anywhere but he chose to risk getting pneumonia instead. Now he's lighting one cigarette with the tip of another. The smoke seeps into every object in my apartment, even if I open the window, and sometimes I even take a puff or bum a cigarette and smoke it down to the filter, remembering all the cigarettes I shared with my boyfriend Marco in high school. (A cigarette after sex in his parents' basement where we went after school maybe two or three times a week.) Now he shows me a photograph of himself, age fifteen, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. ("I used to smoke Camels—unfiltered.") Now he asks someone he never met before if he can buy her a drink, a Nordic-looking young woman waiting on line in front of him at Whole Foods, and she says "no" and turns away. Now he buys a train ticket to Philadelphia and returns the same night. He's on a panel at Temple University, something to do with Martin Heidegger. Whenever there's a Heidegger conference they invite him to speak. Everyone on the train from Philadelphia is asleep except him. Now the woman sitting next to him rests her head on his shoulder without realizing what she's doing. Her gold-hoop earrings, her stiff colorless hair, her rose-scented perfume, the island of freckles on the side of her neck. Now he says: "Do you want to share a cab?" as they exit Penn Station, and when the cab stops at her apartment she says, "Do you want to come in?" Now he says "I'm going to take a bath" but he doesn't. He just stares at the TV screen and puffs on his cigarette like a zombie. Now he drums on his knee in time to the theme from "Law and Order." Now he gets off the plane in Shanghai and she's waiting for him with her brother, the Chinese woman he first met

in the post office. You can meet someone any time, anywhere, and your whole life will be different. At any moment, your life in the present can come to a halt and a new life can begin.

NOW HE TELLS me about the trip to China with his girlfriend and I nod my head as if I'm interested but I'm really thinking about the seminar (Melville and Poe) that I must teach the next day and when he shows me a photo of his ex, with her French braid and wide open smile, I say "how beautiful" but I couldn't care less.

NOW HE LIFTS his leg over the side of the tub. Now he walks into the living room naked while I'm trying to read and gets angry when I don't look up. Now he hangs up on me when I tell him I can't come over, that I'm busy, that I'm being observed in a few days by the Chair of the English Department and that I have to prepare my class on Melville. I'm asking the graduate students to read "Bartleby, the Scrivener," which I've read a million times, but which I want to reread, or at least skim, before the class. It's a week after the presidential election, three weeks after Hurricane Sandy flooded lower Manhattan and knocked out the power grids in both of the neighborhoods where we live. His block, in Chelsea, suffered less damage than mine, on 9th Street near Avenue C, which was completely flooded, so I stayed at his place for five consecutive nights, the longest amount of time we've been together. It was during this time I realized the relationship was a big mistake. He rarely refers to anything I'm doing. If I tell him how I spent my day, I can sense he's thinking about something else, or someone else, I'll never know. Sometimes, anticipating a response, I press a pause button, but he doesn't take the cue and ask me something in relation to what I said. He acts like the story is over when I was just getting started. I tell him I have to prepare for class, that I'm being observed, but it doesn't register at first, even though he's been around academia most of his life and knows exactly what I'm talking about. He did his undergraduate work in Berkeley and his graduate work in philosophy at Columbia, and then he taught as a guest lecturer at schools up and down the east coast, Emory University in Atlanta, Bates College in Maine and at the University of Maine in Orono, a semester at Yale, Stony Brook on Long Island, Haverford in Pennsylvania (which is where he met his first wife, Cody Walker, the crime novelist who taught at nearby Bryn Mawr), among others. He knows the trials people go through to get tenure, including serving on university-wide committees. No doubt, as I'm worrying about the observation, he is thinking about Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt and the book he's writing about their relationship, when Martin was a 35-year-old professor and Hannah an 18-year-old student. The affair between a young Jewish girl and a future Nazi—what more can anybody want? Now he's saying that he's going to the gym, but he could be going anywhere. I have the feeling he's lying about everything, just for the sake of lying, and I'm tempted to follow him when he leaves the house, and see where he's heading. But do I really want to know? Maybe it's time to question what I'm doing in this relationship, which has gone on for over a year, and whether I made the right decision by leaving my girlfriend Natalie for him.

NOW HE'S LOOKING in his pocket for loose change to give to the person on the subway, a young light-skinned African-American man who says he needs money to feed his family, and who croons a few bars of "Summertime" ("And the living is easy") to the blankfaced unsmiling half-asleep and mostly despondent melange of late-night passengers, most of whom avoid eye contact with him and with each other as the train stalls between stations and I think this is where we met, sitting across from one another

in a subway, almost a year ago, and an hour or two later we were in bed in my apartment on East Ninth street, and it's hard not to wonder as the train lurches forward and then stops again whether it's all been a big mistake, whether I might be better off cutting my losses and moving on, and whether I should take up Natalie's offer to visit her in Provincetown this winter, she says we owe it to one another to "try again" but I'm not sure what she means or whether she's leading me down yet another dead end, she knows how much I love it there, our little corner of the universe, and I'm sure she can tell, even on the phone, that I'm not happy, though she doesn't ask me whether I'm still seeing "that man," as she refers to him, since my decision to sleep with a man was the reason we broke up. Now he stands on line at Penn Station to purchase a ticket to Providence where he's giving a lecture on Heidegger at Brown University. Now he calls a car to take him to Newark Airport at 6 a.m. so he can board a plane to San Francisco to be on a panel at Berkeley, his old alma mater. Now he takes half an Ambien (10 mg) and falls asleep in five minutes.

NOW HE TELLS me about his college girlfriend, Margie Rappaport, the night he went to her dorm. The night they made love on the grass beside the football field. It could have happened yesterday. Now he remembers the afternoon he lost his virginity in the Bronx, in an apartment not far from the Botanical Gardens. Now he tells me more than I want to know and I want to tell him to shut up but he doesn't. I know he expects me to tell him everything I've done, as well, every boy I kissed in high school—but I won't tell him anything, I avoid the subject, the last thing I want to talk about is my relationship with Marco, my high school boyfriend, much less tell him anything about Natalie, or any of the women or men I slept with during the first year I came to New York, when I would go out late at night and pick up strangers in bars, when I realized that my relationship with Marco was over and that nothing, nothing, nothing was going to replace it, that there was no one out there at all, and it seemed possible to juxtapose Marco's body on the body of some stranger, that for an hour or two I could pretend we were still together. It's one of the problems in this relationship: I just can't be open about the most important things. I feel like I have to censor every second thought before I say it. The question I started asking myself is why I just don't end it. What's the nature of our attachment? He comes and goes as he pleases and I don't know whether he's sleeping with anyone else. We're both too lazy to put an end to it all, to write the letter or make the phone call or send the e-mail saying that it's over. There are some nice moments, I must admit. Sex, there's still sex, some version of it, but not every night. We used to make love as soon as I walked through the door of his apartment, but not any more. Sometimes he makes me laugh. Less so than in the beginning. My closest friends, Desiree and Ruth, the two people I confide in, think I'm making a mistake. I introduced them to Robert one night at Phebe's, the old-time restaurant on the Bowery where he likes to go, and the next day they both called me, first Ruth, then Desiree, and I could tell they were both puzzled about Robert, who had spent more time at another table where he saw some old friends than talking with us, though the whole point of the evening was to introduce him to my friends, and I could tell they were both having a hard time not being blunt about what they really thought (I can only imagine what they said to one another). ("Have you ever been pregnant?" he asks. "Yes," I say, "I was pregnant. Twice. Yes, I had an abortion. Twice.") Now the ball is in the air and he runs backwards with his arm extended and just as he crashes into the fence the ball drops out of his glove. ("We lost the championship because of me. If I had caught that ball—I was twelve

years old—my whole life might have been different.") Now he reads about the chaos of the Id in an essay by Freud—(*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*). Now he reads about Heidegger, and all the letters he wrote to Hannah Arendt, when she was his 18-year-old student at Marburg in 1925.

NOW HE TURNS on the television and watches the 11 o'clock news. We're in the living room of my 1-bedroom apartment on East 9th Street. It used to be a dangerous street, but now the entire neighborhood is filled with wealthy people, and all the boutiques and health-food emporiums to accommodate them. Now I hand him a glass of Dewar's on the rocks, his drink of choice, and we hear on the news that a man walked into a pharmacy in upstate New York and murdered four people, including the pharmacist, and a seventeen-year-old high school girl who worked behind the counter. Now he turns off the television and tells me about the town in upstate New York where he used to spend the summers with his parents when he was a kid. It's fifty-two miles from Utica, he says, twenty-seven miles from Booneville. Now he tells me about the Booneville Fair where he and his family used to go when he was a child and the two-headed cow and the ferris wheel that broke down when he was suspended with his sister Francine at the highest point and how they huddled in a corner of the little car while day turned to night and the temperature dropped thirty degrees. How everyone cheered when the wheel finally began to spin and they descended in slow motion with the stars and the moon almost full over the hills in the distance. How his mother Bertha enveloped him in the folds of her coat and how he can still smell the alcohol on her breath and her lilac-scented perfume. He tells me about the restaurant where he used to eat with his family, The Knotty Pine, and how some day we should rent a car and drive up there or take a train to Utica and he'll show me everything (as if I had nothing better to do), the hill where he rode on a bike with no brakes and broke his ankle and chipped a tooth. (His parents had to take him to a dentist in Utica.) He tells me everything that ever happened to him and he repeats it all again and I try to pretend I'm interested but I'm already half-asleep. I'm thinking of the class in a few days, how the Chair of the English Department, Ray DeForest, is going to observe me. I'm thinking of Natalie, and the house in Provincetown where we used to go in the winter when the town was empty. We were together two years and we were not in touch at all until about three months ago when she sent me an e-mail, totally unexpected, since our relationship ended awkwardly, to say the least, and of course I wrote back, she's someone I think about every day, and since then we've been in constant contact, mostly trading gossip about people we both know, never once referring to the past or the reason we broke up. The last time she wrote to tell me she was coming to New York from Provincetown where she lives all year round and did I want to meet for coffee? A beer? We haven't seen each other in a year, not since the morning I told her about him and she walked out of my apartment. And of course—I said yes—hoping it would be a day when he was away, so I wouldn't have to lie to him. But why do I care? That's the question I can't answer. ☞

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LEWIS WARSH's most recent books are *Alien Abduction* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015), *One Foot Out the Door: Collected Stories* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2014) and *A Place in the Sun* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2010). He is editor and publisher of United Artists Books and teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Long Island University (Brooklyn).

Alfred Döblin: Outtake From *Wang Lun*

When Döblin's first great epic novel *Die drei Sprünge des Wang Lun* was published in 1915, two sections of the manuscript were missing, presumably under pressure from the publisher. These "outtakes" eventually appeared in the 1920s as short stories, with no reference to their connection with the novel. The first, the omission of which materially affects the shape and meaning of the novel, was restored for the first time in the English translation *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* (1991; 2nd ed. New York Review Books, out this month) as the Prologue 'The Attack on Chao Lao-hsu'. The second outtake, 'Conversation in the Palace of Ch'ien-lung', translated here for the first time in English, is less central to the novel but still worth preserving for the density of the evoked atmosphere and a remarkable example of synaesthesia. A small amount of overlap with the text of the novel shows that this outtake was originally intended for early in Book 3 of *Wang Lun*.

Conversation In The Palace Of Ch'ien-Lung

by Alfred Döblin

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY CHRIS GODWIN

The session of the High Council which convened on the morrow was unable, through an external circumstance, to give consideration to the Torghut question. Once certain personnel matters which had lain pending for too long had been dealt with, the Emperor was called away to view, together with the Chief Overseer of Eunuchs, the young ladies who had been chosen to replenish the Imperial harem.

Seven Manchu beauties of distinguished family trembled on rugs in the vestibule of one of the Imperial houses of women. The Minister named each of them to the Emperor, who nodded thoughtfully. As each was named she stood up, let fall her milk-white veil, exuded the scent of choice perfumes, lifted her gaze. The Yellow Lord was pleased when the third, stupefied, tugged at her veil without loosening it; with a glance he held back the portly Chief Eunuch, who was about to tear away the veil. Ch'ien-lung took the end of the veil that dangled at her waist and placed it around her neck. She shrank back emitting a little squeal. Ch'ien-lung, laughing, pronounced her name to Hu, who was purple with anger. Hesitant, astonished, he engraved the name with a stylus on a wax tablet carried by a house-slave behind him: the young lady was to wait upon the Son of Heaven at the double hour of the Dragon.

The Yellow Lord commanded that Chia-ch'ing, the King of Turkestan and sundry nobles who had his confidence should meet with him in the afternoon.

In the palace the Yellow Lord sat by himself on a dais, his guests on low chairs below the steps. It was already known that the Emperor was discomposed by the Torghut business, that he wished to move matters forward, but that certain difficulties had presented themselves. Chia-ch'ing squatted motionless on his chair. The situation displeased him. He foresaw debates, outbreaks of anger, misunderstandings. He glared at the white-bearded Khan of Turfan, whose bright blue eyes, he thought, lent the man a ridiculous appearance. The inevitable Sung with his owl eyes squatted next to the foreigner, then the chatterbox A-kuei. How to manage it so that nothing would follow from them. Life at Court would be easier to bear without them. Let them all be sent tripping one day over a staff. The blue-eyed King of Turfan, a vigorous old man with a goatee and a Manchu queue, was in a cheerful mood as he regarded Sung, who had regaled him splendidly for half the day with refined and learned verses; clearly Sung took him very seriously; he did not notice how much he revealed to the seasoned Minister by and by about his relation to the Torghuts and to Lhasa. Absolute silence reigned once the Emperor appeared and the guests had prostrated themselves; then, at a word from the Emperor, they took their places. Below the ceiling of the little hall hung an enormous yellow silk cloth; a mighty dragon embroidered in gold, blue and red soared across the symmetrical silken folds that came together in the middle of the ceiling. The windows were curtained despite the daylight; heavy bronze oil lamps hung from chains that pierced the silken ceiling, cast their ruddy glow over the carpeted steps, the sovereign in his yellow gown, and the resplendent silent guests. Young eunuchs busied themselves soundlessly above and below, served tea in a golden service. For a long while Ch'ien-lung held his little cup with its little porcelain lid aloft, flourishing it gently above his guests, and read the verse that decorated the cup, which he himself had composed:

"Over a low fire set a tripod, whose bloom and grain betoken long use. Fill it with pure snow water. Boil for as long as would be needed to turn fish white or crabs red. Pour it onto tender leaves of choice tea in a cup of Yüeh ware. Let it steep until the steam has risen in a cloud and on the surface there remains but a thin swirling mist. Drink this precious liquor at your pleasure, and it will dissipate the five causes of ill-humour. This moment of peace I can only taste and enjoy, not describe."

And how happy the poem made Chia-ch'ing at that moment; for the phlegmatic man hoped and foresaw that the Emperor would be inclined to believe his own poem and at least feign a certain equanimity.

The narrow-shouldered king, addressed by the Emperor, broke out in hypocritical formulae of obeisance. Then the Emperor asked Sung whether Chao Hui had been invited. The lanky general, seated beside A-kuei, had gone unremarked by Ch'ien-lung, whose eyes were failing. Ch'ien-lung nodded to him with a smile: "Could your troops, Excellency, within two months stand once again on the Ili?"

Chao, shocked, pulled himself together and confirmed it. The sovereign's eyes had a wicked spiteful gleam; he knew, must have known, that a slaughter unworthy of man had been perpetrated on the Ili; the benevolence he was wont to accord Chao could not mean that he would entrust him with a repetition of this gruesome task. But you never knew with Ch'ien-lung.

And how old was Chao Hui and how many sons did he have.

The Tartar answered his sovereign with effusive expressions of obligation for his graciousness.

"No need," the Yellow Lord rocked himself in his armchair, "you are strong and your son will tend your ghost. I calculate that your Excellency will dispose of thirty thousand men. In addition to your own tested core troops you will receive Mongolian Banner regiments. The Tsongtu of Chihli will be responsible for filling the ranks, and he will also, upon your request, supply Green Flag regiments. I do not know whether you will find a use for these. At tomorrow's Council we shall make a decision. But the country is empty, the Ili country. At least you will have space for your troops until they are needed. And in your free time, your Excellency can make sacrifices for the fallen rebels of Ili, who I understand from A-kuei still rob you of your rest."

Chia-ch'ing bowed his head. He, like the Emperor, was smiling. He recommended mustering a regiment of bonzes, since soldiers might not have experience of sacrificial rites.

"Excellency Chao Hui is free to recruit such a regiment," replied Ch'ien-lung in a calm, still mocking tone, "I was merely making a suggestion. The details and provisioning of his priest-troops are matters for Chao Hui himself to decide. What I have in mind for you, Excellency, is indeed a perilous task. You know that the Torghuts intend to come to the Ili next year. Well, you will be there on the Ili with your selected troops. Who will be driven back will be decided by who has the hardest bones. But anyway, ever since your unforgettable deeds, the lands on the Ili belong to me. And if necessary I shall issue a decree assigning the hardest bones to you."

"The soldiers of Your Majesty under my command are armed and ready. We await Your Majesty's orders and these orders will empower us to prevail."

The Emperor, disarmed, nodded his head. The doughty warrior's words betrayed not a trace of petulance.

"We are not in Council, Excellency. This is not a serious debate. You are my guests, and we are having a discussion. I hope that I am wrong about the Torghuts."

After they had all raised their cups, Chia-ch'ing declaimed: "Drink this precious liquor at your pleasure, and it will dissipate the five causes of ill-humour. This moment of peace I can only taste and enjoy, not describe. – But if you will permit this youth unblest with wisdom, he would like to put forward a suggestion, in the event that Excellency Chao is forced to mount up once again."

Ch'ien-lung: "To take you along? My son Chia-ch'ing, the lancer."

"If it please the Lord of the World, then yes. Even though Chia-ch'ing takes more pleasure and delight in the company of his father and music than of sweaty Torghuts and soldiers."

Sung piped up: "For nails you use bad iron and for soldiers –"

"No bad men," Chao interjected, "but good iron."

Ch'ien-lung laughed contentedly and lay back. He sent a eunuch, who glided down the steps at the side, to take the general candied figs from his plate. "Only good iron, Chao, the hardest that you can gather."

Chia-ch'ing hummed and hawed, sought for words: "It has still not been clarified, if I may point out in support of His Serenity Sung, whether iron is in any case a particularly valuable metal. It has no colour, does not shine, plays no role in determining auspicious or inauspicious events. One has need of iron, but – perhaps savants of more advanced understanding will mock this youngster – if the outcome were to depend solely on hardness, then forged iron would be better than the man whom it slays; and the primordial Yin and Yang would have erred in embodying themselves in people rather than in iron. But I did not want my proposal to be forgotten."

"You are not quite right, Chia-ch'ing," said the Emperor, "but it is enough generally to be a little bit right, so that errors can be revealed. Iron has its time, jade has its time, water has its time. Sometimes iron has my time."

"How would it be, I wanted to propose to Your Majesty, if Your Majesty were to augment the planned regiment of priest-soldiers by attaching to it the long-nosed missionaries from the West. They claim that the enviable spirit to which they pray can perform boundless acts, far more than any spirit of the eighteen provinces; there are even some among them who assert like children that they have the real, the true, the authentic spirit, who can do anything. While everyone knows that no spirit or god should be allowed to grow too big, as then he would become negligent and neglect his simplest obligations, and it is customary among us to serve many spirits, turn and turn about according to their capacities."

"If Chao Hui desires, I shall put together a battalion of missionaries for him and despatch it to the Ili. It will be a test for them: whether the Torghuts can be brought to a stand through the intercession of the western god or not. This god is not known to us; we do not want to show prejudice against him: but of course we would rather depend more on the iron that Chia-ch'ing has disparaged. And on the calculations of our own astrologers."

Sung, the jolly literatus, craved leave to speak; his old clever face was creased by a smile: "While working on the glorious history of the K'ang-hsi period, this ant came across a report of the Censor of that time, to whom were delivered some western presents for the son of the Son of Heaven. Old Sung's legs may be weak, but his memory is still moderately good. The report on the presents of the Jesuit priest Li-ma-tsu read something like this: 'We have no connection with the west, where people follow neither our laws nor our rites. The pictures of a supposed lord of heaven and a virgin, tendered by Li-ma-tsu, are of no value, the bones which he thinks to present belong, as he says, to immortals, fairies; but he does not consider that when these go to heaven they take their bones with them. We therefore conclude that we can have no truck with such novelties and must send back this man and his presents.' This is what the Censors of old wrote. This ant would add that Li-ma-tsu also offered the Son of Heaven a globe to which no credit could be given, as one sought in vain on it for the Four Seas."

Soft laughter. Teacups and lids clinked. Warm gentle steam filled the hall. The King of Turfan felt impelled to make an observation to Chia-ch'ing. Employing unhelpful men from the west for the war in Ili might perhaps be superfluous; for, setting aside all other considerations, the westerners' god, what's his name, had not the slightest knowledge of that region; the paths and passes between Kulja and Kashgar are difficult enough for natives, unknown in parts, sometimes impassable; southward from Lake Balkash and deep into Dzungaria bare mountain regions soar over steppelands, populated only by

foxes, bears, wild yaks. What could a spirit whose home lies a thousand li to the west achieve here.

As they relaxed, as lissom servants glided over the carpets and the guests engaged in whispered conversations under the gaze of the Son of Heaven, from behind a heavy red cloth curtain to one side bamboo flutes set up a soft music. The wide curtain was painted with discreet magnificence; a curious network of violet lines covered the red background, which almost imperceptibly developed towards the centre into figures and forms. It had been painted by Ku K'ai-chih. A lady sat before a mirror, a round green glinting mirror held up for her by two maidservants, one of them was standing, the other rested the edge of the mirror on an outstretched knee; an ancient eunuch leaned on a staff in the background, observing the young artist who stood behind the lady, winding her tresses into the prescribed coils. No figure was painted complete; only silhouettes, folds, outlines were given, so that the figure was always melting back into the ground. The bright yellow of the lady held the focus; the broad folds of the eunuch's gown in pale blue finely balanced the pink of the hairdresser, whose hands and fingers plunged silver-white into dark masses of hair. The mirror framed the sparsely outlined maidservants; the brown of their garments swelled out of the grey-black of the floor.

The music twittered and chirped, flutes sketched wide springtime landscapes, flocks of grazing sheep, soaring finches and larks; in the curtained hall they enchanted with the delights of the earth over which the sovereign on the dais held sway.

Chia-ch'ing looked up at the dim oil lamps; he was happy and moved by the music.

The Emperor called to him as their eyes met: "Would it not be good, Chia-ch'ing, to fill another land such as this with people and let them tend the soil in its fruitfulness? I would gladly keep Chao Hui here, and spare him. You friend of peace, give me your advice, music is filling the hall, you can speak."

"I believe in the might of Your Majesty. The eighteen provinces are prosperous. Happiness rests in Your Majesty's lap. The wastelands on the Ili should be entrusted to the Torghuts. With the Tashi-lama as their leader, Your Majesty will overwhelm them with the riches of our culture. If the man of accomplished wisdom in Tashi-lunpo guides your thoughts and hopes now and in forty years, then in fifty years Your Majesty's people will have converted to them. Their children will speak of the holy men of Tibet as we do – and wear the robe, worship the ancestors, sacrifice to Heaven – like us. The pacific always prevails over the enemies of peace. Wars bring only momentary success, unless they are the final word of an almost completely accomplished move to peace. This ignoramus dares to utter his opinion. And he has no doubt that K'ung-fu-tse will prevail as he did two, three thousand years ago, for another thousand years wherever he encounters crude barbarism."

"You friend of peace, singer of peace! Tomorrow I shall sit and try to turn your thoughts into poems, Chia-ch'ing. This old man rejoices in his son!"

The deep rapid ever-changing tones of the flutes erected towering cliffs; nomads hunted over narrow passes, muddy brooks tumbled downward, you went reluctantly through the bare landscape. ㊦

First published in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 16 April 1922.

ALFRED DÖBLIN (1878-1957) was a novelist, essayist, neurologist, and a leading figure of German Expressionist writing. He is best known for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which was adapted into an acclaimed TV series by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1980. Leading writers including Brecht and Grass have acknowledged Döblin's influence on their work.

CHRIS GODWIN studied German and Chinese in Edinburgh and Hong Kong. He worked in Hong Kong and China for many years, and now divides his time between England and Beijing. He recently completed the first English translation of Döblin's South American trilogy *Land Without Death*. His translation of Döblin's historical-philosophical essay "Prometheus and the Primitive" was published on the *Brooklyn Rail's* InTranslation website in November 2014.

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from *Miransù* by Monica Sarsini

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY MARYANN DE JULIO

to my grandmother Isabella

When the war was over your grandfather parted from the company and I went to help him in the shop, he needed somebody, if on the spur of the moment a client came, or for the pay for the workers. I understood accounting, I was ten years with a bookkeeper, he didn't want to do anything, he had me do everything but he taught me. I wasn't stupid and I learned fast, so I could help grandfather, he didn't need anybody anymore. In order not to get in trouble with the workers I always went to the Camera del Lavoro to make some calculations, when we closed the shop I took the payroll, I brought it there and said, look, we closed, they're paid handsomely, but there's nothing funny because the calculations had been made by the Camera del Lavoro, how many years they'd been there, how much they were to have in severance pay etcetera. Instead if I'd done it by myself, even if I could have, there would have always been something funny.

Your grandfather had found a way to sell the shop, and well, it was a good price. So I said, bah, sell the shop. That's how your parents got the place, and a partner who didn't have ready cash gave him these lodgings that your aunt now has. Then your grandfather came to stay up here, he was dying to live in the country. He deserved it, from when he was born he was closed up in a shop, we'd never taken a vacation, then they didn't close like they close now, one whole month, in August they all close for the holidays, then a week. He had to work, then we went to find a house for you, he wanted someone there to take you to the seaside, your mama took you for three months, remember, your sister wasn't born yet, only you and your brother. If he hadn't had this job maybe he'd never have gone into retirement, it cost us even this! He came to be up here and me fool that I was, following. My cousin sent us two Sardinians, they lived on the floor below, where now there's the kitchen, then there wasn't the staircase inside, only a wooden one like a trapdoor. He needed to be careful crossing the street, the wife always had the coffee on the stove and wanted to offer it to us. Then they gave us birds, we had the cabin and who went hunting brought us thrush, so we'd told them not to close the trapdoor so that we could use the hearth when we needed it. One day it was closed, they didn't leave us the key and we couldn't make the roast turn. The husband didn't want the wife to go in the fields, to do the grass or to pick up the twigs from the pruning. So he had to pick them up all by himself. She made us cheese, we had three goats, sweet but she was simple, she said that they'd bewitched the baby, she was four, five years old, she didn't feel well, but it's normal for children to wake up at times in the night. She began to say that they'd been bewitched, then they had an argument with Berto, arguments and quarrels never sat well with grandfather, he was a peaceful man. So they went away. The contadina returned home to the house on the hill and put red ribbons in the barn, saying that the Sardinian had bewitched the animals. Things from another world. It was a place a hundred years behind the times. Those who lived beyond the ditch ate jaybirds. When you went out they came behind you, a very strange thing, like a cat, a dog, it flew about your brother, it slept on the porch light fixture, it accompanied you flying from tree to tree. It was brought from the Casentino, for your brother. He was a fanatic for birds. A fool of a girl crushed its head and she ate the bird. Between you children there was the one who wanted to beat her up, the one who wanted to spite her.

In this house there were ghosts, a basket fell on your mama in her bedroom and she said that it was the ghost that had knocked it down, she had to go home her friend she wouldn't sleep there, a ghost began to sit at the foot of the bed, it didn't say anything to her, it was a woman all dressed up, another said that in the bedroom of your aunt there were ghosts, I didn't hear them, not even you, I'm alone and I don't think about it at all, I heard the ghosts, a big bang in the kitchen, but for me something had fallen. Before it used to be a convent, it used only three of these rooms, behind that wall there's a vault where they kept a saint, the lintels of pietra serena are so old that they cost more than all of the rest of the house put together. The hearth especially has an inestimable value. All the history don Fosco had it there, he took it away when he abandoned the priesthood, now he's dead, his wife will have had it, I don't know at all where it ended up. Don Fosco had become headmaster of the science high school where your sister studied, one day she saw him coming from the window of the classroom, don Fosco! she ran to meet him, he was no longer a priest, he'd married good God, she ran after him and these communist friends of hers, you went to call him don Fosco, you embraced him, who is it? And her, he was the priest of our house in the country! Her, he saw her be born. We looked for a house in the country because your mama said, babbo me at the seashore with two small children and my belly out to my eyes I'm not going there, you always say that you want the house in the country so move. Here there was a farmer, he didn't live there, in the beginning he took care of everything, then we began not to have contadini, first we had I don't know how many big animals in the barn, calves to sell, then grandfather bought the tractor, machines suited for working, so we reduced the personnel. Fixed hours, even if they don't go every day, Michele, Loredana, Luciana, they stayed, the gardener twice a year. I knew from Loredana, who do you think tells me these ruses, that Luciana, that widow that comes to bring me bread, had one. Then I began to observe her, she had a nice dress, simple but that I'd never seen, it shows when a woman is particular or cobbled together. That's how this story came about, Loredana told me that this man has an infirm mama at home, in order to look after her they want two people there daily, one in the morning and one at night, she's no longer good for anything. He lives with the mama and a brother, Loredana says, she knows how they are in the country, zibi, the younger brother who generally remains a bachelor has little judgment, is a little backwards you'd say, and this younger brother said, it takes both of us working to pay for these women who keep house for mama. They live in Pontassieve, Loredana knows them, he tells her frankly, that's the woman for me. The daughter of Luciana did like many, she was engaged to a sub-farmer from a very beautiful small farm, she left him, or he will have left her and she in return quickly took up with the one that has the house on his own. So Luciana and the mama were left a little alone. The mama is old but on the ball, she always goes to the seashore with the Catholic association, in the summer they bring her to the country, in September to another part, as they take a trip by coach. Then these women took a room together in Pontassieve where they get together, these old reunited women give so much for each one and they meet up every evening for knitting and monkey business. Luciana didn't tell me, Loredana told me

everything, she told me that even to her they'd proposed something, a widower that needed a woman, though rather lively, you understand Loredana is seventy years old, in truth it's not really like she's that old, she's not decrepit. By God, they all take a husband, there's only my daughters that don't take one. Your mother had several men, your aunt was good with the one she had, your mother at least had the courage to say, no, I was too good with the first, I don't even want to try again, I suffered too much, now I'm free, I do as I please. Your aunt instead had already had the cousin of her friend, with whom they'd gone to high school together, doctor and everything, but she says that she didn't like him. I told her, be patient, you realize that you're almost forty years old, what are you waiting to catch, the bus? But her, no, I don't feel anything, and me, try, it may be that you see being together that you can make it. She said that he was repellant. Another time one, poor thing, took her out, one of her girlfriends got married where Michele goes to buy the flower seeds for me, the father was a notary, and we saw this one here coming, he wasn't much to look at, very short, pudgy, but well put together, clean, he was a lawyer and was going to take the exam to be a notary, notaries earn an arm and a leg. Your aunt met him at the wedding of this friend of hers. When she returned from the honeymoon she had another dinner for all the friends that had participated in the ceremony and she telephoned your aunt. She didn't really want to go there and she answered, I don't even know where you live. Don't worry, Mr. So-and-so will come get you. But I don't know him. He was the one eating next to you. Ah, sì, I understood. This poor devil telephones, he says, let's fix where I must come to get you. I don't even know who you are, she tells him. But what, don't you remember, I was next to you at the wedding lunch. Ah, wouldn't you know, you're the little fat one. I heard this, with my own ears. Him being a lawyer and studying to be a notary he must have been of a certain age, her on the other hand she was thirty-seven, thirty-eight years old, she wasn't a young thing either. Well, after a couple of days she came home in the evening, she had a rose and was laughing like a crazy woman. What's making you laugh so much, I said, and her, look at this idiotic thing that he brought me, he came to get me at the hospital. He had brought her a rose poor thing. He understood that there was no point in insisting inasmuch as he couldn't break her down. Loredana instead her husband she met him at Pontassieve, in the country. A stroll, in those days they didn't go out dancing. If there was a flood they couldn't cross between the Arno and the Sieve, she needed to cross the Arno. The small boat was attached in front of his house, and she saw him get out, younger than her. When the Sieve flooded the Arno took the overflow, it was like a plate of oil, and they went to make landfall from its side, it wasn't kilometers away, the Arno divided Pontassieve by the zone of small boats, Volognano, where her husband was from. The young in order to have fun they went on the other side. She saw him and she liked him, he wasn't ugly, not too tall, with a nice face, she still has some photographs of him on that small boat. He began to chat. They spent time with you, shadowed you, and when it was the time that they knew that you went back, they posted themselves on the street and they came to detain you. If she hadn't liked him she would have gone straight by, she certainly wouldn't have said, I don't like you, he would have answered, look at yourself how you are. He asked her very quickly to get engaged, he gave her compliments, but before dark they needed to be home. He introduced himself and her father made small talk with him, that he wasn't thinking of going and making a fool of the girl of the family. Her brother was happy, he was still a young man and he married after her, he wasn't in a hurry. Loredana went to live with his mama and a sister-in-law, she didn't get along there and luckily she stayed only

four or five months. The trousseau she still has it, they gave everything, remaking with thread, hooks and eyes, measuring tape, night shirts, underwear, under-shirts, stockings made by hand, made by machine, socks, insoles, skirts, towels, only linens not pots and pans or money. They were content with little and the beautiful thing is that, that they were content. Now instead you have and have and there isn't anything that you long for, selfishness, spite. All the stuff they put it in the trunk, in the boxes, in the baskets, it crossed with the small boat and once there reached the house on the sledge, with the animals. She had a room all to herself, the chest of drawers and the night tables she still has them, she sawed the wardrobe in half because up there it didn't go, it had four doors, she brought the whole thing and half she threw away. The father-in-law died thirteen days before they got married, given that they'd already prepared in order not to postpone the wedding, then death wasn't like now, their padroni on the 22nd of April had them marry in the little chapel of the farm and they brought them to eat in Montecatini. Loredana was happy, she wasn't scared of change, the mother-in-law never put in her two cents, her husband was more the one to talk, there was misery in the homes, they had enough to eat, but misery reigned everywhere. They stayed three, the mother-in-law never left home, but they sometimes on Sunday they went out, to get together with a relative. Loredana worked on the small farm, her, her husband and that's it. Her son was born after four years, the mother-in-law watched after him, when he cried she called her in the field and she went to give him milk that wasn't hers, she didn't have any. She had a lot of trouble because of him, with his development, he didn't ever want to eat, she was so fed up that she didn't want anymore. It was a mistake, for him. Her husband always said, me to those that say that it was bad luck, I don't believe it, if you don't sow you don't reap. When they decided to try they pressed on unrestrained six months. In summer in order to bathe they went down to the Arno, it was that time there, she became pregnant, in the dark, in the water, otherwise she didn't linger. The yearning to be pregnant sometimes generates a block, you need not to think about it, then it becomes something natural. Loredana days that a person more meticulous and exact than my husband doesn't exist, he had survived more than twenty years going and getting her and bringing her back, in the beginning he was still young, but never had he said a cross word, furthermore me in her I had a blind trust, otherwise I wouldn't have sent him, I had come to know her. Filomena was young, a discreet woman, and I said, where did my husband go Loredana, did he go to Filomena's?

This evening the moon seems like a drop of burning liquid reluctant to separate from the blue of the sky. I would like to see it dash down parallel to the trunks of the two pine trees that ring it, sink over the jagged dark of the hill and full of torpor let the hunger of the earth devour it. I would stay to watch, seated on the step, I would continue to stare at its liquifying without noise. I would no longer experience pain from that which now has convinced me or observe it, barely brushed by a velvety white that stirred breaks up at the confines of her presence, suspended as if by chance shining on the back of the leaves of the olive tree beyond the distraction of a melancholy butterfly and the distant barking of a dog. My hand brushes against the stone from which I contemplate the night that gathers, what it absorbs from the contact will resemble the indifference with which the listless moon gave off its dim light the evening of the feast. It was there, from the window it could have been grasped between the frozen branches the sweet head of light, uncovered by a stone when the body suddenly fell backward from a gunshot jealous of so much tenderness. If they were to find me between the cracks in a mountain in putting my bones back together they would say that I was a woman. But it's too little, not enough. The heavens

pour down on me like wheatears in the abyss rising from the hood of the hearth, spectral abode of the murmur of those that one time were here, stooped over to clean a windshield or with legs astride of the guardrail to gaze beyond the swash of the cars on the run the lighting up of a puddle if a prostitute inserts her heel there.

Aunt Cora recounted this fact, a son had died on a foreign gentleman that had bought a villa in Fiesole, and he always said, Fiesoli, Fiesoli, was disastrous for me. And me the same, Miransù, Miransù, was disastrous for me. Not to speak of how much it cost us, here it costs, in the plain it's different, they can use machines, we did the threshing of the grain, we brought it in the yard, now they insert the sheaves inside a machine, from one part exits the straw, from the other the grain already hulled, before you kids used to fight to go and pull the strings to tie the presses, now they do all rectangular blocks of straw already pressed, and then they go in the fields, they don't bring the machines in the yard at all like us, it was entertainment, I wasn't entertained much, the commotion always bothered me, there were about fifteen contadini, the feeders, the one that managed the machine, those that did the pressing, they passed the straw down to the boys that tied it, the famous strings, a chore that lasted a long time, now you no longer see anything, they're in the fields, they do everything there. We could do it, but it's not worthwhile, very little came from the grain, in order to use an agricultural machine they want big open spaces, then the machine doesn't need help, what was carried out with twenty workers with two they do it, it's a big difference, sure these machines cost hundreds of millions. For the threshing we prepared minestrone soup, they were disheartened to eat pasta, everybody made pasta, rabbit, goose, then we took the meat from the ox and we cooked big roasts, to be different, this way they gladly came to us to eat, then we offered them something to drink while they were threshing, we took extracts, from mint, and we brought some flasks of fresh water with these syrups inside that gave them a little flavor, they gladly came to us, there were some contadini that lived where the Belgian sculptor now lives, the old lady came to do the grass for the cows, and she said, my daughter-in-law doesn't go by anybody to thresh, she comes only to you. She wanted to come her too but not everybody could, so she said, what do you want, I can't come, my daughter-in-law when you thresh she needs to come! We had a bathroom, with a wood-burning water heater but anyway even that was enough, they worked and they took a bath poor women, with that itch all over, the dust from the grain, from the hay itches, but they all washed themselves, they combed themselves decently and they came to eat. In the kitchen there was Natalina, then Gina and the mother of the one who killed Lapo, Assunta it seems to me. They stayed to serve at table too, whoever wanted to. When grandfather bought here the grain was already there, we handed over ten thousand lire, otherwise they cut it, they took away only the sheaves. We bought in March, the grain was already seeded, the berry was already on it, the contadini that had planted it wanted the price of the grain, grandfather said, if you take the sheaves from me it will be the same to me as uprooting the plant, we bought the land, not the grain, then he asked them to leave it and it was the first year that we made bread at home. The threshing machine we rented it, I remember one time, the first tractor that grandfather bought was called Oto, with the threshing machine they couldn't get out of the ditch. They were looking for someone that had a tractor and they came to ask us. Carlino arrived with Oto, it was very small, but with incredible power, it was made in La Spezia in a factory that manufactured cannons, war supplies, it was well equipped. As soon as they saw it, but why did you bring us this cart, we'll use ours and you keep whatever he brought. And Carlino said, wait, wait and you'll see. He attached the tractor and, brrrr, brummm, in

a minute... But where did you find this thing! It was powerful that little tractor! The way it broke it couldn't be repaired, grandfather called the one that sells old vehicles and he turned the key, we had to pay him just so that he'd take it away. The jeep, you remember, it was left over from the war, a real American one, a Ford, we found it through a builder and we gave him faucets in exchange! It was used to go in the field, your father one time drove us into great danger, he was going onto the little paths, onto the little trails, it had also gone to war that Ford, green and mountain-green blue, they used it in order to deliver the copper, it wasn't at all for going into town, it didn't even have license plates, the tractor was heavy, slow, with this we ran like devils, your father drove us there on the knoll to see the fireworks, it made the hills, ducked round the corner, it was perfect for the pathways. That one too ended up together with the tractor at the junkyard. There were other machines, like that one for crushing corn, grandfather would have been rather modern, he would have gradually bought what came out, to see, to try, he died too soon, he left the shop too soon, pig-headed, he had this damned job, here was his life, he loved living here, he was happy here, someone who all his life was closed up in a room in front of a lathe. He wasn't at all the type that has to die at work, but he was never idle a minute, as soon as he finished at the shop he came up here, old Pedro, the dog, he went with the men in the fields, he took refuge from the sun under a tree, when he sensed that your grandfather was about to arrive he got up and came towards the house. Carlino noticed this and said, beware, the padrone is coming. Pedro stayed up there with Ugo and Natalina, he loved them in vain, when they went away to return to live in Florence he ran after them up to the brook, to get the dog and bring him back here you had to beat him, otherwise he ran away with them.

When I'm here alone and there's no one I think that my life could have been different, grandfather though being a good person, a worker that knew how to get the family ahead, everything that there is he made it, he wasn't affectionate. I needed to be pampered, coddled, for him it was enough to say, don't you worry, I'll take care of it. Even that's a consolation, but it's a poor consolation. He came home from the fields at six o'clock, when the men were partying, he came home alone to get a bite to eat, then he rushed off, and I was here crocheting. It's not that I ever felt lonely, me by myself I'm fine, unfortunately, I make up stories, which I can't tell you. Grandfather was a man that had only work, any foolishness he didn't understand it. With this I don't mean to say that I was unhappy, mercy's sake, just the security of daily life, was what made me respect him more than ever, I'd never had any before in my life. I didn't miss merriment in the least, but I needed to be considered something. We used to go to the seashore, in those moments I was happy, your mother brought me very beautiful dresses, I changed one a day, everybody said, ah, the signora, always elegant. Stupid things, but I felt assured. At Castiglioncello especially I felt like someone, at Forte dei Marmi a little less, there they were real signore. Instead Castiglioncello was more provincial. I've got a stomachache, I feel like throwing up.

The Rail is proudly running Miransù as a serial which began in the December 2013/January 2014 issue and will continue through the winter of 2015.

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MONICA SARSINI was born in Florence, where she lives and teaches writing. She is also an artist who has shown her work in Italy and other countries. *Libro Luminoso* (Exit Edizioni, 1982) was followed by *Crepacuore*, *Crepapelle* and others. A collection of her work was published in English under the title of *Eruptions* (Italica Press, 1999). In *Alice nel paese delle domandine* (Le Lettere, 2011), Sarsini collects stories written by women from the creative writing class that she taught at Sollicciano prison, outside Florence; a second volume *Alice, la guardia e l'asino bianco* was just published in Italy.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Happy New Year!

It's hard to know what to deal with first—not only is the world continuing to go to hell in a handbasket, but the speed of descent seems to have increased. In the United States, where police continue to go unpunished for killing unarmed citizens, and national income continues to flow steadily to the 1% as wages decline and infrastructure falls apart, President Obama finally decided to call for some mild measures of income re-distribution at a moment when, with the Republican victory in the midterm elections, such things have become practically impossible. The international climate change negotiations are clearly doomed to insignificance, while the earth had its hottest year of the last 130 years. Wars rage in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Despite the European Central Bank's firing up the printing presses to create new wads of imaginary money, Europe seems likely to drift deeper into depression, while the Chinese economy continues to slow.

In the face of such developments, the bankruptcy of official discourses is inescapable. In France, where large numbers of schoolchildren refused to honor a minute of silence for the victims of last month's terrorist attacks, the Minister of Education announced a program of "moral and civic training" that would include (according to the *New York Times*) "lessons on how to fight racism, anti-Semitism, and 'any form of discrimination.'" Will this include discrimination against Arab and other foreign immigrants to France? Will the schools discuss methods of lowering the North-African immigrant youth unemployment rate from its current estimated 60 percent? It was, let us not forget, Manuel Valls, Interior Minister of the Socialist government, recently seen insisting on the importance of human rights and French civic values, who called for the accelerated deportation of the Roma, saying that Roma people have "lifestyles that are very different from ours" and that "their destiny is to return to Romania or Bulgaria."

Out of the many topics for investigation offered by this gloomy state of affairs, this month's Field Notes is devoted to three topics: Greece, where the election at the end of January cast a light both on the developing economic, social, and political situation in that country and the potential for a revived social-democratic politics; Paris, where the murders of cartoonists at a satirical magazine and shoppers in a kosher supermarket, both carried out in the name of Allah, have raised profound questions about the content of "Western values"; and Mexico, where the "disappearing" of 43 students focused attention on the interplay between national politics, official corruption, and the drug economy. I am grateful to correspondents who provided materials (and translations) on these three hotspots-of-the-month. As ever, we welcome contributions on any and all topics for future issues.

—Paul Mattick

Is it Possible to Win the War After Losing All the Battles?

by Cognord

Prehistory of a Success

The announcement of national elections in Greece, roughly two years before the coalition government of New Democracy and Pasok completed their term, immediately sparked a renewed interest in this southern and economically peripheral European country. The relative silence that preceded this novel attention for the last two years was, at least in media terms, understandable. If Greece enjoyed an earlier moment of fame, it was primarily due to the unprecedented austerity measures imposed by the troika—the European Commission, European Central Bank (E.C.B.), and International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.)—in exchange for new loans, designed to "assist" the Greek state after it officially announced, in April 2010, that it was unable to repay its existing, "non-viable" sovereign debt (120 percent of G.D.P. at the time). The reactions to the implementation of the austerity program were also pivotal in bringing Greece into the spotlight: general strikes, violent demonstrations, and the movement of the squares ensured, between 2010 and 2012, that the future of Greece's "fiscal consolidation program" (to borrow the official economic jargon) was seriously threatened. Along with the memorandum imposed by the troika, what came under attack was the legitimacy of the political system,¹ generating wild speculation about the future of Greece's membership in the Eurozone, as well as the unpredictable consequences this could have for the E.U., not to mention the global economy.

However, the movement which tried to halt the austerity program failed. The reasons are varied, and it is not within the scope of this article to explain them in detail. Suffice it to say that, as in every other social movement, this failure should be traced to both the violent determination of the government(s) to proceed with austerity *at all costs* (for which the ruling factions have paid a price) and the inability of the movement to transform itself from a defensive mobilization to protect existing conditions into an offensive attack on the conditions that created the crisis.

Nonetheless, the attention that Greece received was justifiable. Without exaggeration, one could argue that many of the political strategies of resistance which the international left has only read about in books were tried and tested in Greece in the years after the crisis: general strikes with massive participation, bringing economic activities to a halt; militant and violent demonstrations with constantly growing numbers of participation; neighborhood assemblies that sought to act as minuscule formations of self-organization, attempting to deal with immediate issues caused by the crisis; one of the most militant squares movements, which managed to call for two successful general strikes; a climate of continuous antagonism that gradually but steadily involved more and more people.

It is, however, no exaggeration to say that none of these inspiring moments managed to counteract the effects of the crisis and its management by the state. However exhilarating, promising, and tense these outbreaks were for those of us who participated in them, it has become imperative to understand their failure to achieve even a small (however reformist) victory.

In official terms, the crisis has only become worse in the last years. Overall unemployment has risen to 27 percent (from 12.5 percent in 2010), primarily hitting young people (60.6 percent for those aged 17 – 25); wage cuts across the public sector are between 30 and 40 percent, while in the private sector the number is only slightly lower (25 percent on average).² Small businesses (the backbone of the Greek economy, constituting around 95 percent of all business activity) have been devastated by the crisis and the austerity measures (more than 250,000

have been closed), while cuts in the Health and Education budgets amount to more than 25 percent. Total G.D.P. losses amount to 24 percent, while despite these cuts (or, as some would say, as a result of them), state debt in Greece has dramatically risen from 120 percent in 2010 to 176 percent of G.D.P. today.

Unofficially, the situation is much worse. In the last two years, on top of reduced wages or forced unemployment, a nearly destroyed health system, and the alarming rise of neo-Nazis as significant players in the political landscape, people have had to live with the defeat of a social movement which gave many participants the hopeful feeling of making a leap into the open air of historical change. It was the disappearance of these antagonisms, followed by generalized feelings of disappointment and depression, that should serve as the background against which the recent elections should be considered. It is precisely the *failure* of the social movements to counteract austerity and the brutal devaluation that brought Syriza to today's position. And while Syriza likes to present itself as the continuation of these movements, it is more accurate to explain its strength as a result of their weakness.

In this context of defeat, Syriza had come to represent for many people the last hope for any alleviation of the effects of austerity. This is also the line that has been predominantly adopted by the left media in Greece and abroad. A bombardment of positive and enthusiastic articles and reports in the last few weeks in left and progressive media outlets have created an atmosphere almost implying that Greece is in the brink of a social revolution. This is, however, quite clearly not the case.

Having said that, it makes no sense to critique Syriza and its program on the basis of abstract criteria of radicalism, anti-capitalism, etc. The reason is quite simple: Syriza is not, and never has been, an anti-capitalist party. It was never part of its program, its understanding of the world, and its expressed policies to question the capitalist system or its political representation. To say this is not to attempt to discredit Syriza, but to give an honest evaluation that takes into consideration Syriza's own self-understanding, its historical role, and its practice as a parliamentary party within Greece's political spectrum. It is beside the point to argue that Syriza has betrayed or fails to deliver a program that was never part of its politics in the first place.³

What is needed is not an analysis on the basis of a non-existent theoretical framework (Syriza's supposed radicalism), but a sober understanding of the historical context of Syriza's rise to fame, the objective forces that it is facing, and its own proposed remedies. It is only in this way that one can have a clear idea of what is at stake. Ideological battles and straw-men are clearly pointless at the moment.

Basic Banalities

Until 2009, Syriza was an insignificant player on the Greek political scene. It barely made the 3 percent threshold required to enter parliament, something that seriously undermined its influence within that institution. But things were not much better outside of parliament. For those of us who have been active in the Greek left and radical scene for more than 20 years, Syriza was never a force to be reckoned with. And though Syriza repeatedly attempted to draw forces away from social movements towards its parliamentary aspirations, none of these attempts were ever successful.⁴

It was only after the elections of 2012, which marked the downfall of Pasok as the government responsible for

initiating the troika bailout and austerity program, that Syriza suddenly found itself with 17 percent of the votes, a result that caught everyone by surprise—even Syriza members themselves, who would have been content with 7 – 8 percent. It was then that Syriza first started contemplating the possibility of forming a government and started understanding that, from now on, what they formulate as policies will have to be realistic and realizable.⁵

Mesmerized by its unprecedented rise in the electoral ranks, Syriza used every opportunity to build support, widen its social alliances, and prepare itself to create the first left-leaning government in Greece since Pasok's victory in 1981. However, as is the case with every left-wing party, Syriza is very suspicious of social movements that it cannot directly control. Thus, in parallel to the increase in its electoral support, Syriza took care not to support outbreaks of social antagonism, even at moments when those seemed in a position to bring the government down and put a halt to austerity, as they continually promised.⁶ The official explanations by Syriza officials in relation to these incidents was typical: denying any wrongdoing, Syriza hid behind the excuse that “the people” (this abused and nonsensical phrase) were not ready for an escalation. A more intelligent approach would be to recognize that a political party which sees parliament as the center of political activity is not interested in allowing the uncontrollable and radical potential of a social movement to determine developments or its policies. Today, almost two years after the last expression of street-level subversion, Syriza can sweep the floor and capitalize on the defeat of a movement, content with the thought that the majority of people have shown that they prefer to place their hopes in political representation rather than their own activities.

Instructions for Contemporary Social-Democrats

Trying to find out what exactly Syriza has planned for the day after the elections is, however, no easy matter. Looking at the various statements and proclamations of Tsipras, Syriza M.P.s, central committee members, and sympathizers, one could easily drive oneself crazy trying to extract a coherent position from an abundance of contradictory and self-refuting opinions. (This is something that the right wing tried to capitalize on in order to show that Syriza has no program after all.)⁷ However, because Syriza will be forced to deal with the real economy, its European counterparts, and the global economic system (and not some imaginary movement), Syriza's proclamations when addressing *exactly those* is a relatively safe way to understand its actual policies.

The main thrust of Syriza's political and economic program, as its spokesmen spelled out at the Thessaloniki Expo in September 2014 (and have repeated ever since), boils down to four key points: first, the immediate management of the humanitarian crisis in Greece; second, immediate measures for re-boosting the economy; third, a national plan for “regaining labor”; and finally, an institutional and democratic restructuring of the political system. These programmatic theses require, according to Syriza, that certain things be in place: a restructuring of Greece's sovereign debt; a direct connection between loan repayments and growth; a disentanglement of public spending from the memorandum agreed to with the troika; and a European “New Deal,” i.e., the introduction of Quantitative Easing by the E.C.B.

The program for dealing with the humanitarian crisis aims at tackling some of the devastating realities of post-memorandum society, by reconnecting electricity and providing food vouchers for 300,000 families; providing free healthcare for all; ensuring housing for all; and supporting low-income pensioners. The plan to regenerate the economy rests on an ambitious program of restructuring the tax system to ensure the collection

of unpaid taxes; an immediate stop of foreclosures (for the main house of a family); the abolition of the recent heavy tax on property; the writing-off of debts (36 percent according to banks) with no possibility of repayment; the return of the minimum wage to 751 euros monthly, something that is supposed to increase G.D.P. by 0.5 percent. The idea of “regaining labor” has to do with the return of pre-memorandum work relations, and in particular the re-introduction of collective bargaining and an end to unlimited lay-offs; and the ambitious creation of 300,000 new jobs and 300,000 unemployment beneficiaries. Finally, in terms of the democratic restructuring of the political system, Syriza aims at abolishing M.P. privileges, a thorough examination of the licenses of the mainstream media, and the reopening of the state television (E.R.T.).

Leaving aside certain (quite important) details⁸ and the parts of the program that concern the “democratization” of the political system, an immediate question concerns the exact cost of this program and where the money is going to come from. According to Syriza's own calculations,⁹ the cost of this program is 11.36 billion euros. And where will the money come from? This is where it gets difficult.

Captive Words

There are two main pillars upon which Syriza plans to finance its program: debt restructuring and the introduction of Quantitative Easing. Not surprisingly, these are the most controversial aspects of the forthcoming negotiations.

1. Debt restructuring: At the moment, Greece's sovereign debt is at around 176 percent of G.D.P. (around 321 billion euros). The interest that this debt creates is paid by the new loans that the troika provides, since the Greek economy does not produce a surplus. This means, among other things, that in relation to the budget of the Greek state, both the debt and its interest are irrelevant. The question immediately arises: Why is it then important to reduce the debt? The answer to that was given by Giorgos Stathakis, chief economic policy maker for Syriza:

The markets do not lend to Greece because the state debt is non-viable. Since, in order for Greece to repay the debt, a surplus of 4.5 percent is needed, it is clear that we cannot achieve any growth within this framework. It is that simple and understandable, and our international colleagues know this. Thus, when the debt is rendered viable again with a deal that a strong Syriza government will make, the markets will start lending to Greece at reasonable interest rates.¹⁰

Do you get it? The master plan behind the idea of debt reduction is to allow Greece to borrow again, and thus increase its debt.¹¹ Genius.

But even if we accept this lapse of reason, other problems arise. Why would the troika agree to restructuring and give Greece the opportunity to ease the debt burden? This topic has received a lot of attention and responses vary significantly. On the one hand, we have a chorus that explains that debt restructuring is entirely out of the question, adding that Greece should feel lucky that any money is actually given in order to save it from complete bankruptcy. This is a view shared (officially) by the German government, and the right-wing government in Greece. On the other side, we have the argument that debt restructuring is absolutely necessary for Greece to exit the downward economic spiral. Plus, the argument goes, “debt restructuring” is not a bad word. It has been done many times before (Syriza's favorite example is the 1953 write-off to help Germany's economic recovery) and it is considered by many economists as imperative to avoid default and to boost growth. This position is held, among others, by numerous economists and Syriza.¹²

Leaving aside these primarily ideological debates, the truth is that it is not entirely unlikely that the debt could be restructured (as it was before, in the far distant past of 2012), and the main reason is that everyone knows that its actual full repayment is more or less impossible. But—and this is the key point—as in 2012, this restructuring will probably occur in a way that ensures the lenders' finances,¹³ and with a clause that requires some form of austerity to continue (even if it gets a more catchy name like “national reconstruction plan”). At the moment, and because the enthusiasm of the left seems to require a counter-argument from the right, debt restructuring is proclaimed by the E.U. to be unimaginable. But, reading between the lines, it seems that the E.U. is willing to consider a generous extension, which for anyone not completely confused by economic jargon, essentially means the same thing.

2. Quantitative Easing (Q.E.): The idea is simple. What is the most important means by which harsh austerity and economic restructuring is imposed on Greece by the troika? Sovereign debt. Greece's inability to finance the repayment of previous loans or bonds means that the markets are unwilling to lend money to Greece. Given that within the eurozone and the euro currency Greece is not able to devalue, default, or do something similar (as Argentina or Iceland did), the Greek government should be given the money to repay its loans from the I.M.F. and the E.C.B., in exchange for a “consolidation” program, i.e. austerity.

If Greece was in a position to create a surplus, issue new state bonds, sell them to the E.C.B., and finance its repayment scheme (with a generous extension in place), there would be no need for austerity. Syriza would thus be in a position to decide exactly what it wants in terms of the internal budget, allocate spending and income on the basis of its own agenda, and even re-enter the market with new bonds. Quantitative easing is, however, premised on exactly this idea: that the E.C.B. will purchase state bonds, lock them away in a dungeon in Brussels, and forget their existence. It is for this reason that the economic powers pushing for austerity and restructuring (with Germany at the lead) specifically rejected the possibility of Q.E., as it would cause them to lose the bargaining leverage they have for imposing these policies.

The January 22 announcement by Draghi (head of the E.C.B.) that the E.C.B. will actually introduce Q.E. in the eurozone, a program which will engage in sovereign bond purchases, does indeed mark a relative change of policy in the eurozone.¹⁴ But the devil is in the details, and one had to sit through the Q&A session after the announcement, to hear Draghi explain what everyone more or less suspected: Greece will not be part of this Q.E., or at least, it will participate only to the extent that it keeps implementing the measures spelled out by the troika.¹⁵

We see that both pillars of Syriza's financing program from external sources, though not necessarily unrealistic in themselves, are premised on a continuation of austerity that undermines any enthusiasm for the future, at least in terms of the forthcoming negotiations. And it becomes more and more obvious that *at a political level*, some agreements can be made (allowing Greece in the Q.E. program and renaming debt restructuring “extension,” in exchange for a certain continuation of austerity) allowing both parties of the “negotiation” to save political face and appear as victors.

The question then arises, how Syriza will be able to justify such a deviation from its anti-austerity program. The internal financial problems shed some light on this. To begin with, for Greece to be able to sort out its economic chaos, a balanced budget is absolutely critical. And though Samaras's government (with the assistance of the European Commission) announced a surplus budget in April 2014, in reality no such surplus existed.¹⁶ As a result, the budget at the moment is (more or less) at 3 billion euros, an amount that has to be found immediately, before Syriza even starts contemplating

how to secure the funds for its €12 billion program. On top of this three billion euros, Greece has to come up with 31 billion euros to meet old and new loans from the troika (shared by the I.M.F. and the E.C.B. and maturing between late February and August 2015). So where will Syriza get the money for all this? The answer is not easily found. And most probably, the reason is that there is no answer. Syriza's own plan, so far, for securing these funds consists of reforming the tax system; attracting foreign investments and encouraging private ones in order to generate growth; and increasing the minimum wage.

The problem with these proposals is manifold. On the one hand, a reform of the tax system could potentially secure some funds but it is a strategy that many governments have promised without any success. But even if Syriza did manage some tax restructuring, it would take a minimum of two years for this ambitious idea to produce actual income for the state. And in terms of growth, it remains to be explained how foreign or private investment will proceed when banks have stopped issuing (or are unable, in the case of Greek banks, to issue) new loans. Last but not least, even in its most optimistic scenario, the increase of the minimum wage only affects a small part of the workforce, its contribution to G.D.P. is minimal, and it raises the uncomfortable question of what will happen to the rest of the wages. If we trust Stathakis's claim made almost a year ago, they will be frozen at today's levels.

The Explosion-Point of Illusions

In terms of the negotiations with the E.U., Syriza has made clear that it wishes to remain within the eurozone; it has clarified that it will not make any unilateral decisions—it knows that it needs the E.U.'s money to keep coming; and all that while renegotiating the terms of the bailout. At the same time, to its voters and to the left, it has promised a (minimal but still ambitious) semi-Keynesian public spending, low-income-support, job-creating program, without taxing the rich or redistributing wealth.

It is clear that it is not possible for both of these scenarios to play out. For a negotiation to take place, both sides need bargaining cards. Syriza does not have one. But what it does have is the certainty that nobody in Europe wants a chaotic situation, the possibility of Greece exiting the eurozone,¹⁷ or the uncertainty that would emerge from such drastic changes. If we add the fact that, upon closer examination, none of Syriza's internal policies (that some people wish to present as radical, but in actuality seem to have a scary resemblance to the first memorandum agreement of 2010¹⁸) are such as would prompt the E.U. to interpret Syriza's government as, for example, *Jacobin* presents it, the situation becomes somewhat clearer.¹⁹

In line with Europe's strategy in the crisis so far (i.e. kicking the can down the road), and far from the enthusiasm that sees Syriza's victory as a turning point against European austerity, the following months will most likely be characterised by a cat and mouse charade: Syriza will ask for more time to re-adjust its program to the economic chaos it inherited from the previous government; it will ask for more time for Q.E. to reach Greece; it will ask for more time until their (only) ally in Europe (the Spanish Podemos party) actually wins an election in December 2015 (if it does). In the meantime, it can implement a few spectacular policies that will be empty of actual content (such as the increase of the minimum wage) to give the impression that it is actually changing things. And if the E.U. has decided to play along (and so far they seem to be on board), they can extend the same courtesy to Syriza as they did to New Democracy and create an atmosphere of economic recovery with fictitious surplus budgets and exits to the market. Meanwhile it seems that a certain form of austerity will continue, but in a way that only a left-government could get away with. ☹

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COGNORD is unfortunate enough to have been born in Greece, and fortunate enough to have participated in the social movements which attempted to put a halt to the capitalist devaluation of that country. Shortly after the farewell party of the movement (the magnificent general strike and intense riots of February 12, 2012) he left Greece and settled in a cold place. Occasionally, he writes articles about his native land.

Endnotes

1. Between 2010 – 12, the social movement that emerged significantly challenged politics as a separate activity. It was not only the parliament that was consistently seen as a legitimate target (with its MPs harassed, even violently, whenever seen in public), but also traditional institutions of mediation (such as trade unions, the mass media, etc.) which saw their ability to create consensus seriously undermined. Syriza, however, worked in the opposite direction: An endorsement of a critique of existing political institutions and their legitimacy would be entirely contradictory and nonsensical for a parliamentary political party. And as soon as the possibility of forming a government started becoming increasingly realistic, Syriza did its best to forge alliances with representatives of the existing power mechanisms.
2. Keeping in mind that private sector wages were significantly lower than the public sector.
3. There have been, of course, some grandiose statements by Syriza members. See for example, S. Kouvelakis's interview on the history of Syriza in the January 2015 issue of *Jacobin* or Milios's statements about how Syriza is a "Marxist" party published in December in *Berliner Zeitung* (in German). But these are selective statements, made to outlets who already support Syriza, and are aimed at discussions within left-wing circles and expectations.
4. Before the 2009 elections, Syriza tried to draw support from the previous December uprising, centering its propaganda around the slogan "from the streets to the ballot box." The result was embarrassing, and yet indicative of Syriza's influence: 4.13 percent of the votes, almost 1 percent less than in the elections of 2007.
5. It is interesting to note that the spectacular jump from 4 percent to 17 percent was made with a relative semblance of radicalism. Syriza comprehended that a large part of the population in Greece was expressing its anger against austerity, the troika agreements and the political apparatus as it stood. It thus adopted a harsh rhetoric calling for a unilateral refusal of the memorandum agreements, a rejection of austerity measures, and a call for an end to the continuous devaluation of the Greek economy. But the more Syriza's percentages grew, the more this rhetoric was replaced with more "sober" and Realpolitik announcements. At the same time, Syriza started attracting Pasok's disgruntled voters, inheriting in this way the people and mechanisms that Pasok's almost 30-year rule had created.
6. The two most obvious examples were the proposed teachers' strike and the shutdown of State Television (E.R.T.) in the summer of 2013. In the first case, a planned strike by teachers during the highly important national exams was pre-emptively made illegal by the government, who pledged at the same time that if the strike went on, the government would resign. Though more than 90 percent of local teachers' unions defied the threat and voted to go on strike, the (Syriza-led) central union cancelled the strike claiming "conditions are not ripe." A couple of weeks later, when E.R.T. was suddenly shut down, the shock wave brought thousands of people in the street, making it impossible for the government to stop the broadcasting which immediately transpired. With State Television on its side, Syriza could have at least enjoyed a pre-election campaign with unconditional support from the largest broadcaster of Greece, which had been occupied and promptly transformed into an outright anti-government propaganda mouthpiece. Alexis Tsipras was invited on the first days of the occupation to appear, and asked to explain Syriza's policies to the 2.5 million viewers (the highest number ever reached by E.R.T.). His answer was indicative: "this is not the time."
7. Of course, this line of argument contradicts the equally dominant one that Syriza actually has a program, but one that necessarily means that Greece will be forced out of the E.U., the drachma will return as currency, Greeks will have no toilet paper to wipe their ass, and Satan will prevail. But then again, pre-election periods are hardly benchmarks of consistency.
8. Electricity will be reconnected only after applicants arrange a repayment-through-installments deal with the electricity company, with Syriza guaranteeing to pay the first installment. Applicants have to prove their "poor" status by submitting detailed tax statements. The same goes for the program for ensuring housing: Syriza will subsidize rent, at three euros per square meter. Moving on, the restructuring of the tax system has been promised by every single government ever since the creation of the Greek state, leaving little hope that this time round it will be successful. Foreclosures on people's homes have not actually been carried out so far. A law forbids them until January 2015, but the main obstacle for implementing foreclosures is the banks themselves: if a bank declares a loan as non-refundable, they have to add it to their losses, thus increasing their overall bankrupt state. The return of the minimum wage only affects 10 percent of the workforce (and the latest agreed number was 640 euros not 751 euros), out of which those on part-time employment will see a 70 euros per month increase. The exact explanation why this measure will increase G.D.P. by 0.5 percent is nowhere to be found in Syriza's texts, and it seems that it is nothing

but wishful thinking. Lastly, it is unclear whether collective bargaining will be re-introduced immediately or gradually in the next 4 years. However, the creation of 300,000 new jobs plus new unemployment beneficiaries is clearly a long-term plan for the next four years.

9. For those who can read Greek, the cost of Syriza's program is systematically analyzed at www.left.gr/news/i-kostologisi-toy-programmatos-toy-syriza. Unfortunately, the source of funding for this cost do not receive a similarly detailed expose.
10. G. Stathakis, interview in *Naftemporiki*, December 22, 2014.
11. Assuming for a second that the troika agrees to reduce Greece sovereign debt from 176 percent of G.D.P. to 100 percent, i.e. a 50 percent reduction and assuming that repayment is given a low rate of 2 percent, interest repayment reaches a 3.5 billion euros per year. Since Greece has no surplus, it will have to borrow money to repay that. In just 4 years, an additional 14 billion euros will be added to the sovereign debt.
12. In reality, the concept of "sovereign debt" is nothing but a useful ideological tool of economic discipline, that only has effect in special situations, such as the eurozone, where states share common currency (but not common monetary policy) and are thus unable to devalue or default on existing debt. Similar to other economic theory jargon, "sovereign debt" is irrelevant to the extent that the economy has the ability to generate growth. In fact, most economically advanced countries in the world enjoy large sovereign debts (U.S. is now at 75 percent of GDP, Japan is at 214 percent, Italy at 124 percent, France at 90 percent, and Germany at 87 percent), without this ever translating into austerity and harsh consolidation programs.
13. The 2012 P.S.I. agreement (the official term given for debt restructuring) was structured in such a way that it essentially swapped old bonds with new ones, with the burden falling on Greek insurance funds who suffered immense losses (the Journalists' Fund, for example, lost around 50 percent of its assets) without even been given the choice to participate in the swap. Apart from that, the end result was in fact an actual increase in sovereign debt.
14. In this context, and because Syriza had already said that the introduction of Q.E. is part of its own plan for financing its anti-austerity program, Draghi's announcement was greeted positively by Syriza. In fact, it was New Democracy that was further ridiculed, because Samaras had said that Q.E. is a stupid idea that will not become E.C.B. policy—furthering the impression that New Democracy was more out of touch with the E.U. than Syriza.
15. Since participation in the Q.E. program will be proportionate to each state's contribution, assuming that Greece (with a 2 percent contribution) is given the chance to participate it would be entitled to 1.2 – 1.7 billion euros per month or 34 billion euros per year, since Draghi said that Q.E. will start gradually, with 60 billion euros each month. What was not announced, however, was what percentage of the 60 billion euros will go towards purchasing state bonds or other assets. An informed guess would say "not that many," but feeling generous, let us just say that half of that will be in fact used for state bonds. That means, for Greece, 17 billion euros per year (0.6 – 0.8 billion euros per month). In a more realistic scenario, these 17 billion euros will actually be used to buy already issued bonds (Draghi clarified that), which probably means that they will be used to buy Greek bonds which are now in the hands of foreign banks who are trying to get rid of them.
16. The surplus was actually calculated using non-traditional measures, excluding a number of crucial payments that should have been made. The economic spokesman of the E.C. admitted that a certain "leeway" was given to Greece, making it clear that the decision to confirm a surplus was a political one. It bought time for the Samaras government, while at the same time giving the possibility to Germany to claim that there is "light at the end of the tunnel of austerity."
17. Regardless of the official statements of Germany about the ongoing risk of a Greek exit, the fact is that no one is in a position to estimate the consequences that such a move would have for the E.U. And since neither Syriza nor anyone else has any willingness to dive deep into the waters of uncertainty, it seems more likely that a common agreement will be found.
18. The first memorandum was focused on a restructuring of the tax system, labor reforms that would attract foreign investments, generous support for the bank system, E.U. loans that would eventually allow Greece to re-enter the markets, and a clause on being especially sensitive to low-income/poor families. Sound familiar? With the exception of wage cuts (Syriza will not cut wages, but will not raise them either), the rest could well have been taken out of a Stathakis interview.
19. The announcement that Syriza will form a coalition government with the Independent Greeks (a far-right, anti-immigration, and anti-Semitic party) as a result of its failure to secure an absolute majority, simply on the basis of its anti-memorandum rhetoric, is already an embarrassing development.

Letter from Paris

by Charles Reeve

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SITUATION WE ARE living through, right now, in Paris and in France.

It's a difficult moment

People are in shock, sad, very concerned. One can feel it in daily life. There is also a widespread need to talk and exchange ideas and feelings, among neighbors, work colleagues, and even strangers encountered in the transportation system or in the street. There is a feeling that the basis of social life is fragile and delicate. The desire for solidarity can be felt in the way people look at each other, in the words that pass between them. This is probably stronger in the popular milieu where, as in the area on the edge of Paris where I live, many people are of immigrant origin and many come specifically from what is called "Islamic culture." They are afraid that they are going to pay a high price for the current situation. They also know that what is happening is, in part, the result of their distress, the social decomposition of sectors of the proletarian community, which is experiencing division, exclusion, and repression. Urban French society is extremely diverse, and there is a feeling that this mixture is something which should be defended and respected; otherwise the social situation will become even worse.

For reactionary types, of course, this diversity is the big problem. As some politician from the right just said, speaking elliptically, "Immigration makes things more complicated." Immigrants are already marginalized; now they are the number one suspects. As a young guy was saying the other day on the bus, "The police already loved us and they were on us all the time. Now, we also have the journalists coming up to us. That must be what they call terrorism!"

The bloody massacre was a military-type action, carried out by people who identify with groups who are at war with the French state. They see themselves as soldiers. One of the commandos, after killing 12 people in the *Charlie Hebdo* office, refused to kill a hostage, saying, "We do not kill civilians." Moved by ideological fanaticism, they executed journalists whom they saw as serving the war of the French state. The targeting of Jewish people in the kosher supermarket was also justified as part of the overall war going on, as a reply to the killing of children in Gaza.

For more than 20 years, the French state has been engaged in several wars and military operations in Africa and the Middle East. Today, more than 8,000 French soldiers are engaged, from Iraq to the Sahel, with planes, warships, and so on. This engagement has been reinforced by the present Socialist government, which keeps talking about going to war everywhere where it's needed. Since the beginning of the 20th century and the First World War, socialists have shown their love for war, and when they are in power one can be sure that they will do their best. It was obvious to anyone who thought about it that this permanent war, which is spreading all over around us, bringing destruction, death, and the massive displacement of populations, would have consequences. How could people think the war was only on television and would not come home? Now, everybody knows, and French society has been awakened to the problem in a brutal way. For the moment, and this is certainly one of the most striking aspects of the present situation, only rarely does a public voice express concern about the war in the media or in political discourse. Only some secret service officials dare to do so, softly. I think that this question is now agitating the spirits of many and that this debate will not be suppressed much longer. The fact is that a Socialist government has better ideological means of keeping the question of war out of public discussion. I'm sure that under a right-wing

government the recent demonstrations would have taken on an anti-war character, as they did in Spain after the Madrid attacks in 2004.

This brings us to a second important aspect of the present situation. The first demonstrations against the killings were spontaneous and very intense: hundreds of thousands, "political" and "apolitical" people, came together in public places, and their slogans were against the barbarous acts as such, without being nationalistic, racist, or patriotic. The Socialist government understood very quickly that they should take the lead and organize the protests before they could turn against the state's military engagement and their own responsibility. They appealed for "National Unity." The President met with the leader of the National Front—for the first time—along with the leader of the Left Socialist party. The message was clear: the "extremes" are close! The



"I am Charlie!" — "Yeah, yeah. Me too."

extreme right was "officially" recognized by the Socialists as a normal partner in the political game and their members invited to participate in the demos—which they did all over the country, singing the national anthem, waving national flags, cheering the police, giving a dominantly patriotic tone to the demos. An alliance with the traditional right for a "defense policy against terrorism" was also immediately accepted. This alliance, the climax of "National Unity," makes it possible to ignore, among other things, questions about the conditions that give rise to such attacks and about the failures of the French secret services. Without falling for conspiracy theories, there are a number of strange facts to note: the commandos were well known but not followed a *Charlie Hebdo* was known to be a main target but not well protected; a terrorist involved in a previous attack against Jewish kids had probably been a double agent for the French services, etc. It's quite possible that divisions and antagonisms exist inside the intelligence services and that some sectors are not unhappy about the consequences of these killings, which can reinforce the acceptance of right-wing forces and ideas in French society. But it's also possible that the services are simply unable to keep track of

all these young guys who are attracted to fanatic militancy. This in itself suggests the importance of the problem inside French society.

Patriotic unity was also a form suited to neutralizing the leftist socialists, communists, greens, and union leaders, political forces that have been totally diluted in the mass demonstration and its patriotic dimension. Whatever the intentions of individuals who wished to demonstrate a critical attitude towards the government, they ended by being integrated into the mass rallies and counted as "people demanding a strong response from government." In fact they were demonstrating in a mobilization organized by the state and their critical concern was never recognized. Today, the slogan "*Je suis Charlie*" ("I am Charlie"), taken up by banks, companies, celebrities, and even religious leaders (!), more and more means: "I am on the side of the state." It's not surprising that you don't see it so much in the working-class immigrant areas.

The fact is that the recent massacres were a victory for both camps. For the state, the immediate result of the mass demos (about four million people in France)—led by a disgusting collection of war criminals (from Netanyahu to officials representing the Russian, Turkish, and Saudi Arabian governments) and political movers of ongoing wars—was to mobilize society to support current policies. To divide more deeply the proletarian class, a class collectively already undergoing decomposition as an effect of the economic and social crisis. To justify more repressive measures, a version of the American Patriot Act, which they will probably push in a different way in France, by adding measures to those already in place, without giving them a specific name.

For the jihadist enemy of the French state, the victory is also a big one. The reactionary religious forces, which take credit for the attacks, present themselves as the "security," the "protectors" of the abandoned sectors of the working class, which have an "Islamic culture." There is a risk in this, since, as some good observers keep saying, there is today in France no such thing as an "Islamic community." The mechanisms of French society are still able to create a living mixture from a diverse population. But the development of the crisis, the destruction of public services, especially education, and mass unemployment and social exclusion, will favor the fabrication of such a community, to the joy of the religious fanatics. In the areas where most of the French kids of immigrant origin live, the rate of youth unemployment is about 60 percent. When one reads about the itinerary of the three fanatics who committed the massacre, it's clear that they were lost in society, and that they looked to religion to orient themselves. The marginalization of large sectors of working people has transformed their living areas into sorts of "reservations," which are increasingly seen by the conservative sectors of society (and not only them) as reservations of "Islamic radicalism and barbarism."

Surely, the government hopes to take advantage of the present situation to proceed with measures of internal social war, taking additional time and space to deal administratively with the social consequences of the economic crisis. A few days after the massacre, while the president went to visit a naval base in the south of France, Air France announced the layoff of 5,000 workers, mostly holders of lower-paid jobs on which thousands of families in the Paris area depend. The external war will continue. Unemployment and poverty will continue to increase; social and educational services will continue to degrade. These are different wars, which are aspects of a global war. Only an opposition to the internal social war will be able to change the current trend. But if the patriotic "National Unity" takes the lead, things will only get worse. ☹

Anger and Shame

by Catherine Robert, Isabelle Richer,
Valérie Louys, and Damien Boussard

We are teachers at Seine-Saint-Denis [a northern *banlieue* (suburb) of Paris, where the majority of children are of immigrant origin]. Intellectual, educated, adult, libertarian, we're done with God and detest political power and its perverse pleasures. We have no master other than knowledge. The discourse of knowledge reassures us, because of its supposedly rational coherence, and our social status legitimates it. The people who worked at *Charlie Hebdo* made us laugh; we shared their values. From that point of view, the attack on them had us for targets. Even if none of us had the courage of that much insolence, we're wounded. For this, we are Charlie.

But we make the effort to change our point of view, and strive to look at ourselves as our pupils see us. We are well dressed, with nice hair, wearing comfortable shoes, quite obviously secure enough from material contingencies to look without envy on the consumer goods of which our pupils dream: if we don't possess them, it is partly because we have the means to own them. We go on vacation, we live in the midst of books, we hang out with courteous, refined people, elegant and cultivated. We take it as given that *Liberty Guiding the People* and *Candide* are part of the inheritance of humanity. Do you tell us that the universality of this culture is *de jure* and not *de facto*, and that many inhabitants of this planet do not know Voltaire? What a bunch of ignoramuses. It is time for them to enter into history: Sarkozy's 2007 speech at Dakar already explained that! As for those who come from elsewhere to live among us, they should be quiet and compliant.

If the crimes committed by those assassins are hateful, what is terrible is that they speak French, with the accent of the kids from the *banlieue*. These two killers are like our students. There is trauma for us not just in the crime but also in hearing that voice, that accent, those words. This is what makes us feel responsible. Obviously, not us personally: that's what our friends will say, friends who admire our daily dedication. But what no one around us should say is that, despite all we do, we are cleared of this responsibility. We—that is to say, the functionaries of a failing state, the teachers at a school that left those kids and so many others by the side of the road of “republican values,” French citizens who pass our time complaining about tax increases, taxpayers who profit from the loopholes when we can, people who have given precedence to the individual over the collectivity, people who don't participate in politics or make fun of those who do—we are responsible for this situation.

The people who worked at *Charlie Hebdo* were our brothers: we weep for them as such. Their killers were orphans, in foster care: wards of the nation, children of France. Our children have thus killed our brothers. A tragedy. In every culture, such a tragedy provokes a sentiment of which no one has spoken in recent days: shame.

So we speak our shame. Shame and anger: here is a psychological situation much more uncomfortable than sorrow and anger. If you are sorrowful and angry you can accuse others. But what can you do when you are ashamed, angry with the killers, but also with yourself?

No one in the media speaks of this shame. No one seems to want to accept responsibility for it: the shame of a state that leaves imbeciles and psychotics to stagnate in prison and become playthings for manipulative perverts, that of a school deprived of means and support, that of an urban policy that parks slaves (without papers, without voting cards, without names, without teeth) in the filthy *banlieue*, that of a political class which has not learned that virtue is taught only by example.

Intellectuals, thinkers, professors, artists, journalists: we have seen our people killed. Those who killed them are children of France. Let us open our eyes to the situation, to understand how this happened, to act, to construct a secular and cultured society, more just, more free, more equal, more fraternal.

“We are Charlie” can be taken in reverse. But to affirm our solidarity with the victims does not exempt us from collective responsibility for these murders. We are also related to the three assassins. ☹

We Should Say No to This Hypocritical Rally

by Patric Jean

This text was published on *Mediapart.fr* on January 10, 2015, in advance of the official anti-terrorism demonstration in Paris. It is translated here by J. Reuss.

“Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue.”

—La Rochefoucauld

Three days after the terrorist attack commenced, we're being dished up a tepid, consensual discourse topped with a hypocritically pious sauce. The worst critics whine about freedom of speech. The hate-mongers call for national unity. The real questions are taboo, and the only line tolerated concerns the war in which we presumably stand on the “good side.”

Sunday's march will erase all awkward questions, and I will not take part in this ball of hypocrites which, according to the prime minister, “will show France's strength.”¹

First of all, I find it hard to see myself marching alongside the worst people on the right, who are openly racist. March next to Sarkozy? To Copé and his *pains au chocolat*?² To Hortefeux and his insulting comments about Arabs?³ Have we forgotten that when the revolution in Tunisia began to overthrow the bloodthirsty dictator Ben Ali, Michèle Alliot-Marie—then minister of defense—offered France's military assistance to fight against the insurgents? March with them tomorrow? With the very right-wing prime ministers of Spain and Great Britain? Benjamin Netanyahu was invited following his kind offer to help France. That great democrat, Turkey's president, is going to send his prime minister. This looks like the kind of joke *Charlie Hebdo* would invent.

What irony to see the minister of the interior showering praise on policemen and gendarmes that one and all hail on the social networks.⁵ Intervention by police forces is required when civilians are endangered, but have we already forgotten what we thought about those same forces when they murdered an unarmed, pacifistic young demonstrator a few weeks ago? The people who demonstrated then will demonstrate tomorrow in a political hodgepodge devoid of meaning. It's likewise strange to hear the (past and present) heads of France Inter and Radio France weeping over freedom of speech.⁶ The very ones who sacked people like Porte, Guillon, and Mermet, who exercised that right on their stations.⁷ Or those who, elsewhere, helped promote the worst reactionaries known for their violent, racist views.

All of these hypocrites will be marching tomorrow. Let's not join them.

Following the death of *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoonists, we are supposedly “all Charlie,” united behind a meaningless discourse which the victims themselves would never have endorsed. The slogan, invented by an ad designer, is truly the reflection of our times. We put aside our political oppositions for a moment, as if they weren't the crux of what's happening. As if all of a sudden, by accident, we were under attack by an external enemy with whom we were totally unrelated. As if the murdered cartoonists could become standard-bearers, something they always opposed.

In the past I've raised questions about how our society produces monsters. After all, they are our own terrorists. They grew up here. Like the thousand youths who've gone to Syria, they now surprise those who knew them. “Good kids,” nice, friendly, but who turned into barbarians. Did they all get the same mental illness? The only answer we're given is that they were manipulated by fundamentalist Muslim ideologues. That's true. However, shouldn't we wonder why thousands of young people fall into such clutches? Couldn't that be the result of a society in which a third of its members are sinking into despair? Institutionalized racism, segregation in jobs, in daily life, in housing, police checks based on racial profiling, endemic police violence. Not to mention unemployment, poverty, and above all no prospects for the future, a sense of implacable, total, and permanent injustice for millions of women and men. Three million children in France live in poverty. Can we reasonably hope that some of them will not become violent? What an illusion.

Then there is the Islamic terrorist violence, which, like all types of violence, has a history. That of the Muslim Brotherhood has its source in a postcolonial context of dictatorships supported by our rulers. In Afghanistan, the United States trained and financed religious fanatics who did not become democrats once the Russians were routed. The interventions in foreign lands led today by the United States, Great Britain, and France repeat the same mistakes and bring about the same consequences. France's demented attack on Libya—on Bernard-Henri Lévy's instigation and subsequent to Nicolas Sarkozy's stately reception of its dictator (and probably of a tidy sum)—led to chaos within that country and to the arming of terrorist militias further south.⁸



“High masses?? The Marseillaise?? For us!?”
“Being loved by assholes is hard.”

Then, France felt obligated to intervene in its Malian private preserve when the situation got out of hand.

Last, the thousands of young Europeans (an appalling share of them from Belgium) leaving for Syria aroused not the slightest questioning about how we function collectively. A society whose ultra-individualistic values rightly brought it to challenge alienating values also built social relations founded solely on competition, thereby barring any solidarity and, as a result, any consciousness of class and of systemic injustice. Hence the political battle. And so it was this way that young people's feeling of injustice found a new outlet through which to express itself.

The outcome has been the lukewarm tap water which has so entranced everyone for the last four days. It would not have amused Charb, Wolinski, Tignous, and Uncle Bernard to see such honor bestowed on their names at the New York Stock Exchange or in churches.⁹ Their blood would have boiled to hear the U.S. president announce that he was praying for them. This manner of tribute tramples underfoot who they were—radically to the left, often anarchists and atheists.

One and all are now heard claiming that the terrorists were not “true Muslims.” Even the President of the Republic, who has never been consulted on issues of theology, stated that this was not the “true Islam.” Once again, this hypocrisy masks a far more complex reality. The three religions of the Book carry within themselves, and in their writings, anything and everything. One forcibly ignores that the Judeo-Christian “Thou shalt not kill” is followed just a few pages later by a divine command to commit genocide by killing the men, women, and children of a people who occupied a “sacred” land which had to be seized. Depending on whether they approach the scriptures from one end or another, believers will develop a language of love or of hate. Or sometimes both. The Inquisition was carried out Bible in hand, as was the massacre of Palestinians. Religion is merely a vector through which one can express an appeased spirituality or the hatred one has accumulated inside oneself, according to one's life experience in other respects.

If we keep on stopping ourselves from thinking while crying for freedom of thought, we pursue the same policy that is leading us to disaster. The brainwashing has been complete, and we're going to refuse to see in events the least symptom of anything other than a “war being waged against us.” Consequently, that war will intensify, other tragic events will occur and we won't be able to deal with them. In his darkest hours, Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak—friend of the West—had a million policemen at his bidding, posted at every street corner. Yet that did not suffice for him.

Tomorrow, people will march alongside those who enabled new Nazis to spread their nauseating ideas everywhere. The producers and journalists who popularized the conceivers of Muslim “deportation” will be in the street. Having grown fat on a quite profitable audience, they are feigning anger over the consequences of what they concocted.

Tomorrow, my socialist, ecologist, communist, and Left Front friends will go march with the right wing.¹⁰ I wish them pleasure in doing so, because soon they'll be reduced to voting for the latter. ☹

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Endnotes

1. Prime Minister Manuel Valls.
2. Jean-François Copé, vying for leadership of the rightwing UMP party, declared “There are neighborhoods in France where children can't eat their *pain au chocolat* because it's Ramadan.”
3. Brice Hortefeux, French politician, formerly minister of the interior, Overseas Territories and Territorial collectivities.
4. French National Anthem.
5. Minister of the Interior is the French equivalent of Homeland Security.
6. France Inter is a major French public radio channel. France Radio is the public service radio broadcaster.
7. Didier Porte and Stéphane Guillon are well-known comedians and troublemakers, Daniel Mermet, an outspoken journalist.
8. In early March 2011, Bernard-Henri Lévy met with Libyan rebel leaders and proceeded to convince then-President Sarkozy to support the rebels diplomatically and militarily.
9. *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists.
10. The Left Front is an electoral coalition between the French Communist Party and the Left Party.

Ayotzinapa

REASONS OF STATE—AND ECONOMY

On September 26, 2014, in the Mexican town of Iguala, in the state of Guerrero, uniformed police and black-masked gunmen shot and killed six people, wounded more than 20, and detained 43 students from the Normal School in nearby Ayotzinapa. (The Normal Schools train people, generally young members of poor peasant families, to be teachers in the rural schools.) The students were apparently handed over to a local drug gang, the *Guerreros Unidos* (United Warriors), in cahoots with the mayor of Iguala (his wife's brother seems to be a G.U. leader). Since then they have not been seen again, and are presumed dead, though their parents are demanding that they be returned to them alive. The search for the students has so far led to the uncovering of a multitude of bodies—not surprising given that, according to human rights groups, an estimated 70,000 Mexicans have been killed and another 27,000 “disappeared” since 2006, when the then-president of Mexico Felipe Calderón embarked on a militarized struggle against the drug industry at the urging of the United States.

The three articles included here originated in a public forum on the theme “Narco-State and Narco-Economy,” organized by the Economics Department and the *Centro de Análisis de Coyuntura Económica, Política y Social* at the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM). They have been lightly edited; translations are by Loreli Mojica.

Why Now? Why in Guerrero?

by Magdalena Galindo Ledezma

In addition to expressing indignation at the crimes the state has committed against the students of the rural Normal School Raúl Isidro Burgos in Ayotzinapa, we think it is essential to analyze the events from a political perspective, in order to attempt to identify not only those responsible, but also the intent behind the crimes.

In the first place, we must recognize that the government's story, which aims at confining responsibility to the mayor of Iguala, some of the local police, and an organized crime group, is improbable, as public protests have stressed. The protests point to an act of repression of such magnitude and gravity that it obviously could not have been the decision of a mayor nor of the municipal police. There are no motives for the kidnapping of 43 students by an organized crime group; since the *normalistas* have no relations with cartels, the drug gangsters have no interest in such kidnapping. The participation of organized crime in the events in Iguala, then, cannot be explained by will or self-interest, unless they acted as mercenaries in service of others.

A second aspect of this situation that must be made clear is that the appearance in security cameras of black vans driven by hooded men, like the flaying of the face of one of the *normalistas*, and the very disappearance of the 43 students is strikingly similar to the counterinsurgency techniques utilized in Central America during the '80s by government armed forces, trained by the United States. (Remember, for example, that Miss Guatemala, who carried messages for Guatemalan guerrilla forces, was detained and later turned up flayed.)

From a more general perspective, the case of Ayotzinapa exhibits two aspects that have become common in the last few years. The first is the fight against the *Normales*, particularly the rural schools, because these schools, created during the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency, have through the decades preserved a mystique of social commitment that now appears dangerous to the Mexican state. As a result, the budget for these rural Normal Schools has not only been cut, but terminated altogether. Only the struggle of students and *normalistas* has kept a few alive, in precarious conditions, within the country. In this context, it is important to remember the assassination of two Ayotzinapa *normalistas* on December 12, 2011 in Guerrero.

The second aspect that it is imperative to remember is that during the last few years the strength of organized crime, and the government campaigns to combat it, have served as a cover for three phenomena equally important to the people and the democratic life of Mexico.

First, the militarization of the country: Under the pretext of fighting organized crime, especially drug cartels, entire Mexican cities and even states have become completely subordinated to the army. Second, the deployment of federal forces, supposedly against organized crime, has served as a cover-up for the repression of popular social movements. And third, organized crime has been used to criminalize political protests and activists, with the notion of some secret connection between the Normal Schools and organized crime justifying unjust incarceration and murder. In the case of Ayotzinapa we must point out a fake connection between “some” of the missing *normalistas* and an unknown cartel called “Los Rojos,” invented to supply a motive for the (real) Guerreros Unidos to attack the *normalistas*.

Apart from this environment and these practices, which provide a context for the case of Ayotzinapa, we must ask ourselves: why now, why in Guerrero? While it is true that the *normalistas* have been at the center of a permanent struggle, their action on September 26, seizing three vans in order to raise funds to attend a demonstration in Mexico City on October 2, does not seem to provide a motive for an action of the size and seriousness of what happened. We must analyze, then, the national conjuncture in which it has taken place, and in particular the reform of energy policy which constitutes the fundamental piece of the political-economic project of the Peña Nieto government.

In this perspective, whatever we think of its ability to reverse the reform, a plebiscite promoted by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas’s PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, Party of the Democratic Revolution) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s MORENA (*Movimiento Regeneración Nacional*, National Regeneration Movement) has gathered almost five million signatures, demonstrating strong opposition to handing over the main resources of the country (hydrocarbons), and the main input into the economy (electricity), to exploitation by private domestic and foreign companies. The first strategy to address this dissent was to discredit and trivialize the plebiscite mechanism by means of the proposals of the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*, National Action Party) and the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, Institutional Revolutionary Party) for referenda on the minimum wage and the number of deputies. However, this strategy proved very weak in the face of widespread questioning of the devastating energy reform. The repression of the students in Ayotzinapa, in Guerrero, a state governed by the PRD and where MORENA is an important force—and in addition to having links to various state-government officials—is an attempt precisely to discredit these two political parties because they are the ones that are bringing together protests against the energy reform.

In part, this goal has been achieved: With respect to the PRD, not only the leaders of the New Left (known as *los Chuchos*, or the Mutts) but also Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas have been rejected in various ways by serious numbers of people. In the case of López Obrador, the crowd that filled the *zócalo* a few days ago shows that his ability to call people together has not diminished, but the very brutality of the crimes against the students is a grim indication of the lengths to which the government is willing to go in order to suppress the movement against energy reform. Last week the Mexican Supreme Court rejected the popular referenda, while the *Diario Oficial* published regulations for the laws establishing the energy reform, completing the final reform, the most devastating for the nation.

The popular response to the crimes against the students of Ayotzinapa was not expected to reach the dimensions that have been achieved today, especially the rapid identification of the events as state crimes. This response, coming not only from students but also from very broad sectors of the population, demonstrates that Mexicans have said, “enough is enough.”

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“IMG_0087” by Miriana Moro (flic.kr/p/pS6gLe), used under CC BY 2.0 / Desaturated from original.



“Memoria Verdad y Justicia para Ayotzinapa” by Isabel Sanginés (flic.kr/p/pqUDPD), used under CC BY 2.0 / Desaturated from original.

Ayotzinapa: The Rural Normal School and the Criminal Government Offensive

by Jorge Cázares

The violence of September 26 in Iguala, located in the state of Guerrero, where six young people were murdered, more than 20 wounded, and 43 Normal School students disappeared at the hands of the local police of Iguala and Cocula, along with paramilitary groups—with the complaisance of the municipal, state, and federal governments and of the Mexican Army, whose 27th Infantry Battalion was stationed in this region—is not an isolated event. It forms part of an ongoing plan of terror and war of extermination waged against the population, mainly the young, which the Mexican regime in recent years has sharpened at the orders of the government of the United States.

Why is there so much hatred of the Normal students of Ayotzinapa? Why were they hunted and killed like animals? Why were they disappeared? These are some of the questions many are asking regarding the brutality of the perpetrators in these tragic events, which all and sundry have identified as a state crime and violation of human rights. Beyond the general point made in my first paragraph, the answers have to do with the hatred and contempt that the Mexican political system has, with few historical exceptions, displayed towards the students and teachers of the rural Normal Schools.

The *normales rurales*, a legacy of the Mexican Revolution and derived from the ideas of people like Francisco J. Múgica, José Vasconcelos, Isidro Castillo, and Rafael Ramirez, have been harshly criticized since their inception by the nation’s reactionary sectors, who see them as a threat to private interests. Aggressive persecution by the Catholic clergy of the first rural Normal School, established in Tacámbaro, Michoacán in 1922, caused the repeated relocation of its headquarters until the school ended up in the town of Tiripetío in 1949. Reactionaries attacked the institution as “the school of the devil.” Such conservative fears were justified, since the school would soon become the seed of a great educational and social movement, known internationally as “the Mexican rural school.”

The impetus given to rural Normalism between 1922 and 1945, during which time 35 institutions of this kind were developed, aimed at training teachers to work in rural areas in order to bring education to all corners of the country. The schools were founded in an effort to advance social justice, the main value of the Revolution. However, they were met with a strong reaction on the part of the ecclesiastical right, which passed from name-calling to the murder of many rural school teachers on the charges of being “communists.” In this the right enjoyed the complicity of governments that did little or nothing to prevent such crimes, because they are not really interested in the education of the poor, the indigenous, or the peasants, except as a means of incorporating them into the capitalist system.

Nonetheless, the rural Normal Schools and the teachers who graduated from them continued their work on behalf of the indigenous and poor peasants of Mexico, teaching not only letters and numbers but, above all, the philosophy of the community—communality, embodied in the social, economic, and political development of the rural areas—fostered by workshops on livestock, rural industry, sports, art and culture, and political ideology. To defend against attacks from the far right and deepen the project of the Mexican rural schools and socialist education, José Santos Valdes founded the Federation of Socialist Campesino Students of Mexico (F.E.C.S.M.) in 1935. F.E.C.S.M., the first student organization in Latin America, aims to promote movements to support social protests in the interests of the people.

During the ’50s, Professor Othón Salazar, educated in the Normal Schools of Oaxtepec, Morelos and Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, led the teachers’ movement. In 1957 he founded the *Movimiento Revolucionario del Magisterio* (M.R.M., Revolutionary Teachers Movement) alongside thousands of rural schoolteachers. This was recognized as the first mass teachers’ movement that stood up against government authoritarianism and yellow unions. Soon came

the heavy hand of government repression. Salazar was arrested and imprisoned in Lecumberri in 1958, but was released after three days, thanks to the movement. After, he continued fighting, like a true *normalista*.

In the 1960s and '70s, Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, both educated in the Normal School “Isidro Burgos” in Ayotzinapa and in the National Teachers School, led peasant and civic movements in the state of Guerrero against the despotism of local party bosses and for the defense of social rights. In the face of strong repression by the regime (imprisonment, assassinations, disappearances) these turned into armed movements, ending in their destruction by the forces of the Mexican state. The same period saw the rise of the great student movement of 1968, which was also severely repressed by the federal government in the Tlatelolco Massacre. Participation of the rural Normal Schools, through the F.E.C.S.M., was essential to this movement.

Another example of the outstanding participation of the rural *normalistas* in social and teachers' struggles is their activism in the *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (C.N.T.E., National Organization of Education Workers), founded in December, 1979, with the objective of contributing to the struggle for the democratization of public education, the teachers' union, and the life of the nation. Throughout its 35-year existence, the C.N.T.E. has developed permanent mobilizations for these goals, recording significant successes despite facing nearly non-stop physical, administrative, and judicial repression of its militants by the political regime.

In 1969, a year after the Tlatelolco Massacre and in the context of the Dirty War, the federal government, concerned about the F.E.C.S.M.'s participation in the movement, initiated a plan to close all rural Normal Schools in the country, on the pretext that modern Mexico did not need them. However, thanks to student resistance, the government's original plan was not followed. Nevertheless, half of these institutions have closed. In states like Michoacán, with two Normal Schools, the government closed one and left the other (in the case of Tiripetío, for males only). Some states (like Guanajuato) were left without any rural Normal Schools, so that many students were forced to seek other options.

The next blow came in 1984, under the sign of the initial imposition of the neoliberal economic model, with the modification of the plans and study programs of Normal education. With talk of elevating the degree requirement for teaching, the government sought to convert the Normal Schools into “pedagogical high schools,” leaving the professional level to the Pedagogical University and other academic institutions. The goal was the same as in earlier years: putting an end to the subsystem of rural Normal Schools, which makes so much trouble for the sectors privileged by the regime and for the regime itself. The student struggle led by the F.E.C.S.M. finally saved the schools, but the degree was lowered to the internship level; the education B.A. was taken from the Normal system in 1988. Thus pedagogical education was lengthened to seven years after high school, with the intention of making it less accessible to the poorest sectors of the population and changing the income profile of students.

With Carlos Salinas de Gortari's ascension to the presidency of the republic through the electoral fraud of 1988 came a new stage of aggression against the social right to public education, including the Normal Schools, which continues to this day under the slogan of

“educational reform.” Salina's “modernization” and “federalization” of education—achieved with the National Accord for the Modernization of Basic and Normal Education (1992)—aimed at, among other things, the dismantling of all national systems or organizations such as the National Educational System, the National Union of Education Workers, the Federation of Socialist Rural Students of Mexico, etc. In this way the regime managed to break these organizations' resistance to its neoliberal policies at the educational, social, and economic levels. This legislation was a hard blow but, thanks largely to the resistance of the F.E.C.S.M. and the C.N.T.E., it was not completely implemented, as both organizations continue to mobilize against the government at the state and national levels.

During the last few years, the regime has intensified its offensive against the rural Normal Schools, with attempts to:

1. Change the curricula for Normal School educators to eliminate the social justice aspect of this revolutionary project.

2. Continuously reduce the numbers matriculating and cancel automatic placements, as a way to make teaching careers more inaccessible to impoverished people and diminish their interest in enrolling in these programs.

3. Close Normal Schools such as “El Mexe” in Hidalgo, and cancel internships, like those in the Atequiza school in Jalisco and the Mactumactzá in Chiapas.

4. Flexibilize and liberalize the teaching career on the basis of the badly named “educational reform” and its General Law of the Professional Teaching Service, which established a mandatory testing system for hiring, promoting, and tenuring; starting in 2016, anyone, *normalista* or not, can enter the educational service who passes a standardized examination set by the National Institute for Educational Assessment according to the guidelines provided by the (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, O.C.D.E.).

5. Implement overt and covert, massive, and selective repression against students from rural Normal Schools around the country, with those in Ayotzinapa (2011 and 2014) and Tiripetío (2009 and 2012) the hardest hit in recent years, leaving innumerable students wounded, detained, dead, and disappeared. And if that were not enough:

6. Criminalize student teachers, through social lynching, non-stop campaigns of provocation and discrediting by the official media—all to justify the final elimination of the rural Normal Schools, one of the last vestiges of the Mexican Revolution.

Today, more than ever, we must understand that to defend the rural Normal Schools, like Ayotzinapa, is to defend the social right of the Mexican people to a secular, free, scientific, public education for the masses, with which—banishing standards and competitions imposed by transnational corporations that reduce us to data, numbers, and economic *things*—we will rebuild the foundations of a truly free, sovereign, just, and democratic country. ☺

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The Criminal Economy

by Sandy E. Ramirez Gutiérrez

The violent disappearance of students attending the Ayotzinapa Normal School, located in the state of Guerrero, highlighted not only the complicity of political power with drug trafficking groups, but also how these organizations have grown from exclusive trading partners to crucial instruments in the execution of state crimes. The growing drug economy is an integral part of capitalism. UNAM economics professor Magdalena Galindo Ledezma has characterized the criminal financial sector and the industrialization of crime as major contributors to the national economy, reaching high levels of concentration and centralization. The economic importance of the drug trade is not limited to the influx of money generated by this activity, but involves the formation of a political subject that, by its historical configuration, is inextricably linked and subordinated to the state.

Here I seek to trace the economic importance of the Mexican drug trade, the complexity of the federal government's income, and its organization; and, in light of its transformations, to understand its influence on national legislation and its place in the repression and criminalization of social activists who unsettle the state.

Mexican drug cartels have been calculated to earn as much as \$7 billion from the transfer and sale of cocaine to the U.S. market, apart from other drugs, crimes, and illicit transactions. For instance, a kilogram of cocaine hydrochloride base paste requires between 450 and 600 kilos of coca leaf. A Colombian farmer receives on average \$1.30 per kilo, meaning each kilo of cocaine base costs between \$585 and \$780. In the jungle, this is sold for about \$700 – \$2,000. In the country's ports, prices rise to the \$500 – \$7,000 range. In Central America, one kilogram can easily reach



“Coast Guard Cutter Richard Etheridge offloads contraband in St. Petersburg” by Coast Guard News (flic.kr/p/qt34rc), used under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 / Desaturated from original.

a value of around \$10,000. On the northern border of Mexico, the price may even go as high as \$15,000. Across the border in the United States, the same kilo can be sold wholesale at a staggering \$27,000 or more. In 2010, the price of a single gram of refined cocaine peaked at \$165 in the U.S. Thus the original kilo, with an average cost of \$650, can be sold at retail for \$165,000, more than 250 times the original price. Profits are further multiplied when chemical adulteration to lower the purity and increase the volume of marketed drugs is added into the equation.

Nevertheless, it is widely known that the increasing association of cartels with legal firms has caused rampant disregard of a myriad of crimes including extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling, with cartels and legal firms sharing extraordinary profits. In 2006, U.S. authorities estimated \$800 million – \$13 billion in revenue from Mexican traffickers for selling drugs. In 2009, the United States Department of Justice estimated the annual revenue of the cartels at \$39 billion. The SHCP (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit) admitted in 2012 that at least 10 billion criminal dollars entered the domestic financial system.

The economic expansion of the so-called cartels of the drug industry cannot be understood in isolation from their form as economic units, otherwise known as companies. Some of these enterprises have developed a form of vertical integration, linking the production of the raw material to the sale of the final product. Within these units, processes of specialization and outsourcing of labor are also to be noted. It is in these terms that we must understand the appearance and operation of bands/gangs, such as the Guerreros Unidos, La Linea, or Los Artistas Asesinos (operating in Juárez). The Guerreros Unidos appeared in 2011, and its members

have been accused of crimes such as drug distribution in the center of the country; killings; kidnapping; extortion; and the theft of public transport, freight, homes, and automobiles.

Therefore, when speaking of “organized crime,” it is imperative to distinguish between levels, since their size and functions are dependent upon the economic, political, and social impact they may have within the shares of each unit. This hypothesis provides a good explanation for differences in the behavior of the cartels. This does not mean that cartels are not violent. In fact, violence is one of the cartels’ inherent features, since they lack the legal contracts that guarantee businesses in capitalism. The action in Ayotzinapa cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but as the carrying out of a direct order. Its purpose may have been as well due to interests of the cartels as to those of the state.

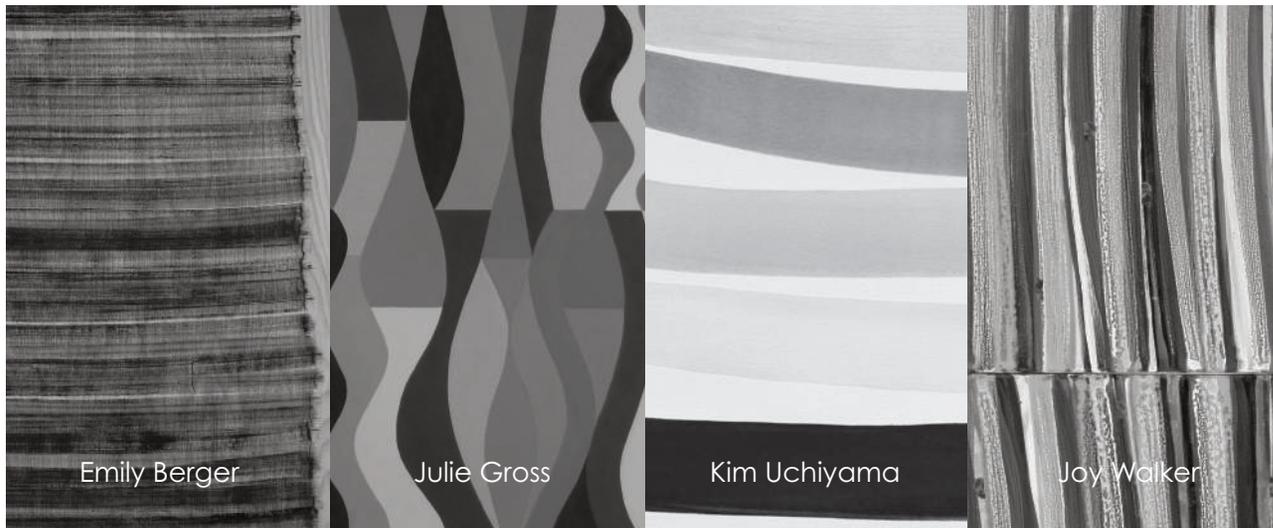
Drug trafficking cannot exist without the consent of the state. The establishment of the Mexican government’s prohibitionist measures on certain goods makes possible the existence of a black market for illicit goods. At the same time, government corruption enables black-market business. If customs officials, the police, the army, and politicians at all levels did not coordinate their activities, the production, trafficking, and sale of drugs (and the rest of the crimes committed by cartels) would not be possible.

Even without the existence of a massive drug trade, the Mexican state can readily be characterized as a mafia in itself. The entrepreneurial perks offered to foreign governments, international agencies, and politicians in exchange for guaranteeing the permanence of the current regime cannot be distinguished from the practices of organized crime. However, while the current pitfalls of the Mexican government’s relationship with the drug trade seem to outweigh the benefit of economic bribes, the deeply intertwined relationship of the federal government and drug cartels is now being configured as a partnership to crush social resistance.

In the case of Ayotzinapa, the abduction of community leaders in Cherán, and the murder of Octavio Atilano—who led the civilian movement against the construction of a dam in Sinaloa—show that the role of the narcotic trade is increasingly not only to act as an instrument of the state to create terror, but also as a means of violence that the state cannot legitimately practice by its own hand.

The drug trade, that diffuse inner enemy, can thus be the perfect pretext to carry out and hide crimes from which the state, transnational corporations, and Mexican elites directly benefit. This makes the action of these enterprises no less brutal, but obliges us to rethink the different arms with which the state implements the discipline required to maintain and expand the plundering to which this country is subjected. ☹

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Kim Uchiyama

Joy Walker

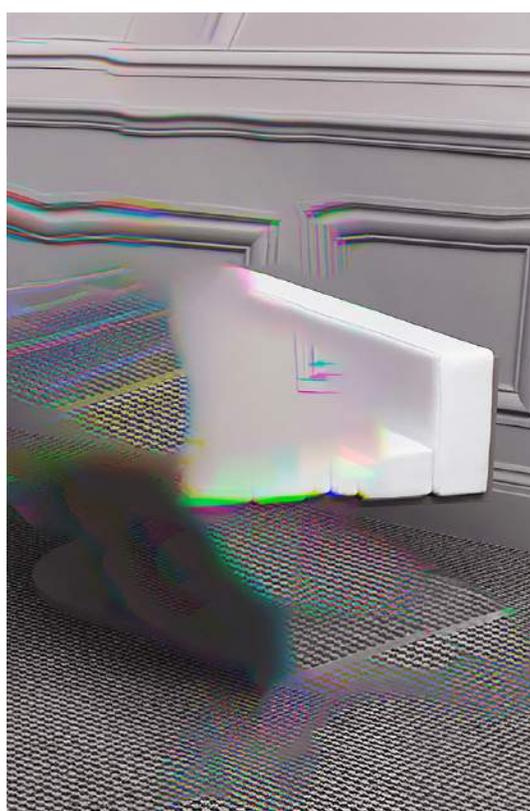
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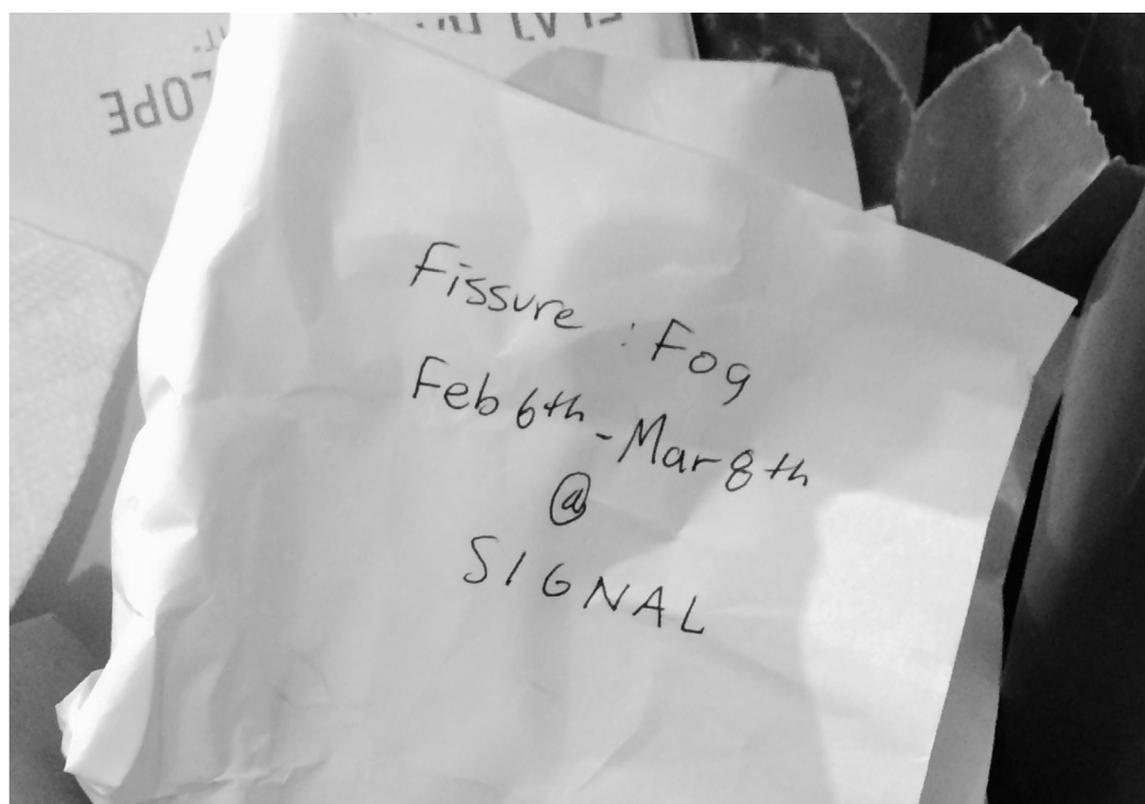
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Richard Meier
On Prospect Park



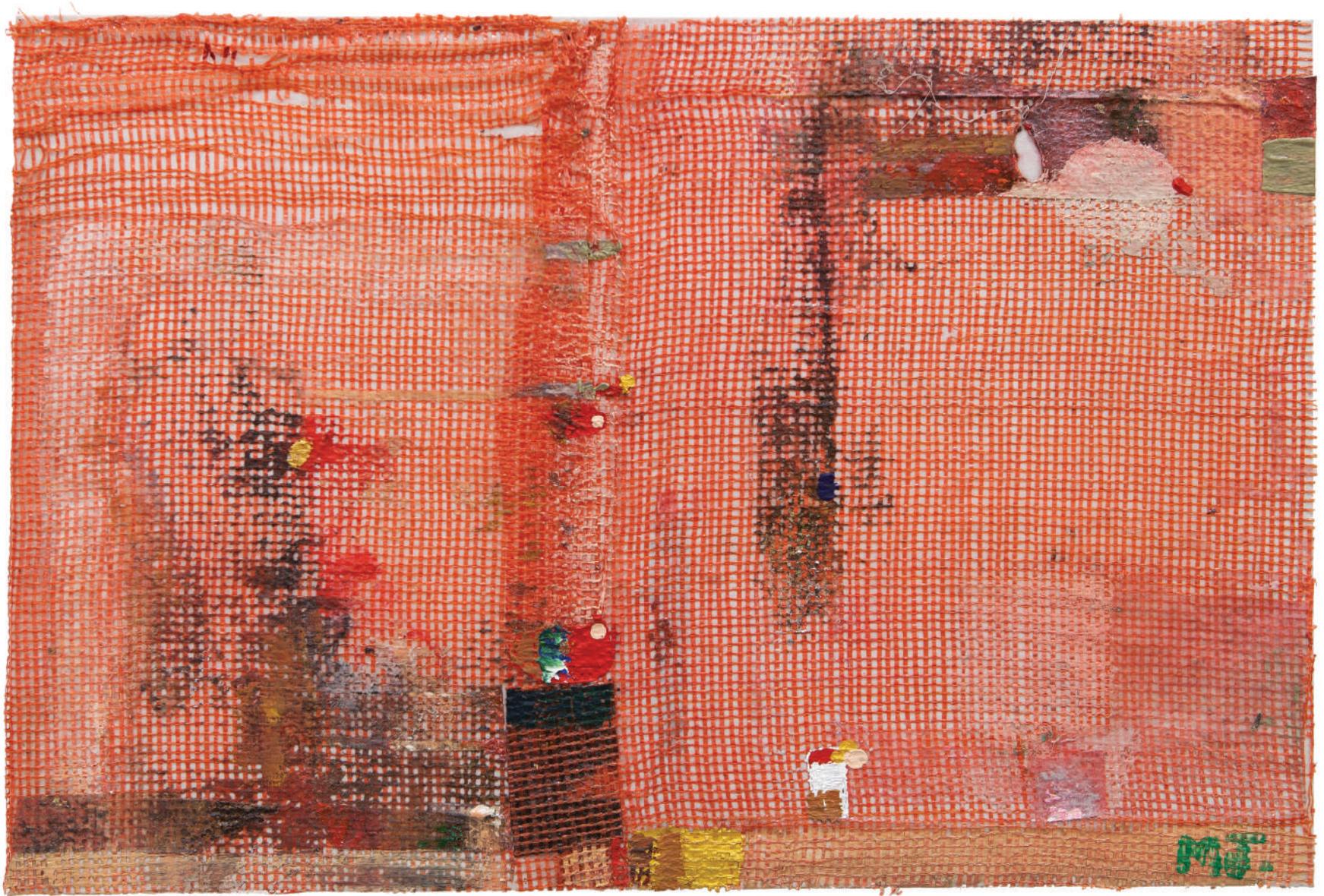
Stephen Davis, *Chair 9*, 2014, gesso, acrylic, charcoal and oil on canvas, 56.25" x 75"

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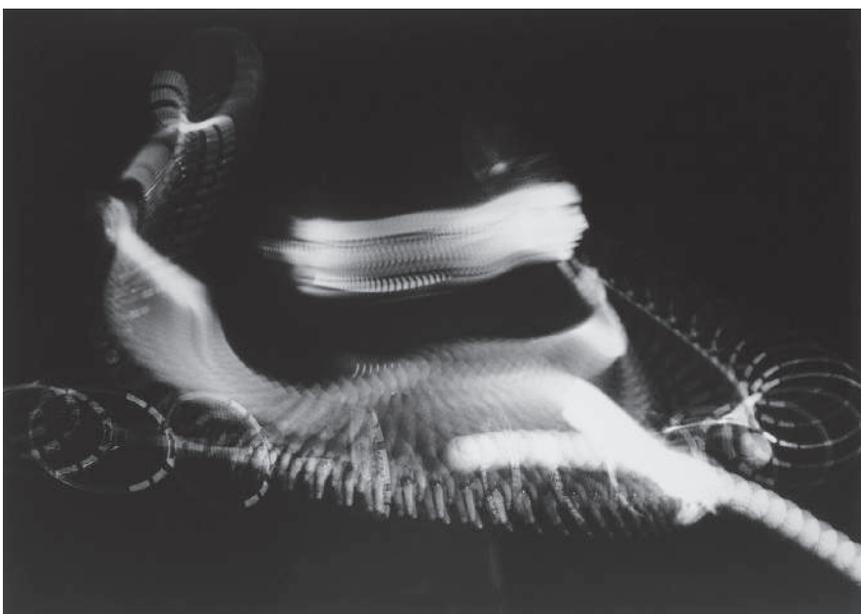
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