45° 16' N, 115° 14' W
Rock Rabbit Lookout, Payette National Forest, Idaho
On July 28, 2017, at approximately 7:00 pm (Mountain Time), lightning struck in the Payette National Forest, sparking what would be named the Highline Fire. In response, the US Forest Service called in firefighters from the National Incident Management Organization, Boise Chapter, over 150 miles to the south, to manage the burn. When the wildfire began to encroach upon Rock Rabbit Lookout, an 80-year-old log cabin atop Rock Rabbit Mountain – elevation 8,327 feet – in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the team bundled the historic structure in a flame-resistant aluminized wrap, prepping it for “passive defense.” As of mid-October, the cabin stands intact, now overlooking a charred landscape. In the strategy of fire management, as opposed to suppression, fire is allowed to play its natural role in a forest ecosystem, while human life and property are protected from radiant heat and windswept embers. The Highline Fire and the smaller, concurrent Goat Fire have burned more than 85,000 acres in Idaho, but they are only two of hundreds of wildfires to engulf millions of acres across the western US this year.
The internet media machine levels the content of the world into a flat archive of information. We all have access to everything all the time. This puts a significant amount of responsibility on the consumer of online information to determine what to believe, what to accept as an accurate depiction of reality. This is, of course, not necessarily a new problem. An idyllic past in which humanity had direct access to reality is a myth; we have lived through centuries of mediation with the culture of propaganda altering images and twisting content for the construction of misleading narratives. The problem at present is that the internet tends to put these constructions on equal footing with media that seek to objectively report a situation, complicating and escalating the circulation of disinformation and leading to the formation of opinions based on falsities.

How can we resist and attack these fake stories and images? There are several options: We could critically expose the falsehoods by revealing their contradictions and paradoxes. We could call out the producers of these stories as liars, unmask them, and explicate their beneficiaries. We could search for objective data describing the condition in question and reveal the chain of relations. We could deny and attempt to selectively ignore – change the channel, to use an outdated analogy.

All of these responses have been and are being used to combat the forces of "fake news." It is important that such responses continue and that we always attempt to get as close as we can to the truth regarding situations and events occurring in our world. But in this struggle, in this resistance, what roles should art and architecture play? Should art rely on an ethical basis for its aesthetic expressions? Should art critically raise awareness and expose the malevolent forces at work in our mediated world; an aesthetics biased toward knowledge production? To behave in an ethical manner regarding our architectural interventions in the world is essential. But
to base an aesthetic on an ethic can lead to righteousness that at its extreme borders on the representation of political ideology. Likewise, we require all of the epistemological awareness possible regarding the behaviors and relations of forces manipulating our world. Yet, we already know we are being lied to. No increase in our awareness of this will significantly alter the conditions at hand. We can chart the data again and again, but this often only plays into the hand of a media that backs its productions with data geared toward whichever point it wishes to purport. The one thing that seems clear is that art and architecture should neither fall victim to nor profit from the production of falsities, but should take a stance on returning our gaze to the real. This is why parafictional art is so crucial in our current moment of splintered mediated reality.

Parafictional art intervenes in the world through constructed fictions in an attempt to open alternative plausible realities; to “peel a possibility away from the dense surface of the way things are.” Parafictional art is political. But unlike traditional examples of political art, it does not operate initially through either ethics or epistemology. It acts first through aesthetics. Aesthetics, in this case, is understood according to Jacques Rancière’s definition as the manner in which sensuous qualities are distributed. Parafiction questions our assumptions about the way reality looks and feels. It demands that the viewer pay closer attention, which can incite in the viewer a desire for knowledge or a desire to be just; a conceptual art initiated by an aesthetic provocation. These are not hidden “meanings,” implicit in the artwork and requiring a close reading for their extraction, but potential outcomes. Parafiction thus does not follow the critical project as developed in the 20th century. It may raise awareness and reveal hidden economic, social, or political forces behind mediated appearances, but this is triggered by an estrangement in realism via an aesthetics of doubt. “In these artists’ hands,” writes Caroline Jones, “doubt has a profoundly social effect. It stimulates public discourse and debate. Using information as the medium of choice and enlisting aesthetic distance to slow the visual cortex, they seek to stimulate skepticism in place of credulity, productive doubt in place of pious certainty, public conversation in place of private fear.” Parafiction directly addresses mediation itself, not as a search for the truth within a specific medium, but through the manners in which each medium builds an image of the world. If an artwork can intensify, elongate, and alter one’s attention to the world, it can initiate a doubt regarding the reality of what one sees.

It seems easy to equate parafiction with the falsities of fake news, but the two concepts operate very differently. Fake news stories begin with fictive content, often with an intended direction of influence, but also with the desire to destabilize dominant conditions or opinions. Once the content has been decided, the work ahead is to make it look like an accepted version of reality. Fake news begins with a political ideology and works through aesthetics to alter the representation of this content with the goal of distorting knowledge and shifting beliefs in favor of that political ideology. This process is an example of what Walter Benjamin describes in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” as the “aestheticization of politics,” which Benjamin finds in fascism.4

Parafiction performs the reciprocal operation: the politicization of aesthetics, a concept developed by Rancière. It takes the conventions by which something looks real and then begins to pull at them, stretch them, distort them until doubts are raised regarding the facticity that the mediations propose. It begins with the aesthetics of the factual and works to produce spaces for people to consider alternate possibilities for how the world could be. This aesthetic argument provokes epistemological questions regarding the truth status of what one is engaged with. “In experiencing most parafiction – where the fictional hangs on the factual – one is evaluating not only whether a proposition is fictional, but what parts of it are true. . . . Parafictions train us in skepticism and doubt, but also, oddly, in belief,” writes Carrie Lambert–Beatty.5 In many ways this art makes the real, strange, and in doing so asks the viewer to pay closer attention to how things look and operate in the world. This quality makes parafictional art a potential form of resistance to the false media machine. This is done in a manner different than that of traditionally critical art, the trappings of which are described by Rancière:

In its most general expression, critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation. The quandary that plagues the project is well known. On the one hand, understanding does not, in and of itself, help to transform intellectual attitudes and situations. The exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation. The dominated do not remain in subordination because they misunderstand the existing state of affairs but because they lack confidence in their capacity to transform it. Now, the feeling of such a capacity presupposes that the dominated are already committed to a political process in a bid
to change the configuration of sensory givens and to construct forms of a world to come, from within the existent world. On the other hand, the work which builds understanding and dissolves appearances kills, by so doing, the strangeness of the resistant appearance that attests to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world. Insofar as it asks viewers to discover the signs of Capital behind everyday objects and behaviors, critical art risks being inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of interpretive signs which brings things to lose their capacity of resistance.

The primary argument for parafictional art is made in Lambert-Beatty’s 2009 essay “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” in which she discusses the work of Michael Blum, Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, 010010110101010101.ORG, the Yes Men, Aliza Shvarts, and others. Describing their work as part of a larger cultural shift, Lambert-Beatty writes: Between 1998 and 2008, artists gave us advertising campaigns for imaginary products, a not-really-censored exhibition, backed museum audio tours, several never-made movies, a sham supermarket, nonexistent video installations, dubious abortions, a staged marriage proposal, an impersonated Pope, ersatz archives, questionable military units, a faked vacation, an invented critic, a fictional historian, a made-up monkey, an arguably authentic rabbit, a projected penguin, and legions of fake artists, both historical and contemporary (twenty-seven in the recent pseudocollaborative EU portrait by Czech artist David Cerny alone). More generally, we’ve seen the term “intervention” supersede “resistance” in discussions of political art, valorizing modes like the parafictional that act disruptively outside the artistic context, while in the wider culture, fiction-in-the-real has become the characteristic mode of political humor for our time, with Sasha Baron Cohen, The Daily Show, and Brass Eye perfecting a technique in which parodists pass as their real counterparts, interacting with unsuspecting subjects whose gullibility, pompousness, stupidity, racism, extremism, or simple greed for the spotlight is then mercilessly exposed.

Parafictional art operates on and through all of the various mediations available. It is medium promiscuous, not medium specific. By intervening in these appearances, the artwork begins to intensify, exaggerate, and speculate on how the world is made sensible. Importantly, there is always a moment when doubt is raised. How and in which ways this moment is produced is a crucial question regarding the work for two reasons. One, the viewer is being tricked, and could rightfully be upset upon discovering that the scenario established by the artwork is a fiction. The artwork has to openly
and rigorously trigger moments that reveal its fabrication. Two, a provocative parafiction uses this doubt to produce an aesthetic estrangement. It does not, as Rancière implies, try to dismantle all appearances with the hope of facilitating critical awareness. Instead it redistributes sensible information. It reveals the artificial, not the artifice. Lambert-Beatty again: *Imaginative viewer of A Tribute to Safiye Behar: a European tourist, vaguely opposed to Turkish accession to the EU, who takes the exhibit as purely factual and whose position is softened, to some degree, by the Turkish history she learns there. What happens when she discovers she has been duped? For some viewers, Safiye’s shift into the category of fiction might harden previous prejudice. But the parafictioneer’s gamble is that for other viewers, or perhaps even for the same ones at different psychological levels, the experience of having known Safiye as real would have a lingering effect even after the disillusionment. “The plausibility itself is very real,” says Blum. The art of the plausible discloses consensus about the way things are; but it also can make a new reality sensible: accessible both to feeling and reason. It not only matches, but mobilizes Rancière’s model of fictions as “material rearrangements of signs and images, relations between what is done and what can be done.”*

An important aspect of parafictional art is the relation between abstraction and realism. It engages these two terms as aesthetic qualities, as opposed to their more customary meanings as ethical or epistemological concepts. Briefly, within ethics abstraction is the transcendence of appearances toward an essence, or ideal truth; realism is a simulation of simulations, it is false. Within epistemology, abstraction represents the general pattern or structure of relations operating beneath appearances; realism refers to a set of genre conventions that makes a specific sign system visually legible, intelligible, and interpretable. Aesthetically, abstraction operates as a disruption, an interruption between image and context, appearance and content; realism is defined as a constructed tension between reality and its representation. An aesthetics of realism often uses abstraction precisely to construct this tension. Realism is thus not a naive copy of the world. This has been the case since realism became established as an aesthetic strategy in the middle of the 19th century with the paintings of Gustave Courbet and the writings of Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Émile Zola. In his recent book *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson makes the argument that these writers developed an aesthetics of realism by putting forward an intensity of detail describing.
the ordinary, details that produced affective sensations that could not be reduced to knowable, named emotions. In effect, their writing operates through aesthetics to estrange the background of the everyday. This excess detail falls outside of the typical sign systems building the literary structure; Roland Barthes would describe it as the aspect that is “neither a respect for the ‘laws of the genre’ nor even their mask, but proceeds from the intention to degrade the sign’s tripartite nature in order to make notation the pure encounter of an object and its expression.” These episodic interventions of detail can be seen as collage-like interruptions that abruptly break the narrative flow, creating an aesthetic tension within the text. Where Barthes is concerned with the significature of excessive detail, operating to produce what he terms the “reality effect,” Jameson understands the same intrusions as outside of epistemologically interpretive structures; these intrusions disrupt or defamiliarize, producing affective sensations.

Within aesthetics, abstraction and realism are not anti-theetical. For instance, much parafictional art engages collage at some level. Aesthetically, collage can be described in terms of both abstraction and realism. Collage requires the extraction of material from one location and its recombination with other decontextualized images, objects, and media—a very abstract operation. It is also the interruption of “real” material into the space of image construction. This could be chair caning (Pablo Picasso) or printed newspaper scraps (Georges Braque, Kurt Schwitters), or it could be the abrupt edge of a distinct material rupture in the traditions of photomontage (Hannah Höch, Alexander Rodchenko, Mies van der Rohe, Richard Hamilton, Superstudio, OMA, etc.). The main difference between a parafictional collage and these historical examples can be found at the seam. To leave the seam—the evidence of construction—exposed is characteristic of collage. When architecture has employed collage, visible seams are often interpreted as a sign of its criticality, a criticality which is increasingly defined by ironic juxtaposition. These fragmented forms expose their artifice, and wink as they do so. To erase the seam and conceal this artifice could be understood as deceptive. But within parafiction, this erasure is crucial, for these collaged interruptions are not to be experienced at the level of the medium. The seam is displaced from the surface into the reality the mediations produce; it becomes the doubt raised in the viewer. This apparent seamlessness eschews irony. There is, as Jones suggests, “no invitation to smugness, no certainty handed to the viewer for complacent acquisition.”
Collage is intimately tied to technologies of reproduction through the possibilities of decontextualization and recontextualization made available through the mechanical copy. As Benjamin writes, "Technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations to which the original itself cannot attain." This aspect links collage to the loss of "aura," theorized by Benjamin in his "Work of Art" essay. Benjamin observes that one of the consequences of the proliferation of technological reproductions is the loss of context, of presence, of the authenticity that held an original artwork to be a singular creation. The internet might at first seem to accelerate this loss of aura; however, there is a possibility that the differences between mechanical and digital reproduction would require us to reconsider Benjamin’s observation. Boris Groys makes a compelling argument that the digital copy is different from the mechanical copy, pointing out that the digital copy does not resemble the image it stores and transmits; it is data. When an image compressed into a JPEG file is displayed on a screen or printed on a material substrate it is aesthetically different in each iteration. These differences depend on the machine displaying it, software opening it, color settings, resolution, printer type, etc. A digital image is not a mechanical reproduction of an original image without aura; Groys argues that digital reproduction is all aura, with no original. Every visual manifestation is a singular performance and the data that stores the file is a set of instructions for that performance. This aspect of digital reproduction can account in part for the difficulty in identifying origin within a digitally mediated world. This is further compounded by the interwoven networks of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram etc., which have become the dominant platforms for the distribution and redistribution of digital information. What takes place in online circulation is a continual performance of images decontextualized through technologies of reproduction, collaged into alternate relations, hyperlinked and hashtagged into other adjacencies, all building up into the aggregate we call the internet, and in the process, constructing a multitude of microconstituencies of possible worlds.

There is no claim here regarding "reality" from an ethical or epistemological position. Parafiction does not possess new knowledge of what reality truthfully is, nor does it claim to have access to this reality transcendentally or empirically. Parafiction accepts that what makes the real seem real is its constant withdrawal from our access to it. We know what we know only through mediation, and parafiction could, in
a way, be understood as a deliberate engagement with the ways in which contemporary society constructs these mediations. An aesthetic claim toward realism is just this: How does the world appear real to the senses? And, as quoted above, parafiction asks how we might “peel a possibility away from the dense surface of the way things are.”

Parafiction should be particularly appealing to architecture for three reasons. First, architects speculate on possible future realities through multiple forms of mediation. Parafiction stresses the necessity of this multiplicity. If this were embraced, architecture could escape the trap of being defined by a specific medium such as drawing or building. The plausibility of any parafiction is achieved by embracing all of the media that intervene in the world, and challenging this media to be other than it is assumed to be. Second, parafiction positions the relation between abstraction and realism through aesthetics. For too long architecture has treated these as antithetical categories. This opposition is mired in the historical understanding of these two terms through ethics and epistemology, treating aesthetics as secondary and derived from the other two. This leads to problematic positions in which an architect is cast as either conceptual (abstract) or sensorial (realist), either avant-garde (abstract) or pragmatic (realist). A parafictional project would fail in its provocation if relegated to a single side of these pairings. Lastly, parafiction places the responsibility of political intervention on aesthetic production. Any disruption of reality is a political act, and architecture has always been one such disruption. Parafiction asks not that one formulate a political ideology and then represent it through aesthetics. Nor does it ask that one critically dismantle a given appearance and then construct something new solely to explicate one’s findings. Instead, parafiction asks what happens when the aesthetics of the world are disrupted, when doubt itself becomes aesthetic, and through this, what actions become possible, what plausible realities become available. This is a speculative realism.