

A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM

moMus

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Foreword

Since October 2014, Momus has quickly become a trusted reference for those wishing to reflect on contemporary art at a slightly slower pace, and with greater focus, than our online platform typically allows. We've published features, interviews, and reviews that have been widely read and shared, and cited by peer publications including [artnet News](#), [Hyperallergic](#), [LA Times](#), [Daily Serving](#), and [Art F City](#). We've benefited from the support of esteemed arts patrons including Bruce Bailey and Ydessa Hendeles; and notes of endorsement from artists and writers including Frances Stark, Chris Kraus, Douglas Coupland, and the editor of [Tate Etc.](#), Simon Grant. The publication's initial partnerships include a content-sharing relationship with [artnet News](#), and a main media-partnership with [Feature Art Fair](#). Further, Momus has recently engaged in a relationship with [Tate Etc.](#) We've initiated a curated [Artworld Events Calendar](#) representing our global artworld centers. It's been a good start to something of already lasting value.

In an effort to survey our achievements, here are twenty of our best-read and most valued articles to date. From Andrew Berardini's well-loved "[How To](#)" series to a frank, slightly bawdy [conversation](#) between Sheila Heti and John Currin, criticism – in all its potential and pliability – has been upheld and regularly challenged on Momus's pages. We demonstrate our appreciation of our writers by paying above-industry-average rates, something we intend to increase in the coming year.

Patronage has been crucial to this publication's early success and ability to support its contributors. As we approach our first anniversary, and look to further increase our content and raise our rates, we're encouraging engaged individuals who share our vision for renewed reflection in evaluative criticism to offer a measure of support. It goes directly to our writers and design team and its value is reflected on the site. Visit our "[Donate](#)" page for more information on our patrons and how to contribute.

See below for some of our best-read and most talked-about articles to date. It's a slim collection of what we hope to be a library to come.

– Sky Goodden, editor

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HOW TO WRITE ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART

by Andrew Berardini



Kathleen Gije, "Rosalind Krauss in the Manner of Degas," 2006.

First, don't.

Don't intend to write about art at all. Write about something else. Go harrowingly into debt for an MFA in creative writing from a school with classes on polysexual prose and delirium. Write short, surreal poems about hurried sex with strangers or a long, unreadable novel about genocide in Africa.

Apply for jobs to be an editor of a TV trade newspaper or a copyeditor for a legal handbook. When you go into the interview in their air-conditioned mausoleum an hour from your house, your footsteps shuffle soundlessly across the dense, neutered green carpet. The recruiter seems to really like you. You come off as bright and dynamic. Confidently walking out, you hear only the funereal buzz of the ventilation and the dry turn of a single page as you pass dozens of sub-editors ensconced in dense cubicles correcting proofs. When they don't hire you, try to understand it as a compliment.

Bednest in depression for longer than is appropriate. Count the motes of dust that pass through a shaft of light in your bedroom. Watch back-to-back trilogies. Weep.

You really like art, but you have zilch in formal training. Go to every art opening in the city. Sneak into the premiers of grand museum retrospectives, awkwardly hang around the beer bucket at shows for art-school drop outs pinning collages to the walls of coffeeshops,

make witticisms half-drunk on cheap wine to potential acquaintances at commercial galleries, even if those cold crystal palaces spook you with their imposing facades and flinty receptionists. Pore over every magazine, studying every article and memorizing the names in each ad. Longingly finger through all the books at the local museum shop. Be relentless in your self-education. Even though you are paid nothing for this, somehow mark these hours in your head as 'work'. You are a detective, a pure researcher, an alchemist digging through potential fakery and arcane code to find the secret gold. Your curiosity whenever unmet eats through you like acid and you get drunk on all the knowledge.

Have a child.

Meet and even hang around real artists. When they ask what you do, breathe deep. You've published in school newspapers. You've made a zine. You've written short, surreal poems and a long unreadable novel. They don't know this. You don't feel much like a writer. Fake it til you make it. Act supremely nonchalant when you say, "I'm a writer." With each utterance, you'll feel like you're electing yourself president, the self-appointed emperor of an undiscovered country. Or something better.

One of your neighbors hands your contact to an editor in London working for the website of a magazine in New York. The global-glamor gives you a little shiver. She offers you a gig covering a party at a bou-

tique hotel on the Sunset Strip for their social diary. You sort of hate these nouns: boutique hotel, social diary, Sunset Strip. It pays roughly the same as three shifts at your coffeeshop. You have two dollars and twenty-seven cents. Burble with enthusiasm.

Go. Frightened, hurtle through. Breathlessly, sleeplessly, write it up. Turn it in. The editor lovingly walks you through it: measuring the rhythm of every line, sharpening each joke, drawing out subtle details half-remembered and sometimes nearly illegibly scribbled into a brand-new leather pocket notebook splurging-ly purchased upon your ascendancy to professional writer.

The piece is published. The subjects groan with complaint. Readers appreciate the poetic bravado and slight petulance against those in positions of power. The editor loves it. A paycheck almost mysteriously appears in your mailbox. The community subtly re-shifts to accommodate your new position as a writer, however lowly, for a real publication.

One leads to another. Keep repeating that you're a writer. Pitch reviews, interviews, events. They begin as dense prose poems: plumped with odd metaphors, slant usages, obscure but beautiful words. Most of this gets edited out. Do this for a year, then two, then three. Get a poorly-paid teaching gig somewhere awful. Gain and lose a job at an underground press for critical theory and feminist fiction. Quit the job at the cafe.

Make too many mistakes to count. Keep writing.

The dense prose poems almost disappear. You write in newspapers, websites, magazines, pamphlets, brochures, books. You write press releases, artists' statements, and calendar copy. You grind through review after review, word by word.

Your mother tells you she doesn't understand what you do. Your father asks you if you have health insurance.

It all starts to feel pretty rote. Your writing, though still more poetic than the competition, has been beaten by editors into trite formulas.

"[Name of city]-based artist [name] in their [city] debut [juxtaposes/interrogates/explores/problematises] the [slightly jargonish abstract concept #1] and [slightly jargonish abstract concept #2]." Followed by flat, bloodless descriptions and speckled with de rigueur references to art history and critical theory, the words are ashy and you hate them.

This depresses you. Progress feels negligible. Dream of short, surreal poems of hurried sex with strangers. Contemplate unweaving that unreadable novel into something potentially publishable. Take the Foreign Service Exam and begin to plan some kind of exit strategy.

Get fired from half-a-dozen jobs half-heartedly sought in hunger. Somewhere in here, your family falls apart.

Tell yourself "Fuck it. I've got nothing to lose." Write an essay on a favorite artist in the strangest and most beautiful sentences you know. Every metaphor blossoms with fictive potential, every verb tumescs with desire. This isn't an essay, you are writing a love letter, an inflammatory manifesto, a last glorious surge in a losing war. This is a song, a paving stone, a sculpture, a dream. Scare off every cliché and phony second-hand thought. Every word, terrible or triumphant, is yours. There isn't a comma that doesn't feel true.

Bracing yourself for self-righteous defeat, start cruising online job-

boards and the websites for graduate-school programs you are wholly unqualified to attend: botany, zoology, astrophysics. Having passed the FSE, fly to meet working diplomats for the final day-long interview. You are asked what to do if you are offered rotten meat by a local official (eat and puke later), if you see an American ship bombed in the harbor on the weekend when the rest of the office is on holiday (immediately contact a superior, somewhere), and how would you defend giving military aid to a country with a terrible human rights record and a history of armed conflict with its neighbors (whatever your answer is, it won't be very good).

The magazine accepts your last-ditch essay. When you receive it in the mail, your piece is on the cover. It is the first time this has ever happened to you. Understand the empty vanity of such small achievements, but let it deliciously swirl in your soul anyway.

Fall in love and abscond with your best friend's girl. Get your heart broken by this crystalline noise witch. Drink a little too much and catch something you're ashamed of.

Stick it out. Keep writing.

You realize art writing is just writing, another aspect of literature. That catalogues can be short novels and reviews haikus and columns soliloquies that transcend the ephemerality of quotidian journalism. You write nothing but wet fleshy narrative essays with formal inventiveness. You return to writing prose poems, but these are informed as hell and backboned with serious analysis though still sincerely as weird as you. Your metaphors billow into whole worlds and evanesce into parable and fiction.

You understand that being a professional is stupid. You would rather be unprofessional. Human, inappropriate, vulnerable. You decide that you are no longer an art critic or a novelist or a poet or even really a writer. You're just you, in competition with nobody for nothing, merely doing the one thing that can only be done by you.

Somehow this works. Your daughter is fed. Your rent is paid. You try not to worry about the rest.

Get into an argument with a colleague at an opening when he tells you his responsibility is to the artist. Tell him that's advertorial, infomercials. This doesn't go over well.

Surprisingly, you win a prize.

You get your hands on a book by Gilda Williams titled *How to Write About Contemporary Art*. Though clearly written for neophytes, you wholly delight in the deft simplicity in which Williams explains the hot mess of the artworld and how underpaid writers might somehow navigate it with only words. You find her history of art writing beautifully concise, collapsing your years of subtle research into pages. Much of the text, however, though it uses examples from art writing, could just as easily be said about all writing.

Don't be phony. Don't try to sound smart. Forget cliché and jargon. Be clear. Make your reader feel something.

Remember that Williams rightly begins by saying "the truth is that anybody who ever succeeded invented their own way. Good art writers break conventions, hold a few sacrosanct, innovate their own."

One aside by Williams sticks out especially:

Note: If you possess anything like Walter Benjamin's astonishing intellect, fierce imagination, and writing craft: by all means, take a leap. But first drop this guide immediately, you do not need it.

Like all good teachers, she cuts us loose should we surpass her instruction.

Sitting at a café, a little depressed but definitely free, struggling to meet deadlines, go through all the chance occurrences that got you there. Remember when you were twelve scissoring out the plates in your brother's art history textbook, bought with GI Bill money after the army. One of them was Warhol's blue Marilyn. At the library looking up Warhol, you learned about the Velvet Underground. You peddled to the music shop and bought their record. On the way home, you stopped at a café that you've never left.

Take a sip from your coffee. Pen an essay titled "How to Write About Contemporary Art" that describes your individual route to wherever it is you are. Circuitous, fairly ridiculous, and a little heartbreaking, you could not have done it any other way.

You are not Benjamin, you are only you. Set the book down and leap anyways.

The café is closing. Your coffee is cold.

Now, close your laptop and leave as it's time to pick up your daughter from school. As you pull up, her face fireworks with delight as she runs to meet your car.

Press send.

IT'S NOT STEALING IF IT'S ART: A RE-PRIMER ON IMAGE APPROPRIATION FOR THE INTERNET GENERATION

by RM Vaughan



Left, Arabelle Sicardi and Tayler Smith's original photograph, "Hari Nef," 2014. Right, Zak Arctander's appropriation, "Cheeks," 2015.

... every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it... [text operate] within the totality of previous or synchronic texts ...

- Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva branded the concept of "intertextuality" nearly four decades ago, but technology and philosophy are poorly-matched bedfellows. It's time to spell out the basics of appropriation in visual culture for the smartphone generation.

I'm sorry that the above sounds paternalistic on my part. Actually, I'm not. An entire generation of artists raised on the internet shouldn't need instruction on how image transference and re-purposing works: you created this free-for-all; please stop complaining when you occasionally fall down and get a boo-boo in your own bouncy castle.

Of course, I am referring to two recent art "outrages," one involving Richard Prince and his re-purposing of images created by, among others, the [for-profit pin-up site](#) Suicide Girls; and another upset attributed to an alleged follower of Prince, who [re-purposed the work](#) of two emerging queer feminist photographers.

I rather doubt the Prince works would have received a tenth of the press they did (and that I am giving them now) had it not been for the (delayed) reaction by some of the artists and models featured in the

show. Prince skimmed through his Instagram feed, picked some photos of women he found attractive (a sadly predictable lot of rather traditional sex-pot images), and blew up the scans. He first showed these blow-ups at [Gagosian Gallery](#) over a year ago, and nobody cared. Then the works started selling at the Frieze Art Fair New York for around 100K, and suddenly everybody cared. A vacuous collection of casual gestures by an over-rewarded artist, a series of works that ought to have been yawned into oblivion, became a cause celebre.

Prince [has won legal battles](#) over copyright before, and won them handily. So, in the United States, at least, it is legal to re-purpose images created by somebody else. Forget about using the law to fight your battles. As for the "natural law" proposition that theft is inherently unjust, let's remember that ethics and legality are wholly different entities, and ethics is the far more slippery of the two – because ethical dilemmas are as subject to relativism, and relativist judgements, as are the very works in question. Ethical arguments have about as much value in this situation as discussions of "good taste" or, indeed, the whole tired "but is it art?" merry-go-round.

I do not doubt, however, that the work of one Zak Arctander, [recently featured](#) in the New Yorker, would be mostly overlooked (and not making the kinds of headlines it has made) had not the photo-based artists Arabelle Sicardi and Tayler Smith, who created the image that forms the base of Arctander's weak piece, called him out on Jezebel.com for his lack of "empathy." Getting your art in the pages of the New Yorker

is no mean feat. We should all be so lucky. But the New Yorker comes out every week, with new art inside frequently enough, and the article Arctander's work accompanied focused (ironically enough, given the subsequent controversy) on the "new freedom" in photography, not on Arctander's work in particular. Who even remembers the art used to illustrate (or decorate) an argument from two weeks ago, a month ago? But Sicardi and Smith's [blunt dissection](#) of Arctander's work, and the power systems that inform it, has given Arctander's art (again, the irony) "legs." Sicardi and Smith's j'accuse is at its roaring best when it offers the following: "If art is about perspective, it's also always about power: the production of it, the reclamation of it, and the violent reversal of that rebellion, too. So I can't even say that what happened to our original photo is simply theft, and not art – I know it's art. It's just bad art, it's lazy art" Indeed. I could not agree more. Nor could I part company faster with any subsequent claims. Art is "also always about power," and therefore, by its nature, disempowers somebody. In the internet age, that "somebody" is all of us, because we're all on here, all the time, and by that very act of digital self-presentation (for acceptance, praise, scrutiny, abuse, you name it), we've signed on to a hierarchical system that enacts the same object/subject, viewer/viewed dynamics the artworld has always performed – only much, much faster.

To Sicardi and Smith, the Suicide Girls, and other artists (and artists' subjects) who feel ripped off, I need to say that I understand and sympathize: I'm a 50-year-old queer writer from Canada ... there is no such thing as an injustice I don't understand or want rectified. I get it. You feel powerless, and to some extent you are – but only if you buy into the narrative of ownership in the first place, which is where I get confused by your outrage.

Here is where I must ask, what *don't* visual artists today get about putting imagery up on the internet? Once you click "post," you lose ownership. And you know this because you participate in the grab-ass yourself. Have you never enjoyed or made a comical meme based on somebody else's imagery (the awkward family photo created by people you've never met, the photo of the prancing cat, stills from *Game of Thrones*)?; have you never clicked through *Giphy.com* for a laugh, or participated in a brand hack to protest the misbehavior of a corporation? Have you never shared images with your friends of sexy people you've stumbled on while sliding through Tindr or Grindr? How is that OK, but your art is sacred and indeed subject to copyright protection? If we get past the idea of full ownership and instead accept that we are all contributors to the vast sea of information, we stop thinking of our own works as deserving of dispensation, of rescuing from drowning. In my own case, I have published ten books. Almost all of them are available via Google or other search engines, in their entirety. There is nothing I can do.

The fact that Richard Prince is a rich and famous (white, straight, male) artist and you are not is sad-making (and infuriatingly typical of the artworld, every damned time), but not in play here. Appropriation as a strategy is as available to him as it is to you. You just got the shit end of the stick in this particular case. Sort of like that guy who stupidly posed in a Christmas sweater with his cat, back in 1984, that guy whose image you've been sending out as a holiday e-card since 2011. Where's his money?

I realize this is a harsh proposition, and another way of saying "just deal with it," which rarely helps anybody, but we all now live in a world surrounded by imagery first created by others and subsequently re-worked, put in a wholly different context. It is naïve for us to expect that whatever we might create is immune from this viral replication fever and/or any acts of *detournement*. Every time you use an image you found online for your own purposes, whether for a casual joke between

friends or to make capital-A Art, you're performing the same action as Prince has performed (and been performing for decades). As Kristeva noted, you are also investing that new work with both your own associations and ideas as well as anticipating that following viewers will recognize the very different associations and ideas that informed the "original." In this dialogue, nobody is the core creator and everybody is potentially a new creator. The difference is that Prince figured out how to monetize his one-liners long before you and I were born.

It is especially strange to me that artists participate in the act of "building their brands," as they are constantly told to do, by putting their work online, but then get angry or confused when their brand is increased by somebody else's attraction to and re-use of that work. Isn't that at least partially the point, the viralizing of the brand? Even a misuse of a brand-self is a form of PR for that brand-self. That's not cynicism, it's a fact. P.T. Barnum is whistling in his grave. Better a meme than a nobody.

When the Prince uproar started, it took the media about 11 seconds to find a handful of women who had no problem at all having their faces replicated in his art. Some claimed to find it flattering. The trouble with the "build your brand" message is that it does not alert potential brand-builders to the fact that some aspects of their brand, particularly the imagery, might (and if you are a woman whom your particular culture deems "attractive" or "unattractive," let's just be honest here and say it *certainly will*) be used in ways you never anticipated, without attribution, and, far too often, in ways you find offensive. The artworld is no less prone to bullying than the schoolyard.

I'm not arguing that in order for people to avoid having their brand/self be abused they hide from the online world (that sounds too much like "don't wear a short skirt if you don't want to be harassed"), and I am aware that brands/selves created by women are much, much more likely to be abused because the digital world is, of course, a mirror – granted a warped mirror, but one that nevertheless reflects and refracts real life. And in real life, women and their images, those created by them or of them, are treated like fodder.

Thus, this is the big flaw in the "build your brand" rage: once it's online, it's not your brand, it's everybody's brand, and assholes will be the first in line to fuck with the brand, no matter how cleverly or beautifully or carefully constructed. Attribution becomes as antique a notion as politeness.

In an ideal world, all participants in this tangled system would be paid, but artists are hardly paid in the most consummate, pre-internet sorts of situations (I'm looking [at you](#), National Gallery of Canada). Need I repeat the cliché that the internet is the "Wild West"? In a perfect world, all the participants in an exchange or re-jigging of an image would be credited. But why do we expect such high-mindedness when no other image-making system works that way?

Take the movies, for instance, the single most popular and widely understood medium on the planet, a medium based on and generated by a flow of imagery so fast it tricks the brain into thinking one is watching a live-action being performed before one's eyes. Even in this highly profitable and relentless image bombardment, directors are constantly stealing shots and compositions and effects from one another, and movies cost and make hundreds of millions of dollars, real money worth fighting for in court. Making art is, after all, a retail enterprise. But they get away with it, and if you can get away with stealing from the competition in one image-generating field (the movies, television, advertising), where the money piles up at a rate that 99.9% of the world's practising artists cannot imagine (the latest Jurassic Park movie made

over a billion dollars in less than two weeks), you can certainly get away with theft in an image-generating industry with markedly lower stakes.

Contrarians in this debate love to cite the legally-coded practice of sampling in pop music. They use this as an aspirational parallel to image re-use. But the recorded music industry took a century to create a legal framework around the use of melodies and arrangements, and that framework is far from stable (see the [recent case](#) of Robin Thicke vs. the estate of Marvin Gaye – that a major pop star, one equipped with an army of lawyers, can still fall afoul in an ownership debate is very telling). The image sharing/poaching/re-packaging possibilities created by the internet are, by comparison to the music industry, in their infancy, as are any subsequent structures devised to provide regulation and/or compensation.

When the Richard Prince/Suicide Girls blips first pinged, I was taking tea with a wise old queen, who reminded me of “party line” telephones – telephone systems common to rural Canada half a century ago. A party line was a shared line. The phone rang, you picked it up, and if the call was not for you, you hung up and let the intended recipient carry on. But nobody ever played by the rules. Listening in on the party line was unethical, and completely normalized. Everybody did it.

“The internet,” my dear pal offered, “is the new party line. If you don’t want to share something, don’t use the party line.”

We all know what we should do when it comes to image recycling, but we also all know that we can and will, and will exactly because we can, not always behave admirably, or even legally. And since we all know how the system works, we can’t freak out when someone does to us what we have all done hundreds of times to others, usually total strangers.

The trick is to make the game work for you by keeping the game running. Re-appropriate the re-appropriated; add another mirror to the funhouse, up the ante. Or get off the line.

POST-CRISIS: WHAT'S NEXT FOR ART CRITICISM IN A DIGITAL AGE

by Sky Goodden



Bernard Berenson, American art critic.

Momus was founded a short time ago. It was initiated as a proposed recovery from a confused and defensive (and, so I thought, largely lacking) moment in art criticism, one that, now, nearly a year later, makes this initiation feel distant, and maybe naïve.

The field of art criticism is newly recharged and shifting, stretching out over the expanded room of digital media, and adopting new tonalities in response to its growing audience. The genre is evolving at such a rate that asserting an agenda or a mandate for a critical publication can quickly date its platform.

Art-writing sites are proliferating, criticality is regaining a foothold on its shallow podium, and the conversation regarding our field's value – its platforms, empowerment, economy, and audience – is regularly uplifted in the pages and theaters that we claim for our record.

A [recent conference](#) at the [Walker Art Center](#) grouped several hundred critics and publishers to discuss the very chaise we're newly mapping, its potential, challenges, evolving dimensions, and shifting weight. Over the course of those two days and three nights I realized Momus's tagline was already becoming dated. We are not in need of a rescue, I realized, but a sense of where to go.

It's interesting that in the weeks since that conference (which was capped with dancing and drink, a jubilee suggesting something had been accomplished), various critics went on to [publish their accounts](#) of what happened, surmising the forum's effectiveness, oddities, ingenuity, and lack. But no one has produced a text beyond journalistic recounting, diaristic notes, or partial meditation. No criticism, really,

has been espoused.

I understand that the conference was too close for many of us to derive a sense of consequence. It's difficult to step to the margins of our wooded field. But occupying that red theater over a weekend in Minneapolis, each of us penned a notebook, or scrolled a propped-up screen. What were we writing? During breaks we answered emails, Tweeted impressions, met over coffee to exchange impatient strategies ("how do you pay your writers?", "how often do you publish?"). It quickly became clear that ours is a lonely occupation, and that this conference was a rare forum, a fevered dream. We keened to see ourselves reflected, to compensate for our quiet days and improvised gambits. We were under-socialized and over-studied. We met with our contemporaries, relieved to find we are not alone. We came across as underfed, ambitious, and halting.

I recently spoke about this conference with [Andrew Berardini](#) (one of Momus's contributing editors). His writing never lacks for intimacy, so it was fitting that he asked, "but what was the feeling of it? No one's written about the feeling."

The feeling was that criticism is done worrying about its relevance, but we've moved on to a new anxiety: How do we sustain ourselves? And should our forums be built to last?

For a conference asserting a practical niche in its title – "Art Criticism and Journalism in a Digital Age" – the featured talks maintained a rarified and abstracted air. Rarely did the panelists engage in "real talk" discussions regarding our medium's tenuous and malnourished econ-

omy, and the potential for our sustainability. This was a dated forum, in a sense, treating the internet as a new frontier. [Orit Gat](#), a freelance critic (and recent inductee to the Momus masthead, now serving as our NY contributing editor) who quickly became a star figure in her panel by insisting that her colleagues discuss the practicalities of this market-related field, issued a singular suggestion – unoriginal though it was – that we re-initiate the “pay wall” method. No one suggested another option, the presenters reluctant to discuss brass tacks.

The issue of criticism’s evolving structure was granted a slightly better scrutiny. [Ben Davis](#) delivered a galvanizing keynote that queried the potential for post-descriptive criticism. Citing John Berger as a progressive thinker who foresaw the import of the image over criticism’s footnote-like provisions (Davis linked this reference to digital media’s limitless capacity for demonstrating our subjects through pictures), he set up a faded comparison. Reading aloud John Ruskin’s famous description of J.M.W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, he issued the long paragraph with theatrical, evolving speed, and a surge of feeling. We laughed when he was done, relieved by our perceived distance from this emoting hubris. But I think a great many of us were also nostalgic, wishing we could return to something bearing such pulsing color. By the end of Davis’s lecture we hadn’t been shown a way forward so much as a problem – a blinking cursor on our waiting screens. Davis was demanding a new solution.

The feeling at this conference was one of halting ardency, a tangible desire to take off, were we not so grounded by practical fear. Since we’ve recently found ourselves released from a foreboded “crisis,” we might have neglected to plan for what should follow. How can criticism be sustained? How can we pay our writers, our editors? How do we remain uncompromised while beneficial to our sponsors? How do we capitalize on our work’s value in a market so full of potential, and yet occluding? This conference bore out conversations too limited by abstract query. We’re needing new solutions, now, and they’re ours to make.

In an effort to upset the unanswered-question motif, here are a few suggestions for how digital art-criticism publications can maintain themselves:

1. Pay your writers well.
2. Pay your editor well.
3. Sell your advertisers on the idea that paying your writers and your editor well results in better content.
4. Engage in analytics that regard the time your readers spend on your site, in addition to mere “clicks.” Our readers’ attention spans (as inferred by the time they spend with articles) is becoming a new metrics of value. Sell your advertisers on this.
5. As many intimated during this conference (and as Frieze’s Dan Fox outright said), let’s slow down the internet. Publish less so that you can publish better. So that we can pay our writers more.
6. Sell your clients and patrons on the significance of what you’re attempting. Be sincere. Work hard. Be both aspirational and effective.
7. Look for new alternatives. These provisions won’t hold.

SHEILA HETI INTERVIEWS JOHN CURRIN ON THE FUN, BEAUTIFUL THINGS

by Sheila Heti



John Currin, "Mechanicsburg," 2008. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

I met with [John Currin](#) a couple of years ago. He was finishing up a series of paintings sourced in porn images from 1970s girly magazines. I arrived at his studio after he had finished working there all day, a huge warehouse space not far from Union Square in Manhattan. We spoke for three hours while drinking beer. He had an all-American, somewhat jock-y vibe. There was something innocent in him, too, as he spoke self-consciously about being an old man (he's in his early fifties). He was unguarded and self-critical and was clearly at a crossroads: how should he embody his role as a "mature" or "senior" artist when his reputation and inspiration has been tied to being a shocking young artist?

John Currin was born in 1962 in Colorado. He is married to the artist [Rachel Fienstein](#), whom he met in art school, and they have two young children. His best-known works are distorted, even Mannerist portraits of women – grotesque, often large-breasted figures with tiny waists and big, round hips, wide eyes, and flowing hair. They are fascinating, beautiful, ugly, and strange. While his painterly technique has always been admired, art critics and audiences have, at times, [felt his work to be misogynistic](#), which he says bothers him deeply.

Currin is represented by the [Gagosian Gallery](#). One of his most famous works, *Bea Arthur Naked* (1991), sold at Christie's for nearly two-million dollars. He mentioned to me a recent [photo shoot](#) for *Vanity Fair* in which he posed for Annie Leibovitz. One often sees him photographed in the society pages with his wife.

When our evening ended, it was clear that Currin was disappointed, that talking about art was a great pleasure for him, and he didn't want to stop. He reluctantly shut off the lights, hailed a cab, and dropped me

off where I was staying. We continued to talk about his process in the taxi, even until the moment I shut the door. I left with the impression not of someone rehearsed and blasé, secure with his position in art history, but that of an artist still young in his enthusiasms, naive in a way, practised in others, still wanting to do great work. I felt vividly as though I had just left an art student's studio in the middle of the night.

MORE NUDITY

You were painting in a different way when you were quite young – more abstract, like De Kooning, not really you. And you found it difficult. Then once you figured out your thing, it became easy and joyful.

Follow your pleasure, right? Part of the trick of painting is to make everything work in unison – not just to do the thing that you're really super-good at, then kind of hope everybody forgets the things you're not so good at. It's to have all those things work as, you know, seal team 6. And the weak link has to be included. You have to move at the speed of your weakest skill. You can't let your highly-developed skills get ahead of your less-developed ones. So you paint at your lowest skill.

What's your lowest skill?

[Thinks] I don't have a particularly fluent drawing ability. I don't think I have a very good decorative sense – I'm not very elegant at filling in areas, I don't naturally make good patterns. I'm a lazy draughtsman. I don't *like* to draw. There's a kind of eating-dinner-in-front-of-the-TV feeling to it. So I try not to hide my crummy drawing. It's a subtle

thing. In some ways, I'm kind of full of shit right now because I actually changed my mind about this in 1999, 2000. I decided, you know what? Fuck it. I'm going to completely indulge the things I'm really, really good at. I started making more nudes and there was less ugliness in my work.

What happened in your life around 2000?

I got married.

So the paintings before that were much sadder or something?

Yeah, I was a sadder person. And Rachel showed me how to be a happy person – and how to project happiness in art. Everybody thinks everything has to be a big bummer, an after-school special about abortion and abuse and cutting and anorexia. But Rachel gave me the idea of making work about being happy. Of course, the harder you try to be upbeat and all-American, there's a tragic thing headed your way. But Rachel just encouraged me to not to reject things because I liked to do them. You know, distrusting something because you fear you're jerking off.

So the things she's said to you over the years have really affected the directions you've gone in?

Oh, definitely. She's the one who's pushed me into not feeling guilty about putting sexual stuff in my work, not feeling guilty about showing off my gifts. She's the one who really encouraged me to just do a few paintings where you show off. And I did it, and it was, Wow, this is fun! And easy! Painting doesn't have to be that hard! Of course, it *is* hard, but not *always*, you know? She's not as uptight as I am. Rachel always says to me: you're thinking too much. Don't think. You don't get paid to think.

Right.

Before that, there was a kind of pressure – like very tight, tightly-bound things. I thought of myself as an expression-repressionist. Or a repressive-expressionist.

And now there's more humor and joy and sexiness?

I think there's just more nudity. I thought the most interesting aspect of my personality was my unhappiness – that was what people paid to see. When I was in art school, I really liked Francis Bacon, and I thought, *he's gay, he's alcoholic, he gambles, he's British, he hangs out with criminals*. I look at myself and I'm suburban – I'm just so boring. Keep in mind, it may have had something to do with grunge, everybody falling over themselves to be like Kurt, a tortured guy. That's stupid, that attitude, and you can see where it leads, heroin and all that stuff. Just the bummer of it – it stopped being appealing to me. I met Rachel and I wasn't unhappy anymore. I'd lost my shtick in a way. That said, as I get older, I realize I'm a fairly depressive person.

It's true. A lot of younger artists feel their work has to come out of their unhappiness.

Part of it is that when you're young, generally you're broke. You don't know how good you have it, just being sort of effortlessly beautiful and elegant and lovely. But fine. That's the prerogative of the young, to think they have it really terrible. The other thing about the young is – young people *should* be fakers and liars and try things out. I always think David Bowie is the best example of this – someone who just makes something up and decides that's going to be it. He doesn't have to sing

about his experiences; it's fantasy. And he uses his beauty and his youth and that makes it even more spectacular. There's something gross about an old person doing that. You can't use your beauty anymore. The big question for me is how you keep working as you get older.

You lose your spark?

No, you get technically good and you narcissistically want to present to yourself how good you are at things, and a kind of circularity starts to show up, in which you're choosing things in order to showcase your – to build your own confidence. The metaphor that always sadly seems apt to me is you become a kind of jazz fusion. You start out as like a garage band, and end up as some noodle-y jam band. You *do* get better technically and you do get more experienced. But what gets lost is the audacity of faking it – using your charisma and beauty to carry you over the dead parts of the track.

But how does that work for a painter? Do you mean being physically present at your shows?

Oh no, I don't mean literally. I don't mean unblemished skin or something like that. There's just a beauty to just being young. Your ignorance, just the charm of it. Maybe I should say charm rather than beauty. The charm of doing stupid things when you're young, and the entertainment that other people ... When you're young and you make mistakes in public, it's almost like a gift to everybody around you. When you're old and you make mistakes, it's just sad and depressing for everyone around you. You know, when I turned forty, I felt, I don't want to piss people off anymore, I don't want to be a bad boy anymore, I don't want to have people mad at me anymore. I used to have this whole idea that bad reviews were healthy. I don't feel that way anymore.

What do you feel now?

I'm very thin-skinned. I hope everybody loves me, and I'm worried everybody hates me.

So where is the path of freedom when you're working?

I don't know. I'm less aware of how to get there than when I was younger. If a painting's going well, I just keep moving. I get ideas. I have enthusiasm. I want to have live models come in. I had a model yesterday and I thought, *This is fun*. It's so easy. It feels like you're cheating. Like, I'm copying, I'm doing my term paper from the encyclopedia. You've got the model there – if you don't have any ideas, just do her. It's funny. I had to do a photograph for *Vanity Fair* – Annie Leibovitz came and Rachel was here and we were posing as a couple, and I felt, *Ah man, I'm really a sell-out*. And Annie was just the nicest person you ever met. She was like, "How about Rachel poses for you and you paint?" And I'm like, "No, that's so awful! I don't want to do that!" I was upset and pissed off but I thought, okay. And I dragged out a nude and Rachel lay down and I started painting her, and it wasn't going well. I thought, "Now I'm fucking up this painting just for a stupid photograph." Then Annie sent the crew away and she just started taking pictures and I started getting interested in it, and Rachel actually fell asleep. Also, I never get to paint Rachel anymore cause her studio's down on Canal Street, and it was kind of wonderful, and I realized, *This is good! It's getting good!* The veins are popping out on her forehead cause she's asleep and – anyway, it turned out nice. And there's no idea behind the painting at *all*.

THERE'S NO KITCHEN

I always feel like humans are the same throughout time, so the idea

that a porn magazine from the seventies – even if the photographer has no experience with art history – might set things up in the way of a religious painter ...

Right, some of the source images for these porn paintings I'm doing, I find they remind me of religious paintings. I like things that have a religious, kind of formal ... somebody facing you and somebody coming in from the side. It's like an Annunciation, where the angel's coming in from the side, and the angel seems to be from a spatially different world.

The photographers for these magazines were incredibly good. I'm not going to gross you out by showing you pictures, but they're beautifully done. There was this magical period in the seventies where they got very good photographers. I'm a bit embarrassed to be making paintings of them because the pictures are already so good, but hopefully I've transformed them enough. I saw some blog where a guy managed to find the porn images I used, and he had this indignant response, like, *I thought you were okay but now I've realized you're a complete fraud!*

I saw the Cosmo cover with the heart in the dress, which you painted.

Francesco Scavullo [the fashion photographer] took those pictures, and Wayne Bend was a very famous make-up artist and stylist. They made those great '70s Cosmo covers. One way to find out how fantastic they are is to just compare them to – well, everything is terrible now, but –

[Laughs] Everything is terrible now?

I've started feeling like a middle-aged curmudgeon. Here's something I hate about modern life – this eating your lunch in places that don't have a kitchen. You'll see young, vaguely fashionable workers going to, like, Pain Quotidian. And you get plastic utensils! You can sit in a plastic chair in fluorescent lights and eat it there, but it's not a restaurant, there's no kitchen. And that's kind of taken over! There are no coffee shops and there are no diners. And I totally don't understand Starbucks. Like, the aesthetic of drinking out of a paper cup, and the crappiness of the coffee? But it seems to be the way of the future.

Because it's fast.

Young people don't like to sit around in coffee shops – read and kill the day. That's something that has kind of ruined New York. And everything's gourmet, like you can't get a sandwich that doesn't have something *stupid* on it. It's like, we have a sauerkraut with honey mustard and then there'll be some Middle Eastern spice thrown in for good measure. Jesus Christ! I want a ham and cheese sandwich with iceberg lettuce and mustard! I get the feeling this decade will be looked back on pretty negatively.

Which decade? Zero to ten?

Well, zero to ten had wars and September 11th. Now we're really in the '70s again, with a Jimmy Carter president and a horrible economy and sort of crypto-socialist tendencies. You know how when you look at '70s movies and there aren't any really beautiful women in them?

But there aren't any women in '70s movies!

Yeah, it's all men. But, take *Rocky*. Why is the female lead just this plain nobody? I feel like we're in a similar situation now. Or you get totally plastic ones, these young girls who are super-beautiful, but actually – who's the one with the black hair and the blue eyes? Kind of has this

bronze skin, glistening skin always – glistening, glossy lips?

Straight hair?

Yeah. And ferocious-looking. What's her name? *[We try different names]* Megan Fox! Or Jessica Biel. These kind of real fitness-y-sports girls. Then there's this kind of wasteland of –

Wait. What are you saying about Megan Fox? Yea or nay?

I was saying nay, I guess.

Because she's too cold?

Because, even though she's beautiful and sexy, there's no real echo in her presence on screen. You know who's good? Blonde. Sorry, I'm so bad with names. Witherspoon.

Reese Witherspoon?

She has this kind of nuttiness, and there's an insane edge to her. She actually looks a little bit funny. I mean, she's beautiful, but there's an entire world in this person. You don't see that as much in actresses now. Though if I was in my twenties, maybe I'd think, *Wow! Everything is great and exciting and the world is new!* But I think something happened to culture in the '80s. Somebody gave me a box of every *Playboy* from 1969 to 1985, and it was fantastic. '75, '76 was the high point of *Playboy*. December 1979 is still okay. Then – January 1980 – the pictures get *ugly*. Everybody's hair goes short – all the women – they get muscular and thinner and more fitness-y. They've got those awful legwarmers and workout gear on. The pictures start to have a lot more silvers and blues. They just don't look as good.

Do you think making images is a way of saying “I want the world to look more like this”?

Well, I used to think I wanted to make images that were abrasive and that would irritate people and things like that. But it's more important to me now to make things that are beautiful. Maybe I'm just owning up to what I've always wanted. You're supposed to be transgressive when you're young, but I think I'm actually interested in things being beautiful and satisfying, which I guess is conservative.

Just before I came to see you, I saw Damien Hirst's dot paintings at Gagosian.

We were going to go to the opening and then our daughter got sick so I haven't gone up there yet.

There are two paintings that are actually mesmerizing – the dots are placed in such a way that there's a mystery to it. But the other ones are so regular you can't look at them for long. The guard said, “I hate being in this room. I feel like I'm in a pediatric office.”

[Big laugh] Well, Damien – I still think he's a great artist 'cause I remember seeing his cow, a rotting cow head in this big vitrine, and flies make their way to the head, and then they get killed by the zapper. It just smelled horrible. You could smell it from a hundred feet away. And I found it totally spectacular, like a war movie or something. It had this demonic energy, like a kid who builds a train set and blows it up. And in a way the banality of it brings these huge themes down to the scale of your life in a pretty amazing way. He's the real thing, in terms of an artist.

What makes him the real thing?

Well, he's an example of someone figuring out what they're interested in and then so effortlessly – without having to be smart about it, without having to be *intelligent* all the time, 'cause one of the wonderful things about Damien's work is, there's always the feeling in your mind that, *This is so stupid, I really shouldn't be taking this seriously* – but nevertheless it's totally captivating. I mean, the pieces are so simple and so dumb, but they're kind of doing what the classical artists do. That's another fault with the culture right now, this idea that you have to be intellectually credentialed, or have a high IQ, or some sort of special thinking ability – philosophical ability – in order to be an artist. That's not what art is. Art is about magic and beauty, and it helps to be smart, but it's not a prerequisite.

IT'S A VERY COMPLEX MIRROR

So is it a pleasure to be here doing this? Painting?

Oh yeah, it's the most fun there is.

And things in the world – critics and all those things that come along with success – do they complicate and confuse?

Well, paintings costing a lot of money is confusing. I don't feel like being as funny as I used to be in painting. Although the porn paintings are comical, I suppose. But the whole thing seems a lot more serious now than it did fifteen years ago. Now it's kind of about getting lost in this reverie – this super-gaze – but that's the kind of art I like, where you're just burning a hole in an image.

With your eyes?

Yeah.

Is it possible to do that without painting women?

I don't know. Maybe van Gogh doing his Cypress trees? I don't know. Have you ever seen the Orson Welles movie, *The Lady from Shanghai*?

No.

Rita Hayworth's in it – she's got short hair, blonde hair. And she's lying down and the camera is like *here* – *really* super close – and it's just like, *fucking hell she is so beautiful!* And you want her *so bad!* And the guy in the movie wants her so bad! But there's something wrong with her, she's cold, she's evil, and it's basically a cartoon of what everybody hates about the gaze. I always thought that's the best part of the movie, when you're looking at her that way. To me, there's nothing *but* gaze with paintings. That's all there is – a possessing gaze that transforms things. The metaphor I would think of is you take this woman and you sort of love her and squeeze her so much that she turns out all mangled. Like you've strangled your pet kitten by accident, you know? *[Laughs]*

Do you feel that's *your* gaze in the world?

Yeah. Sure. There's a kind of a distortion that happens with adoration. You're destroying this thing, smothering, holding back someone. It doesn't have to be sexual. You sometimes feel that way with your children. It's a hard thing to describe, but you want this all for yourself. It's almost like you're involved in a narcissistic love affair with yourself, with the person or the kid as a prop. For instance, my son was involved in a bad sledding accident a year ago where he hit a tree very, very badly and got a terrible laceration. And it was a totally traumatic experi-

ence for *me*.

The odd thing is it changed my life in some ways because for a month he looked terrible, and he's such a beautiful boy! He looks like me, and we're very, very close, and to see him sort of broken – he's totally healed now; he's got a scar but it's, like, going to get him chicks in college – anyway, it's like the mirror was shattered. I'd been using him as a mirror. The accident wasn't a good thing, but some positive things came out of it. I started seeing him as a separate entity, you know what I mean? And painting is that. It's a girl or whatever – but it's a mirror, and you're projecting everything onto it. It's a very complex mirror, so complex you could never understand it, and you should never try to understand it. I guess it's a little like God. When my son asks me about God, I always have to say that it's a mystery. It is. There's no philosophy that will get you there. I think the secrets and mysteries in paintings are similar. It's cheap for me to bring up my son's accident to illustrate that. But in a way, it was a similar, a strange feeling of being pulled out of this trance I was in, and it was a good thing to be pulled out.

You weren't even aware that you were in a trance.

Yeah. And there a real person was involved. But with painting, it's like you kind of need to be in the trance.

Forever.

It's part of the wonderful aspect of painting that you live in a dream-world.

I'm trying to visualize what the rupture would be.

Bad art. *[Laughs]*

There was a rupture with your son, but there hasn't been in your life as an artist.

Well, I don't know. I worry the new paintings will be seen as sad – like dirty-old-man, fetishistic, and claustrophobic, and just not charming. Depressing. That is the shaming, feminist read of them, I suppose.

Do you think Botticelli worried he was a dirty old man?

Well, yes, actually. Botticelli flipped out. He made all those beautiful paintings, and then he flipped out. He fell under the spell of Savonarola, the guy who came to Florence and held a bonfire of the vanities, and he decided to burn all of his Venuses and start doing religious paintings in a kind of penance. It's just architecture and bummed-out sinners after that. He got very scared about his salvation. You can mess up. Guilt is a bad thing in art.

Are you afraid for your salvation?

Yes I am. Definitely. Especially with kids. The feeling that this is frivolous ... that I should be doing something heavier. I don't know. *[Sighs]* Sometimes I feel like you're wasting your life if you're not doing the fun, beautiful things. That's the real waste. *Or* you're wasting your life if you spend all your time eating candy and having sex and playing. *That's* the waste. Depending on how you look at it, you can say I've wasted my life on frivolity, or I've wasted my life on – you know, I was just looking at The Master of Flémalle, with the virgin studying the Bible in her cubicle or whatever. She's living her life with such discipline and – boy! I'm not that way!

[Opens a book] Look at these, the beautiful shadows, and these little

miracles of gold coming out from behind ... Somehow it does seem like a great argument against making nudes and pagan paintings and pleasure paintings. Or maybe it's the superior morality of realism – a kind of melding of science with an acknowledgement of God; this spectacular combination of faith and a total, rational understanding of the natural world. It's the perfection of these two human possibilities: faith, and seeing what is around you, truly. I guess that's one reason I'm still attracted to doing the porn things, because it *is* a terrible combination of pleasure and pain and nudity and shame and pleasure. *[We look at his huge canvas in front of us]* I just thought that big ass, to try to paint it – it would be an absolute miracle. Just to make it gigantic and ... I don't know. Just to present it as a bounteous miracle.

Totally.

I had a very troubling dream that I was in a room with grotesque people all having sex, and there was some vague feeling that my kids were witnessing it – that something obscene and terrible was happening. In the dream there's a kind of floating. You know the bubble in Wizard of Oz? The good witch comes down in this kind of bubble? In my dream, it was a kind of hologram Virgin of Guadalupe that was floating around the room in a sort of redemption. So, rather obviously, within this kind of Dionysian hell, there's redemption

A FORM OF LIFE

I think some people come to your paintings and think, *I shouldn't like this, but I like it. This is grotesque, but this appeals to me.*

Well, thank you. But it becomes harder as you get older. You don't gross yourself out when you're young. You don't think, *oh god this is so sad*. And part of it is: how do you make this kind of an image in a world where there's probably billions of pictures of naked girls made every year? Like, *gol-ly!* Why on earth would you want to make a handmade version of that? Well, for the same reason there's a market for a billion of them every year. It's just an addiction that we're helpless in the face of.

So you judge yourself now? Because when you were young –

When you're young you think, *Ah, fuck them if they can't take a joke.*

I've had arguments with people who think your early paintings are sexist. I've never found them that way. They seem kind of humorous. Scary too, sometimes. But I never found the sexist thing to stick, exactly.

I wouldn't deny that there's sexism in some of my work, 'cause I'm not a perfect person. But I don't dislike women. And there is a particularly stupid feminist idea that – I always thought the gaze thing was just complete bullshit. I find it to be stupid on a societal level and on a cultural level, and it's stupid on a personal level. It's like, adoration should be accepted in whatever form it comes.

But is wanting to fuck somebody adoration? You can want to have sex with somebody and have it be the opposite of adoration. It can be contempt.

I guess so. I guess pornography really is that way. In terms of men's lust, it's just so circular. It's a man being involved with himself.

What's circular?

The dehumanizing lust for women on the part of a man. I can only speak for myself, but I don't see it as violent. The thing that's bad about it is you're thinking too much about yourself, not the particular women. But men are plagued with hormones that have to be acknowledged and controlled.

So you think when a man lusts for a woman, he's thinking more of himself than the woman?

In the case of a gaze that grosses out women, yeah. It's probably what separates a sexy man from a gross man, controlling for physical attractiveness. One guy can be just as forward as another man, but it's the one who's less involved with himself that gets away with it. The stuff I had in my last show was less pornographic and more pin-up-y, which weirdly offended some people more, because it's more just a fetishistic naked-lady thing. I was way more worried about those than the earlier work, and I felt more guilty about those being stupid, and not that different from a nice pin-up in a magazine.

What is the difference?

The difference is, uh, the difference is that I painted it. I don't know what the moral difference is, maybe there's not much moral difference. But hopefully they're alive in a way that a photograph of a naked girl is not alive. Paintings are like living things. They're in the room with you. It's not a record of the thing that happened – it's happening right here right now. A Botticelli – it's not an imitation of life, it's a form of life. And it's a *form* of immortality for Sandro Botticelli, as well. I think there is something terrifying about faces in paintings, compared to faces in photographs. It's kind of a bodily thrill on almost a sexual level. Maybe that's one reason I'm interested in Venuses and naked ladies, just the equation of the sexual excitement with the eye, and this Frankenstein-y, *It's alive!*

I wonder, is there any part of you that wants to uplift people?

I don't think about that. No, that's not quite the truth. When I was a kid I used to have this book – Frank Frazetta, he's an illustrator – every teenage boy in the '70s had it. He's the universal style for heavy metal and violence and big-breasted women and muscular guys – sort of Dungeons and Dragons/middle-earth themes. I used to have this fantasy as I was looking through the Frank Frazetta book that some girl was looking through it, and those were *my* paintings, and she was saying, *Wow! Wow!* So I think I do have a remnant of that – that people will be overcome with the spectacle of beauty. There's a wonderful quote from – I don't remember – who's the incredibly beautiful movie star, black hair, cleft chin? Not Rita Hayworth – she became an alcoholic – not Lana Turner. Anyway. Somebody asked her, "What is it like to see yourself in your movies?" And she said, "When I see myself on the big screen, I think I'm so beautiful, I want to cry." That's how I want to feel when I see my paintings. I want to cry. I really love that quote. That's a real artist talking.

INTERVIEW: TACITA DEAN

by Sky Goodden



Tacita Dean, "JG," 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Twice in the course of a thirty-minute interview with [Tacita Dean](#), her eyes move across the room and narrow-in on the media coordinator, who sits quietly and at a distance, her head bowed towards her phone, her fingers silently moving. The coordinator's preoccupation with her smart phone (a small blessing for this journalist, who prefers to interview alone) represents the weight of many things, for Dean, an artist whose attention to film and its slowness, its inherent embodiment of, and comment on, time, forms the center of her practice. It's one that spans 25 years, a [Turner Prize](#) nomination, and Dean's unmoving determination to use a medium that has, in recent years, become increasingly politic.

Still folding her brow at our unwitting subject, Dean considers digital technology's clamp on our attention, and our resulting inability to daydream, our inability to grow bored. She reflects on her ten-year-old son, who keens at her phone. "My other half, [Matthew \[Hale\]](#), didn't have a mobile phone until very late and it was incredibly annoying," she laughs. "Great for him, but hard when you're parents. I just think that it doesn't have to be without or within. It would be great if somehow they didn't make it so tempting to the exclusion of all else," she says, her gaze still anchored to our preoccupied third party. "We try, but it's an ongoing struggle."

Dean's current Canadian exhibition, a 35 mm "anamorphic film" titled [JG](#) (2013), on view at [TIFF](#) until August 23 (and free to the public), has brought her to this room, an expansive tumult of empty chairs and long, unpeopled tables. She has a habit of taking pauses between speaking, filling the space with gestural thought, and appearing, at turns, both fatigued and engaged. This film, which was first exhibited two years ago, and potentially bookends a decades-long conversation with her subjects, JG Ballard and Robert Smithson, doesn't appear to have lost its interest for her. "I don't think it has aged, really. But I haven't seen it for a while," she admits. She is eager to discuss the film's complexities and vagaries, as though its reel still occupies her cutting table. This entrenchment is a testament to Dean's continued engagement with, and long study of, subjects shrouded in a timeless aura, inhabiting a canonical status that invites fictive inserts.

Building on a trip she took to find *Spiral Jetty*, in 1997, which resulted in an audio work describing her Quixotic effort (the landwork was either submerged, or she was in the wrong place, Dean concluded), *JG* develops further on this mystic, elusive form, twinning a short story by

famed science-fiction writer JG Ballard, "The Voices of Time" (1960), and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Dean draws convincing conclusions (partly informed by a friendship she forged with Ballard, before his death in 2009) that Smithson was aware of JG's somewhat-obscure narrative, and built his iconic land art in response to – however partially – its imagery of a mandala etched into the bottom of a swimming pool.

Advancing the technical constructions that she designed for her 2011 work *FILM* (presented at the Tate's [Turbine Hall](#)), Dean makes film an elastic medium in *JG*, employing single-frame double exposure, stenciling, and her innovative aperture-masking. The result is a rumination on geology, time, memory, and perception.

If you read into this film a comment on the infirm status of its very medium, you won't be wrong, but it's a hardship for its author.

You've been working in film media –

Medium.

Medium. The film medium.

Yes. I'm not trying to correct you aggressively, but I'm trying to keep that word. It's a medium, like an artistic medium, rather than *media*.

Sure. So, you've been working in this medium over the course of two decades that have been quite pivotal for film's trajectory. We've watched digital technology encroach on the moving-image arena such that using film feels like a comment, or a politic. How does this reality affect you, or the way you view your practice?

I am sad that it becomes an issue every time I show my work, because for years it wasn't. It was just the work. Now it's like making a painting, and everyone talks about the fact that it was made with oils. I hope that this period will pass. But it has been inevitable.

I've refused or resisted having my work shown on any other medium than the one I made it on because the medium was related to the work itself. I've had to become, increasingly, a spokesperson. But it is sad that it just dominates. What it means, though, is that, more and more, I'm making films more purposefully in ways you couldn't with digital.

To make a point that actually it's very different, and this work is made from the medium. It's been hard.

I imagine it's frustrating, yes.

It's the finances. It's all money, rather than artistry. Which is what's so sad.

Can you talk a bit about how you achieved the particular effects of this film? I don't have the vernacular for what you do, but it looks like collage, pocking, overlay, and splicing.

It's actually all inside the picture. There's no fancy editing techniques. It's all filmed inside the emulsion, inside the picture frame in the same way as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. It's just that what I'm doing is dividing the frame up, and exposing bits of it through masking, and then rewinding and exposing different bits of it. There's no aggressive thing done to it. I could phone the lab and print it; it's all inside the negative.

Are these techniques a way to hold still a medium that lends itself to, or mandates, forward motion?

Well, no; it still has that temporal movement. But what happens is that I can mix different places and times within one film frame. Which is quite profound, actually.

You're making this linear thing more elastic.

Especially with Ballard and Smithson who were both, you know, time merchants to a certain extent. So for example with the mask of the spiral, which is based on Smithson's spiral. I have that mask [in the film], and the Great Salt Lake. But within the mask is the water from Utah, or flies from Southern California, or the sun is the same sunset but filmed a half hour later than the one before, so it becomes a time thing within one film frame. There was no post-production. I didn't do much of anything other than edit or cut scenes together.

The word "intervention" crops up in my mind, not just in terms of what you're doing with your medium, but your subjects, too. How do you feel about this word, "intervention"?

If anything, I've intervened in Ballard and Smithson's relationship, rather than something so massive as building a spiral jetty in a lake in Utah. So my intervening isn't necessarily a physical one, but an artistic intervention. You know, they didn't know each other but they knew of each other. Smithson made *Spiral Jetty* in 1970, and "The Voices of Time" was published in 1960. A decade apart, but Smithson, I think, really knew that short story.

The terms that get used in that short story, and in its description – entropy, meditation, the threat of Ballard's protagonist becoming "a sleeper" – these terms are made manifest in your film, in its slowness, and in the geology it frames. Are you articulating this slowness as a comment on the speed of the contemporary moment? Are you doing this in a more aggressed or urgent way than you might have a couple decades earlier, when you first began to "converse" with these subjects?

This work would never have been made at an earlier time. It's come out of a cycle of events, including the aperture-gate masking [I produced] because of *FILM* at the Turbine Hall, which was a work about film.

When I actually made this film, a lot had happened [regarding] JG's life

in the intervening time. If you've read any of Smithson's writing – and he was very engaged with film, but he wasn't engaged with film in the same way as me, because he didn't have the urgency of its potential loss ... But his *Spiral Jetty*, the spiral of film, the spiral of the typewriter for Ballard, the spiral and spooling of magnetic tape in Ballard's writing, they all relate. And of course the spiral present in Smithson's belief that the Great Salt Lake was an ancient whirlpool; and Ballard's looking up at the spiral nebulae – the spiral underwrites everything. So suddenly when I find this line in Ballard that says "the spirals are breaking up, and saying goodbye," it became a very valid entry – at that time, about two years ago – about the end of film, I have to say. I hope there will be no end of film, and I'm more optimistic now than I was then, but it was a valid entry, of course. The spirals breaking up and saying goodbye. Even the end [of the film] with the *qwwpt!* [*makes a quick wrapping-up, cutting-off sound*].

It's interesting to me that you title it JG, especially because there are more citations included in this, larger commentaries ...

Well actually that was a working title.

Oh, really?

Yeah. [*Smiles*] Because when it began ... it's a really old project. I wrote to Ballard many times to see if I could make a film of "The Voices of Time." And then he said to me, "treat it as a mystery that your film resolves," speaking of the *Spiral Jetty*. And then this great thing about, "why the *Spiral Jetty*?" You know, I think time [doctored] the *Spiral Jetty*, which I think is just a beautiful idea. Also in relation to the analogue spiral, and time. So it was more about Ballard, always. Because I knew him. And I got very close to Claire [Walsh, Ballard's long-time partner] and, I don't know if you've seen the book – she wrote a little text in the book. She died as well, last year.

So for me it was JG Ballard, and it became JG, and in the end it stayed, because it's like calling a spade a spade.

There was an interesting moment in your interview for the [Pew Center for Arts & Heritage](#) where you comment on how you realized, after-the-fact, that JG mimics aspects of his short story, with the recurrence of the clock, for instance. You comment on how you hadn't realized the shared leitmotif between these two works until it was done. Would you have liked more distance between this film and that story, or are you pleased with the (somewhat) illustrative nature of what resulted?

Well I think I'm quite far from the narrative text, to be honest, because of the nature of it. But the thing is that when I thought about props, or what to bring for the shoot, I thought of Ballard, and I thought of the masks, and his drained swimming pool, and the spiral, with Smithson. Then I thought of planets and time. So I bought a couple clocks in Berlin. And I didn't know what to do with the clocks. Then we set the Ballard times in the book [through the film], but not with any coherence. I looked at the clocks I'd bought and I thought, "oh god they're so crass, I'm not going to use them – especially the one with the eye." [*Laughs*]

How I make my work, really, is alone and on my cutting table, day-in and day-out, really working with the material. I can't ever go back and get more so I have to wrestle with what I have. And I suddenly saw a sort of thing that was building up, which was this diminution of time. And then *really* late on, I thought, "dammit, I wish I had another clock." I had four [and the story requires five]. Then I thought, "I'm going to have to *use the eye*." [*Laughs*] I'm quite glad I did; I mean it still makes me cringe, but I think in a way that when time speeds up in that book,

and he runs out of it – there are five chapters – and so each of the sections gets smaller and smaller and smaller, until then end, and there's just the lizard. That's the end.

I wonder how you reflect on the language we use regarding time's passage, how we illustrate it in the current moment. Everything we do is so tethered to the clock, whether digital, on a screen; our work and conversations are impossible without the presence of time's passage. I'd be curious to know how you wish we talked about it differently, how we lent it image and import.

[*Long pause*] Well I'm a social human being as much as anybody. George Perrot talked about how we carry watches, and why don't we carry compasses? We always want to know the time, but why don't we want to know north, south, east, west. Even *JG* comes out of my ... You know, earlier films like with Donald Crowhurst, and his time madness when he didn't know where he was on the surface of the globe. Because he didn't know where he was in the relationship between time and place.

[*Drops her head*]. How would we do it differently? You know, it is true, with the digital universe, that everything has sped up to such an extent that we don't take time anymore, we don't even take time in cinema, which I regret.

How do you mean that?

That very few films will take quite long to do something. And as soon as they do, they get put into the sidelines, into art cinema or something. Whereas cinema used to take more time, there used to be more time within cinema. That saddens me quite a bit; I feel disenfranchised by digital cinema. I don't really go to much cinema anymore. Maybe it's a generational thing, always out of step with the next generation.

I remember analogue. I remember when everything took quite a bit longer. Letters took longer. Faxes were new, and even they took longer. Now we have iPhones and we don't ever daydream. We don't – you see? [*gesturing to the media coordinator across the room, studying her phone*] – we don't get bored anymore. It's really hard to sit in an airport and not put your iPhone on.

I ran a workshop in Lake Como last year that was about that. It was about a [Robert] Walser book and it was about Berlin, it was called *Berlin and the Artist*, and it termed “sluggardizing,” the necessity for artists to just lie under skins, under pelts. It's what's perceived as laziness but actually it's a stasis that can be very creative. I mean this [“sluggardizing”] is the translator's word, but the German word is like “under felt pelts, under skins, like a slug under animal skins,” or something.

But I love the idea – those times that you do nothing can actually be incredibly creative. And that's what I would change. There isn't enough of that anymore. [*Dean pauses until the interview is over*]

WHAT IS AN ART CRITIC DOING AT AN ART FAIR?

by Orit Gat



An installation by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, at the Esther Schipper booth, Frieze New York 2014.

In May I was part of a panel at [NADA](#). It wasn't about criticism but someone asked me why I write reviews of art fairs. The question caught me by surprise, given the setting, but I'd had that conversation before. I wondered about it too. I'd thought through the same concerns: a fair is not a place to look at art, it's a marketplace; a fair is not curated; all fairs look alike, so the reviews about them will operate similarly, only swapping out the names of the artists or galleries.

At NADA, I gave a really simple answer: that an art critic can't walk into a room (or tent) full of art and not respond to it somehow. A [member of the audience](#) then pointed out the historical link between criticism and the salons (namedropping Diderot at an art fair!). But my response might have been too facile. It eschews responsibility.

What's the difference between Chelsea and an art fair? Almost all the reviews I write cover solo exhibitions or curated thematic group shows in commercial galleries. How is that so different from Art Basel's sections, like [Feature](#) ("emphasiz[ing] precisely curated projects that may include solo presentations by an individual artist, or juxtapositions and thematic exhibits from artists representing a range of cultures, generations, and artistic approaches") or [Statements](#) ("exciting new solo projects by young, emerging artists")? The result of a substantial relationship between an artist and a gallery, the solo gallery exhibition can be a space for an artist to realize a project they couldn't have at a nonprofit (which may not be able to support a given work, or has less of a commitment to the artist). The gallery is a space to test new work and ideas, but it may not be as different from the art fair as we want to believe.

When criticizing fairs as spaces meant for the sale – not the observation – of art, we focus on viewing conditions. Granted, looking at art is what an art critic does, but there has to be room for that discussion to include systematically writing about circulation and production, two things the art fair has changed to a great extent. In fact, a gallery exhibition may disguise the direct work-to-market relation by emphasizing viewing, by the sheer familiarity of the white cube. A fair presents it, and yet, it's part of what we renounce when saying fairs are not places to really experience art.

Should we talk about money? The famous Ruskin-Whistler trial was the result of a question of economics, not artistic merit (well, quality was involved: Ruskin, in his review of an exhibition which included Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, wrote, "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." The criticism here is obviously one on aesthetics ["a pot of paint"] but its impetus is monetary: the charging of 200 guineas). Ruskin may have lost Whistler's libel suit (he paid a token sum of one penny) but the result was a discussion (in court!) on the role of the critic and the relationship between artists and their critics.

Divorcing criticism from the economics of art doesn't add up. It's like separating the artwork from its market value: it presents a partial reflection of the art object's circulation in the world. The market can embrace any practice so long as it sells, and – as we've seen with performance, installation, and video – all media can be saleable. I'm not calling for a Ruskinesque attitude in which work is assessed

according to its market price, but rather, the opposite. One of the critic's most important roles is to keep the market in check. In the context of an art fair, this doesn't mean reporting sale prices (we can leave that to [the many websites](#) that blur criticism and journalism), but rather considering the market's operation when looking at art.

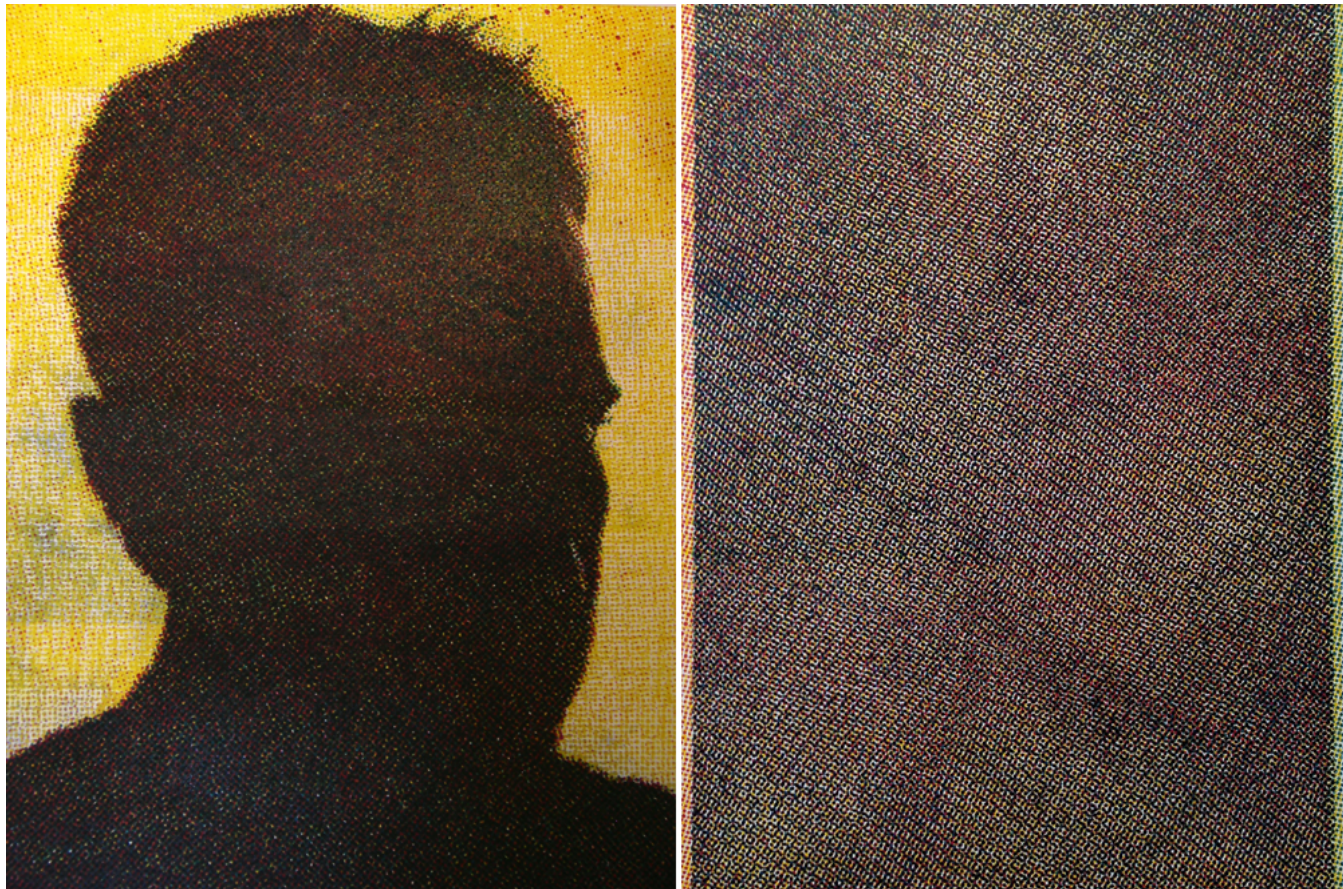
I could write an essay about the state of painting in New York based on last May's fairs season. It would mean thinking through what sells, what merits a spot in the \$500-per-sqm booth, but also how the market determines what we get to see. Art fairs don't just present what has a chance of selling, and they don't only alter the way work circulates in the market. Sometimes they change the kind of work that gets produced. With the pressure to bring "new" work to a fair, artists find themselves producing pieces for their galleries and the fairs they attend. This production of market-driven work isn't unique to fair demands (in the back room behind that ambitious video installation is oftentimes a pile of framed stills from that video), but it can be jarring to see the marketable work of artists who have recently had successful shows that didn't necessarily include any framed pieces hanging on the wall.

Criticism, moreover, induces capital. I don't want to overstate the importance of criticism, but a long bibliography can still be translated to a longer list of sales. Being cognizant of that is fundamental to a critic's understanding of his/her role and the terms of engagement with the artworld. It's not a matter of taste, really: in fact, when reflecting on the subject of subjectivity, I grapple with a statement by Guardian critic Adrian Searle, who, [when asked](#) about the issue of taste, shrugged it off, responding "taste is something you have to get over." I'm not sure I agree, but to keep with the thought experiment, for criticism after taste, what is the task at hand? At an art fair, it's not to weed out the "bad" from the "good" (I'm not getting into questions of quality), but to recognize the many quandaries surrounding the ethics and complexities of an art fair – for example, how to assess the curated sections and special projects. These important silos can't be considered as exterior to the economics of the fair. Nor are their viewing conditions always different from those of the works displayed at booths. And then, how do we think about the talks programs as a space that builds context for – some would say, instills meaning onto – the works for sale? These are some of the issues that should drive our critical exhortation.

All these questions lead to one: Do we consider the fair a space in which contemporary art is presented only to those who can afford to buy it? We better not. Just as the gallery system is far from a perfect economic model, but is one that supports artists and discourse (this is my attempt at saying "this is the best we've come up with thus far"), so is an art fair part of the monetary system that defines the artworld. Artists, curators, critics, and dealers need to delineate – possibly constantly redraw – their respective relationships to the art market. We need to test the ethical waters with every step we take into the deep end of this economic system. Does participating at a fair's talks program or curating a section of a fair make one complicit in any kind of way with this translation of cultural capital into dollars? Critics can't afford to pretend the market does not exist. A critic's role is to shape the conversation around it. If criticism doesn't examine the systems of presentation, dissemination, and production of work, then what are we all still doing here?

PAUL P. ON TWO WORKS BY STEPHEN ANDREWS

by Paul P.



Stephen Andrews, "A small part of something larger ...," and "10 IX 01," both 2001.

There have been many works of art made by artists about September 11th; countless artworks attempting to make sense of, or commemorate, the geopolitical ramifications of that day. Some grew out of an intellectualized perspective gained as the decade continued, others were the emotional result of the relatively immediate aftermath. The above work, titled *10 IX 01* by Stephen Andrews, is particular because it is an artwork whose inception was almost perfectly synchronized with the falling of the twin towers.

The painting was begun on the preceding day as its title records, though its true inception took place on the following day. I was Stephen's relatively new studio assistant. We may have made a few marks early that day, though as the reality of the morning progressed, we sat around his bedroom TV, while Stephen's partner John silently ironed shirts. Our regular studio days of chirpy easy-listening radio were interrupted. No other physical work was done that day.

The multitude of micro dots that make up these paintings were executed by him and me in the those anxious, terrible, even somewhat exhilarated moments which stretched into days and weeks afterwards; we knew that history's course had experienced one of those rare irrevocable alterations. The sadness of the event mingled, at least for me, with an excitement at the remote possibility that the world might somehow change for the better; that the anarchy might be progressive. Of course it didn't, and it wasn't. I recently mentioned this sensation of mine to Stephen, and he let me know that never for an instant had he imagined anything but the worst. Those emotions – of our world transgressing a deadly threshold – are embedded in every mark on this painting. Those circular stamps that we dipped carefully into paint and

then touched to the canvas were, literally and figuratively, his impressions.

Stephen's work, taken individually, or as an oeuvre, is an emotional and subjective reportage. He relays the effects, presented poetically, of contemporary historical tragedy as it becomes personal. This painting may begin with September 11th – but Stephen's point of origin as an artist was the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and '90s. From out of a period of relative calm – as the progress of gay-liberation steadily pushed forward, within a time of gay spiritual and corporeal freedom – AIDS, sustained by a still seething homophobia, ushered in the Plague Years.

Stephen Andrews had the misfortune, or fortune, to have lived through the AIDS crisis. He has lived with HIV for decades, experienced the death of many friends, his heroes, his partners. His body was deteriorating and his mortality was very near, so when I refer to his fortune, I don't necessarily mean the luck at having survived, but something harder to contemplate or account for: the wisdom gained from a terrible, humanizing experience. If terrible things must happen, may they happen to someone capable of communicating their horror back to society, thus working towards the alleviation of suffering, however little, in their present, and in the future. Stephen was still alive just, just in time for the invention of the "AIDS cocktail." Stephen knows about preparation for death and also about the nebulous promise of second chances.

This is what distinguishes his activist spirit, which Stephen both wields and is haunted by, and which allowed him to acutely recognize the watershed moment of September 11th. He is sensitized to recognize the

precipice off of which change hangs. Because of his experience with the horrors of the AIDS crisis he was able to analogize his experience of conflict, grief, and struggle towards understanding, and genuinely sympathizing with this global upheaval.

The impulse to mark life as it's lived is Stephen's MO: *I paint, this is how I exist, dot, dot, dot*. Stephen is a master drafts-person, proficient within a tradition, but he is also an alchemist, in that he devises or divines the process in which he works, from scratch. The ignition to Stephen's work is not his chops or his magic, but the power that lies in his capacity as an observer, as a witness.

This work at hand may be opaque in some senses, may seem like a like a formal exercise or a modernist trope, and to some degree it carries this at its base level. But it is a work about labor (as labor is equal to care in Stephen's hands). It is also about printed media, and its nefarious, as well as radical and positive, potentials. Finally, it is about the subjective power of the artist's hand; this ostensibly abstract work is imbued with the drama, beauty, and eroticism of all the work he's produced previous to it. Everything piles up; there is no fresh perspective for an artist – the subtext is the text.

By Stephen's reference to printed media I mean that these thousands of dots are laid down in an imitation of the four-color separation technique know as CMYK: cyan, magenta, yellow and black. *10 IX 01* heralds the beginning of Stephen's fascination with, investigation into, and mimicry of this process, but also the establishment of his interest in color, which robustly continues in the present. These works also signal the beginning of Stephen's life as a painter. He'd previously been a drawer of images in black-and-white. Here came new and uncharted ways of working and being. Despite the inauspicious moment from which they emerged, there was an undercurrent of sustaining creative joy.

10 IX 01 and *A Small Part of Something Larger #1*, which begin this exhibition's chronology, are perhaps the follies that were necessary to bring Stephen to where he is now. Rather ambitiously he sought to replicate, by manual labor, CMYK printing. The plan was that each color, in its proper order, be applied in dots by little hand-carved rubber stamps. Each layer was left to dry before the next one was applied in its corresponding direction: horizontal, vertical, and two diagonals. A beautiful idea, but punishingly painstaking. Stephen and I sat in close proximity, on those September days, and far beyond, staring into and making dots. We were blinded by dots; when I lay down to bed all I could see were dots.

Time, his time, our time, was marked and preserved. As if time were bottled, it is here in these paintings ready to be un-bottled, here for the viewer to read. The painting is the marked experience of time spent in its making.

When Stephen hired me, I was in a very precarious place. I was 24, and I was driven to be an artist but had no practical examples of what it was to be an artist, let alone a gay artist. For my particular generation – I was born in 1977 – we were incarnated along with the AIDS crisis. There was never any before or after; as a gay person my sexual awareness developed in relative lockstep with the ravages of the disease. I was deeply affected by the stories of lives lived and lost. That late summer I felt miraculously rescued, but also unworthy and inept, as well as blissfully happy to be there.

A Small Part of Something Larger #1, from the same period, is a portrait of John Greyson, Stephen's wonderful boyfriend (the one ironing that morning). I recently mentioned my memory to John of his very

domestic coping strategy; he said it was the last time he'd ever ironed his shirts! John, in addition to being a very handsome man, is a brilliant filmmaker whose *Lilies*, from 1996, had, years before, made a profound aesthetic impact on me. He is Stephen's muse; symbolic of love and the beginning of the second part of Stephen's life, the sequel. In fact, Stephen's original conceit for both of these paintings imagined them as the promotional posters for his "film," or rather the idea of a film in the form of drawings and collages laid out in film-strip format which he had been making, images to be amalgamated into an unrealized film. Cinema was in the air. Hollywood romance was his rubric, John was the love interest.

These works, like much of Stephen's work, speak about love, for love is simply fascination. The total density of John's darkened almost-profile (a profile in *contra jour* – the art-historical term for the shadowy silhouette caused by standing "against the day") has a gravity and intensity, a foil for the psychedelic effect of the just-off-register abstract work. Both are about devotion and made through devotion.

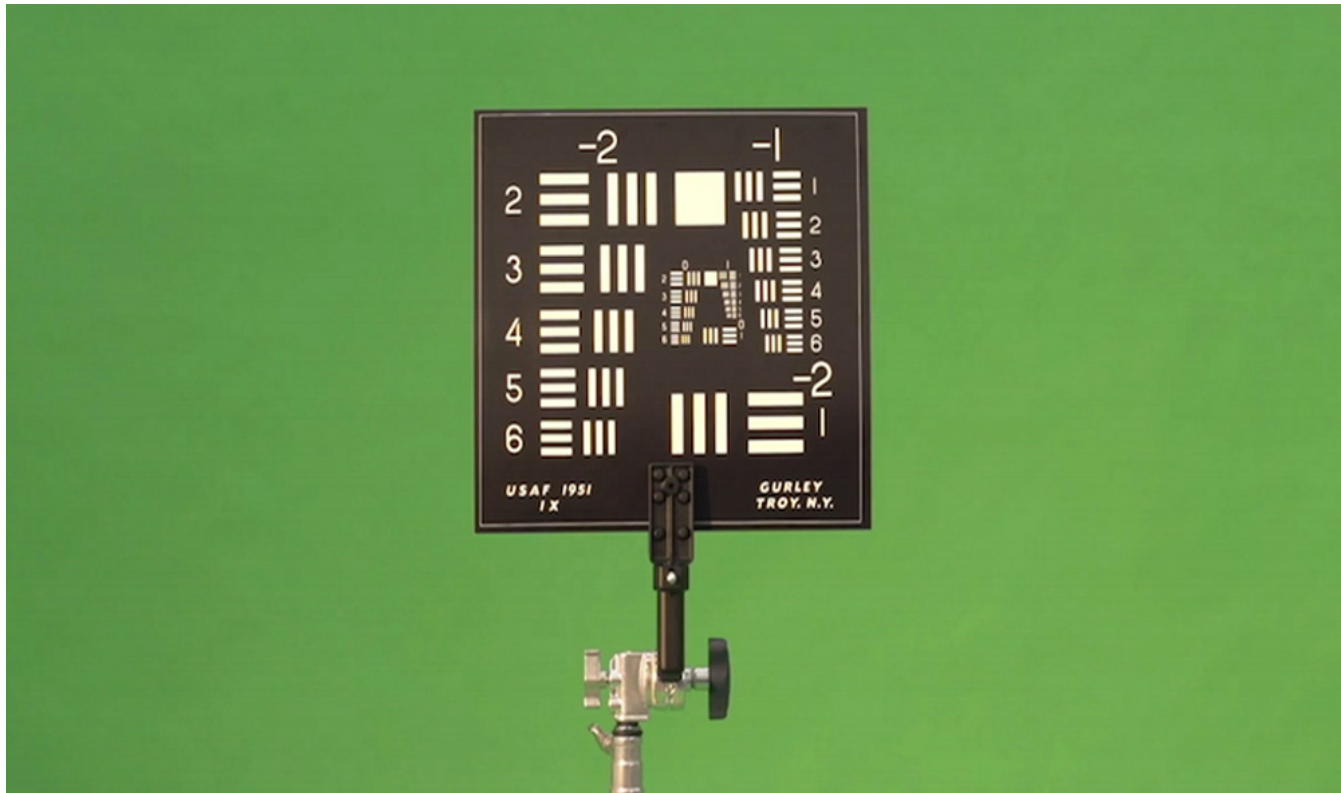
Stephen had also devised a method of a making a monoprint at the end of each day's work, whereby a piece of rolled canvas was lowered and pressed onto the fresh dots, making a secondary print/painting, and also giving the dots their puckered quality. The daily impressions are visible in the slight horizontal bands that run through the picture's background; evidence of how little, or how much, two hands can do in a day.

The impulse to make the indelible mark is an acknowledgement that feelings are felt and their communication has been attempted. I'm reminded of a Joni Mitchell lyric from Hejira: "I looked at the granite markers/ those tributes to finality to eternity/ and then I looked at myself here/ chicken scratching for my immortality." All good artists are, at any time, chicken scratching, at their best; groping for the ineffable with nothing but our ultimately flawed communication. Trying to harness a moment of life in the only way possible, which is by letting it be known that, "I've loved."

This text was first commissioned by, and presented at, [First Thursdays](#) at the [AGO](#), on June 4, 2015.

TO CUT AND TO SWIPE: UNDERSTANDING HITO STEYERL THROUGH “HOW NOT TO BE SEEN”

by Kaegan Sparks



A resolution target featured in a still from Hito Steyerl, “HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File,” 2013.

The complex work of contemporary artist, media theorist, and filmmaker [Hito Steyerl](#) often pivots on a surprisingly simple tactic – wordplay. Consistently, across both her media and textual works, Steyerl hyperlinks disparate environments, historical events, and spheres of meaning by way of puns and coincidences. “Duty,” for Steyerl, is both an ethical responsibility and an import tax; both stocks and airplanes can crash. The natural referents of words like “cloud,” “web,” “bubble,” and “liquidity” oscillate jarringly with their datalogical and financial connotations. To “engage” is both the objective of museum-education departments and a security protocol for drawing one’s weapon; an “occupation” is simultaneously a job and a mode of colonization. In Steyerl’s work, these lexical chance encounters constitute a *modus operandi* of political revelation, mapping unlikely connections between the realms of art, economy, ecology, and global power regimes in a way that seems to augur their ultimate structural collusion.

While Steyerl’s transparent reliance on homonyms may seem dubious as a mode of critique, it’s a strategy that allows her to lay bare unlikely, and often unsettling, intersections in the real world (the same software facilitates the production of both starchitect-designed museums and Cobra attack helicopters, for instance). As an aside in one of her many shrewd essays, she defends the “magic affinity” between like-sounding terms with reference to Walter Benjamin’s 1933 essay “Doctrine of the Similar,” which suggests that language inherited the mimetic faculty of mystical and occult practices. Superficial as it may seem, Steyerl’s practice of linguistic speculation – another term whose valences shift uncomfortably between high-risk capitalism and utopian thinking – has hit a nerve in the contemporary artworld for its capacity to expose

the tangled, and often surreal machinations of our excessively networked environment.

Steyerl’s signature mode of conceptual double entendre recurs throughout the nine films and video installations that comprise her current retrospective at New York’s [Artists Space](#), as well as her 2013 video *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File*, currently on view as part of *Cut to Swipe*, an exhibition of recent acquisitions at the MoMA. A fourteen-minute self-reflexive tutorial on negotiating contemporary conditions of virtual representation and pervasive surveillance, *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* coaches viewers through a series of infinitival strategies: “to hide, to remove, to go off-screen, to disappear.” Of the two maneuvers that frame *Cut to Swipe*, the touchscreen “swipe” may seem the most native to Steyerl’s piece. However, here the “cut” manifests profoundly as well, less as a cinematic splice than a performance of absence.

Protocols

Punctuated by blocky inter-titles (dictated by a text-to-speech avatar), the five lessons in *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* (“How to Make Something Invisible for a Camera,” “How to be Invisible in Plain Sight,” “How to Become Invisible by Becoming a Picture,” “How to be Invisible by Disappearing,” and “How to Become Invisible by Merging into a World Made of Pictures”) duly reflect the work’s heavy-handed title. As art historian [David Joselit has argued](#) (via the work of Seth Price), and as media theorist [Alexander Galloway has established](#) in his writing on protocols, digital formats and the specific transitive actions they offer enable access to information at the same time as they reinforce

structures of control. Accordingly, each of Steyerl's five sections proffers a reductive inventory of evasion tactics for those wary of Big Data (the spectrum of ways "to disappear" evoked above). While the first three sections of the video establish more individually-focused protocols, the last two expand Steyerl's exercise to an ecological and social level.

In her video's opening frame, Steyerl introduces a resolution target, a readymade object for calibrating photographic detail that she will mobilize as a rotating, telescoping motif throughout the rest of the work. Propped here on a camera tripod in front of a green screen, this simple graphic composition works to embed a complicated set of relations – it performs as a migrating image-object traversing both physical and virtual environments, a benchmark of shifting horizontal and vertical orientations (and accordingly, power relations), and a compact index of complicities between observation and violence (the camera shoots and this is its target).

While the resolution target appears in the first lesson of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* as a photographer's tool, assumedly to "ground" her representation in its object, Steyerl's video later transposes this default graphic pattern to a horizontal asphalt plane. A voiceover informs us that "in the 1950s and '60s, the US Air Force installed gray-scales and resolution targets in the California desert to calibrate aerial photographs and videos." With a backhanded nod to a milestone in the history of painting – Pollock's laying flat the vertical canvas, making it (according to Harold Rosenberg) an "arena in which to act" – this shift of the resolution target from upright in the studio to flat on the pavement reinforces an intimacy between perception and global politics. We learn at the conclusion of Lesson III that by 2000, the precision of aerial cameras had advanced such that one pixel of information could depict one square foot of real ground (before, the highest resolution for one pixel was twelve square meters). "To become invisible, one has to become smaller or equal to one pixel," the robotic voice concludes – a constraint the video later parodies with dancing figures wearing IKEA storage bins as readymade pixel-masks.

In her essay "[In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective](#)," Steyerl traces the historical evolution of perspectival systems as regimes of power. The God's-eye view, or an omniscient, aerial "new view from above" proliferated by drone warfare and Google Earth, "is a proxy perspective that projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery onto a backdrop of expanded 3-D sovereignty," she says. Ironically, then, it's not just that these new standards of representation curtail our perception of the world; today, infrastructures of total surveillance actually inhibit our own first-order arenas in which to act. Perhaps this is the reason Steyerl's video attempts to teach new choreographies (rather than epistemologies) as countermeasures to ubiquitous supervision.

Gestures

In *Lesson II* of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN*, Steyerl appears onscreen to perform simple motions that correspond to the narrated list of ways "to be invisible in plain sight." The first two instructions, "pretend you are not there, hide in plain sight," are grammatically imperative statements implicating the viewer/listener; whereas the last five phrases – "to scroll, to wipe, to erase, to shrink, to take a picture" – recapitulate the work's refrain of neutral and hypothetical infinitive verbs. These last terms also refer to a familiar lexicon of gestures that mark our interface with digital images on touchscreens, hand movements that the artist demonstrates for us while squarely facing the camera. When Steyerl acts out taking a picture, she holds her iPhone in front of the camera that records her, creating a feedback loop as well as a rectangular redaction bar that obscures her eyes from us.

Later, in *Lesson III*, Steyerl appears again, this time to perform more aggressive gestures than those we might apply to our touchscreens. At the mention of "to camouflage" (the first in this lesson's list of seven ways to "become invisible by becoming a picture") she wipes away her own face with her fingers, as if applying grease-paint, to reveal a vibrant color-chart on the screen behind her. As the voiceover chants "to conceal, to cloak, to mask, to be painted," another hand applies what might be a cosmetic "concealer" in brush marks mimicking resolution target lines on her forehead; these again dissolve into abstract optical patterns flashing in the background. The simple gesticulations of this section simultaneously evoke tropes of both military combat and performances of femininity amplified by consumer culture, or beautification to the point of obscuring one's face altogether. The direct and demonstrative style of Steyerl's movements also suggests the rote pre-flight briefing from an airline stewardess, one of several stereotypically feminized or "pink-collar" professions. In a number of her essays, the artist addresses the specific exigencies placed on women workers, who predominate in another, often invisible class of labor which Steyerl, like writer and activist Gregory Sholette, dubs as the integral and unacknowledged "dark matter" of contemporary-art economies.

Invisibility

At the beginning of *Lesson IV*, the visual framework of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* expands from the studio to the (virtual) street, as animated renderings of generic architectural spaces – malls, hotels, playgrounds, or resorts; Koolhaasian "junkspace" become the backdrop for the ongoing voiceover. A roving supervisory vantage gives a three-dimensional tour of this milieu, which is overlaid with sales pitches, and ominously traversed by human outlines (the kind often used in architectural renderings to demonstrate interaction and scale and provide an objective link to the reality they represent). Here, they exceed their generic status to the point of blankness – the figures are not stock models, but white opaque paper dolls cut from, or offering remarkably less information than, their polished, video-game surroundings.

Commensurate with this shift in setting, the recited text of "Lesson IV: How to be Invisible by Disappearing" lists a series of gerunds (active and ongoing verbs, rather than direct orders or potentialities) that supplement the simplistic and metaphoric options heretofore offered with descriptive, contextual scenarios: "living in a gated community; living in a military zone; being in an airport, factory, or museum; owning an anti-paparazzo handbag; being fitted with an invisibility cloak; being a superhero; being female and over 50; surfing the dark web; being a dead pixel; being a Wi-Fi signal moving through human bodies; being undocumented or poor; being spam caught by a filter; being a disappeared person as an enemy of the state." The last two phrases in the series map fairly directly onto issues Steyerl has developed in her essays "[The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation](#)" and "[Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy](#)," respectively. In the former, Steyerl correlates the "invisibility" of spam "made by machines, sent by bots, and caught by spam filters," to an increasingly common decision made by individuals to withdraw from representation. Today exposure has become more of a threat than a privilege. Steyerl posits the passive move to avoid being monitored, or the active one to destroy cameras and surveillance equipment, as breaching a social contract, a deliberate denial of the privileged visual circuits of surveillance between governments, corporations, and the public.

Alexander Galloway has argued that "there is a new political posture

today ... with an acute black-box profile,” projecting the model of the black-box, a technological device that obscures its inner functioning, on contemporary strategies of non-participation. He cites the [Invisible Committee](#)’s tactics of opacity – toward becoming un-representable and unreadable to authority, rather than struggling to occupy space – as akin to the refusals of recent protest movements to make demands, thus declining to participate in pre-established protocols of political struggle. Similarly, Steyerl has advocated for the counterintuitive move to embrace objectification, urging people to identify with images, and to identify images as things: “[An image] doesn’t represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other – a thing like you and me.” This call to participate *in the image*, or forfeit subjectivity “as a privileged site for emancipation,” might just be the flipside of Galloway’s strategic non-participation.

Yet Steyerl’s essay “Missing People” also calls attention to the violence of involuntary underrepresentation: “a growing number of unmoored and floating images corresponds to a growing number of disenfranchised, invisible, or even disappeared and missing people.” Near the end of Lesson IV, the speech avatar of HOW NOT TO BE SEEN suddenly switches from male to female, and intones:

In the decade of the digital revolution 170,000 people disappeared. Disappeared people are annihilated, eliminated, eradicated, deleted, dispensed with, filtered, processed, selected, separated, wiped out. Invisible people retreat into 3D animations. They hold the vectors of the [dimension] to keep the picture together. They reemerge as pixels. They merge into a world made of images.

The verb inflections in this script are notable: now the people are objects being disappeared (or annihilated, eliminated, etcetera) by an undisclosed force. Far from emancipatory, this version of “merg[ing] into a world made of images” entails internment at the “black sites of production, from *maquiladoras* to PC rooms,” as the dark matter of late capitalist labor.

Escapes

As the text on disappeared people is being read, the video’s stage is reset. The landscaped courtyard of a corporate complex dissolves into flat pixels, which gently recline from a vertical orientation to form a carpet on a green screen within a photography studio. A Google Earth desert landscape appears as a desktop background peppered with icons. Atop the grid of pixels a resolution target is projected, which also slowly rotates from a vertical to a horizontal position. A series of translucent figures in full-body green cloaks materialize on the platform.

The final lesson of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* unfolds on multiple versions of this stage, both virtual and actual. The narrator describes: “This pattern has been decommissioned in 2006 as analogue photography lost its importance. Rogue pixels hide in the cracks of old standards of resolution. They throw off the cloak of representation.” At this rhetorical pivot, seemingly real footage of a resolution target painted on a cracked slab of pavement in the desert gives way to a much lower resolution (clearly virtual) rendition of the same scene, suggesting the artist’s pre-shoot mockup on a computer. Where a green screen was within this landscape, we now see a self-help Powerpoint on the subject of happiness, which transitions to the resort scenery of *Lesson IV*, where Second Life avatars of the vocal group The Three Degrees perform their hit “When Will I See You Again.”

Birds transverse the boundary of the screen to emerge on the desert platform, and the camera crew is suddenly exposed, heightening the

friction between the “real” and simulated realms and their inhabitants. More vertiginous oscillations ensue: the virtual performance by The Three Degrees gives way to an actual music video on a flat screen (or computer window), and internal cues (seemingly from the video’s own postproduction – “shoot this background for real!”) emerge on the Google Earth background. These narrative phrases, unrealized in the video’s imagery, concatenate in a frenzied flight of fancy: “camera crew disappears after invisible energy rays emanate from iPhone” / “U.S. Air Force drops glitter from stealth helicopter.” / “happy and excited pixels filming from crane” / “and fly away with drone!” We are left with the final shot of two “real” figures in green faceless bodysuits punching at a resolution target.

In her essay “Cut! Reproduction and Recombination,” Steyerl describes a spectacle-suffused space similar to the synthetic landscapes of the last two sections of her video: Tropical Islands Resort is a “multi-exotic spa landscape, complete with replicas of rain-forests, Jacuzzi look-alikes of Mayan sacrificial pits, as well as giant Photoshopped infinity-horizon wallpapers” housed in a revamped hangar on the site of a World-War II airfield in Germany. Steyerl deems it a space of pure postproduction, a real space that approaches virtual reality through its simulated layers of “cut-and-paste territory,” which is “jumbled, airbrushed, dragged, and dropped in 3-D,” and elides its own history through continual edits that never culminate in one final cut.

The shifting terrains of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* – shuffling between the photographer’s studio, Google Earth on a desktop, a desert landscape, an architectural rendering for lifestyle marketing, and a recording of a 1973 musical performance – echo this condition, repeatedly recalibrating the protocols that govern the figures within them, and stressing conflicting grounds for representation. The video seems to ask, how does representation – in terms of political agency, or just regulating one’s own image – operate in the studio versus a black site, or in front of a camera phone versus a surveillance satellite? Is there an avenue for revoking our consent to being imaged? Can the *swipe* register a radical refusal, denying access to a regime that converts our every gesture into mineable, exploitable data? In a panel on aesthetics and politics at the Vera List Center in 2013, curator João Ribas attended to this very issue:

We no longer merely look at images. We now pinch, drag, scroll, swipe, and flick them, gestures that have been patented by corporations for almost two decades. The somatic codification of labor at the very level of a gesture inscribes an order of relation of us to what we produce. As such, what might be the Chaplinesque equivalent of these gestures? The movements that easily, or not so easily, escape or disrupt the model of production they imply. What does it mean to touch an image, rather than to merely look at it, and what might we call the haptic equivalent of looking away?

With some irony, Steyerl’s video offers two possible alternatives: escape or havoc. Withdrawal has often been suggested as the only means of refusing a contemporary working regime that utterly depends on workers’ identification with and commitment to their subjugated roles. However, the ludic dimension of Steyerl’s video contradicts its very deliberate instructions, not just in tone but also in content: the ecstatic energy of the final scene converts the pavement resolution target into a dance floor – here bodies don’t disappear but exuberantly enunciate their presence. The ultimate gesture of *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN*, figures pummeling a resolution target with their fists, is in fact an act of sabotage – the industrial era’s radical counterpart to contemporary calls for withdrawal. In a powerful application of her signature wordplay, Steyerl’s last protocol – the *strike* – encapsulates both the refusal of work and physical retaliation, the evacuating cut, and the defiant swipe.

THE SUFFERING BODY OF 1993: WHAT- EVER HAPPENED TO THE “ABJECT” (PART I)

by Joseph Henry



Kiki Smith, “Untitled,” 1990. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

The best way to fuck something up is to give it a body.

A voice is killed when it is given a body.

Whenever there’s a body around you see its faults.

Theory proves that.

- Mike Kelley, *Dialogue #1 (An Excerpt from “Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ”)*, 1993

In her [reportage](#) on the opening of the 2013 New Museum exhibition, titled *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, Artforum writer and artist Rhonda Lieberman comments on a strange mnemonic sensation in seeing an art show about the recent past: “I knew a museum show about ‘NYC 1993’ would be creepy, I just didn’t know what kind of creepy ... When the nostalgia train hits a time when you were actually an adult, you palpably experience the constructedness of history.” Discrepancies emerge between Lieberman’s recollection of the 1993 New York artworld and the inevitably different equivalent on display. She notes the most prevalent impression of NYC 1993, its overall melancholic and mournful tone. “The show was heavily skewed toward AIDS, gender politics, kinky sex, prostheses, fucked-up doll parts ... all under the harshest medical lighting. We had lighting and white walls in 1993 – but I don’t recall it seeming so harsh,” she writes. “There was an overall seriousness, sterility, and darkness in tone to the show.”

Deliberate or otherwise, Lieberman replays some of the most public art criticism of the 1990s, usually tied to exhibitions around politics and identity. In Roberta Smith’s pointed, yet generally supportive review in *The New York Times*, regarding the 1993 Whitney Biennial, she [writes](#), “There’s not a lot of eyes-on pleasure to be had inside, where the latest Biennial turns its back on the razzle-dazzle of the 1980s and faces the harsher realities of the ‘90s,” later calling the exhibition a “pious, often arid show.” In the same year and publication, Holland Cotter [writes](#) of two exhibitions shown at the Whitney, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* and *The Subject of Rape*. “[At] the Whitney, where ‘transgressive’ art is just the byproduct of haute-couture theory, both exhibitions have a juiceless, frozen, inorganic look, as if they were shrink-wrapped artifacts of something already called the Early ‘90s.” Between exhibitions at the New Museum and the Whitney, the personal experience of time is already bracketed as a historical moment. For Lieberman, the recent past returns as an object of museological study, and for Cotter, the present curiously brackets itself as a historical paradigm.

Yet this feeling of loopy time is not a pleasurable abandon of synchronization, but instead something serious, unpleasurable, frozen, creepy. Historicism feels like atrophy, here, where you realize your membership in a distinct moment in time may have been taken for granted. But the unease of an exhibition about art of the early ‘90s doubled for these critics in the art itself. Art like Andrea Serrano’s [The Morgue](#) series (1992), which turned corpses into high-gloss

pictorialism, or Charles Ray's [Family Romance](#) (1993), which took an uncanny isomorphic approach to a troop of naked parents and children, explored sensations and representations centered on the gross and the bizarre, in short, to cite a key ekphrastic of the era, the *abject*. Weighty and disarming themes permeated *NYC 1993, Abject Art, The Subject of Rape*, and the 1993 *Biennial: AIDS*, social injustice, sexual assault, bodily fluids, and racial violence.

With this nexus of feeling, history, identity, and art, we might approach an understanding of the veritable moment in the 1990s of so-called "abject art." Abjection, the phenomenon of tossing away the undesirable elements of life and their related affects of disgust, became a key explanatory in both the Anglophone artworld and the academic humanities – cultural spheres basically coterminous to begin with. German scholar Winfried Menninghaus, in his *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (1999), notes that between the years 1982 and 1997, 28 pages in the Modern Language Association Bibliography appeared with the word "abjection" in the title. Spurned by the 1982 translation of psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva's [Powers of the Horror: An Essay on Abjection](#) into English, the focus on abjection gave its practitioners, from contemporary artists to feminist theorists, a shorthand to describe the concomitant Culture Wars and the identity-based oppressions inflicted by a conservative populace and its conservative elected officials. The AIDS crisis, the Watts Riots, the Anita Hill trial, anti-feminism, and the general collapse of the American welfare state all pointed to a historical scene replete with crisis. When Lieberman, Smith, and Cotter all critiqued the doom and gloom on display in 1993 and its second wave, it seemed less like an aesthetic judgment and more like the observation of a political reality. The low critical opinions toward this work only magnified, from the most influential of art historians on modern and contemporary art to the United States Congress.

The question is, now, in an artworld and social climate grappling with similar if not identical questions, how to contend with these issues of identity, their expression in art, and the perpetual abjection of certain people without entombing them as a weird phenomena of the 1990s? Contemporary art has never seemed to understand what to do with the wounded, injured, and broken bodies both on TV and in the galleries. No wonder, then, that debates about disproportionate representation and identity surface today as stronger than ever. What could we learn in revisiting abject art?

The organizing object of abject art, institutionally speaking, was *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, curated in the summer of 1993 by Craig Houser, Simon Taylor, and Leslie C. Jones, all students of the Whitney's Independent Study Program (ISP). By means of artworks using or suggesting bodily fluids and anatomical body parts considered "disgusting" or "offensive," the exhibition attempted to mobilize the psychoanalytic theory of abjection for an exploration of the limits of taboo subject matters and their political implications. As the curators stated in their catalogue's introduction, "Employing methodologies adapted from feminism, queer theory, post-structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, our goal is to talk dirty in the institution and degrade its atmosphere of purity and prudery by foregrounding issues of gender and sexuality in the art exhibited." As "abject art," their curatorial neologism meant to describe an art that either utilized or commented on abjection, it would directly challenge normative notions of morality, cleanliness, decency, and invariably, identity.

Under this rubric, the ISP curators assembled a wildly heterogeneous group of works, organized in sections of "The Maternal Body," "Unmaking Modernist Masculinity," and "Transgressive Femininity." In a brief glance over the exhibition's selection of objects, the aesthetic

porosity of abjection as an artistic descriptor becomes clear: work such as Arshile Gorky's [The Artist and his Mother](#) (c. 1924-36), Eva Hesse's [Untitled \(Rope Piece\)](#) (1969-70), and Robert Mapplethorpe's [Self-Portrait](#) (1978), which features an artist brandishing a bullwhip in his asshole, were gathered together in the name of exposing social dictums around proper and oppositely disregarded subjectivities. The curators oscillated between degrees of referentiality, from abjection's suggested presence to its direct citation: if Jackson Pollock's [Number 27](#) (1950) implied a painterly performance akin to male ejaculate, John Miller's [Untitled](#) (1988) sculpturally mimicked feces itself. Few instances of actual bodily products were curated, save a section from Mary Kelly's well-known [Post-Partum Document](#) (1974), which featured her infant son's soiled diapers. As its curators defined their premise, abject art "does not connote an art movement so much as it describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials, such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality" (among others).

As was commented by more astute critics of the time, the ISP curators worked with an overly stable definition of abjection's materials, as if shit or blood were irrevocably abject in its artistic evocation. Moreover, the use of "abject" as an organizing descriptive principle elided subtle distinctions in artworks about the body more broadly, such as the gestural smears of Cy Twombly's [Untitled](#) (1964/1984), and even conflated other adjectives of ugliness, such as "disgusting," "uncanny," or "grotesque" (I [leveled](#) a similar charge at the Hirschhorn's recent *Damage Control: Destruction in Art Since 1950*, as well). The looseness with which the curators applied "abject" almost mimicked the condemnatory register they were trying to critique: in Jones's catalogue essay, she refers to Chris Rush's *Scrubbing* (1972) as "abject domestic labor" and describes Carolee Schneemann's [Meat Joy](#) (1964), a work more about a positive exploration of embodiment, in equal terms.

Yet the most productive ambiguity in *Abject Art* was its organizers' assumption of the correlation between the *physical components* of abjection, its blood and guts, and its *social metaphor*, as an expression of certain subjects' marginalization. This came to be the most cited application across intellectual spheres more broadly, even if it represented a willful misreading of its primary reference, Kristeva's *Powers of the Horror*. A thorough elaboration of Kristeva's theory demands more attention than can be given here, but, to gloss, abjection refers to the condition following "primal repression," or the subject's psychic and biological split from the mother in infancy. In order for the child to assume a self and enter symbolic communication, they must renounce and repudiate the maternal, a zone representing "no clear distinctions of subject and object, inner and outer, 'I' and others," as Menninghaus writes. This violent fracture from the mother, which necessitates the psychic casting of the maternal as consuming and threatening, haunts the subject their entire life. Kristeva notes, "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it. On the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger." Abjection is fundamentally an anxiety of proximity, of what constitutes the self and what does not. The psychoanalytic paternal law and the whole of culture itself relies on the maintenance of primal repression in spite of its perpetually threatening presence.

But in *Powers of the Horror*, abjection and primal repression are ahistorical, universal qualities in the development of subjectivity and society. Even more technically, abjection theoretically precedes the development of the symbolic, and stands above and beyond mere representation. Thus *to depict* abjection is, in Kristeva's account, impossible, though what art can trigger is the affect around disgust, the feeling of engaging the abject. In a famous encounter with the

condensed skin on top of milk, Kristeva narrates: “I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in my stomach, the belly, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause foreheads and hands to perspire.” Note the cataclysmic qualities of Kristeva’s disgust (for her, the abject is “edged with the sublime”). When applied to aesthetics, this would mandate that “abject art” necessitates a feeling of overwhelming horror. Hard to imagine gagging *per se* in front of a Pollock.

For Menninghaus, then, the political appropriation of Kristeva in the 1990s moved beyond a flatly phobic reaction toward abjection, providing practitioners of this modified theory “a new articulation that allows both identification with and protest against their own ‘abjection.’” In this dual usage, one strain of critique aimed to expose the “regressive function” of cultural authority while the other sought to affirm “abject” existence as a “socially un-accomodated way of life.” Accordingly, abject art related tactics: it could express the condition of abjection as an existential dilemma or marginalized subject (usually the artist) and thereby expose power in a melancholic request to bear witness to society’s act of abjecting. Alternatively, abject art could incite disgust in the viewer in a performative gesture to lure abjection’s conditioned prohibitionism in subversive irony. We might see the former technique in Kiki Smith’s *Untitled* (1990), which depicts two seemingly lifeless male and female bodies held upright on poles, breast milk and semen dripping down the work’s two respective bodies. The latter, affirmative strategy manifests in Danny Fass and Joe Kelly’s video *Skullfuck* (1991), in which one man inserts his head into another’s anus, and then pulls out and gleefully licks his shit-covered face in a parodic exaggeration (from a homophobic perspective) of abject queer sex. Arguably, it is the melancholic articulation of abject art that has remained in historical consciousness.

Although Kristeva’s book came out nearly ten years before abject art’s apotheosis, its theory, in whatever guise, seems to have responded to a specific historical moment. In *Abject Art*’s introduction, the curators connect their exhibition to the American political climate of 1993, replete with pressures concerning neo-conservatism, the censorship of art, attacks on multiculturalism, the reproductive rights of women, and the pathologizing of queer people. Taylor constructs an entire iconography, noting that the “malevolent associations of the other which the abject (e.g. women and menstrual blood, gay men and disease, the working class and trash, blacks and dirt) have been deployed by artists to trace the stereotypes to re-signify and circulate in alternatively parodic, celebratory, and non-oppressive ways.” Within the historical elaboration of abject art, it seems impossible to remove identity politics from the picture.

[Part II of this article can be read here.](#)

SEEING RED: UNDERSTANDING KAZUO SHIRAGA'S SUDDEN FAME

by Carol Strickland



Kazuo Shiraga performing "Challenging Mud" at the 1st Gutai Open Air Exhibition, Tokyo, 1955.

In recent years, the reputation of postwar abstract painter [Kazuo Shiraga](#) (1924-2008) – known for turbulent, crimson paintings made with his feet – has taken a giant step forward on a path long in the making.

As a result of Shiraga's expanded visibility, curators and gallerists specializing in Japanese modern art are finally witnessing non-Western works be admitted to a formerly Euro-American art-historical narrative. "We've been arguing for this for a long time," says Alexandra Munroe, senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum. "It's been a real fight." The independent curator Reiko Tomii agrees. "It's only in the last ten years that academia is trying to incorporate non-Western art into art history, especially for those diehard modernist art scholars."

The avant-garde movement called Gutai has received a belated recognition and a new appreciation of perhaps its most brilliant member, Shiraga. While an ethnocentric, aesthetic chauvinism in the American artworld has downplayed the significance of this movement, a newly revisionist spirit is driving a wedge into the monolithic canon, upsetting an entrenched view of the West's monopoly on reinventing art.

Collectors, curators, critics, and educators are rectifying past neglect. In the market, Shiraga's prices have soared since 2003, when a 1961 painting went for \$46,000 at auction, to 2014 when Sotheby's sold a 1969 painting for over five million. This spring, three shows at major New York galleries and a museum retrospective have spotlighted Shiraga, the most well-known of the Gutai art collective.

Although his work is a staple in Japanese museums and has been exhibited widely in Europe for nearly fifty years, Shiraga is having "an American moment," says Ming Tiampo, associate professor of art history at Carlton University, Ottawa. "It's really only now that American audiences are paying attention," she adds. "Having all four strands of the artworld – academia, museums, the market, and critics – interested in his work at the same time is really quite powerful."

"There seems to be a Shiraga-mania going on," a visitor to the [Mnuchin Gallery](#) (showing 17 canvases until April 11) noted of the flurry of exhibitions. At the [Dominique Lévy Gallery](#), 23 paintings were on display until early April. From April 30-June 20 [Fergus McCaffrey](#), who represents the artist's estate, will exhibit works by both Shiraga and his wife Fujiko at his eponymous gallery. [The Dallas Museum of Art](#) pairs Shiraga with his Gutai colleague Sadamasa Motonaga in a comprehensive show enriched by loans from the Japan Foundation until July 19. Scholarly catalogues accompany each exhibition.

Munroe first showed Gutai artists at the [Guggenheim SoHo](#) in New York in 1994 as part of *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. Since 2012, both the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York and [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#) have included some Gutai works in exhibitions of postwar Japanese art, but it was the recent Guggenheim show, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, that formed a tipping point. "Our presentation was the first sweeping introduction to Gutai in a major American museum," says co-curator Munroe. "The world was not ready to fully take on the historical achievements of Gutai in the context of world art until 2013."

The [Gutai Art Association](#) was a collective of radical artists founded by Jirō Yoshihara that lasted from 1954 (Shiraga joined in 1955) until 1972. Yoshihara's mantra – “Do not imitate others” and “create what has never been done before” – demanded originality. The artists jettisoned past practices in an explosion of experimentation, staging performance-based works outdoors that predated Happenings in the West.

Shiraga took his mentor's mandate furthest when he enacted his pioneering performance *Challenging Mud* in 1955. Stripped down to shorts, he plunged into a mixture of mud and unset concrete, struggling to shape the gloppy mess with his whole body. Shiraga expert Reiko Tomii calls the product a “performative painting.” “The way he channeled force into mark-making,” she says of his energetic style, “is where we see the artistry.”

Shiraga was already familiar with Jackson Pollock's practice of dripping and pouring paint; he had seen Pollock's work in Japan in 1951. Yet the critic Harold Rosenberg's 1952 definition of action painting, which considered the canvas “not a picture but an event” and “an arena in which to act,” was not known in Japan until 1959. The confluence of Gutai practice and Rosenberg's concept of a painting as an improvised result of an encounter with material rather than a planned image seems to have been part of the *zeitgeist* in both East and West.

“It was the whole idea of moving art from depicted reality (a picture that hung on the wall) to experiential reality,” Munroe says. “Our show proved definitively that Gutai not only expressed these ideas – often first – but also expressed them extremely well.”

Gabriel Ritter, co-curator of the Dallas exhibition, says knowledge of Shiraga's achievements “expands our understanding of modernism, dispelling notions that movements such as Abstract Expressionism and the participatory and process-driven elements of so much contemporary practice are purely Western inventions.”

Gutai art, including work by Shiraga, was first shown in the US at New York's [Martha Jackson Gallery](#) in 1958. The critic Dore Ashton's negative review in *The New York Times* set the tone for underestimating the work. She pronounced it derivative, basically a knockoff of New York School Abstract Expressionism. “It's really shocking reading criticism of that show because it's so myopic and narrow,” says McCaffrey, an expert on Shiraga. “It's completely dismissive” of anything not conceived in New York.

Ritter terms Ashton's analysis not just “uninformed” but wrong, since the impetus for Japan's radical departure from tradition was spurred by entirely different issues than those of the Abstract Expressionists. “Now that the context in which the Japanese works were being made is more fleshed out and people have information, background, and art-historical knowledge, it would be difficult to say there was anything derivative at all,” Ritter maintains.

Tiampo, co-curator of the Guggenheim Gutai show, explains the vastly different circumstances that gestated the new art: “People think about postwar Japan from an American perspective, but from a Japanese perspective – especially for artists, intellectuals, and writers – a lot of the reflection wasn't, ‘why were we victims [of atomic blasts]?’ It was more, ‘why did we perpetrate a war that was unjust?’” Gutai artists concluded that the reason the masses obediently followed the Emperor to an unjustified war was due to what Tiampo calls “a lack of humanism and subjective autonomy.”

American critics, inflated with pride at the shift of the artistic avant-garde from Paris to New York after World War II, were afflicted with not only a victor's arrogance but cultural blinders that kept them from understanding the divergent philosophical underpinning of work emanating from Japan.

Understanding Gutai and Shiraga requires awareness of the socio-political situation in Japan following a war that claimed 60 million lives worldwide. Cities and the countryside were devastated; people were starving, factories destroyed. In two days' bombing of Tokyo alone, in 1945, 100,000 people died and more than one million lost their homes. The cultural ground, too, had shifted: Americans occupied Japan, the Empire was dismantled, the Emperor forced to repudiate his divinity.

Chairman Mao's epigram, “there is no construction without destruction,” comes to mind, for in the face of this void came the freedom re-create visual art: to discard tradition and make it express the new, unsettled reality. Artists felt liberated from constrictions of the past but also deeply skeptical of groupthink ideology that had subordinated free will to the dictates of a militaristic, totalitarian state.

Gutai sought to express the trauma of war and its aftermath after the anguish of defeat. One translation of Gutai is “concreteness,” and these artists trusted no abstract concepts like “Fatherland” that had led them astray – only tangible, physical things with objective reality like the body and matter.

In place of social unity and conformity that had abetted the fascist state, they substituted individual expression – not for novelty but to nurture an independent spirit. The Japanese word *shishitsu*, meaning individual qualities – aesthetic, intellectual, and philosophical—at the core of a person, would be expressed through the body's collision with material.

Throwing away his training in traditional Japanese painting, Shiraga used his body rather than paintbrushes, first using his hands, then fingernails, and in 1954 developing his signature style: painting with his feet. Channeling energy into action, he hung by a rope above a canvas on the floor, swirling a pile of pigment around the canvas with his bare feet to create paintings that in Dominique Lévy's words seem like “an implosion and explosion” of force.

“I want to paint as though rushing around a battlefield, exerting myself to collapse from exhaustion,” Shiraga said in 1955. He described the symbiosis of creation and destruction his work embodies: “My inner feeling became so urgent that immediately I had to crash into my canvas.”

The early works of the 1950s and '60s are characterized by a prevailing use of the pigment crimson lake, which Shiraga said “reeks of blood.” An athlete who had belonged to both *Judo* and *sumō* clubs, Shiraga had a macho side not unlike the heroicism of Abstract Expressionism. He wanted to paint “brave” or “daring” paintings, Tomii says, embodying power and something of the grotesque. Besides hanging onto a rope and twisting his torso to spread arabesques of paint, he stomped aggressively, splashing colors like crashing waves.

“The horrors of war,” Shiraga explained, “became my subjects.” Yoshihara considered a 1956 work by Shiraga that evoked sacrifice and cruelty (cow livers in a cloudy liquid) too grotesque to exhibit. But Shiraga's two 1963 paintings on a bristly boar's hide reveal his penchant for rawness. “My art needs not just beauty but something horrible,” he said in a 1998 interview. “All of my works more or less express some sort of gruesomeness.” The Dallas Museum of Art's exhibition includes

Wild Boar Hunting II, in which red and brown paints soak the hide like clots of dried blood on a wound. Ritter describes it as “jaw-dropping, incredibly visceral, very violent, quite bloody.”

One can also read many early works that feature a vortex of red and orange paint, heavily impasto-ed in the center and spreading outward in swooping swaths, as an allusion to flames. “I just saw war victims and Osaka burnt to the ground,” Shiraga said in 1998. “These aspects of my memories were materialized in my work.”

Throughout a fifty-year career, Shiraga consistently made paintings of high quality, which makes his prior absence from the official canon all the more egregious. And, although he continued to paint with his feet, his style developed in harmony with Japan’s transformation and his own maturation. “Every period has its own distinctive voice,” Tiampo says of his evolution. “The content of the work changes.”

In Shiraga’s earliest period (1954-59), the work was about his response to war, violence, experimentation, and youthful energy. At first, his movements were rather limited, resulting in a choppy, aggressive effect, and his palette was overwhelmingly red. Both composition and palette are less exuberant than in his mature style, and the paint application is thinner (seen in *Untitled* of 1959).

In the 1960s, he used his body more freely and acrobatically, combining red with blue, yellow, or white, as in *WorkBB85* (1961), where the red doesn’t read as blood so much as paint. “The compositional quality of some of the later oils surpasses that of the early work quite dramatically,” McCaffrey says, noting that the aesthetics were always very important to Shiraga. “The act of painting with his feet wasn’t sufficient in itself in terms of his creative process. It was a means to an end,” which was “to create objects of beauty.”

His unusual method gave Shiraga the advantage of painting with more vigor, as well as the capacity to move large amounts of paint. “When you’re swinging from a rope with your arms, torso, and legs extended,” McCaffrey explains, “your stroke is that much longer.” Shiraga’s revolutionary abstractions have a dynamic compositional style of criss-crossing, blended colors and almost volcanic tactility. Looking beyond the shock value of someone painting with his feet – seeing it not as a gimmick but a productive innovation – allows one to appreciate the singular aesthetics and emotionally charged power of the paintings.

In 1971, Shiraga faced questions of how to reinvent himself after attaining a level of success in Japan and Europe. He began the arduous process of studying to become a lay monk of the Tendai sect of esoteric Buddhism. In 1974 he was ordained as *Sodō* (*Simple Way*) and resumed his career as an artist. Praying to the god *Fudō* and chanting the heart sutra became part of Shiraga’s preparation before painting.

Although works from 1973-76 have titles naming Buddhist deities and incorporate a circular motif akin to the Buddhist wheel symbol, Shiraga never literalized Buddhist teachings in his work. The different facture is due to his use of fluid, alkyd paint in pastel colors. The 1972 alkyd painting *Daikokuten* (*God of Wealth*) has a lush liquidity and splashes, with paint spiraling out from a central vortex. In relation to the material, grace has replaced brutality. Tiampo finds a “sense of sublimity and calm,” that turns the violent energy of the 1950s and ‘60s into an explosion of poetry, as in the woven streaks of paint in *Daiitokuson* (1973).

Balletic tension rather than brutal rawness persists in the 1980s middle style. Shiraga was continuing to discover himself, often using a single color (black or white) on unprimed canvas, as in *Tokkō* (*Self-Reliance*),

1989. In the 1990s, bold colors like black and blue appear atop a bright red ground (see *Ususama*, 1999).

In his final years, works like *Imayō Ranbu* (*Modern Dance*, 2000) have a joyous vigor. The pastel colors are applied playfully in a circus-like riot of color, as if prior demons have been exorcised.

In his late-period work up until 2007, when he was 83, Shiraga’s motions were more contained – the movements of an old man exploring fragility, aging, and the disintegration of the body. The yellow and white palette of *Chimōsei Hakuajitsuo* (*Daylight Rat incarnated from Earthly Wasted Star*) of 2001 evinces continued vitality, even though his signature is tenuous, shaky with tremors.

Now that the American artworld is making up for past negligence, undoubtedly more museum and gallery exhibitions on Gutai and Shiraga will occur. The movement, born amid ruins, has continuing relevance in today’s war-torn world, especially in light of what Gutai aimed to achieve.“

By painting with his feet Shiraga explored freedom of the mind,” Tomii says. “Because the Gutai artists came out of a totalitarian regime of wartime Japan, freedom was a key concept. If each individual thinks on his own, they hoped to stop repeating the same mistakes.”

In the contemporary moment’s globalized artworld, American curators, collectors, and art historians are taking a transnational approach, acknowledging the merit of artists whose radical innovations were once overlooked. Hence, an “aha moment” has arrived for Shiraga. His work is acknowledged as expanding the impact of abstract painting. Its visually compelling merger of craft, form, thought, and content deepens our insight into history and humanity.

HOW TO START AN ART SCHOOL

by Andrew Berardini



CalArts, imagined. The school, established in 1961, was Walt Disney's vision for "different artistic disciplines sharing space under one roof."

Why would you even want to?

We want to be makers, not bureaucrats or lecturers. But after a dozen years of making, maybe you care about the continuity of knowledge and experience; you want to give of yourself, and maybe make space for others to find their voices, as you did. Artists founded art schools for these same reasons.

There are plenty of examples out there, from fly-by-night, for-profit scoundrels, to august, ivy-draped centuries-old institutions. Why not just join one of them rather than go through the trouble of starting something new?

Unfortunately, the current model for art school sucks.

Let us count the ways, easily summed in dollars.

In Southern California, the cost of an MFA ranges from \$31,000 at [UCLA](#), a public university, to just under \$79,000 at Art Center, a private school. This does not include accommodation, food, materials, books, etc. It only includes tuition.

I owe around \$50,000 for my MFA degree in writing from [CalArts](#). This is an albatross around my neck. I tell everyone who asks not to do it, not to go into debt, but I didn't really have an alternative to take, myself, and too few to give others now. It's time we had more.

For many decades, our entire community in Southern California was formed and sustained through art schools. The costs of education in the last forty years went from free at public schools to extortionary across the board. CalArts, a vanguard model for many years, now has

its faculty unionizing to fight against the creeping corporatization of the school, though one does not expect this to lower the tuition and fees of over \$90,000 for a two-year MFA. [The University of Southern California](#), which had one of the best art programs in the country, appointed a dean to dismantle it and move the institution towards a feeder school for "creative industries" under a rubric set by Dr. Dre and Jimmy Iovine. USC tenured professor [Frances Stark](#), with an upcoming retrospective at the [Hammer Museum](#), quit in protest from the changes. The destruction of the USC graduate art program is devastating, even more tragic as for some years it offered full-tuition for most of its students. The era of art schools in Los Angeles is fading. I talk about where I live specifically but this is happening all over.

Maybe the whole university-industrial complex in the US is busted. When I read that [Elizabeth Holmes](#), the 30-year-old female billionaire who revolutionized blood-testing, decided to drop out of Stanford and take her school money to successfully develop her idea, it gave me pause. Or that billionaire entrepreneur and libertarian objectivist [Peter Thiel](#) is encouraging brilliant students to drop out and take his grants instead; I think deeply about the system we've wrought.

Our current system, a medieval guild-cum-unitary corporation accompanied by debt culture, needs to end for artists. My government in California built one of the best university systems in the world only to have its funding chipped away, along with the promise of free universal higher-education. Barring a dramatic shift in government policy, it's time to change this ourselves.

For the past six years, I've been teaching at the [Mountain School of Arts](#), an artist-run school based in Los Angeles. All the faculty, staff, and lecturers, including myself, work for free, and none

of the students pay to attend. Sometimes we are even able to find *gratis* accommodations for the students. Everyone participating - speakers, teachers, and students - does so as an act of openness and generosity. Perhaps I am lucky enough to afford this generosity, though not everyone can. And while this experience has allowed me to give back, its attendant sense of precarity is getting to me. I long for a third option that is stable and sustainable.

We need to pass on knowledge and give space to create, without hobbling graduates with massive debt.

So let's stop that and do something else.

Though there have been many attempts by artists to deal with the current debacle in education -- most of them admirable, from [New York Arts Practicum](#) and [The Public School](#) in the US to [SOMA](#) in Mexico or [Islington Mill Art Academy](#) in Britain -- the most serious and sustainable alternative model in the US is the [Whitney Independent Study Program](#) (ISP). Founded by Ron Clark in 1965, the Whitney ISP offers inexpensive education from some of our brightest artists, scholars, critics, and curators. Its full price is \$1,800 a year, an amount even I could have pulled together working a part-time job (though even this can also be subsidized based on need). They also do something that we at Mountain School can't do, help organize for student visas. Sustained by modest tuition and the usual fundraising, the Whitney ISP falls in between the purely volunteer-run school and the excruciating debt machines.

There is one functional long-lasting alternative now, but there should be many, each defined by the spirit of the artists that teach there, and the needs of its community. Though I'm suspicious of how museums fit into power in the US (through their sticky relationships to the wealthy, mainly), museums are educational institutions and would only be fulfilling their missions to harbor other ISPs.

One can love or hate the specific philosophical program at the Whitney ISP with its emphasis on conceptual rigor, but it offers a sustainable alternative to the current hot mess of bankrupting and bankrupted graduate education. There is one and there should be many, each different but committed and in the spirit of generosity that should inform all education.

I propose that we as a community accept the ISP model as equal to an MFA degree and move as quickly as possible from using a system that no longer serves us.

There are a million ways to do this. The simplest is to find a space and start giving classes. The more complex way that the Whitney ISP pioneered was to find a sponsoring institution, a group of serious artists, and start organizing. The solution needs to be tailored to and by both teachers and students.

We need to stop giving time, money, and credibility to institutions that no longer serve us. We can do this.

And while abandoning the MFA entirely looks attractive, at times, I've seen how much a concerted two years of making and thinking can have on a young artist's work. I'm not yet ready to entirely give up on the experiment. But I'm close.

I hope we can find a new debtless way to educate artists in the US, in my city most of all, and I'll do all a disorganized poet can do to create a sustainable alternative to the current system. It's up to us that the next generation not be indentured servants to bankers, revenue to

education-corporations, and products to feed to the culture industry.

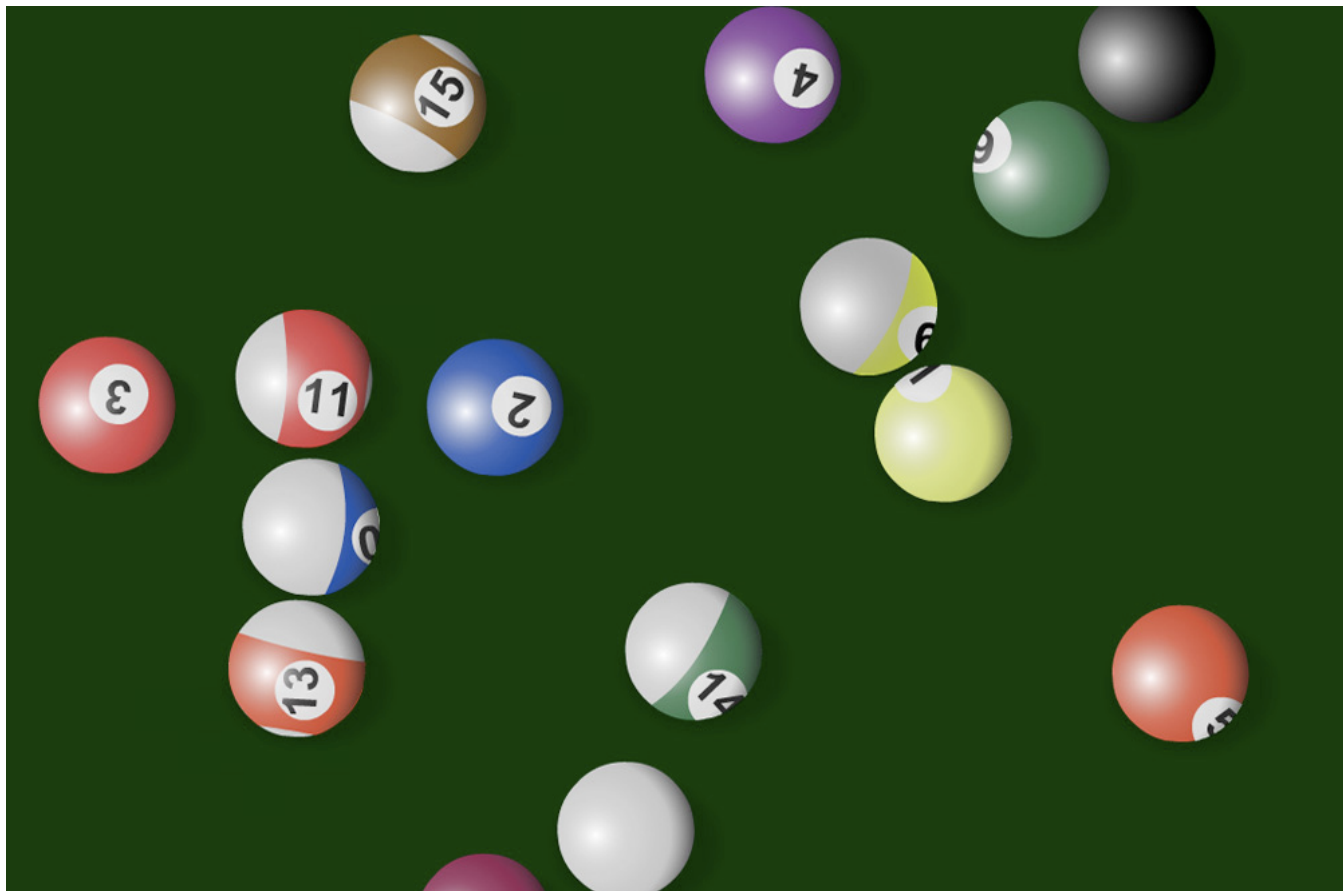
How to start an art school?

We make space to dream, create, and later move on to give the same opportunity, freely, to others. Starting an art school begins here.

So let's get to it.

KILL THE EXPERT: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN DROITCOUR

by Joseph Henry



Guthrie Lonergan, "gjkhfdgjkhdjkgh.com," 2008.

The word “post-internet” is a useful, if maybe not quite necessary, evil. First attributed to the writing of artist Marisa Olson, the term has been alternatively employed with promotional gusto, dismissive scorn, analytic explication, and mystified questioning in contemporary art. Describing a new and already indispensable [anthology](#) edited by Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, Art F City’s Paddy Johnson conceded her exhaustion with the term in one headline: “[Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art](#).” Arguably, what post-internet descriptively means has become less important than what it socially indicates: a network of artists, critics, curators, and other online interlocutors interested in the aesthetic and sociopolitical ramifications of the internet in a culture thoroughly saturated by it. (Though, if I were to hazard a definition, I’d stay humble and say the term designates a cultural attitude wherein the internet is its own object of investigation rather than merely a medium.)

One of the major voices, if not proponents, of “post-internet” art has been Brian Droitcour, a critic and curator living in New York. In an unambiguously titled [blog post](#) called “Why I Hate Post-Internet Art,” Droitcour fired shots against the movement-cum-sensibility for its infatuation with commercial imagery and flat-footed, apathetic acceptance of technology’s ever dynamic effects. Droitcour’s divisive essay became an article for *Art in America*, the publication also responsible for his equally important “[Young Incorporated Artists](#),” which identified certain artists’ problematic cloning of corporate aesthetics. Yet Droitcour probably gained the most attention for his numerous reviews of galleries and museums on [Yelp](#), a platform usually antipodal to incisive commentary. His recollections of writing on Yelp became “[Vernacular Criticism](#),” an article for *The New Inquiry* that

necessitated a nuanced, politically even-handed approach toward the numerous perspectives and voices attending to contemporary art outside the artworld proper. With his writing not just on “post-internet art,” but “post-internet” criticism, Droitcour expanded the term’s often navel-gazing chatter into broader theories of community and culture.

Momus interviewed Droitcour on the core principles of his writing on the eve of a new announcement, that he’d be contributing an essay to the catalogue for the New Museum’s much-anticipated “[Surround Audience](#)” triennial and editing a book of poetry for the exhibition. I sought to expand on the ideas presented in his writing, touching on questions of image aggregation, critical expertise, perceptual attention, and even Jerry Saltz.

A primary pivot in your work seems to be how writers and artists engage corporate culture as it operates online. You’re generally supportive of criticism on Yelp, even though it’s commodified through a top-down system from which Yelp profits. Yet you’re critical of “post-internet” artists, which is a designation we’ll use for now, and how they mimic corporate branding.

I see it as a difference between wanting to emulate these structures and acting within them out of necessity. I don’t think it’s possible to live socially without somehow representing yourself to Yelp or Facebook. I definitely think with something like Yelp, like any of these systems, you’re forced to work within their defaults, but what’s really interesting about Yelp is the dissonance between the way people are on Yelp and the way Yelp presents their writing. Yelp offers five affects that you can choose from when you’re doing the review, between “eek!” or “wow!”

But when the full text of the review is written it expands beyond those interjections and the number of stars – the tools of data management – into a narration of a contingent, unique experience. And for me this is the reverse of personal branding, where life gets shaved off to streamline a certain image of it.

There seems to be a structural equivalency between The Jogging, for example, and Yelp: they're both user aggregations with open submission policies, even if the former is ostensibly self-aware. Is the aggregation model the primary artistic production mode for post-internet art?

The Jogging isn't active now – either it's over or on its second hiatus – but after its last incarnation appeared in the summer of 2012, there was a long period where all the images on it looked similar: a stock photo with something uncanny about it, a hard-edged mass-produced object put in contact with something edible or leaky. Eventually it loosened up and The Jogging began to feature a lot of reflexive posts that served as meta-commentary on The Jogging itself, or posts that mimicked right-wing conspiracy theorists or political cartoons. So in that sense users had more freedom. It wasn't just all an aggregation of images in one style. But in both cases what The Jogging did as a collective mirrored Tumblr's own activity as an aggregator, whether that meant amplifying a particular cool style or encouraging users to do whatever they want as long as it fits the limits of the system, and thinking of that seeming “anarchy” as a cool style in its own right. The Jogging aligned itself with the platform, rather than the user.

In this curatorial model, the actual creation of objects is secondary to their collecting. The point of aggregation is the mass of objects, not a focus on one.

Yeah, I'd say this is the kind of activity that Tumblr fosters.

I get the sense that a hybrid “prosumer artist” is emerging now. I understand the prosumer in the contemporary context as an online user whose consumption of a given platform or format is the production of content for that platform or format. For example, Tumblr relies to a large extent on user-generated material, like the way people modify GIFs and circulate them. Some artists have the same means of production, even they identify as “professionals.” To me, this leads to questions about the relationship between post-internet artists and an establishment artworld that began operation before the internet.

I think we're coming up against an asymmetry of terms. What you're calling a “prosumer artist” is what I call a net artist. And you're using “post-internet” in the broad sense that it's often used in, where any artist working with the internet falls under its rubric. I've tried to pare down a definition of post-internet based on the aesthetic and intellectual interests that commonly come together under the term in group shows and get propagated via Tumblr – references to stock photography, a consumer object, perhaps a liquid of some kind and a fern, arranged in a brightly lit, vibrant image.

I find it useful to understand net art and post-internet art as separate ways of making work, though of course there's crossover and artists who use both. Net art – what you call prosumer art – is what is seen online, on a single-serving web site or an artist's hand-coded blog or maybe integrated in a social media feed. Post-internet art can be seen in a gallery or online, but in the latter case the gallery is visible in the installation shot.

So post-internet art has to have an exhibition supplement?

Yeah, I think of it as an internet-oriented way of making art for a gallery.

One of the points that I really like in your article “[The Perils of Post-Internet Art](#)” is that you say post-internet art involves objects that are meant to look good on the internet. There's a reciprocation where something is made offline to look good online.

Some people don't seem to understand the difference between artists who care about the way their work is photographed and artists who make work for the installation shot. That's a huge difference. When artists work with a post-internet mindset, sculpture gets passed over on the way to documentation. In my criticism of post-internet art I'm kind of like the guy who writes a Yelp review about how the burgers at Burger King don't look as good as they do in the commercials.

The stock image and the stock object become the formal and conceptual building blocks for post-internet art. But the threat of any art mimicking a commercial structure, like stock image repositories, is infinite regress. The advertisement and the artwork become indistinguishable.

Certainly art borrows from other visual languages – the languages of stock photography, advertising, Hollywood – but in good art those borrowed elements do things they'd never do in their native environment. With bad art that transformation doesn't happen. It's like when Pop Art becomes a vernacular consumer practice – Mickey Mouse's face in a Warhol grid. It collapses into commercial marketing and consumer culture.

But the same problematic doubling happens with criticism when it serves as promotional material. The main economy of criticism now is basically advertising.

It's become the norm for art writing to reproduce artists' accounts of their own work. Artists are shocked when that doesn't happen. The nature of language is such that no one can fully realize how others understand what they're saying and art is like that, too. I think the critic should be a careful listener or viewer but that care can't be totalizing and neither can a critic's authority. I've found Yelp to be a useful model for thinking about the how the critic's writing works in a field of differing perspectives. Look at any page on Yelp with more than five reviews and you'll find a five-star review and a one-star review. If you're trying to decide whether or not to patronize that establishment, you're not going to take Yelp's three-star average as authoritative – you'll look at the positive and negative reviews and decide which voice sounds more like yours, which one speaks to your tastes. When a critic does nothing other than find out what artists say about their own work and report it back to the reader, I think that discredits the viewer's experience, and the possibility for spontaneity and communication in the encounter with the work.

Yelp seems like a useful condensation of criticism's dynamics.

I read Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to try to get a handle on what happens on Yelp and how it relates to criticism in the traditional public sphere of newspapers and magazines, and I was really struck by the first sentence, where Kant says that aesthetic judgment originates in the subject's feeling of pleasure and pain. Yet this embodied, subjective experience – this private judgment of taste – has to be moderated by a judgment of reason in order to be fit for public consumption. Kant was a philosopher of the bourgeois revolution, and he was interested in consensus, how universal values can be established in a liberal

democracy. Aesthetics turned out to be the best field for modeling the idea of freedom that interested him. I'm interested in Yelp – and social media more broadly – as a ground for thinking about what happens when you put private judgments of taste in the public eye and let reason and consensus play a supporting role. What social or political forms can emerge from that reordering? But that's very much an unfinished project.

That's something I like about your writing: you're generous toward people who do use social media. It's very easy, and maybe at times necessary, to demonize these platforms and consumption patterns. In your article on MOOCs and MoMA's online classes [for Artforum.com](#), for example, there's a very measured account of how these things could make communities.

I like to think of social media as a discursive space that's distinct from the public sphere. While the organs of the public sphere have used it and tried to adapt to it, social media has a plurality of voices and perspectives that reveal the public sphere as a technology for propagating a singular perspective, one that values things like rationality and objectivity as foundations for the power of the bourgeois white man. Social media has opened up a lot of pushback to that. People talk about the death of newspapers and the death of experts, and I think that's great. Of course I don't ignore the reality that social media companies are enriching a small group of people in Silicon Valley, but I'm more interested in how social media is breaking down those other entrenched values. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, but often one master makes the tools for dismantling the house of another.

The cliché in contemporary art is that we're now facing a crisis of criticism, but it's actually a crisis of the critic. The idea of the expert is under fire, which can only be seen as an anxious problem if your position is defined through expertise.

I think social media has increased the visibility and potential for pluralism, but ideas about pluralism in art criticism go back several decades to the feminist criticism of people like Lucy Lippard and the Guerilla Girls. They identified the accounts of art and art history found in most institutions as representative of a singular perspective, and were interested in art criticism as a field where its authority could be challenged.

I'm trying to think about the question of attention as you touched on it in your [review](#) of Performa 13 for *The New Inquiry*. I know this rings a tad reactionary, but I can't help but argue that contemporary art, especially net art, centers on a crisis of attention: it's often sketchy, instant, distracting, consumable, quick.

That's one way to see it. But as I wrote in the Performa review, it's important to remember that there's more than one kind of attention. A museum of painting and sculpture is oriented toward what psychologists call "direct executive attention," a sustained, intense focus on a singular object. Certainly a lot of performance art relies on that kind of attention as well, but I was interested in writing about how some works were oriented instead toward diffuse or ambient forms of attention. That's also the kind of attention that matters if you're looking at the work of, say, someone who writes creatively on Twitter. You're not going to spend three hours in quiet study and contemplation of a single tweet. Instead, you'll read a couple of tweets every day for the rest of your life, or however long Twitter lasts. I'm less interested in measuring all art against a particular standard of attention than thinking about how art can lead to an appreciation of attention's varied forms. I'm not saying we should burn all the paintings. I just think we

should be open to the many ways that art can be experienced.

Jennifer Roberts, an art historian at Harvard, gave a [lecture](#) on pedagogy where she mentions that she asks all her students to look at a painting they're studying for three hours. It's hard not to read it as a sentimental "slow food" kind of thing, but this approach seems to have its merits.

She's right that the longer you look at a painting the more you can learn about it. And in an academic setting that kind of study is valuable – probably more so than spending three hours reading art history books about the painting's historical context. But I don't think it's realistic or productive to expect a museum visitor to spend an hour or even fifteen minutes focused on a single work – that's not how leisure time is spent. What interests me about net art – and even post-internet art – is its orientation toward diffuse attention. It's art that you come to know and appreciate by looking at it in fits and starts over long periods of time.

I thought about this in relation to Jerry Saltz's [protest](#) about the plans for the new MoMA expansion designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. I haven't looked at the designs so I won't dispute Saltz's negative evaluation of them, but I don't accept the terms of his protest, which insist that any addition to the museum's galleries should be suited to the contemplation of painting and sculpture. I'm not convinced that this is what museums need to prioritize in 2015.

It's the "temple" model of the museum. Saltz is an interesting variation on the Yelp critic: he maintains a very active social media presence and maintains a populist approach to his criticism.

There was a time when I avoided reading Saltz but the more I thought about Yelp, the more I realized that I should pay attention to his writing. He's a critic with a serious commitment to his own taste and expressing it in a very communicable way. And even if I don't always agree with his taste, or like his voice, I think his way of being a critic is an important one.

A THEORY OF EVERYTHING: ON THE STATE OF THEORY AND CRITICISM (PART ONE)

by Saelan Twerdy



Steve Lyons, “Towards an Anthropology of Influence” (2014) from “D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant / Actors, Networks, Theories,” Dazibao, Montreal.

Given that I’ve chosen to contribute to a platform that boasts “a return to art criticism,” it would be worth considering what that might mean. To *return* to criticism implies that it’s been in exile or decline, that it’s been neglected or marginalized, or that what is called criticism today is actually something else entirely. None of these notions will be unfamiliar to anyone involved in writing about contemporary art. The idea that criticism is in crisis has been around so long (and reasserts itself so often) that it has begun to seem like a permanent feature of the landscape.

The complaints are diverse, though the complainants can usually be divided into two camps: journalistic critics, who bemoan the dominance of theory and call for more feeling, more engagement with a general audience, and especially more judgments of value (“is this art good or bad?”); on the opposing side, more academically-inclined critics complain about the market’s stranglehold over art and art publishing, about the ballooning proportion of *Artforum’s* page count taken up by ads, and about the lack of critical rigor and political position-taking in art writing. Both camps are united, however, in their frustration with the diminished influence of criticism in general.

Whereas once, in the prehistoric age of Clement Greenberg and his ilk (Harold Rosenberg, Leo Steinberg, etc.), critics could compete with art dealers in establishing the merit of artworks and the terms of debate with which artists grappled, much of that authority has since been

seized by curators and by artists themselves (for whom a facility with writing about and promoting their work is now an imperative), though the principal power of conferring value seems to have been decisively usurped by the dealer-collector axis. Art fairs are the new biennials.

Meanwhile, any critic actually trying to make a living from writing faces the same pressures that journalists have faced everywhere as Old Media empires crumble: shrinking word counts, shrinking (or non-existent) paycheques, grueling freelancing regimes (since full-time, stable art writing gigs have virtually disappeared), and the tyranny of pageviews, listicles, gossip, and clickbait. This is in large part because of the internet, which demands immediacy, encourages everyone to be a critic, and allows images to circulate much quicker and more widely than they ever could in print magazines. The self-validating mechanics of virality have, in many cases, made the contextualization of images a moot point. All of which helps explain why there are so few people writing about art who identify exclusively as critics. Almost everyone who contributes to art magazines or writes catalogue essays also does (or has done, or will do) something else, whether they are an artist, an art historian (or graduate student), a curator, an educator, a worker in a gallery or museum, or whether they are, more nebulously, a *theorist* – arguably the position of highest cultural capital (though not of actual power) within the contemporary art ecosystem.

Indeed, it’s tempting to assert that criticism’s decline has been accom-

panied by theory's ascent – that the most influential writing on art today (influential, that is, in terms of being broadly read by people interested in art and having an impact on curatorial programmes and an effect on artistic production) is neither art criticism nor art history, but *art theory*. One of the most prominent platforms for art theory in recent years has been [e-flux journal](#) (which is, notably, readable online and ad-free thanks to the funds it collects via its announcement service), with Boris Groys and Hito Steyerl among its most representative and regular authors. In neither of the latter theorists' e-flux articles, however, does one often encounter detailed or opinionated accounts of recent art production. Rather, their output offers more wide-angled cultural criticism, often focused on the relationships between technology and the history of avant-garde art, delivered in stylish, edgy prose that occasionally borders on satire or sci-fi hyperbole (both writers also have an appreciable sense of humor). This art theory, while not exactly art history or art criticism, is, furthermore, a bit different from what is typically connoted by the term "theory" in general. But what is theory, exactly?

This is a more complicated question than it may initially appear to be, in part because "theory" is a catch-all euphemism that's been stretched beyond legibility by loose usage: "theory," "French theory," "postmodern theory," and "post-structuralism" are often used interchangeably, as if they denoted a single, unitary entity (they don't). A variety of heterodox thinkers did emerge in France in the late 1960s, particularly following the tumult of the May '68 student uprisings. Much of this work attempted to either continue the project of radical politics within academia or to move past the orthodox thought (party-line Communism and establishment philosophy, for example) that were deemed inadequate to the post-'68 situation. However, it was really the belated translation and reception of these texts in English-language humanities departments that made French theory into a canon. The artworld played no small part in this development: Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" had its first publication in the short-lived, American avant-garde art magazine *Aspen* in 1967, only appearing in a French journal the following year. The timeliness of this import was, however, an exception. It took until the second half of the 1970s for theory to really penetrate Anglophone universities and art schools.

The rise of theory in the art world is often linked to the emergence of Conceptual Art. Conceptual artists were the first generation of artists to be university-educated, and the first to actively assume the role of contextualizing and historicizing their own work in writing. That said, the philosophical interests of most conceptualists tended towards the structuralism or phenomenology that were fashionable in the late 60s – structuralism in particular facilitated the turn away from modernist notions of individual art objects possessed of inherent quality (which was to be judged by intuition and conviction), towards a focus on art as a system of (linguistic) relations in which the actual art objects were contingent and sometimes dispensable. It was when first-generation Conceptual artists became teachers at the experimental art schools of the 1970s, though, that post-structuralism and the writing of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and others began to assume a dominant role in art pedagogy.

By the time that *Artforum* dissidents Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson founded *October* in 1976, theory was a full-fledged concern: *October*'s first issue promised regular translations of critical and theoretical texts from foreign languages. Initially, this meant mainly the Russian avant-garde, but by the 1980s, it entailed a strong investment in French theory, especially around issues of authorship. The year 1976 also marked Semiotext(e)'s "Schizo-Culture" conference, which convened Foucault and Gilles Deleuze alongside Kathy Acker, John Cage, and William S. Burroughs in order to draw out connections between

underground culture and cutting-edge currents in high theory. This has remained Semiotext(e)'s mission, and their publication of small, smartly-designed books (exemplified by the Foreign Agents series they began in 1980) has been instrumental in making theory hip. Semiotext(e)'s editor, Sylvère Lotringer, has also had a long, collegial relationship with *Artforum*, in which he has appeared numerous times as author or interview subject, often commenting on authors that he publishes. *Artforum* itself enthusiastically embraced theory in the '80s. In 1983, they even added Jean Baudrillard to their masthead as a contributing editor, apparently without him actually knowing it.

This last anecdote comes via an art piece by Steve Lyons entitled *Towards an Anthropology of Influence* (2014), included in an exhibition currently on view at Montreal's [Dazibao](#) gallery: *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant/Actors, Networks, Theories*, curated by Vincent Bonin. This show is actually the second of two installments – the [first](#) was held at Concordia University's Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery from November, 2013 until January, 2014 – both of which take the reception of French theory in the English-speaking artworld as their theme. It's a very ambitious project, though not a surprising one if you're familiar with Bonin's résumé. He was a co-curator of *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* at the Brooklyn Museum (2012) and *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980* (2012), as well as the curator of another two-part exhibition on conceptualism held at the Ellen Gallery in 2007 and 2008 and entitled *Documentary Protocols*.

Naturally, a history of theory and its reception is an unwieldy subject for an art exhibition. In conversation, Bonin readily admitted as much. "I quickly realized," he told me, "that French Theory was mainly a structural device to put together the exhibition about many other issues - one of them being a certain legacy of discursive practices and one other had to do with the relationship between the critic or theoretician and the artist." If viewers are looking for a discernable narrative or historical account in Bonin's two shows, they'll likely be frustrated. While the two exhibitions will eventually be followed by a book in which Bonin can be expected to provide an informed and insightful historical perspective, he insists that curating ethically required him to give artists in the show "a lot of freedom" rather than instrumentalizing their work to advance his own argument.

Nevertheless, Bonin's two exhibitions are equal to their subject to the extent that they'll likely confuse the uninitiated while rewarding those who either come equipped with certain background knowledge or are willing to invest the effort of digging into a lot of supplementary didactic material. For example, in the first instalment, different rooms represented various historic moments in the reception of theory and the development of critical art practices, often within a Canadian context. One room offered a section of Mary Kelly's *Post-partum Document* (1973-79) that was purchased by the AGO in the '80s and was displayed, in this show, alongside a sound recording of Kelly speaking at Concordia in 1988 and a poster from an exhibition of hers at Montreal's La Centrale. Other sections alluded to group exhibitions which, in Bonin's words, "became contexts for a collective debate around certain theoretical ideas of the time," such as Group Material's *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)* of 1987, and *Magnificent Obsessions*, shown at Montreal's Optica in 1985 and curated by artists who studied with Victor Burgin in England.

This sketching of theory's reception and rise through affinities within intellectual communities (like teacher-student relations or Group Material's activist milieu) becomes even more pronounced in the second instalment at Dazibao. Walking through the door, the viewer is immediately confronted with Bernadette Corporation's video *Hell*

Frozen Over (2000), which features Sylvère Lotringer standing on a frozen lake, giving a lecture on “nothingness” in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, intercut with footage of models posing and being directed in a kind of absurdist fashion shoot. Staffed and shot by an incestuous who’s-who of the New York City experimental art scene in the early 2000s, Bernadette Corporation’s video (and corporate persona in general) represents the convergence of high theory with fashion and branding, made possible by theory’s institutionalization and the ubiquity (and consequent vagueness) of “criticality” at that point in art discourse. Nearly fifteen years later, it still feels pretty fresh.

Installed just behind *Hell Frozen Over* at Dazibao is the Steve Lyons piece mentioned above, which lays out, in a schematic fashion, the social network that Bernadette Corporation was moving in. In fact, Lyons’s contribution addresses the theme of the exhibition more directly than any other – unsurprisingly, Lyons is a doctoral student in art history in addition to being a practising artist, and this work draws directly on his dissertation topic. One vitrine holds some ephemera related to the anecdote about Baudrillard on *Artforum*’s masthead, along with print-outs of emails exchanged between John Kelsey (a member of B.C. as well as a gallerist and critic who regularly contributes to *Artforum*) and Lotringer. The wall behind is covered in mirrored wallpaper on which Lyons has printed black-and-white scans of every *Artforum* page spread in the last fifteen years that mentions Semiotext(e) or one of its associated authors. Suffice to say that it fills the wall easily. The mirror-wallpaper mimics the display strategy adopted by Semiotext(e)’s editors when they were invited to show (as an “artist”) at this year’s Whitney Biennial, but it also aptly encapsulates the allure of theory itself: it’s something alien but seductive, something hard and slightly futuristic, something you want to be seen reading, something you want to see yourself in. *Towards an Anthropology of Influence* also makes it possible to trace a network of mutual promotion. As Lyons wrote to me in an email, “Art and theory are mutually productive, since theory performs a legitimizing service for art when it enters art writing in magazines like *Artforum* and *Texte zur Kunst*, and the art world has long provided theorists with a major promotional apparatus.”

[In Part Two of “A Theory of Everything: On the State of Theory and Criticism”, Saelan Twerdy considers the manifestation of theory in contemporary art since 2000 and the “critical” element in critical theory.](#)

WOMEN AND INFLUENCE AND THE OTHER THINGS HE GOT WRONG: A REBUTTAL TO BRAD PHILLIPS

by Sky Goodden



Rebecca Belmore, "sister," 2010.

At a time when so many critics are perfunctorily setting about their annual “best-of” surveys, Brad Phillips published a [3,000-word article](#) that carried the tone of a clarion call. A frequent contributor to Artslant, and an occasional scribe for Modern Painters, Phillips is known, in certain circles, for his flat-footed, world-weary, and searing (though rarely searching) approach to broad trends and influences in contemporary art. His criticism tends to shout-down rather than call-up, and, at its weakest, can read as impatient, aggressive, and projected or too biased. But he makes himself clear, and – considering he chiefly practices as an artist – doesn’t reveal any fear of market retribution. He writes on subjects ranging from Matisse to Peter Doig, and has, especially in this most recent article, published opinions that are held by many. Indeed, Phillips’s subjects are the kind that go shared in back rooms, and, like any number of character-measuring currencies, at post-*vernissage* dinner parties. So his opinions aren’t his alone, really, but he’s putting them in print. And that’s brave and commendable. Especially in a place like this.

Canada is, in fact, his most recent target. Phillips opines on a long-felt and oft-discussed sense of competition between Vancouver and Toronto, and Toronto and New York. He feels “there’s something terrifically sad about a rivalry where only one side is even aware that a rivalry is taking place,” and I agree, and so do others. He queries the differences between his chief Canadian art centers, measuring them by their population in contrast to their artistic output and artworld significance. He derives from their perceived discrepancies

(Vancouver carries a fraction of its competitor’s population, but, as he sees it, punches well above its weight; Toronto remains ungenerous, mimetic, and “ill”) that the West Coast succeeds due to its isolation, and Toronto fails for its proximity to greatness (New York). These are salient observations. Where Phillips falters, however, is in mistaking international influence and market savvy for isolation, and thinking that one can simply squirrel away for “another essay” the inclusion of a subject so all-important and hyper-relevant as women.

Before I begin, let me quote Phillips’s most offending lines regarding the latter subject. “[That] the following lists do not include any female artists is both problematic, and also too complex to address in one essay. However, I write this piece fully cognizant of the glaring exclusion of women amongst the artists I’m about to list.” Phillips later writes, “there’s no avoiding that the art scene in Vancouver is a boy’s club. Certainly this is unfortunate, but it’s a topic for another essay.”

I’ll first point out the obvious: a social inequity is not an “unfortunate” *anything*, and certainly not one that’s best broached on its own, like a problem child held after class. It’s addressed by *redress*, and through corrective enforcement, again and again. It’s done right when not *gestured* at but tended to – and what were the “census stats” he’d read, exactly, that suggests women are apart?

Had Phillips cared to concern himself with – rather than caveat – the missing half of his subject, he might have arrived at a very different

argument. It's artists like Shary Boyle, Mary Pratt, Joyce Weiland, Janet Cardiff, Liz Magor, Françoise Sullivan, Kelly Mark, Wanda Koop, Doris McCarthy, Betty Goodwin, and so many more, who are not only buoying up but *producing* the profile of contemporary Canadian art. And we needn't look further than the current exhibitions on display to prove this: a [Suzy Lake retrospective](#) at the AGO currently dwarfs Alex Colville's frame of gimmickry; a heart-stopping call-to-arms by [Wendy Coburn is presented by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#); an overdue commercial presentation of [Rebecca Belmore is on show at Jessica Bradley](#); a survey of [Vera Frenkel at MOCCA](#); a nuanced portrait featuring [Carolee Schneemann at G Gallery](#); a [touring exhibition of Mary Pratt](#); a [2014 Sobey Art Award for Nadia Myre](#), and an [RBC Painting Prize for Tiziana La Melia](#). Then let's talk about the market: galleries helmed by founding dealers like [Jessica Bradley](#), [Georgia Scherman](#), [Catriona Jeffries](#), [Olga Korper](#), and [Ydessa Hendeles](#); collectors and consultants like [Jeanne Parkin](#), [Carol Weinbaum](#), and [Robin Anthony](#); and our two leading art fairs directed by the likes of [Susannah Rosenstock](#) and [Julie Lacroix](#), respectively – these are not the exception, they are the rule. You're just not reading the headlines, Phillips, and you're certainly not entering the galleries, if you think women aren't relevant to your assessment. This isn't a subject for another time, and it's one that's waited long enough. Luckily, we haven't been waiting for your acknowledgement at all.

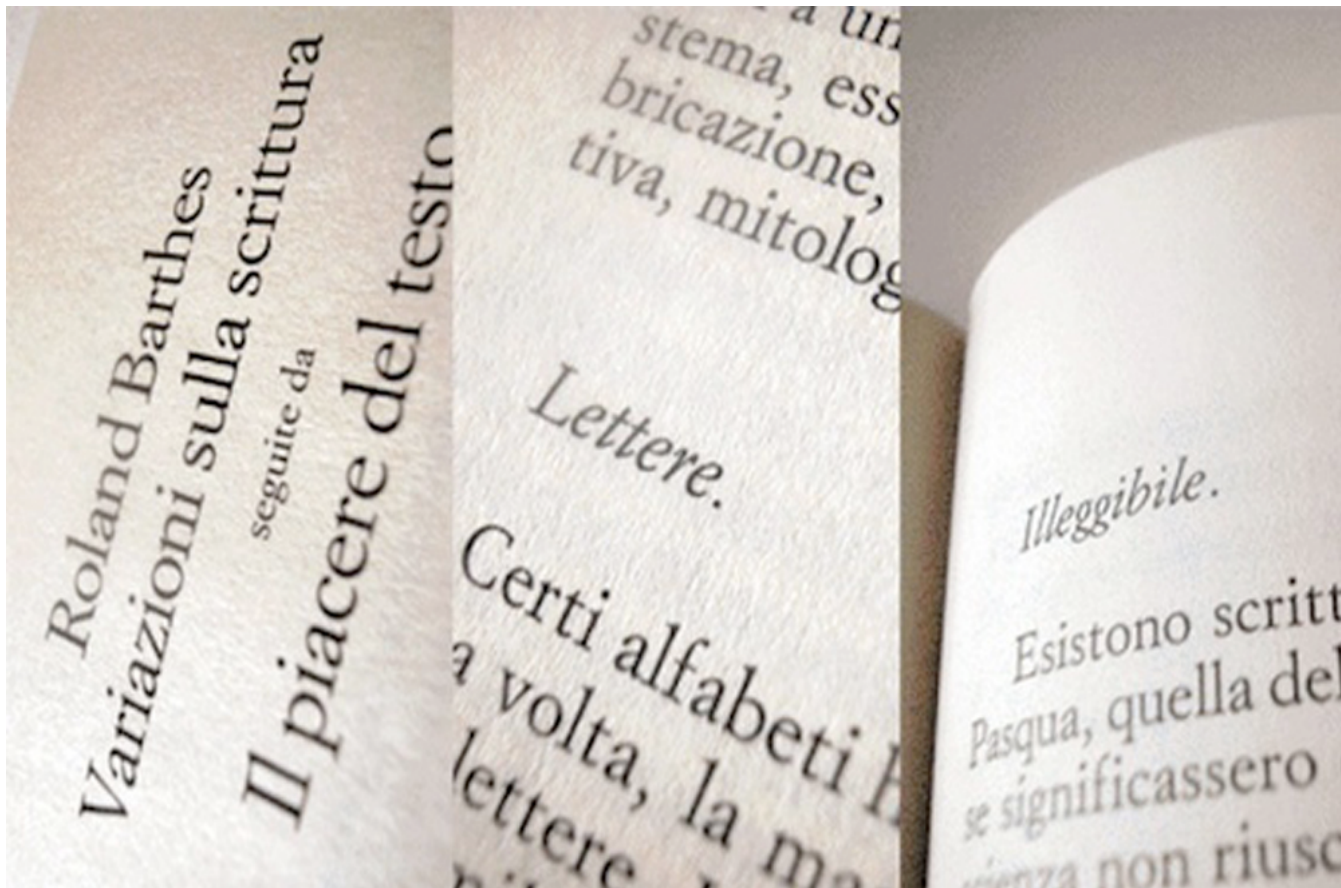
Regarding the issue of place, this article ("[Why There Aren't More Important Canadian Artists: An Irrelevant Rivalry](#)") focuses on a founding generation of Vancouver School artists who, by Phillips's assessment, "never left Vancouver, but smartly bypassed showing in Canada." He includes in this list Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham, Ian Wallace, Steven Shearer, and Stan Douglas. It's not worth quibbling that he's wrong – that these artists do in fact show in Canada (we needn't look further than the recent [three-part survey of Rodney Graham](#), or Stan Douglas's [significant Canadian presentations](#), in recent years, to prove our point) – because it's more important to query why the author illustrates his argument with such dated subjects. Wherefore [Geoffrey Farmer](#), [Isabelle Pauwels](#), and [Scott McFarland](#)? Wouldn't these examples have provided the ballast for such an adamantly contemporary argument?

What really misses the mark, however, is Phillips's assessment that Vancouver succeeds for its remoteness from influence. I'd counter that, having recently done a month-long tour of the West Coast, where I searched hard and dear for a critical community in its art scene, and found my hands grasping so much water, Vancouver is, truly, an artist's city, and a city of academic archiving. Through any number of successful connections and gambits (from the Düsseldorf photography school's [influence](#) on the first generation of the Vancouver School, to Catriona Jeffries's sangfroid rejection of the very country in which she operates), Vancouver's international reach has certainly lily-padded over Canada and gone straight to the European and New York exhibition circuits, [and market](#). I tip my hat to its artworld for that achievement, and it's a feat that should be studied. But despite this, or maybe as a result, the city hasn't borne out any truly influential critics in recent years. And this critical vacuum is a signature of Vancouver's youth, or, at least, malformation. It's an artworld whose artists reflect on their own (Jeff Wall, among so many others, is a storied art historian and writer). While this, as Phillips suggests, can be read as a measure of its artists' generosity towards one another – and certainly their investment – it can also be regarded as a community's artists policing their own narrative. I don't care how many [click-baiting](#) art pundits tell me criticism is newly irrelevant: without a critical presence vetting so much insider art, a healthy and truly international art community cannot be considered legitimate.

Phillips skewers Toronto's art community for its lack of self-assurance, but I'd wager that Vancouver's lack of self-doubt is a problem that sows something more fallow. After all, good art arrives in the asking, not the telling. And so too, good criticism. Phillips should try raising his hand, as he takes a knee.

A REBUKE TO THE PERCEIVED “CRISIS IN CRITICISM”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE LIBERATED READER

by Earl Miller



In 2012, *Frieze* surveyed art critics writing for newspapers, magazines, and online publications, asking how they conceived of their connection with the public. None reported a direct relationship with readers, whether through letters-to-the-editor, social media, or the online comments section. Considering the technology and shifting online readership trends, it's remarkable this disconnect persists. It was, after all, nearly fifty years ago that Barthes's postmodern touchstone *Death of the Author* – a text with which many critics have first-hand familiarity – argued, “A text consists of multiple writings ... but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader.” The comment section and sharing options of social networking clearly offer the potential to realize Barthes's integrated writer-reader relationship and in so doing, provide a much-needed wider audience for art criticism.

Two intrinsic features of the social network(s) are crucial for involving readers. Online comments facilitate interaction with the writer, and sharing options permit readers to circulate this discussion organically, allowing it to grow on their collective terms. Both form what Deleuze and Guattari would deem rhizomic networks: networks reaching out in variant, organic directions. That said, such structures greatly risk traveling through the restrictive corporate territories comprising most social-networking sites. However, if both critics and readers are mindful of the context in which they are posting, social networking has, of course, a tremendous potential to liberate its parties.

According to Orit Gat, a critic specializing in contemporary art's relationship to the internet, comments “promote a writing that relies on a shared-versus-contingent experience: the critic is no longer an expert coming in to contextualize, but rather, a member of the institution's presumed audience.” An exception among critics who readily incorporate comments into his practice is a prominent one: Jerry Saltz. He boasts that “over a quarter-million words had been generated” on *New York Magazine's* Vulture website in online comments below his episode recaps of the canceled reality-show art contest, *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, which he once judged. His 5,000 Facebook “friends” (the Facebook limit) regularly comment on his posts, and share them. Saltz's recent commentary on the lurid cover of a vintage pulp novel, *Art School*, for instance, was shared 347 times. He's onto something.

However, as Gat caveats, the online reader-writer collaboration can show “a sloppy, irresponsible style and lack of editorial oversight.” Critics including the *New Criterion's* James Panero argue that social networking enfeebles art criticism's professionalism because “with its language of ‘Likes’ and ‘Fans,’ everyone is also a critic. Therein lies the particular crisis for critics in print.” Yet this perceived crisis may just be an admission of reality: many individuals other than critics are well-schooled enough in art theory and practice that they can equally contribute to critical debate. This false hierarchy is why media theorist Geert Lovink contends that we need to stop polarizing populism and elitism, claiming that what “we need to overcome is the high-low distinction.” He reminds us that “Walter Benjamin emphasized the role

of commentary in the making of classical texts. Today, online comments are an integral part of the network effect, and to ignore or dismiss this element is to understand only half the story.”

Yes, comments are now largely improvised and unrevised, but with time, commentators may opt for a slower, more erudite stream. After all, as Lovink reiterates, “Up to the time of Hegel, commenting on classic texts belonged to the philosophical repertoire.” Writers and readers on social networks should likewise counter. Certainly, the potential exists. (Most comments on Saltz’s page, for instance, are made by professional artists, and occasionally critics, too.)

The greatest budding threat to free commentary and sharing is context; indeed, the corporate-designed structure that hosts the most popular social networking sites interferes with reader-writer interactivity. Users’ profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks undoubtedly facilitate the projection of individual identities rather than promoting communitarianism. These sites have what Lovink aptly terms “a collective obsession” with “identity management.” Despite the community-building Saltz claims to be involved in (he compares his Facebook page to the Cedar Tavern), he positions himself at the “community’s” forefront with his Facebook profile, as the cult leader who collects words, “likes,” and shares from his followers. Still, he did not build this cult, at least not in whole. These networks reflect the individualistic narcissism of twenty-first-century global corporatism.

Another problem with the corporate dominance of social networks is their control over both the author’s and reader’s freedom for the sake of maintaining brand identity and preventing legal controversy. Social networks – Facebook included – have banned nudity; Instagram went so far as to ban a breastfeeding selfie. If users fail to conform to the standards of a site, they are removed from it. Facebook, perhaps ironically, sanctioned Salman Rushdie for a networking *faux-pas*: using his better-known middle name, Salman, rather than his first, Ahmed. He was booted from the site. Further ensuring accordance to corporate software architecture is the Facebook rule that users cannot add script or code to the site. Without being able to build on or determine the frame in which they work, critics present their writing in an environment that discourages open debate.

The art critic Brian Droitcour, who has attracted attention for writing art criticism in the corporate framework of Yelp, stated in a [recent Momus interview](#) that his reviewing “expands beyond [...] the number of stars – the tools of data management – into a narration of a contingent, unique experience.” I disagree. The requisite star-rating of exhibitions and readers ranking the review itself as “useful,” “funny,” or “cool,” blocks expansion. Besides, Droitcour has bought into the use of unpaid labor that buoys Yelp, Amazon, and many other sites’ profitability.

It’s paramount that art critics on popular social media and networking sites either address the specter of corporatization or avoid such platforms. Otherwise, they risk complicity. Art writer Sarah Tuck wisely cautions against “Fetishizing new technology in cyber-libertarian discourse, that assumes these new technologies are value-free or historically novel.” She qualifies that “It is against this background of a fetishized populism, assaults, and disinvestment in public services, and a precarious labor-market that artists work and in which an online arts journal publishes.” The prevailing neo-liberal ideology of social-networking sites is why Lovink stresses that users “need to defend [...] the very principle of decentralized, distributed networks. This principle is under attack by corporations such as Google and Facebook, as well as by national authorities who feel a need to control our communication and data infrastructure at large.”

To see how “decentralized and distributed” networks can work, it’s worth looking retrospectively to the idealism of the early internet before 1992, the year the US Congress passed the Scientific and Advanced-Technology Act, one with global ramifications allowing commercial organizations to connect to computer networks. Prior to the internet’s commercialization, largely text-based electronic bulletin-board systems (BBSs) served as prescient discussion forums. Users dialed-in so that they could access a chosen BBS, meaning these systems were, in fact, a decentralized means of networking. And, as the most popular form of networking until the early nineties, they were also well distributed. Discussion forums did replace BBSs, but these forums’ awkward stacked-message chains and hard-to-navigate menus would give way to the expedited communication channels of popular social networks. What’s ideally needed, now, are contemporized social-networking sites whose architecture, like BBS, does not encourage narcissistic hierarchy and practice censorship; whose labor practices are not Dickensian; and whose content serves intellectual, academic, and educational rather than commercial purposes.

Ultimately, such sites need to be developed based on models that lie outside the populist realms of social media and networking. Another framework for liberating readers of art criticism is one I proposed myself at *The Curatorial Lab: Curating in the Electronic Community*, a panel discussion I organized in 1994 at Toronto’s new-media art center, InterAccess. Intrigued by the experimental possibilities for “electronic” art criticism, I proposed an interactive online exhibition catalogue to replace the print catalogue. An unconventional option then, this catalogue was to be a fluid, interactive publication allowing the author to revise his or her essay online. The text would include a comment section where readers and exhibiting artists could respond to the article. The author could reply to the commentators; a dialogue could ensue. I even suggested the writer include some sections that readers – primarily an art audience, I anticipated – could edit and amend. (Some of these ideas were reiterated in an online catalogue that I wrote, titled “Model for Critical Collaboration,” published for a 1995 new-media exhibition titled *The Disembodied Mind*, which was also held at InterAccess.)

In addition, consider a current initiative, [Commentpress](#), a plug-in for fixed documents and online publications that the [Institute for the Future of the Book](#) developed. Commentpress allows readers to comment in the margins of the text rather than below the article. This annotation results, as Commentpress’s promotional text explains, in “turning a document into a conversation” and into “collaborative thinking and writing.”

Both my proposed catalogue model and this available plug-in could lead to a creative partnership between reader and writer that lies beyond corporate-designed structures. They illustrate how art critics can democratize their relationship with their audiences by a similar interaction through social networking. Increased collaboration with readers on a truly egalitarian level could not only increase audience reach, but also contribute to the many initiatives in art writing occurring in art criticism in this burgeoning post-crisis .

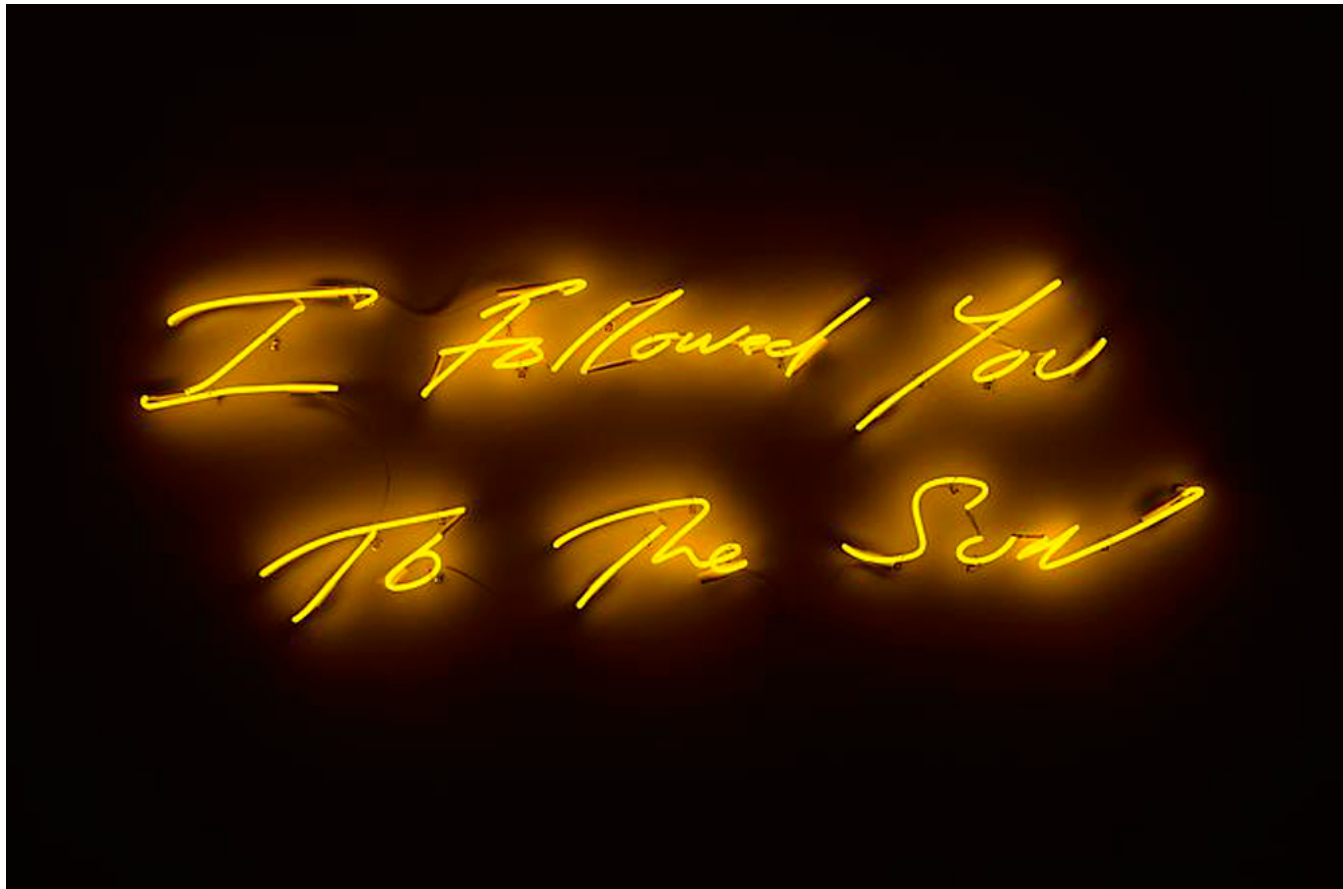
The most significant of these initiatives, the one that stands out amongst neo-Marxism, neo-populism, object-oriented ontology, *et al*, has to be the recent return to evaluation that has appeared globally in art publications, including this one. Such reviewing is a welcome break from caution, a critic’s joyride. Still, evaluative criticism risks leaving an aura of *faux* authority around the critic. In other words, even though hundreds of thousands of graduate students possess the required theory to judge contemporary art, only a select few art writers have

been able to do so online or in print. Knowledge of contemporary art has grown dramatically, this century, and its resource pool should enter the critical debate. Barthes's call for reader's agency provides a timely solution.

This is a revised version of a paper that the author presented at AICA-Korea's 2014 [AICA International Congress](#) in Seoul, South Korea. AICA is a French acronym for the [International Association of Art Critics](#).

HOW TO SURVIVE INTERNATIONAL ART: NOTES FROM THE POVERTY JETSET

by Andrew Berardini



Tracey Emin, "I Followed You to the Sun," 2013.

You are a writer, a curator, an installation artist, a social practitioner, a fly-by-night art advisor, an art-fair fixture, an inveterate biennialist. You live on one continent and work on two others. There is perhaps a rainbow of passports at your behest, persons of special-abilities visas, a foundational backer or commercial sponsor, a citizen of at least one wealthy country with decent travel treaties.

Most of your stuff is in storage somewhere and that somewhere might as well be "home."

You work only on site, you are reporting from the trenches, you live in perpetual motion beyond the bleeding edge. A rich hotelier, a non-profits arts center, a well-funded art school, a provincially-owned fair, a cultural tourism agency bought your ticket. Sometimes you stay in luxury hotels that your mother could never have aspired to be a maid in, other times you flop on lumpy provisional sofa in the spartanly furnished apartment of another art nomad, a stack of wadded airline tickets, varicolored receipts, and empty cigarette packets with warnings in Korean, French, and Spanish crumpled on the cardboard box they use for a coffee table.

You feel like a musician on tour, you eat and sleep sporadically on airplanes, time defined less by night and day and more by openings and afterparties, install dates and hosted breakfasts, red-eyes and the calculated time between the fast and the slow train, under the half-light of the high barreled glass and steel vault, drinking a watery espresso, the colors of the lifeless glossy magazines and sports papers on the stands bloom like a bouquet of tropical flowers.

Your expertise apexes in racking up miles and ordering a variety of specialty meals from airlines, Asian or Oriental, Jain or Hindu, Lacto-Ovo or Raw Vegetable. Somehow the human residue of airports and seatbacks never quite washes away, the thin layer of grime coats even those parts of your body tucked under clothing, and over time, you pick out favorite restaurants in common layovers. Uncultivated, an air of weary cosmopolitan glamor settles over you, each bit of your ensemble picked up in desperation and on the cheap in Moroccan bazaars, New York sample sales, and Norwegian flea markets.

Every place you are hosted by friends met in other far-flung places, a biennial in Germany, an art fair in Switzerland, a residency in Canada, themselves products of international liaisons with names like unlikely songs blended from distant civilizations: Franco-Polish, German-Chilean, Swiss-Tibetan.

You give lectures in yawning halls in ivied schools and in the basements of infested off-spaces.

The energy or perpetual motion infects you. And you find it hard and harder not to talk in witty repartee, party chatter, a melange of the clever and referential, a firsthand knowledge of the sunrise over the Po, the sunset over Shenzhen, the crackle of the midday sun as the Acqua Alta wets your calves and cools with its dirty water the tenderness of your hangover. You learn how to establish rapport quickly with strangers and navigate the subways of a dozen strange cities, an underground web that will take you from Time Square to Alexanderplatz.

In France, you learn to eat only in restaurants from the former colonies: North African, Vietnamese, Cambodian. You learn how to say “I am a vegetarian” in a dozen languages; in Germany, to appreciate falafel; in Nakuru, to eat fruit out of cans. You gather that the taxi cabs in Buenos Aires will exchange money and the money changers at airports are never to be trusted.

Learn which friends to ask for sleeping pills to get some kind of rest and try to avoid cocaine, the Columbian marching music that will invariably keep you awake past dawn. Take notes between drinks and write your report on the plane home. Never quite learn how to decently dispose of business cards, they collect in odd places, winter coats and summer sweaters, laptop bags and side-tables, stuck in the pages of novels. Years later they turn up and make flickering memories but not always of who they are or where the card was acquired.

You pass through national museums and regional kunsthallen, grand palaces and brutalist concrete bunkers. You see things long fingered on the pages of magazines, highlighted in art-history textbooks, and uttered by experts. You learn more of the partial art histories of countries each time you visit them. You see masterpieces from artists you never heard of and throwaways from too many that you have. A lot of it washes over you, but some of it doesn't. Some of it sticks, haunting long after the passport stamped home. Whatever color you were before, you are now a richer shade.

Your family stops asking for stories from your travels. Your couplings are dalliances with exotic strangers, darkling beauties and off-beat geniuses randomly encountered and you begin to wonder if you're capable of any kind of relationship beyond temporary confluences, romantic but incidental caresses in the taxicab past the Colosseum or the Danish field under the 3am setting of the midnight sun. If you fall in love, you wonder if it's because they conveniently live thousands of miles from you.

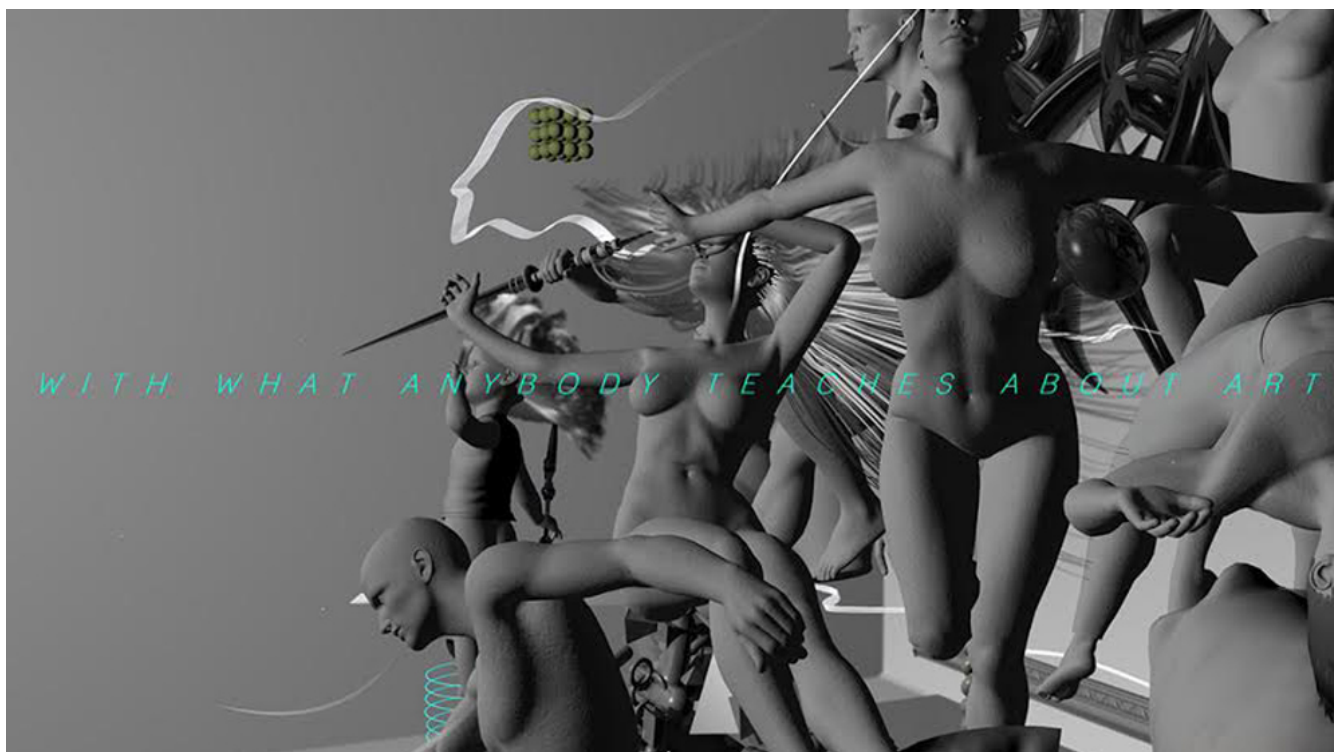
You begin to wonder if you're lucky or just crazed. Whimsy and possibility too readily embodied when you know in your bones the long, hard grind of boring quotidian labor is the only way you'll ever really achieve anything.

Over time, the travel wears you down, but the motion is too narcotic to release you fully. But still you take time off from planes, mark the passage of weeks with stillness. Understand that every time you leave, whatever is gained out there is lost back home. Birthdays and holidays, exhibitions and performances by friends, the unexpected serendipities of quietude and slow observation disappears with all that movement.

In those long breaks between trips, eat well and take long runs on the river, practice yoga and take your vitamins. You spend long hours on hikes into alien deserts and soporific forests, evenings lazing in bed watching movies, passing out at eleven. It takes a little while to get used to the pace, but each repetition in this one city grows richer, fuller: you belong to this community, you watch it grow and change with age, a work of the student wends its way into a permanent collection, great talents disappear with only your memory of their passing. The everyday office and the late-night studio, the morning cafe and the dozy afternoons on the sofa. You promised yourself never to work in in the afternoons but do anyway. Every alarming AM, you awake in your own bed, over and over again, surrounded by all your things, grown almost mythical by their absence, or rather yours.

THE COMMONS OF AGGREGATION: THE CASE FOR NET ART AS PUBLIC ART

by Joseph Henry



A still from V5MT's inclusion in "Ways of Something," TRANSFER, 2014.

Let me begin with an art historical chestnut — a 1855 painting by the French painter Gustave Courbet called *The Artist's Studio, A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*. In it, we see the artist putting the final touches on a pleasant landscape. A naked female muse approvingly looks over his shoulder and a young boy looks up in awed respect. There are two crowds flanking Courbet: on the right, there's what we might call the artworld, with people like the critic Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire. On the left stand what we might call the masses, or per more contemporary parlance, the commons. There's a priest, a merchant, a beggar, and a whole roll call of marginalized social types. In the "real allegory" of his painting, Courbet suggests that both the social avant-garde and the common man motivate his work culminating in a democratic harmony fueled by the artist's unique gifts.

I thought about this painting, which admittedly now reads as an aggrandizement of the male lefty artist, as the summation of the fantasized artist's studio, replete with admirers, friends, and a markedly inclusive public. In Courbet's rendition, art-making mends social differences and joins together all sorts of people, from the intelligentsia to the subaltern. Imagined in line with Courbet's own radical communitarian politics, the artist's studio is a utopic scene of the collective.

I then thought about Courbet's studio in relation to its arguable antipode, net art. What does the net artist's studio look like? One imagines the entirety of Courbet's auditorium compacted into a computer with the artist's proponents, collaborators, and spectators accessed at one point. Net art is disseminated, viewed, collected, and consumed with immediate connectivity by a network of both artworld professionals and casual browsers. But if there's a network of affiliation, is there a collective? What kind of structure of social belonging or community does this art speak to? When you network, you make contacts, not necessarily friends. The majority of net art is viewed online and alone. For an

art-form predicated on circulation and distribution, net art more often than not surfaces as an atomistic field of individual users, producers, and consumers.

In the last year or so since I've been writing on net art, my primary critique of the form has been that net art clones the mostly deadening experience of being online, rather than challenging or expanding it. Looking at Tumblr, Pinterest, and the strangely historical collection of funny GIF lists that used to populate the internet is almost identical to taking in net art exhibitions online. In the genre's splashier ventures, like the Wrong Biennial or the inaugural all-GIF film *twohundredfiftysixcolors*, parsing the collection of online material generated a fatigued sense of perception. If net art, as I'd speculate, takes its historical cue from the impossibly diverse archive of cable television, is there an online equivalent to David Hall's 1971 "[TV Interruptions](#)"? Net art is so often experienced in solitary confinement, which makes moments of its actually public display all the more promising.

Brooklyn's [TRANSFER Gallery](#) offered such an opportunity this summer with a screening of *Ways of Something*, a six-episode series of films curated by the Canadian net artist Lorna Mills. *Ways of Something* is comprised of various sixty-second clips bridged by a voice-over from John Berger's 1972 BBC miniseries, *Ways of Seeing*, a widely-watched mini-series he eventually turned into a foundational essay for visual culture studies. In the original show, Berger invited his large broadcast audience to a pedagogical exposé on the politics and techniques of the art-historical canon and everyday imagery more broadly. He focused on, through the writing of Walter Benjamin, the status of art after its endless mechanical dissemination and the resulting technocratic relations of power.

Commissioned by Amsterdam's Sandberg Instituut, Mills selected an international who's-who of net artists to deconstruct Berger's show. The

first two episodes were screened this September; the first introduces the series's aims and the second takes on historically conventional images of femininity and gender — you can watch the pilot [here](#).

Sandberg's Julia van Mourik runs "The One Minutes," a platform for experimental films of the nominal sixty-second duration. Following Mourik's orders, Mills stipulated that each artist select one minute from an assigned Berger episode, with the only proviso being that Berger's narration stay in place and that subtitles be visible. With Mills only scantily editorializing her submissions, the film's visual component was as heterogeneous as one might expect. The standard strategies of net art's moving image appeared: video-game simulations, webcam vamping, geometric trickery, and fractured text sequences replaced each other with brisk pacing.

Most artists approached the venerable *Ways of Seeing* with cheeky derision, the type of casual mockery that undergirds most online chatter. Great Master paintings were twisted and deranged (Courbet would be under fire here); memes scored Berger's serious analysis of ideology and vision; and a perpetually nodding skull wearing a Google Glass-like apparatus mindlessly affirmed its background narration. When artists like Rea McNamara, Jennifer Chan, Rhett Jones, Carrie Gates, and Erica Lapadat-Janzen engaged darker, more melancholic, or curiously emotional tones — such as Jones's citation of war footage — these resonant minutes registered as blips. They were like snippets of errant programming when flipping channels.

Ways of Something was, in effect, consumable, which is not to say boring: it almost always entertained, and Berger's exegeses in fact lost none of their potency more than forty years later. But the problem of a medium that takes its compositional cue from Tumblr becomes pronounced. In a work split thirty ways, chains of detail replace any kind of formal cohesion by definition. Reflecting on the film months after the fact, I can only process the unity of a single episode as the product of its myriad components. Each episode crystallizes as a series of impressions whose connection to one another feels arbitrary or circumstantial. When sheer difference is the guiding aesthetic for a work of art, the evaluation of that art condenses into vague critical reduction. How do we process a work of art fed by the rapid fragmentation of the online screen, especially when its unique aesthetically components are so explicitly composed as different sources? In short, how are we to understand any media that is pure aggregation?

In a well-known essay called "[In Defense of the Poor Image](#)," Hito Steyerl describes her nominal subject as the base material of visual culture. The poor image is low-res, illegible, cheap, mobile, at times obscene — and arguably the building block of net art. *Ways of Something* itself staged the confrontation between the rich images of Berger's art history and the poor images of its myriad interventions. In this sense, the poor image isn't necessarily a bad thing, and for Steyerl it carries political potential in its distance from the institutionalism of more sumptuous or spectacular media. But this potential is wide open. As Steyerl notes, "Poor images are thus popular images — images that can be made and seen by many. They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd; its opportunism, its narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its contact readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission. Altogether, poor images present a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction." Consider *Ways of Something* as an inventory of poor images and the wildly divergent aesthetics and responses they elicit. It stands as a representative for net art's inveterate disregard for cohesion. A work of art that can't make up its mind — that embraces distraction as a guiding sensibility — is a critic's nightmare.

However, it would be bad criticism to lament net art's fragmentation as so much newfangled, random chaos. Division, citation, and assemblage are standard technique across modernism, from structuralist film to Dadaist photomontage to Courbet's Realism, which disjunctively pasted in tropes from popular media. You could even stretch back to Brueghel's narratively chaotic canvases; his 1564 Procession to Calvary makes an appearance in Joe McKay's minute in the pilot. Mills's own work, particularly her GIF tableaux, shrewdly build on these examples, intentionally or otherwise; they seem to distill the internet writ large into curious combinations of images (often people or animals, often fucking) writhing, shaking, and trembling per the GIF's weird para-mobility.

But what might separate net art from its antecedents is the expansion of fragmentation and division from an aesthetic strategy to an institutional framework. The production and reception of *Ways of Something*, from Sandberg's outsourcing of its curation to Mill's assemblage of her various components, repeat in the standard mode of watching the film — on a Vimeo page on your computer. If in 1972 *Ways of Seeing* found distribution in the mass public of broadcast television, then *Ways of Something* adapts that presentation for 2014 through the networked but inherently split mode of online viewing. This is why TRANSFER's screening of *Ways of Something*, even if maybe just a gallery event, seemed to clarify the extensive implication of Mills's project. What kind of community was formed in watching this patchwork collage of online material as a singular viewing experience? More broadly, what does it mean to watch the internet collectively?

As Ben Davis intoned in a [recent review](#) of *Ways of Something*, the film poses these exact questions of watching and consuming. I think Mills's work offers a response by something of a caveat (and Davis in turn celebrates the film's adaptation of Berger and Walter Benjamin without a productive reading of the film itself). Instead of proffering some real critique of internet spectatorship, *Ways of Something* relies on its wild stylistic heterogeneity to provide a non-answer. Steyerl touches on this when she ambivalently suggests the full range of political participation her idea of the poor image elicits. You can probably predict my next line: the medium is the message. Net art and related practices' reliance on the fragment, component, or collage carries little weight in the boundless digital archive of poor images that constitutes our visual culture.

This is why I think net art, or really any art that takes the internet as its point of departure, makes its most interesting commentary precisely when it goes offline. What if *Ways of Something* was also broadcasted on TV as its own series? The argument could be made *Ways of Something* should be seen online for the very reason that for better or worse, our engagement with culture happens with a broadband connection now (and this runs the risk of political generalization — it's too easy to take internet access for granted in conversations around new media). But to summon a different Walter Benjamin than the one Berger and Davis consider, by comparing net art to more obsolete technologies of circulation and collectivity, like television or the history painting, we then might grasp the changes in social belonging and affiliation currently underway. If Courbet performed what he thought was painting's power for democratic inclusion in *The Artist's Studio*, I'm curious to see what similar ideation net art could conjure.

Which isn't to say that net art's grasping at new modes of the commons isn't underway. At this year's Nuit Blanche in Toronto, Mills projected her often-pornographic GIFs at monumental dimensions on the walls of OCAD University. The frightening obscenity of the poor image erupted as a very public issue. The same night, artists Sara Ludy and

Nicolas Sassoone displayed digital patterns from the w-a-l-l-p-a-p-e-r-s project on the façade of the Drake Hotel. The desktop wallpaper, a fairly inconspicuous application of a personal aesthetic, became a civic installation.

So let me advocate for net art as public art, and do so when the very idea of the public is being recoded and dismantled by both state policy and economic privatization. The commons, as it were, in this context, is irrevocably online and digital. When that notion becomes the starting point for net art, and not just the URL bar, the genre becomes real allegory.

THIS IS WHERE IT ENDS: THE DENOUEMENT OF POST-INTERNET ART IN JON RAFMAN'S DEEP WEB

by Saelan Twerdy



Jon Rafman, "A Man Digging," 2013.

In a [recent essay](#) for *Artforum*, Jon Rafman described his early work as "romantic." Specifically, he cited his virtual safaris of *Kool-Aid Man in Second Life* (2008-2011) and the Google Street View screen-captures of his *Nine Eyes* project (2009-). His more recent videos and installations, he commented, "have a darker tone."

Rafman's eponymous [solo exhibition](#) at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) – the first Canadian museum show for the Montreal-based artist (a [shortlist nominee](#) for this year's Sobey Prize) following earlier solo exhibitions at the [Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis](#) (2014) and the [Palais de Tokyo, Paris](#) (2012) – confirms Rafman's drift towards increasingly disturbing subject matter while demonstrating the persistent influence of Romanticism on his work. Through his frequent references to Romantic poetry and painting, Rafman continually presents himself and the subjects of his videos, installations, sculptures, and images as wanderers on a quest, exploring uncharted (virtual) territory in search of the Sublime, in the form of a lost ideal or a transcendent experience.

Rather than growing less Romantic, then, Rafman's work has become Romantic in a different vein. What has changed in particular is the kind of sublimity that he and his imagined narrator-protagonists pursue. It's telling that this exhibition – which is an early-career survey, though by no means a comprehensive one – doesn't include any images from Rafman's celebrated *Nine Eyes* series, for which he trawls Google Street View in search of striking photographic compositions accidentally produced by Google's roving cars. The slow shift in

Rafman's body of work that this exhibition documents is largely a shift away from what he was doing with *Nine Eyes*, which was, until fairly recently, his best-known project. The transformation of attitude involved is also, as I will explain, representative of larger trends in internet culture and among Rafman's circle of contemporaries.

When it launched in 2007, Street View was a particularly potent symbol of the convergence of the real world and its digital mediation through internet-based apps and platforms. Thanks to the wave of Web 2.0 technologies that rose to prominence in the mid-2000s, such as Youtube, Facebook, and the Google empire itself, the internet ceased to be (if it ever really was) a free-for-all playground for hackers, programmers, and nerds, and became a part of normal life for most people.

This is the juncture that [Gene McHugh periodized](#) as the post-internet condition, and it was in the nascent stage of the term that Rafman's peregrinations through Google's globe-spanning streetscapes captured some of the euphoria that accrued to the internet as a public space. The sense of the sublime that Rafman captured in this project wasn't only inspired by the unexpected beauty of urban or natural landscapes (of which the series includes quite a few), but by the sense of limitless potential inherent to having so much of the real world so easily accessible for virtual browsing.

Of course, *Nine Eyes* also indirectly gestures at the problems posed by having such an enormous archive of images in the hands of a private

corporation – all the blurred faces, addresses, and license plates on Google Street View hint at the Faustian bargain we’ve all entered into, trading the constant tracking and surveillance of our actions and environments for free access to information. Over the course of the last decade, grandiose promises about the internet’s potential to democratize politics, business, and culture have faltered. Though Silicon Valley suffers no shortage of utopian prophets, its credibility has been challenged by revelations regarding the extent of government and corporate surveillance, and by increasing evidence that the profits of the digital revolution have mostly accrued to a tiny (mostly white, mostly male) class of entrepreneurs.

This being the case, it might not be surprising that Rafman’s art has drifted away from investigating the factors that put the “post” in post-internet – the mainstreaming and ubiquity of digital technology, the collapse of any definitive break between the “IRL” and online worlds – towards more marginal web communities and subcultures where the fantasy of the virtual as an escape from real life still thrives. Rafman’s recent works blend images sourced from deviant and hedonistic micro-communities ([furries](#), [“crush” fetishists](#), [hentai](#)) with a poignant sense of nostalgia for the visions of the future offered by previous eras.

It’s fitting that the first works that a viewer encounters in the MACM exhibition are videos drawn from Rafman’s *Kool-Aid Man in Second Life* project, presented in a viewing installation composed of a glass box with a built-in chair and integrated speakers – one of a number of custom installations produced for this show in order to display Rafman’s video works, most of which are available online. In retrospect, *Nine Eyes* (2009-) and *Kool-Aid Man* (2008-11), both of which were initiated around the same time, represent a crossroads in Rafman’s practice. Both involve the artist on a journey of exploration through virtual worlds, but where *Nine Eyes* raises questions about the politics of visibility, about surveillance and data ownership, and about the status of photography in a world of image excess, *Kool-Aid Man* has more to do with the psychology of gratification enabled by the internet. The latter is a quasi-ethnographic and often voyeuristic catalogue of the wildly varied pleasures and fantasies invented and pursued by denizens of the web’s murkier corners. Needless to say, the path suggested by *Kool-Aid Man* is the one that Rafman’s more recent work has followed.

Wherever Rafman’s Kool-Aid Man avatar goes in Second Life, he finds environments and other avatars apparently created for the sole purpose of having weird sex – or at least some facsimile thereof. Watch as Kool-Aid Man encounters a male figure in baggy jeans and a bucket hat masturbating a recumbent unicorn, or as he observes a hermaphroditic centaur mounting a fox-humanoid from behind, or as he approaches a fire-breathing, three-headed dragon in a torch-lit castle (a moment’s hesitation, a hint of relief – has Kool-Aid Man finally encountered a legitimately majestic creature?) only to see the dragon get up on Rafman’s avatar and start *humping* it. One has to wonder what kind of satisfaction Second Life users were really deriving from these crudely-animated sex acts. Not to belabor the obvious, but CGI models don’t experience pleasure, and making it look like they do takes a lot of effort – a fact that becomes more clear when Kool-Aid Man visits the “Pompeian Delights Sex House,” where the walls are plastered with pixelated ads for 3D-rendered body parts, animations, and sound effects to make one’s virtual sex experience more lifelike. It’s not all quite so sordid, though. As with Rafman’s Google Street View images, Kool-Aid Man’s journey through Second Life is punctuated by as many moments of surprising beauty and meditative reverie as absurd or pathetic spectacle. Half of what makes the project so intriguing is how often those two poles co-exist – parody, nostalgia, and celebration are virtually indistinguishable in this, as in many of Rafman’s works. Consider, for example, Kool-Aid’s Man happening upon a

synchronized dance routine, performed by furries, goth-raver avatars, and a blue-skinned Na’vi, all the while set to Darude’s 1999 trance hit “Sandstorm.” The patent absurdity of the scene crosses over into touching pathos: a lot of work went into crafting this moment of strange togetherness. The figure of Kool-Aid Man himself (itself?) condenses these contradictory aspects as a commercial mascot from Rafman’s childhood (and my own, I should add, since we’re more or less the same age), noted for peddling a cheap, sugary drink with outrageous party attitude. Contrasted with the more adult situations through which Rafman pilots his protagonist, however, Kool-Aid Man’s blankly euphoric grin and goofy dancing animation take on a beatific innocence, uncorrupted and eternally enthused.

The same glass-case installation that screens Rafman’s *Kool-Aid Man* videos also displays a few of his other stand-alone videos set in virtual worlds, such as *In Realms of Gold* (2012), which borrows its title from a poem by John Keats. The video distills excerpts from a first-person shooter in which no combat action occurs, giving the viewer a chance to luxuriate in the lifelike renderings of landscape features, foliage, animals, and atmospheric effects. It’s one of Rafman’s most straightforward statements that, within virtual worlds traversed by gamers or internet users, an experience of sublime beauty is possible. *Woods of Arcady* (2010-12) juxtaposes a text-to-speech reading of W.B. Yeats’s poem “[The Song of the Happy Shepherd](#)” – its first line: “The woods of Arcady are dead / And over is their antique joy” – with footage of classical statuary and architecture in Second Life, carrying the more ambiguous message that virtual archives allow access to historical information and experience while, at the same time, the sheer volume and availability of such information dilutes any possibility of legitimate historical consciousness. Technology provokes a futile quest for an imagined, authentic experience that is ultimately unrecoverable, and attempts to recreate it produce only travesty.

In *Kool-Aid Man in Second Life* there is another layer of nostalgia that has to do with the datedness of the platform itself. Launched in 2003, Second Life was already a bit passé by the time Rafman began exploring it in 2008. Though its user base [peaked around 2009](#), its graphics have remained at a fairly clunky 2003 standard. More importantly, its free-for-all ethos is closer to the cyberpunk future [imagined in the 1990s](#) than to the mundane, contemporary reality of social networks exemplified by Facebook’s “real-name” policy. Despite the sensationalism of much of *Kool-Aid Man*’s content, the project is pervaded by a sense of loss and melancholy provoked both by the relegation of the utopian dream of a virtual world to the fringes of internet culture, and by the thoroughly abject ends to which this technology (and the imaginative resources of its users) has been employed.

As Rafman has gravitated towards extreme internet phenomena, the utopian sublime of his earlier work, characterized by outward exploration into the promising expanse of new virtual territory, has shaded into a more dystopian sublime, plumbing psychological depths rather than geographic space. In a series of videos including *Still Life (Betamale)* (2013), *Mainsqueeze* (2014), and his new *Erysichthon* (2015), Rafman has trawled the message-boards, forums, and video channels of the deep web to create disorienting and often difficult-to-stomach collages of deviant imagery. In this exhibition, *Still Life (Betamale)* and *Mainsqueeze* are both presented within a blue vinyl “pit couch” installation reminiscent of viewing architecture that Ryan Trecartin has used to display his videos – which makes sense, given that both artists aim to give form to the sometimes pathological mutations of selves squeezed through digital networks.

Still Life (Betamale) was conceived as a collaboration with electronic

musician Daniel Lopatin (a.k.a. Oneohtrix Point Never). Through images of scum-encrusted keyboards, dank computer dens overflowing with empty bottles and tangled wires, and clips of 8-bit anime and furry fetish porn, the piece evokes the figure of the troll whose total immersion in the internet has left him sexually stunted and socially alienated. *Mainsqueeze* is broader in scope, juxtaposing a wide range of obscurely troubling video footage (a washing machine spinning itself to pieces, a woman crushing a live shellfish under a spiked heel) with art-historical images of violence and depravity, suggesting the ahistorical continuity of a human (or perhaps *inhuman*) drive towards entropy and debasement.

Rafman's new video, *Erysichthon* (2015), here displayed inside a darkened, enclosed cabin with a vinyl floor and mirrored walls, brings this tendency to a fevered pitch of poetic intensity. The piece is named for the mythical Greek king of Thessaly who was cursed, after cutting down a sacred grove, to a hunger so all-consuming that he eventually ate himself. Though the imagery itself is more oblique than *Betamale* or *Mainsqueeze* (a cube being absorbed by black sludge, fingers incessantly swiping screens, a snake in a dish eating its own tail), its piercing soundtrack and disturbing voiceover conjure a mind pushed to its limits, reiterating that it has seen too much. "If you look at these images long enough," it intones, "you begin to feel that you composed them." And, at another point: "They corrupt me so. Is it too late?"

Displayed around these videos and continuing throughout the rest of the exhibition, Rafman's new series *You Are Standing in an Open Field* (2015) offers another visual metaphor for the correlation between virtual escapism and physical abjection. Throughout a number of large-scale photographic prints, Rafman stages juxtapositions between cluttered keyboards (each one "themed," in a way, with its own personality, whether it's glamor mags and makeup, or energy drinks and anime colouring books) and, in place of a computer screen, appropriated landscape paintings from the Romantic era and Hudson River School. The further twist is that the surface of each print is splattered with translucent resin, suggesting either ejaculate or a glaze of spilled soda, functioning in either case as a gross materiality that blocks access to the hoped-for sublime, or the by-product of actually finding it. The quest for transcendence, Rafman implies, despoils its object rather than ennobling its subject.

In focusing on the perils and pathology of approaching the internet as an escape from physical reality or the real social world, we might wonder, however, if Rafman is missing out on the more pressing – though less sensational – aspects of what digital technology means for average users. Rafman has [asserted](#), however, that "the more marginal, the more ephemeral the culture is, the more fleeting the object is ... the more it can actually reflect and reveal 'culture at large.'" The parable of Rafman's *Erysichthon*, for example, might reflect that even the most casual internet use is governed by a network logic which demands that our attention spans keep up with the speed of digital communication: new emails in the inbox, more tabs to open, more comments to respond to, posts to like, notifications to check. We may not all have seen too much, but we are all faced with the anxiety-inducing fact that there is always too much to see. The more of it we try to access, the hungrier we become.

The other question that emerges from Rafman's trajectory is how much further can he mine this vein? The voiceover of *Erysichthon* repeatedly invokes a dead end or a point of no return. The last two major video works in the exhibition, *Remember Carthage* (2013) and *A Man Digging* (2013), are both film essays sourced from video games (*Max Payne 3* and *Uncharted 3*, respectively) in which the narrators seem to come unmoored in time, and ultimately get lost, or lose themselves. Is

Rafman similarly hitting a dead end? Or has he lost his way?

In the [same essay](#) I quoted earlier, Rafman stated that he's fascinated by the darker manifestations of internet culture because he sees them as a by-product of the lack in contemporary society of a "viable or compelling avenue for effecting change or emancipating consciousness." He writes: "the energy that once motivated revolution or critique gets redirected into strange and sometimes disturbing expressions." Without a belief in any redemptive, transcendent, or even effectively critical function for art, however, one wonders what motivations remain to fuel an artistic practice. Rafman has also confided that his own artistic process mirrors that of the trolls that he portrays: "[It] begins with surfing the internet to the point of sickness, where it feels like I'm about to lose my mind sitting in front of the computer for so long." Simply put, can he keep it up? Should he?

A number of Rafman's contemporaries have recently made public renunciations: Jennifer Chan [tweeted](#) "Postinternet: I renounce my intellectual contributions to this colonial movement. It's been a massive ideological jerkoff." Nik Kosmas of AIDS-3D [quit making art](#) in order to focus on bodybuilding and his [matcha tea](#) business, declaring, "I just didn't think there was a point or a respectable future in endlessly critiquing or arrogantly joking about innovations coming from other fields." Jaako Pallasvuo decided to [stop uploading](#). And in a talk given in Montreal this April, trend-forecasting collective [K-HOLE](#) declared "burnout" to be the next big thing: the ability to go off the grid and enforce your own privacy is now a potentially expensive luxury, a status symbol. Some might strategize a "[weaponized burnout](#)," calculated to keep their audience hungry, while others might experiment with "lifestyle burnout," downgrading (or outsourcing) their internet presence for their own well-being.

It may be that post-internet art itself is burning out. In Lucy Lippard's [canonical account](#), Conceptual Art – at least in its first, focused, capital-C/capital-A iteration – lasted six years (1966-1972). Post-internet art, if we date it from 2008 (when Marisa Olson allegedly coined the term) or 2009 (when Gene McHugh started his blog), has lasted about as long. Of course, it was only after the end of its first phase, and the termination of the more radical aspirations associated with it, that Conceptual Art was canonized, its higher-profile practitioners safely integrated into the gallery system, and its influence distributed as a more diffuse form of small-c conceptualism.

It is likely that we are nearing the end of the breathless first phase of the artworld's reckoning with the hegemony of the internet, and the long-term fallout may well follow a similar trajectory. For one thing, post-internet artists are getting solo museum shows now. Jon Rafman's work has been some of the most provocative and popular of post-internet art's initial wave, and he stands poised at the cusp of, potentially, much greater commercial and critical recognition. But the long-term reception, relevance, and viability of post-internet as a category remains uncertain. If Rafman levels up, he could rise above the label, or cement its respectability, or define what comes after. At present, though, Rafman appears to be more concerned with drilling down than rising up. In his latest work, the future appears as a yawning void rather than a promising vista – though still sublime in its own way. Whether this image is what the age ultimately demands will largely depend on how the age appears, once we're looking back.

LABOR LOST: OKWUI ENWEZOR'S ART-WORLD BIENNALE

by David Balzer



Jeremy Deller, "Factory Records," 2013.

Consuming visual art is conspicuously, if oddly, social. You are inherently distracted, aware of watching and being watched, even, perhaps especially, in the darkened spaces of video installations in which the comings and goings of strangers are a given. The very word "gallery" suggests, architecturally, a widened corridor in which you are meant to linger but not stay. It's an exhausting form of browsing (over two-dozen shopping malls across the world are now called "Galleria") and of eating, buffet-style. Digestion is rarely included in the process.

The Venice Biennale dates to the late-19th century and has changed through the decades, but not much. It's no longer directly tied to the art market (it used to have a sales desk), though it retains many obvious, indirect connections. This, despite the event's recent curators, notable among them Francesco Bonami in 2003, trying to rearrange, or at least startle, the template. This, despite various protests and unsanctioned projects, such as those of 1968, trying to explode the event's hegemony. Like the modernist art institution, the Venice Biennale persists in the capitalist mode, absorbing rather than adapting to structural critique.

So it was that this year's politically leftist Biennale, artistic-directed by Nigerian power curator Okwui Enwezor, felt ineffectual. Could it have been otherwise? On preview week, we peered at Enwezor's radicalism as if from an observation deck, muttering "dark" and "political" while carrying on, business-as-usual, gawking and texting. It didn't matter that many of us had, say, read Debord. In press conferences and interviews, Enwezor sincerely discussed his intentions while at the same time conceding to the systemic limitations of making a Venice Biennale exhibition truly radical.

In one such piece, with *Artforum's* Michelle Kuo, Enwezor spoke of his interest in the Biennale as a "space of residue," responding to Kuo's subsequent question about the "risk of simply flattening" this idea through the context of the Biennale's own, prestigious group show: "I see no way of such flattening happening," he said. "This will not be like roaming the streets of Chelsea or the corridors of art fairs ... My motto for the moment is access and accessibility." What? The Biennale is not an accessible event. Venice is expensive to get to and expensive to stay in; it is difficult to navigate. Regular full-price tickets to the Biennale are 25 euros.

Yet Enwezor insists on Marx in *All The World's Futures*. The exhibition's "core part" is *Das Kapital Oratorio*, [a live reading of Das Kapital](#) mingled with various performances, on a grand central stage in the main pavilion of the Giardini. To talk about Marx is, naturally, to talk about labor. Enwezor topically acknowledges this through the work of Joachim Schönfeldt, Oscar Murillo, Tetsuya Ishida, and many others. But to talk about Marx and labor in an exhibition context – one of the biggest in the world, and the art-historical model for the contemporary fairs Enwezor summarily denounces – should be to talk about commodity fetishism, Marx's idea that capitalism makes us impart a religious aura to goods, turning their market value into their only value, and obscuring the original labor and laborers that went into their production. While contemporary art has produced decent work about this, it has struggled to walk the talk, with so much anti-fetishist curatorial efforts becoming, with disturbing swiftness, new sites of fetishization. For Enwezor, tackling commodity fetishism as an exhibition-maker seems a low, if nonexistent, priority.

It's worth noting that the Marxism of Walter Benjamin, whom Enwezor uses as a pivot point for his exhibition statement, was informed by Brecht, whose own response to the problem of commodity fetishism, and indeed labor, was of course to alienate audiences, preventing them from psychologically identifying with characters and from suspending disbelief. To this end, Enwezor's exhibition uses three "filters": "Garden of Disorder," "Liveness: On Epic Duration" and "Reading Capital," with the Biennale itself "as a filter through which to reflect on both the current state of things and the appearance of things." It's all quite vague. "Disorder" seems key, with "a diversity of practices" left for the viewer to sift and sort. This is inspired, Enwezor claims, by "Sergei Eisenstein's idea of a dialectical montage" – of editing in film form as expressing disjuncture as well as an unsettling type of unity.

In the Arsenale portion of *All the World's Futures*, none of this is apparent. Eisenstein's montage was directed and purposeful, not disordered. Enwezor's own montage is a euphemism for serial curating: few works share the same space, and the ones that do are either neatly juxtaposed or politely cordoned. As usual with the Biennale, it is over-programmed, a pointed impediment if a curator aims to provoke and unsettle. There are no didactic panels, which might be refreshingly disorderly were there not so much ethnocultural, political, and intellectual context to parse. (You may purchase a hefty 80-euros catalogue at the gift shop if you want to know more.)

Nothing at the Arsenale prompts a deeper consideration of the Biennale's history and current function. Nothing disturbs the received exhibition context of contemporary art. Nothing, for instance, makes us aware that the Arsenale had a history as a rope, munitions, and ship-building factory, a former site of intensive manufacture that is among the earliest examples of the rapid production process that eventually led to the assembly line. Stunning works such as [Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick's](#) *Slavery, The Prison Industrial Complex*, a photographic series documenting lingering 13th-ammendment-sanctioned slavery in US prisons, maintain the Arsenale's current usage as a place in which to view ideas and events from afar.

[Rirkrit Tiravanija's](#) performance/installation *Untitled 2015 (14086 unfired)* consists of Chinese brickworkers making bricks stamped with the Situationist slogan "Ne travaillez jamais" in Chinese characters. For 10 euros, you can purchase a brick, with the money going to ISCOS, an Italian NGO that supports international workers' rights. "The labor of the brick workers in transformed into art," writes Tim Roerig in the Biennale's short guide, as if this somehow makes it more valuable.

Tiravanija's aesthetics have a zoological or anthropological quality. His call for donation is reminiscent of [Clarissa Dalloway's](#) "shilling into the *Serpentine*" – a small gesture of bourgeois closure. Tiravanija's workers are not named, just as the Thai artists who executed his *Demonstration Drawings* in the Giardini are not. Elsewhere in the Arsenale, the [Gulf Labor Artist Coalition](#) hangs a giclée banner graphically representing the migrant South Asian workers who are building branches of the Guggenheim, the Louvre, and NYU in Abu Dhabi. When I stood before it, a woman sped by to take a photo of an adjacent [Gedi Sibony](#) work. Will the GLAC occupy the Arsenale as they did New York's Guggenheim on May Day? There is a need for actual, disruptive voices of non-artist laborers in the Arsenale. [IM Heung-soon's](#) video *Factory Complex*, installed in a small, black-curtained space before Tiravanija's piece, documents the exploitation of women workers in Korea. It's a moving account of resistance from the front-lines, and it has little to do with aesthetics.

At the entrance to the Giardini's main pavilion (likely Enwezor's specifically-intended "Garden of Disorder," given its name), Murillo

hangs long, black, stitched-together canvases behind the entrance's columns. In Roerig's words, he is "subverting the stateliness of the neo-classical façade," though they look quite ornamental. A beautiful new neon work by [Glenn Ligon](#) covers the pavilion's sign, evocatively reading "blues blood bruise," words from Harlem-Six teenager Daniel Hamm. Given Enwezor's overtures to inclusion, it seems relevant that Ligon and Murillo are represented by [David Zwirner](#), and that five other Zwirner artists – Jason Rhoades, Marlene Dumas, Kerry James Marshall, Iza Genzken, and Chris Offili (six if you count Adel Abdessemed, no longer with the gallery) – appear in *All the World's Futures*. Enwezor's inclusiveness is predicated on giving lesser-known artists proximity to power. Make no mistake: this is an artworld Biennale.

The appropriately-named [The ARENA](#) is where Enwezor's ambitions come to roost. It's a theater designed by architect David Adjaye that takes up a significant portion of the Giardini's main pavilion, and is home to the aforementioned *Oratorio* (orchestrated by Isaac Julien) and a variety of related performances. Adjaye's is a thrust stage, painted an unsubtle red; you can see and sense an audience through dim lights. It's hard to judge the efficacy of the project, which seemed risibly contradictory when I first read about it. No one will see it all.

My two experiences of The ARENA were uneven. Its performances bled audibly through much of the building, demanding a certain attention. Its central thoroughway provided an easy means of escape. I was captivated, however, by [Jeremy Deller's](#) *Broadsides and Ballads of the Industrial Revolution*, for which a young woman with blue hair and a floral dress sang the titular works, giving powerful voice to a vernacular, sentimental art. She was clearly nervous, straying from ballad rhythm often, but increasingly possessed by the words she sang. One ballad was from the perspective of a 13-year-old factory girl, a limning of the changes industrialization, not puberty, had wrought on her body. By the end of the song the blue-haired woman was in tears; I watched through my own. The ballads, presented by Deller as a political readymade, proved that art can emerge from absolute necessity, that song and speech have a durability, even a purity, beyond material.

Deller's installation elsewhere in the Giardini is similarly concerned with the culture of labor created by laborers themselves, whether wittingly or unwittingly. He is admirably reluctant to speak for laborers or to style their experiences into art. (Indeed, *All the World's Futures* seems otherwise ignorant of the 20th-century's fraught engagement with social realism, with Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* unironically presented around the corner from Deller's works.) A jukebox plays ambient recordings of factory noises, and Deller calls this *Factory Records*. In *The Shit Old Days*, he furnishes a series of Victorian photographs of anonymous women ironworkers from South Wales – stiff, uncomfortable, and wan in their studio-backdrop poses, their faces and bodies articulate with pain and injustice. Contra Enwezor, Deller employs didactics, using them in the manner of acerbic historical plaques. It's profoundly affecting.

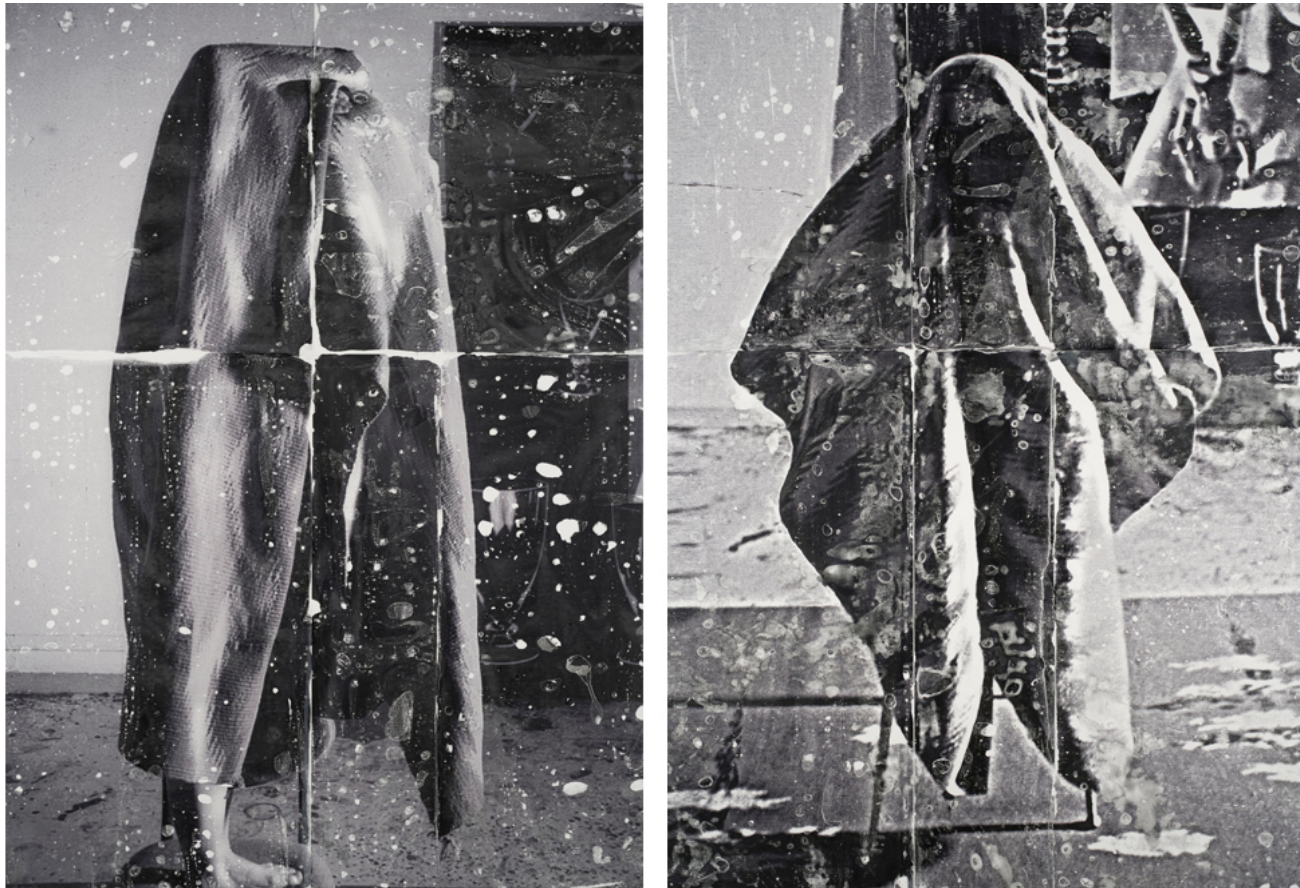
Early during preview week I saw Enwezor leading a group of suited men through the Arsenale, trailed by security personnel and a small flock of paparazzi. It may have been President Sergio Mattarella, or Prime Minister Matteo Renzi; I glimpsed Italian-flag sashes. Enwezor possessed an expert calm, performing exceptionally as an employee of contemporary art. I thought of Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry," a song about how public, political figures are particularly vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy, ones Lamar defiantly and devastatingly owns. I also thought, less generously, of Suhail Malik's ideas on the necessity of exiting rather than escaping contemporary art,

for to try to escape it is merely to reinforce and perpetuate its limitations and inequities.

All the World's Futures becomes most potent in its failures. In this way, Enwezor's best statement on labor is unknowingly made through the framework of the artworld that sustains him: so many efforts exploited, diverted, misdirected; so much unfounded, inflated, impotent notions of what art can do, and be. So much work behind us, so much work ahead.

BODIES BEHOLDEN: THE CHANGED CORPOREALITY OF DAVID SALLE'S NEW PAINTINGS

by Becca Rothfeld



David Salle, "Silver 10" and "Silver 12", 2014. © David Salle, licensed by VAGA. Courtesy Skarstedt, New York.

In a 2008 commercial for the Swiffer SweeperVac, a conservatively clad woman weaves back and forth with the futuristic device, apparently engaged in an intimate dance. The broom she's cast aside in favor of the SweeperVac croons "baby come back!" and scatters a trail of rose petals to the hot tub in the backyard. But the broom's owner has already succumbed to the wiles of the machine that, in the commercial's opening shot, swished so caressingly across her floors. In the most effective advertisements it is products, not their human stewards, that succeed in seducing us.

[David Salle: New Paintings](#), a late-Spring exhibition at the Skarstedt Gallery in New York, presented an array of objects more alluring than bodies. The show consisted of a series of loud, bright works, the *Late Product Paintings* (2014-2015), interspersed with offerings from the comparatively muted *Silver Paintings* (2014-2015), which feature a model ensconced in amorphous garments or draping. Both sets of images explicitly allude to Salle's older work: the *Late Product Paintings* series incorporates imagery directly culled from his *Early Product Paintings* (1993), and the *Silver Paintings* imitate photographs that Salle took of performer Massimo Audiello posing in front of the aforementioned *Early Product Paintings* in 1992, when they were still unfinished. The artist transferred these photographic images onto linen canvases without the aid of digital technologies, and the 2014-2015 *Silver Paintings*, with their aged, grainy quality, are the result. Compared with the *Late Product Paintings*, which overflow with a richly textured wealth of images of cigarettes, toothbrushes, and foodstuffs, the human bodies in the *Silver Paintings* appear flat and subdued. Salle's objects are more

corporeal than the bodies they complement, and in *David Salle: New Paintings*, the human form is superseded by the process of commercialization that has come to shape and define it.

This is not the first time that Salle has conflated object and physique, experimenting with curiously inanimate bodies. The artist has long been famous – at times notorious – for the sexualized and arguably objectified female figures that people his early work. In paintings like *Schoolroom* (1985) and *His Brain* (1984), nude or revealingly clad women bend over, exposing their buttocks and obstructing their faces, inviting us to desire them even as our invasive gaze depersonalizes them. In *Schoolroom*, an anonymous male hand is crammed up an anonymous skirt, an indiscretion that we view from the uneasy angle of behind and below.

Salle's critics, Brooks Adams, Robert Storr, and Roberta Smith among them, have argued that these images are misogynistic – but Salle often depicts the subordination of female agency to male fantasy as isolating and unglamorous. His nudes labor in contorted positions, harshly lit and elaborately posed. In *Closer* (2011), a woman lies supine on a bed. Her posture is stiff, as if Salle has stretched her out on a surgical table, offering her up for dissection. Indeed, one of her hands remains sketchy and indistinct, stripped of layers of detail and dimension and reduced to the painterly equivalent of its skeleton. This image doesn't titillate so much as sadden, repurposing the tropes of pornography in the service of a different end, intimating that an amorous encounter is too often a rote operation akin to a surgical procedure. Like the bodies

draped in cloth in the Silver Paintings, the female figures in Salle's early work are inaccessible to us: his initial nudes are also "clothed" to the point of inaccessibility, albeit in the contrivance of their stylized nakedness. The *Silver Paintings* are an explicit nod to Magritte's morose, despairing portrait of failed eroticism, the 1928 painting *The Lovers*, which depicts a kissing couple swathed in two separate sheets. Divided by their respective layers, the titular lovers can't quite reach one another's lips. Salle's earlier nudes are a thematic nod to this image, with its dour insistence on interpersonal unattainability.

The latest exhibition at the Skarstedt extrapolates on Salle's beloved theme of bodies beholden to things. Where the objects in the *Late Product Paintings* seem to protrude from their canvases, the model and backdrop in the *Silver Paintings* are flattened into a plane. The latter series documents the transformation of a body into its representation. The images that constitute the *Silver Paintings* began as photographs with clear ties to their flesh-and-blood subject, but they evolved into paintings of photographs that maintain only a nebulous link with the physical body that occasioned them. The resulting portraits are lifeless and fixed, while the products in the *Late Product Paintings* are dizzyingly mobile: crackers spill from their wrappings, milk gushes from an overturned glass, and thick globs of toothpaste ooze from a tube and onto a bristling brush.

These objects incite us, literally and figuratively, to consumption, tempting viewers with outsized foodstuffs that make dramatic claims on their canvases. Fragments of advertisements are paired with pies, crackers, ice-cream bars. While Salle's women and men are sketchy, more like allusions to bodies than bodies themselves, an exquisitely lifelike slice of banana-cream pie, directed almost accusingly outward, looks thick enough to touch, in *Yellow Fellow* (2015). Even the rich depth of Salle's layered toothpaste has a voluptuous quality. Paradoxically, it's his renderings of the inanimate world that most stimulate his audience's animal appetites.

Ballantine's (2014), one of the *Late Product Paintings* not exhibited at the Skarstedt, emphasizes this reversal of the usual roles. An intrusive human hand in the lower right-hand corner of the painting seems fitted to the bottle of whiskey it grasps: it functions as a prop in the service of its possession. The canvas is otherwise dominated by an outsized box of crackers, its contents tumbling from their packaging – an image that recurs in *Faster Healing* (2014), where crackers topple from the top of the canvas to the bottom, creating a strong diagonal focus. To their left, an upside-down woman, her head severed by the lower parameter of the canvas, stands docilely by.

Salle's bodies, so often faceless and even headless, are individualized only by the vivacity of their accessories, and in paintings like *Waste King*, 2014 (another *Late Product Painting* that wasn't exhibited), objects contextualize and color the human form. The two female figures in the center of the painting aren't shaded in: they are translucent, humanoid frames through which we glimpse a bed and a furnished interior. Compared with the anemic women, the bed, rendered in a bright red, is dynamic, even sanguine. In *Waste King*, as in Salle's earlier and more obviously sexual works, female bodies are drained of their substance. Eroticism is a matter of gestural rather than physical exchange.

Indeed, Salle's paintings, with their explicitly material focus on products and commodities, are implicitly ethereal in their defiance of the mandates of physicality. In paintings like *Ode and Aires* (2014), we swim in a jerky collage, not of images integrated into a single pictorial plane, but of isolated pictures jostling against one another and competing for our attention. Overlaying a printed musical score is an advertisement for milk and several disembodied heads and torsos. In

this painting, as in the rest of the *Late Product Paintings*, objects vault on top of one another without ever coming into contact. Salle's work is set for the most part in a non-space, an impossible domain in which images of different scales and scopes collide but do not touch.

But if Salle's objects seem to float past one another, it's because they're no longer objects in the conventional sense: as products become indistinguishable from their advertisements, materials become indistinguishable from their images. Salle is a representational painter not for depicting the external world but for depicting further representations. The *Late Product Paintings* refer to the *Early Product Paintings*, and the *Silver Paintings* refer to photographs of the *Early Product Paintings* – and, in turn, the *Early Product Paintings* refer only to images in advertisements.

Yet Salle acknowledges that a rejection of conventional realist modes does not free us from the constraints of social context – and it's this very revelation that functions, as the critic Carter Ratcliff has noted, as a rebuke to Minimalist painters like Ad Reinhardt. In her 1986 essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," critic and art historian Rosalind Krauss accuses Reinhardt and his cohort of aspiring to ahistoricism: these artists see their work, Krauss writes, as anti-narrative, "impervious both to time and incident." Their fantasy is one of hermetic insularity, of occupying a self-contained world that refers to nothing beyond its own aesthetics. In contrast, Salle's work hastens to acknowledge its deep embeddedness within visual and pop culture. If, as the *Late Product Paintings* suggest, reality is increasingly imagistic and laden with references, our new landscape carries its own host of expectations and constraints that comprise an inescapable vocabulary. In deference to their origins, Salle's "new paintings" at the Skarstedt are obsessively referential, marked by their nostalgia for the iconography of the 1940s and '50s and their attentiveness to the flashy feats of contemporary advertising.

But the greater the hold that images have on us, the greater the impact of imagistic resistance: Salle's recognition that we operate within a rigid visual order empowers him to more effectively flout the established grammars. His pointed refusal to defer to perspectival convention allows him to juxtapose images without conflating them – to countenance glaring contradictions. In an interview with Bill Powers featured in the exhibition catalogue, Salle notes that he wants "the differences to show, but to somehow be resolved anyway. It's symphonic." And in this way he sets out to solve the riddle of unending consumption, fueled by advertisements that trade in impossible promises. In the *Late Product Paintings*, where images are heaped on one another to create an impossibly dense and intolerably sumptuous tableau, we really can have it all. Confronted with Salle's indulgent creations, we enjoy a sensation all-too rare outside the gallery: we are over-saturated and nauseated, but also, mercifully, satiated.