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A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM

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Foreword

As we near our two-year anniversary, and summer draws to a close, *Momus* takes a moment to reflect on the last twelve months of publishing. This eBook, our [second](#), highlights our best and most affecting long-form journalism and art criticism. Whether it's the best-read pieces (for instance Andrew Berardini's "[How to Be an Unprofessional Artist](#)," which went viral in March, attracting over 65,000 readers inside a week and receiving citations from around the world, including in *e-flux* and the CAA); the most controversial (Kimberlee Córdova's "[Misogyny and the Myth of the '90s at Kurimanzutto](#)," which caused a great and overdue disturbance in the set hierarchies of Mexico's artworld); the most contemplative (Renan Laruan's strange and resounding "[Please Hold Your Questions: A Culture of Asking Questions as Criticism and Authority](#)," and Orit Gat's reflective "[Any Plans After the Exhibition?](#)"); or the most assertive in their challenges to issues that persist in our field (Catherine Wagley's meditative "[Friends Among Us: Reflections on the Value and Risk of Nepotism in Art](#)," and Amy Zion and Cora Fisher's conversational "[Regionalism Vs. Provincialism: Agitating Against Critical Neglect in Artworld Peripheries](#)"), this selection of twenty features and reviews is representative of *Momus* continuing to sound bells, strike chords, and wire new alarms. It's a document that frames our writers and editors' effort to improve upon the existing models for online publishing: to slow down, go deep, and speak honestly. To return us to an art criticism that is evaluative, considered, and brave.

Our good work is being encouraged by a readership that has tipped over half a million, this year; and citations in peer publications, including *Frieze*, *The New Inquiry*, *artnet News*, and the *LA Times*. New and returning patrons including Ydessa Hendeles and Bruce Bailey have helped make it possible for us to raise our writers' fees by 50% this past spring. We are working hard to be leaders in our industry, in both the remuneration of our staff and contributors, and the quality of what we're producing. Please bear this in mind as you read us, share us, and reflect on our publishing. We are advancing our field as we propel an art criticism you can believe in.

– Sky Goodden, editor

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How to Be an Unprofessional Artist

BY ANDREW BERARDINI



Bruce Davidson, "USA. New York City. 1959. Brooklyn Gang." Courtesy Magnum Photos.

No one likes being called an amateur, a dilettante, a dabbler.

"Unprofessional" is an easy insult.

The professional always makes the right moves, knows the right thing to say, the right name to check. Controlled and measured, the professional never fucks the wrong person or drinks too much at the party. They never weep at the opening, never lay in bed for days too depressed, sick, broken to move. They say about the professional, "so easy to work with" or "so exacting but brilliant." The professional takes advantage from every encounter, employs every new acquaintance as a contact, always hits the deadline. When asked about their work, they know what to say, a few lines of explanation sprinkled with enough filigreed intrigue to allude to abysses of research, the mysteries of making. They answer emails in minutes. Their PowerPoints are super crisp. Look at their website, so clean, so modern, so very *pro*.

You don't feel like any of these things.

You are hungry, tired, overworked. You drank too much at the party and then slept with the wrong person, and then the really wrong person. You missed the deadline, it just

thrushed past with a whoosh. Hustlers around you disappear into wealth and fame. Your dealer tells you to make more with red, those red ones are really selling. Maybe, she says, you make only the red ones for a while? Your student skips class to go to an art fair. The most pressing collectors are the ones holding your student loans. They keep calling, you wish you could trade them a drawing. It can take days to answer the simplest email. Your website, if it exists, is in shambles.

You wander. You doubt. You change styles, media, cities. You experiment, you fail. Again. And again.

Unprofessional most literally means “below or contrary to the standards of a paid occupation.” Who makes the standards? Is everyone paid? Fairly? Is being an artist a job or something else? Who sets these standards? Do you wish to be standardized?

Art and success.

So easy to cocktail those two words together into “professionalism.” Pull up a famous artist’s CV and work from the beginning. Does success look like a sculpture plunked outside the Palace at Versailles? Is it a biennial, a prize, a blue-chip dealer? Is it the cover of a magazine, a thick, chunky retrospective catalogue? Even more evasive things just glanced, the luxury sedan like a bullet, shiny and hard, that the aging photographer bought after he dumped his smallish gallery and long-term partner, for a bigger dealer and a younger girlfriend, shiny and hard as his car; or perhaps, the off-hand mention of a domestic servant, a personal chef, the third nanny, the smallest chink in the opacity of wealth, so very far from the roaches scurrying in your kitchen sink and the fact that you’ve eaten nothing but mashed pumpkin and cigarettes for a month.

This did not feel professional, but it’s true. These things you experienced to be an artist.

Your body of work is a mark of your passages, the richest of your thoughts and the deepest of your emotions. Simply manifesting this into art is hard enough, but today you feel like you need to be professional. The pressure and penury makes you nervous and cautious. What can you make that will take the iron of poverty from your flesh, that will make this feel less like a terrible mistake?

*Can't you tell by my clothes I never made it
Can't you hear that my songs just won't sing
Can't you see in my eyes that I hate it
Wasting twenty long years on a dream.*

Lee Hazlewood, "The Performer" (1973)

Somehow making money makes us feel for real. Money we can trade for food and shel-

ter, for time and space and materials to continue. These things are hard and pressing, but it's not the money that makes us real. We are real already.

Everyone can be an artist, not because they have a degree or they sell, but because they live life artfully, with skill and imagination, freedom and awareness.

But artists trade promissory notes and subsume authority into institutions for some outside validation. Proof to your beloveds they weren't crazy in supporting you financially, emotionally, spiritually. Later, broke, you exchange dreams for money, or even, later yet, make other people's dreams and trade those instead.

Collectors, they are *really* responding to the red ones.

The path is clear for the professional. BFA, MFA, Commercial Gallery, Museum. 5 Things Every Artist Has to Know About Getting a Gallery. 10 Easy Tips for Killing Your Studio Visit. 3 Totally Simple Steps to Art Stardom. Mix in a teaching appointment perhaps, a grant here, a residency there.

For the unprofessional, it isn't so narrowly defined. As Charles Bukowski wrote, the shortest distance between two points is often intolerable.

It's not that artists shouldn't be paid for their labor, but we ought to refuse the assignation of value and worth purely based on salability or the validation of institutions. Systems will always seek to swallow us. We must resist the efficiency of their gears with the softness of our humanity. Unprofessionalism is asserting our right to be human against this machine.

Fragile, weak, doubtful, bumbling, to be "unprofessional" is to simply be human. This does not mean acting without ethics, honesty, or basic kindness. These finer qualities can easily exist independent from how we trade our time for money.

Professionalism makes a person into a brand. The cynical think this has already happened: our slightest movement tracked for personalized advertisements, our declarations and photographs that we share with others all branded and branding, self-awareness as commerce. And though others can attempt to professionalize you, reduce your spirit to a slogan, a product, a logo, you do not have to do this to yourself.

For the time being we live under capitalism, but we don't have to be broken down into its systematic alienations, divisions, inequalities, reductions of all value to market-value.

In some ways, I was piqued to write this by Daniel S. Palmer's [recent essay](#) on hyper-professionalization just published in *Artnews*, which ends on an inspiring note: "In a moment of monotony and conformity, artists must reclaim their freedom."

He opens his essay with a young artist pitching a practised spiel, surrounded and

over-handled by art pros. This fails miserably to impress Daniel Palmer. Obviously, being a professional in this sense doesn't always work. It might have currency with those who are also hyper-professionalized like this particular emerging artist, churning through a system crafted for exactly such purposes. But it didn't work with Daniel Palmer, and it wouldn't work for me.

Such clear professionalism is crass, careerist, empty. Repulsive even. "Ambitious young artist" always sounded like an insult to me.

I see making art as the necessary expression of the human spirit. We all need to live, but when the acquisition of wealth becomes the primary endeavor, you are no longer an artist but a financier.

More than a gallerist or a manager, a dealer or an advisor, a critic or a curator, more than an army of assistants and a clutter of collectors, an artist needs the courage to act alone and a community that makes such acts more bearable. One that allows us to be vulnerable, inappropriate, to go rogue, go wild, act weird, and fail.

To be amateurs, dabblers, dilettantes.

An amateur is filled with love beyond compensation, the dabblers fearlessly go places they don't belong, the dilettantes happily lack the hidebound pretensions of experts. When we step out of the imposed confines of professionalism, we can be as open as students, able to flirt with other modes, to seek knowledge, experience, and value in our lives without limits.

Stripped away of institutional validation and the pressures of the market, we are free to be human, to be artists, to be unprofessional.

Misogyny and the Myth of the '90s at Mexico City's Kurimanzutto

BY KIMBERLEE CÓRDOVA



Dr. Lakra, "Untitled" (2014). Courtesy kurimanzutto, Mexico City. Photo: Omar Luis Olguin.

Kurimanzutto is a pristine, vaulted gallery in the San Miguel de Chapultepec neighborhood of Mexico City. As part of the recent exhibition *XYLAÑYNU. Taller de los Viernes*, cumbia music drifts over the guard onto the sidewalk, casting a nostalgic spell on the airy space.

The tropical rhythms flow from the radio of a parked car in the entranceway, its windows rolled down. The 2002 Skoda Octavia station wagon has been hand-painted Kelly green and bubble-gum pink, and has chicken bones dangling from an extended front windshield wiper. A gnarled two-by-four is strapped to the roof of the car and a baby's car seat is buckled into the back. The whole assemblage, titled *Autoconfusión* (2015), is a piece by Abraham Cruzvillegas. Just beyond, in the gallery's vine-draped atrium, lounge four Gabriel Kuri sculptures from his series *this, please* (2010). The vaguely corporate-looking slouched circles are finished with stubbed-out cigarettes wedged into their perforations and creases.

The conceptual jumping-off point for the show is a revisiting of the eponymous gather-

ings (*Taller de los Viernes* translates to “Friday meetings”) that took place at the home of Gabriel Orozco from 1987 to 1992. Curated by Guillermo Santamarina, the exhibit presents recent works by five artists: Orozco, Damian Ortega, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri, and Dr. Lakra (also known as Jeronimo Lopez Ramirez). These artists met for five years in what has been described as “a playful space of collective work, exchange of information and ideas, experimentations and coexistence.”

In theory, a curator’s statement contextualizes its show. Santamarina’s idiosyncratic piece, however, flings around red-herring declarations in a winking and theatrical un-logic. He appears to take to heart his own notion of the exhibition, that the creative process should be played like a game.

Contrary to the protests of this deliberately confusing text, the framing of the exhibition insinuates that Mexican contemporary art owes a credit to the legacy of the Taller de los Viernes and the work of these five artists as a starting point for the artistic practices we see today. It begins:

I declare that I care very little about the crowning via the promulgation of another (or even an undoubtedly-true-and-everyone-might-was-well-know-it) genealogy of contemporary art in this country [...] and even less so about the resulting elbow in the face. Or the little air guitars held up in glory of “ha, ha! I said it firsts.”

The statement reads like a nonsensical smoke screen thrown up to avoid accountability for conceptual holes and what looks like a deliberate lack of curating, prompting the question, why did Kurimanzutto think a curator was necessary for this commercial gallery exhibition?

Meanwhile, a vacuum where context should be provided makes Santamarina’s apparent humility difficult to take.

Informal artist gatherings can leave a lasting imprint on the artistic landscape of a place; they’re well worth reflection and documentation. It’s a tricky proposition to attempt this in a commercial space rather than a museum or cultural center, however, as commercial galleries utilize a shorthand or incomplete allusions to history for market gain. As a retrospective of the Taller, the Kurimanzutto show does not deliver any contextualization, no historic or anecdotal media. There are no images, ephemera, or texts relating to the gatherings. None of the work was produced in the years during which the Tallers were held (the oldest piece is from 2007, 15 years after the end of these gatherings). Similarly, there is nothing to explain why these artists’ production methods were important or unique in Mexico at the time the Taller was in session. No mention is made of the then-dominant mode of classic academy-style art making, or that pre-NAFTA Mexico was (for better or worse) effectively sealed off from the world commercially, academically, and artistically. The sole justification we are given for the exhibition

and the specific works included is an unspecified “game” for which the artists gathered and “proposed new works made in the last decade that have never been shown in Mexico.”

Perhaps the exhibition’s premise and execution could be forgiven if the timing wasn’t so conspicuous. However, the show was aligned with the Mexican artworld’s most visible moment internationally, the [Zona Maco](#) fair. No doubt this positioning was attractive to Kurimanzutto’s directors (José Kuri and Mónica Manzutto, from whom the gallery gets its hybrid name), as they work to underscore the myth of the Taller de los Viernes as the starting point of contemporary Mexican art, and their gallery as the seat of authority regarding contemporary art history in Mexico.

Certain aspects of the story are true. Gabriel Orozco did host these gatherings at his home in Tlapan from 1987-1992. Participation was limited, albeit informally to all five of the show’s participating artists as well as to Gabriel Kuri’s brother, José. In the late 1990s Orozco came up with the idea for a gallery in Mexico to represent his work. He recruited José Kuri and Monica Manzutto as directors, and, according to some, he retains part ownership (Kurimanzutto denies this). Today the space is one of the most prominent and powerful galleries not just in Mexico, but [in Latin America](#).

However, as Etgar Hernandez explains in [his review](#) of the show, the myth of the Taller as seminal to Mexican art today is a fabrication that was still congealing as dictum as recently as 2000. It seems unbelievable that anyone could maintain that the contemporary artistic production of an entire nation might be traced and reduced to the work of five artists. I regard this as a story told to justify the concentration of certain voices in the field by silencing the contributions of others through omission. When Santamarina claims not to care about coronations or accolades, it smacks of false modesty.

His curatorial approach, which he describes as “a game of parrhesia and theft,” is the equivalent of a curatorial exquisite corpse. Further contributing to the show’s visual confusion is his election to show only recent pieces, which leaves the presented works with little apparent dialogue between them, beyond the “[mere series of moments](#)” the artists spent together 30 years ago.

Artistic processes, media, and subjects are left to intermingle with all the complementary sophistication of a neighborhood potluck meal, but they’re lacking the charm. Gabriel Kuri’s *bilateral growth* (2013) sits swallowed between Santamarina’s wandering exercise of a text and *Untitled* (2014), Dr. Lakra’s visually domineering record collection. Orozco’s chromed balls, *GO1174* (undated), are placed almost apologetically, hung low and hidden behind his *Blind Signs* (2013) installation. The snowy Styrofoam spillage of Damian Ortega’s large vaginal cube *Paisagem* (2015) blocks the viewer from getting close enough to see Dr. Lakra’s collages of nude pinups, lost amid the white expanse of an enormous and otherwise blank gallery wall.

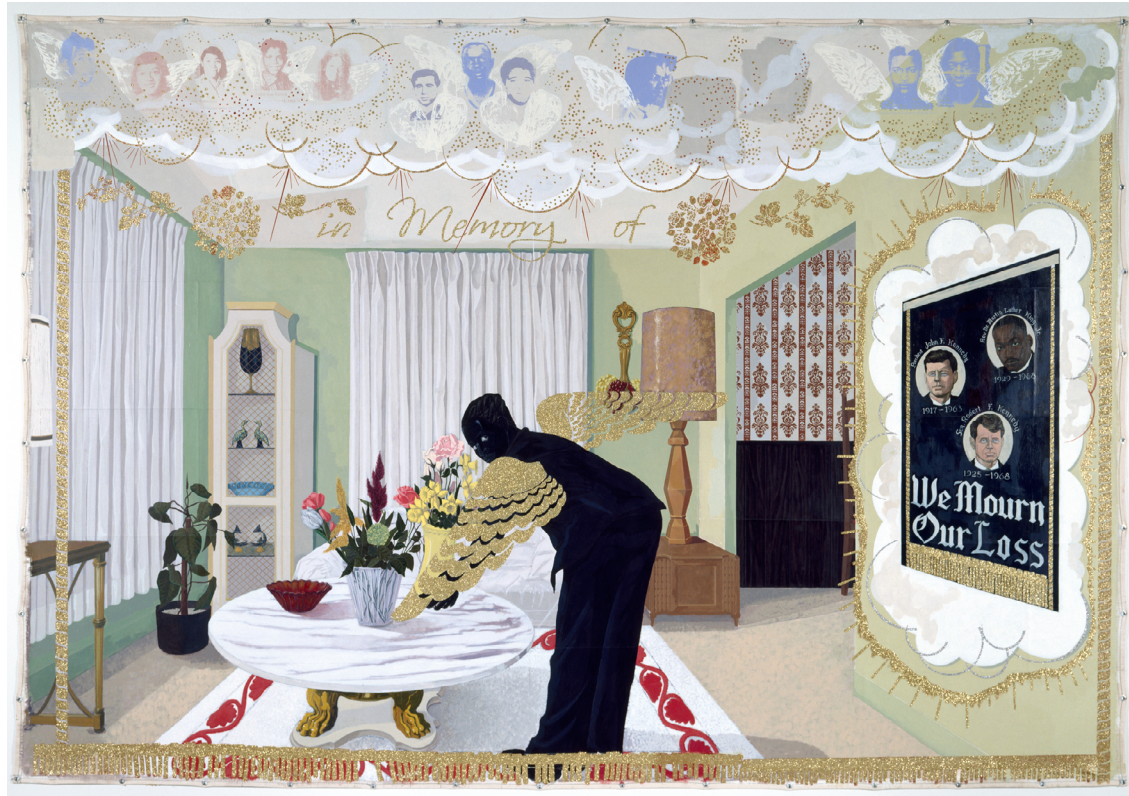
The accompanying promotional poster featuring five aging artists (and I assume the curator) in Peruvian quolla masks brandishing beers, books, and backpacks brings to mind [El Chavo del Ocho](#)'s later days played by an aging Chespirito. At least Kurimanzutto seems to be aware that the self-congratulatory myth of the Taller is growing dated. The yearlong Project Room program launched this September to exhibit the work of six young Mexican artists is evidence that the gallery knows that their *enfants terribles* of the 1990s are no longer *enfants*. But the motivations behind the Project Room are still unclear. Whether these emerging artists have the real support of the gallery or the gallery is just using their youthful voices as a relevance-refresher remains to be seen.

Taken in light of the gallery's exhibition history, *XYLAÑYNU* is a self-serving monument to the mythos behind an old boys' club. All-male origin myths are depressingly common in Mexico (and beyond), and it's business-as-usual to see few women artists represented at this gallery. Kurimanzutto's last two group shows were all male; there hasn't been any work by a woman in the main space since [Minerva Cuevas](#)'s exhibition in October 2015 (which came a full year after the previous such exhibition, by [Mariana Castillo Deball](#)). Worse was the two-year gap between [Marieta Chirulescu](#) (2013) and [Monika Sosnowska](#) (2011). Perhaps this is a rhetorical question, but why do we continue to accept a commercial gallery's program as a just-this-side of our art-historical canon when it so noticeably excludes women's voices?

Amazingly, sexism and nepotism are minor crimes in this exhibition. The real issue with *XYLAÑYNU. Taller de los Viernes* is the self-indulgent repackaging of a gallery's private history as the entire narrative of Mexican art. Any time a claim that bold is made, it should give us pause, whatever the relationships between the institution's founders and the artists it presents.

“If You Are Black, You Really Are Coming from Behind”: Orders of Visibility in Kerry James Marshall’s “Mastry”

BY RAÉL JERO SALLEY



Kerry James Marshall, “Souvenir I,” 1997. © Kerry James Marshall. Photo: Joe Ziolkowski.

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the collective imagination of black people in America in terms of freedom dreams, and these dreams are the primary media through which radical black culture is today produced.

Indeed, it may only be in dreams that American black people have been able to tell their stories. Our audiences can admire such narratives in images, observe the grammar, syntax, and composition of black dynamics. But our stories have yet to be fully told: these are tales that no American is prepared to fully see or hear.

Kerry James Marshall’s career is as an American mythologist. His stories are as disquieting as they are pretty, and lack narrative closure. They comprise a mix of the Western visual tradition, black experience, and notions of community.

Born in Alabama and raised in Watts, Los Angeles, Marshall has long committed himself

to artistic mastery, and his pictures and writings are unapologetically black. His visual forms make apparent the past and present conditions for blackness, including the fights for equality, in America and beyond. The work opposes marginalization, inside and outside of black communities, with a quiet, unveiled directness. Marshall is unrelenting in his critique of power, as demonstrated through a re-visioning of Americana.

Among black people, in 1963 as in 2016, there are deep misgivings about the institutions of the formal political realm. For Marshall, the artworld is no better: “As an African American, descended from a people enslaved to serve the interests and benefits of dominant ‘whites’, I am acutely aware of the weakness of my position within the wider world, and even more so in the institutional structure of the artworld,” wrote Marshall. “If you are black, you really are coming from behind.”

Marshall has recently opened a retrospective exhibition that contains highlights from nearly forty years of art making. [Kerry James Marshall: Mastry](#), now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (April 23 – September 25, 2016), and traveling to [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (October 25, 2016 – January 29, 2017), then the [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#) (March 12 – July 2, 2017). The exhibition focuses on paintings made over the past 35 years, from Marshall’s inaugural work, titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), to his most recent explorations of American history, ways of seeing, and imagination. The show’s three curators – Ian Alteveer (MET), [Helen Molesworth](#) (LA MOCA), and Dieter Roelstraete (MCA Chicago) – assemble a compilation of art and writings for the exhibition of record on Marshall’s work. At MCA Chicago, the show is enveloping, and there are moments of curatorial lyricism.

Blackness, art, and politics, together, form an American phenomenon so convoluted that it simultaneously demands and defies generality. There is no shortage of critical commentary on the links between these terms, but each insight seems to contradict the one that came before. For one thing, it is impossible to predicate the existence of a truly common experience of “blackness.” But what we can observe are specific and historically constituted *orders of visibility*.

In the modern world, artists and audiences inhabit political and cultural frameworks for being and seeing. This infrastructure of visibility continues to entrench roles in societies and communities. It is engrained in contours of political divides, and is perhaps most directly felt where blackness frames the memories and practices of everyday life. Invisibility is, of course, notable in Marshall’s *Invisible Man* (1980), but the theme of appearance has recurred throughout his career over the years: *Black Artist: Studio View* (2002), *SOB, SOB* (2003), *Black Painting* (2012), *Small Pin-Up, Lens Flare* (2013), and *Untitled Sofa Girl* (2014).

Retrospectives show progression over time. Marshall’s *Mastry* reveals how the artist’s creative activity includes a belief in abstraction, an ethic of industry, and a vision of futurity. The show moves from entry-level works exploring the materiality of paint, as in *Invisible Man* (1986), to the alchemy of “water and stone” apparent in intermediate

“If You Are Black, You Really Are Coming from Behind”: Orders of Visibility in Kerry James Marshall’s “Mastry”

BY RAÉL JERO SALLEY

tableaus, such as the *Souvenir* series (1997). The middle works pose new challenges to painting practice, and later, masterful pieces demonstrate a shift from alchemical virtuosity to a certain meaningless magic, apparent in *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* (2009) and *If they come in the morning* (2012). Unlike most retrospectives, which feel conclusive, *Mastry* assembles works that envision possibility.

An artist who has been a student of picture-making and art history for most of his life, Marshall initially trained with realist master [Charles White](#) in an era where the polemics of social realism and expressionist abstraction were still powerful in artistic discourse. Uncoupling from genre-specific tradition, Marshall makes space for a host of innovative approaches to painting. He is well known for depicting actual and imagined events from African-American history: complex and multilayered portrayals of youths, interiors, nudes, housing-estate gardens, and land- and seascapes. The work synthesizes different traditions and genres, and counters stereotypical representations of black people with different, empowering imagery. Engaging with issues of identity and individualism, he frequently depicts his figures in an opaque black that stylizes their appearance while also serving as a literal and rhetorical reference to the term “black,” and its diametric opposition to the “white” mainstream. Beyond this, the compositions magnify the contradictions within the artworld’s structures of visibility. Viewers are offered a highly personal perspective, including a critique of art-historical subjects. Marshall offers a way of seeing that is both transparent, recognizable, and darkly discrepant.

The creations in Marshall’s *Mastry* open both historical events and more contemporary moments to reverie. Among these are largescale paintings featuring black figures, defiant assertions of black experience throughout art and popular culture. These bold, nominal representations might be interpreted as giving pride of place to tired, huddled masses that usually have a slim chance of being seen in pictures on museum walls. While this may be true, these paintings do something far more exceptional: they produce a historiography, a lens through which to peer at the art of art’s history. The pictures even track historians as they develop visual discourse into disciplines, and show us the peculiar subject of blackness in America. Marshall critically examines the Western art-historical canon through its most canonical forms: the historical tableau, landscape, and portraiture. Each piece breathes the spirit of American rebellion: a feature of political liberty and part of an individual’s right, civic duty, and democratic responsibility. Marshall’s artworks riot against an allegedly natural order of things, an order of visibility (and invisibility) envisioned in colonial governance and maintained by modern visual culture.

A key theorist of the artistic history of blackness, Marshall explores the links between American art and racial politics in both image and text: “You have rightly understood the importance of historical awareness. This should not be limited to art objects alone, however, but should include the social, political, and economic circumstances under which their makers have labored,” Marshall wrote in *Young Artist To Be*, in 2006. He was making this observation at a time when a certain degree of optimism may have been

justified. The rise of a black senator from Illinois to the world's stage came with predictions of revolutionary, radical change for black people in America.

Following his years of making rebellious, unconventional work without recognition or financial reward, and emerging as an artist in Los Angeles, Marshall took residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem before establishing his home in Chicago; over the decades he grew in renown from that city's South Side. In 2008, I think a certain kind of struggle had ended for the artist (not un-coincidentally coalescing with Obama's departure from Chicago to the White House), and Marshall must have hated to see it go. In the context of his career, the termination of obscurity and material struggle was signaled by the artist's own reluctant realization that he had achieved success in America, but that now he would have to go the distance. However, the question of Marshall's struggle as a black American is not solved because he gained notoriety as an artist. Nor is it allayed because he is a distinguished emeritus professor, or because he manages to make a living through the art market. James Baldwin once wrote that nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. Divested of the affliction and crutch of material struggle, Marshall's toil was modulated to a more complex plane: the work of envisioning futures.

In 2008, Marshall was invited to mount a major retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. He responded with [*One True Thing: Meditations on a Black Aesthetic*](#). The exhibition was filled with new experimentation, and a range of media that demonstrated energy and eclecticism. Looking back now, it seems *One True Thing* announced an artistic endeavor that was getting richer and more complex. Over the past ten years, Marshall has produced increasingly innovative paintings that distinguish themselves from much of his earlier work and offer fresh analyses of contemporary society. *Mastry* culminates in the painter's unrelenting critique of visual power. This is especially pronounced in his work that refers to pop culture in the form of graphic novels, banners, and references to Pop art.

By revisiting traditional art-historical genres of painting, Marshall's recent works trace how culturally black practices of mixing metaphors, doubling media, and blurring boundaries between individual and community have exploded into the contemporary moment. His persistent retrieval of an art-historical context points to an active legacy of the visual that was established before the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, persisted through Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements, and endured the triumphs and sorrows of Obama-led hope. With a visual theory intensely colored by politics and poetics, Marshall rewires history to recover images that could not otherwise appear.

This revisionist history is subtly evident in *If they come in the morning* (2012), the first of a series of three paintings from his 2012 exhibition *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*. Organized using bands of color on either side of the canvas, the painting features a flat black on the left and an incident of green to the right, complementing the unabashed red hue that dominates the overall canvas. The oblate symmetry of this field

of red produces an unusually direct perceptual experience of the chromatic span. At eighteen feet across, its breadth is too wide for the viewer to take in the full scene and observe its details simultaneously. The visual vocabulary is Abstract Expressionist color field painting, of course. But the shifting values across the canvas reveal the phrase “If they come in the morning,” legible in large block letters punctuating the field. The painting asserts its authority through the use of scale and color. It employs formal references that, art-historically, invoke abstract dreams of the absolute and the infinite. Marshall’s response to such modernist orthodoxies is romantic, born under the black star of protests and boycotts. His work overturns what proponents of modern art – among them Charles White, Jacob Lawrence, Eldzier Cortor, Norman Lewis, Betye Saar, and Sam Gilliam – perceived as an unnatural order of things.

Marshall’s *Mastry* offers a new look at how each specific picture opens to a range of cultural and historical references, new ways of seeing. Whatever the visual questions, they are critically oriented. He demonstrates that art-making and visual discourses are still encumbered by the elitism of the Royal Academy that set the terms in the 18th century. These pictures re-imagine the lives and loves of black people as they inhabit a sphere that refuses the modern world’s seemingly permanent state of racialized controversy and violence.

Blackness exceeds color. Blackness is a way of referring to what is unseen, excluded, and marginalized: the people, the places and ideas that determine the texture and boundaries of the dominant order, as well as its associated privileges and communities. Careful viewers may see both insatiable abstractions and concrete facts in Marshall’s pictures. They may interpenetrate art, history, and social imaginaries. Marshall revolutionizes the instruments of dream-building and opens new ways of approaching the abolition, colonization, and revolution that is our shared history.

Any Plans After the Exhibition?

BY ORIT GAT



View from “*When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*,” Fondazione Prada, Venice, 2013.

The image above is an installation shot from *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*. It was a recreation of Harald Szeeman’s famous exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, shown in a Venetian Palace occupied by the Fondazione Prada. The 2013 exhibition’s curator, Germano Celant (who worked on it “in dialogue with” artist Thomas Demand and star architect Rem Koolhaas), conceived of the original 1969 presentation as a “readymade,” which he then “restaged” in Venice. The 2013 show presented the same artworks as Szeeman’s original and the arrangement winked at the Bern one, with lines on the floor demarcating the organization of the space at the Kunsthalle Bern.

The subtitle of Szeeman’s show was “Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information.” *Attitudes* was revolutionary because it reflected a then-current mode of production (which included what we now refer to as Land Art, Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, and other proximate movements) that was immaterial. The word *information* in the exhibition’s title is especially crucial here, since Szeemann’s interest was not necessarily in showing work, per se: it was in showing working processes. Fast forward to 2013, where a dematerialized attitude takes the form of objects once more.

Attitudes was far from the first exhibition to have been restaged. There was *Other Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2014, the title's "other" connoting that the show reexamined the historical *Primary Structures: Young American and British Sculptors* from 1966 at the same museum. And in 2012, the Brooklyn Museum mounted *Materializing Six Years: Lucy Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*. Focusing on Lippard's influential book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972*, the show included artworks from the time, alongside ephemera from exhibitions of that period, catalogues, artists' books, and so on. While Lippard centered on the political contexts and possibilities of the art she was analyzing, the Brooklyn Museum exhibition cordoned off the sections dealing with "politics" and "feminism," leaving the main stage to the art objects and vitrines of collectibles. Forty years, give or take, is apparently the amount of time it takes to shift from "dematerialization" to "materialization."

A wave of restaged exhibitions is no accident. It operates in the context of a rising interest in contemporary curatorial practice (which many scholars credit Szeemann with defining) – and with it, a spike in research into exhibition histories. This makes a lot of sense: researching exhibitions means looking into the conditions under which art is shown and produced. Yes, we should think through the exhibition as a format: there is still a lot to say about the roles different kinds of exhibitions – solo, thematic group show, commercial versus nonprofit, international biennials, the list goes on – play in the production of art and establishing the value of artists and their work. But I would like to argue that we also need to rethink the way the artworld has established the exhibition as the central experience and means of viewing art.

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One of the main ways we see art today is in a small square on a screen. Research begins online and it often begins with a series of thumbnails. Much of the contemporary experience of art is mediated via images, but somehow that does not constitute seeing art – because it's done in front of a screen, because it means looking at copies of copies, because it does not involve a physical presence in an art space. "Art exists in a kind of eternity of display," writes Brian O'Doherty in *Inside the White Cube*. He was right then and he's still right. The question today is what could constitute "display." (I relish how great this word is in this context because it's used just as often to discuss art and screen technology.)

Technology changes the way artworks circulate. One day an exhibition could be sent to an institution via email. Scratch that, it already happened. A video file is sent for a screening program, a high-resolution .tiff is printed at a local printer by a museum. This is happening with more object-oriented mediums, too, and we'll see more .stl files 3D printed as exhibition copies, alongside more editioned sculpture work. We are currently living through a much more substantial dematerialization of art than the one Lippard

discussed, and among the primary responses of the artworld is rarefication. So any work that can be infinitely reproducible is sold in editions. A gallery's letterhead on a certificate of authenticity is where the value now lies: Can there be a more dematerialized object?

These strategies of rarity prove that technology has yet to – cannot – cancel our object obsession. But what constitutes looking at these objects today? A curator or an art critic will be given a viewing copy of a video work by a gallery: Does that constitute watching the work? No, if it's a video installation that requires a certain environment, or a multi-channel presentation. But much video work at the moment is narrative, single-channel presentation. We rent it from Electronic Art Intermix and Lux. We stream it on Ubuweb. We view it on internet platforms like Opening Times Digital Art Commissions, Vdrome (organized by the magazine *Mousse*), and *The White Review's* White Screen – though both White Screen and Vdrome only screen every given work for a period or a month or two weeks, respectively, abiding by the gallery system's rarification mechanism by not making the work fully available. This is not a criticism per se: both platforms make a huge contribution – and it's not a coincidence that they are organized by publications – in promoting new writing on moving-image work by commissioning essays in conjunction with the screening. The temporary presentation facilitates questions of rights acquisition, server space, and reproducibility; it translates the standards of the offline exhibition to sort through complex issues of online circulation.

Seeing art onscreen has become one of the main ways in which we are exposed to both contemporary and historic work. But viewing art is still defined by the gallery-dependent experience. Even with the rise of numerous platforms for the presentation of art online, there is still no rigorous criticism of work presented solely on the internet. And though I am not advocating for critics writing reviews of exhibitions based on installation shots, criticism needs to be expanded beyond the gallery. It hasn't: though art viewers may feel that art can happen online, the significant conversation happens offline. It's the belief that the event brings with it an encounter – with the work, with other viewers – that departs from the realms of immediacy, isolation, and insignificance (you're supposed to imagine a single person sitting in front of a screen looking at an image of a cat) that are often associated with the internet.

We should resist the popular imagination of how art circulates online by emphasizing an overall understanding, and understate the installation-shot feed. The notoriety achieved by a site like Contemporary Art Daily is the result of the current status of the installation shot, presented as a quick, fix-all solution to the problem of sound-bite viewing online, like sites that post "an image a day," divorced of all context. But the installation shot is too susceptible to cozying up with the art market: it values a white cube and work that requires only visual context (other work) rather than historical, textual, or performative material to accompany it. But to build a critical apparatus that responds truly to the way we see work online, the entire landscape of web-based engagement should be considered. It means that images, gifs, Vimeo links – and yes,

installation shots, too – are all mechanisms that inform contemporary art. It means to discuss the web as what it is for contemporary art: a space for dissemination and production concurrently.

3

New York-based nonprofit Independent Curators International (ICI), whose mission is to produce exhibitions, events, publications, and research that posit the curator and his/her role as organizer at their center, began to circulate exhibitions in a box in 2010. Described in the press release as “charged with a do-it-yourself imperative,” each box is a collection of exhibits – small artworks, videos, soundworks, text works, ephemera, and archival matter – that could be packed up and shipped to art institutions across the world. Assembled by artists, curators, and historians, the boxes provide a cost-efficient point of access to the discourses that take place in the global artworld. (The first exhibition in a box, by the way, focused on Harald Szeemann’s Documenta 5.) That they centralize knowledge and deemphasize the individual needs of different institutions in favor of a well-worn product is negated by the idea that the ordering institutions can install the boxed exhibition at their discretion.

The exhibition in a box couldn’t have happened without a fight undertaken by minimalism and conceptualism – and largely won. The separation of the work from the object dates back decades: milestones like Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects” (1965), Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965), or Dan Flavin’s use of store-bought material (and inclusion of instruction for their readymade replacement in case of a damaged fixture) allow for an exhibition of ephemera, of copies, of small-scale artifacts meant to circulate easily. What was so revolutionary about conceptualism is now flattened to become not “specific objects,” but rather, “almost-objects”: objects that depend on the exhibition space to define them as something worth looking at. To define them as art. There’s a lasting impact to this: the intellectual shift dissociating the art from the object defines the way we discuss contemporary art, and yet the importance of the museum as a site to validate the work as art has not been diminished at all. This is where Carl Andre meets Rirkrit Tiravanija’s pad Thai meets a certain urinal (or fountain) meets abstract painting. The reliance on the context of the institutional walls, floors, or screening rooms allows for easy recognition of the work as art.

There’s still work to be done with the exhibition format, but much more to discuss in what happens to art outside the exhibition space. And for that, we may need to discuss what happens after the exhibition. The term – call it “exhibition,” “show,” “presentation,” or any other synonym used to avoid sounding repetitive – communicates too little. An exhibition is basically an event: even if it’s on view for five weeks or three months (which seems to be the cookie-cutter standard for galleries and museums, respectively), most visitors will only see it once. This event-ness plays into the hands of the market. It allows for nonprofits and museums to show artists they cannot afford to collect

(while enhancing the value of the work by way of institutional affiliation), adding the loan agreement from a private collection to the certificate of authenticity in the category of pieces of paper that assert and build value. Globalization has also played an important role in the financial aspects of the exhibition, especially where cultural tourism is involved (I am not the first to point this out in the context of the rise of international biennials), but also in the mushrooming of multinational galleries.

Exhibition histories, as a subject of research, relies on the importance and potential of looking at the exhibition as the context in which art is produced, but “the subject of exhibitions tends more and more to be not so much the exhibition of works of art, as the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art. [...] So it is true that the exhibition weighs in as its own subject, and its own subject as a work of art,” as Daniel Buren wrote in the catalogue for Documenta 5. Szeemann was criticized for asserting too much authorship in his Documenta. That curatorial authorship anxiety has not diminished with the widespread professionalization of curating as a practice of knowledge-production. The exhibition does have an important role as a space for dialogue but the arm-twisting to “generate meaning” – and to generate meaning at least four times a year of working in an institution – has created a highly regulated, professionalized curatorial practice that is marked by a pressure to produce exhibitions. And at times they feel like a tree falling in the wood: an event without viewers (save for an e-flux announcement that safely places it in a history).

Is the exhibition the best we’ve come up with? It would be very provocative of me to say, “let’s stop making exhibitions” and that’s not what I’m advocating. But there is a problem of overproduction of exhibitions in contemporary art. The internet will not be a solution to the overabundance of biennials, but it could be one space to engage with work that escapes the confines of the event. Curatorial practice has adopted the enhanced meaning the term has acquired as it has been distanced from “caring for art” and overtaken by “curated” wine lists. An expanded idea of curating is now understood to encompass much more than exhibition-making: it includes public programming, editorial work, educational initiatives, the curating of screening series, and so on. Maybe the exhibition needs to pass through a similar deflation as a term. Maybe once we see the term “exhibition” exhausted (as the overused “curating” has become in the last decade) we’ll see a way out of the event.

4

One of the iconic works in Szeemann’s “Attitudes” was Walter De Maria’s *Art by Telephone* (1969). It included a phone with a sheet of paper in front of it reading, “If this telephone rings, you may answer it. Walter De Maria is on the line and would like to talk to you.” It’s a work that requires an institutional setting (De Maria calling random numbers off the phone booth would hardly be the same work) and uses it, rather than relies on it: a daily object (phone) and activity (picking it up) morphing into a singular expe-

rience because of the set up in the exhibition. *Art by Telephone* rang on the opening night of the Venice version of “Attitude.” Miuccia Prada was the first to answer. The way I imagine their conversation, it began with – maybe after some pleasantries – De Maria asking Prada what the exhibition looked like. He would ask, though he already knows.

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Friends Among Us: Reflections on the Value and Risk of Nepotism in Art

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY



Grace Hartigan with Helen Frankenthaler, 1952. Photo: Walter Silver. Image Courtesy of George Silver and Irving Sandler.

Corazon del Sol had just arrived in Lisbon, to an apartment she left in the early 2010s, not long after losing someone close. She spent her first night there dreaming about intimacy, she told me over Skype. She woke up tired. “Understandable,” I said. I hadn’t spoken with Del Sol for two months, not since she left L.A. in September 2015. I wanted to know about the time she’d spent in residence at Skogen, in Gothenberg, Sweden. The topic of the residency had been “The Personal is Political,” not a new notion but an especially relevant one, given the artworld’s ongoing obsession with professionalism. “Can’t we release ourselves from the formality that’s become so important to us,” Del Sol asked, “and accept that our personal experiences aren’t separate from our professional ones?” Then we were off again on one of our frequent conversations about how vulnerability and authority can – and should be permitted to – coexist.

Del Sol is among a growing number of artists I no longer feel comfortable writing about in critical contexts, and certainly not without a full disclosure. I met her in 2012. I was writing about a show she co-curated about the legacy of her grandmother, gallerist Eugenia Butler, who had given a handful of now-iconic Conceptualists their start. The show, a pop-up installed in a vacated West Hollywood storefront, had mirrors every-

where, left over from whatever retail tenant had been there last. You could stand in a back corner and look up towards the ceiling to see reflections of art elsewhere: by Dieter Roth, James Lee Byars, John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler. On Saturday afternoons, Del Sol hosted picnics, with blankets laid out on the floor. I referenced the show's anarchic energy in my writing as Del Sol transitioned from subject to friend.

Critic Jonathan Jones does not believe writers and artists should be friends. "This is a great time to be an art critic," he writes in a short 2007 essay for *The Guardian*, "with so many egos to puncture. All that's stopping us is friendship." Friendship "corrupts," he says; it makes him distrust his judgment. He's not alone: Robert Hughes famously took an adversarial position toward many of his artist-subjects; and critic Erica Jeal considers it "creepy" to begin a friendship by taking notes and making pronouncements about that person's work.

I distrust my judgment often, sometimes for reasons that have nothing to do with personal relationships. Artists with overinflated market prices make me cranky; I've judged work by Urs Fischer and Matthew Barney too harshly before seeing it, because I disliked the way press releases trumpeted them as heroic; sometimes I praise shows at unconventional, "alt" spaces too enthusiastically because I want such spaces to succeed. For the first five years of my career, these kinds of biases worried me most, as I largely felt like a fly on the wall, a quiet observer. Then, quickly, as if I'd slid through an invisible wall, this changed. I didn't just "know" the scene; I was in it. Conversations with artists who interested me began to continue long after I'd filed an essay or interview. "Corrupting" friendships became my routine concern.

Friendships have infected art writing at least since the days of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), a man (often cited as "the first art historian") who based much of his tome *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550) on gossip gleaned from friends in the know. Vasari refers to his personal relationships sparingly, preferring to play omniscient narrator, but it's well understood that he favored his contemporaries in Florence, and attributed to them the advancements of the Renaissance.

Indeed, since art criticism became a field of its own in the later 18th century, critics have resisted revealing bias. Think of John Ruskin calling his close friend Edward Burne-Jones "gigantic," or praising J.M.W. Turner in the commanding third person while avidly collecting the painter's work (Ruskin owned 300 Turner paintings at the time of his death).

Art criticism, and art history by association, is frequently written by insiders reluctant to admit how "inside" they are. Readers receive a streamlined, neutral-sounding version of what matters and why. This adaptation can mislead, and read less interestingly than one citing the mess of association and the path to revelation. If we weren't so eager to present art as serious, or to conform to existing conventions of newspaper or magazine criticism (objective, authoritative), we might be better positioned to convey a compel-

ling depiction of art's pull. It's unfortunate that our notions of transparency and authority rarely go hand-in-hand.

When I first wrote about the exhibition Del Sol curated, I found navigating her subject, Eugenia Butler, challenging. Butler's programming was wildly experimental, and she'd done strange performances outside of her gallery (for instance she staged her own funeral, and had nude models parade down the stairs of her home). In 1970, she brought as her date to a LACMA opening one of her artists, who goes by "Adam II, the Late Paul Cotton." He wore a bunny suit cut open to expose his genitals and carried a tray of marijuana (they were escorted out). The two began an affair around that time, and the dissolution of Eugenia Butler Gallery corresponded with the end of Butler's marriage. Her husband, a lawyer and art collector, challenged his wife's sanity in his effort to control her business and records. Butler wrote angry, sarcastic letters to people who sided with her husband, sometimes appearing unhinged.

In the high artworld, "crazy" women who no longer have power are still too quickly dismissed. I tried to write about Butler in a way that acknowledged her intensities and the bold choices as part of her influential work. Then, when the article appeared online, the headline read, "How a Crazy Gallerist Inspires the L.A. Artworld." I emailed my editor, who replaced "Crazy" with "Wacky," an imperfect fix.

Del Sol, who had never experienced Conceptual art outside the shadow of her family's complexities, didn't seem to mind. She was keenly interested in the way life stories bleed into art stories, and the difficulties involved in narrating that indistinction.

The first time I felt misled by a piece of criticism was in 2008, when *L.A. Times* art critic Christopher Knight published [a memorable review](#) of *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* at the Hammer Museum. The review suggests Walker "queers the racial discourse" with art that blurs violent realities into racialized fantasies. Knight also claims an overlooked predecessor to Walker, L.A. painter Lari Pittman, a queer artist who used pre-Victorian silhouettes in the 1980s, before Walker did. He declares Pittman's omission a serious failing.

Initially, I barely noticed the "full disclosure" line near the end, where Knight assures readers he brought up this "elision" of Pittman, not because "Pittman is a friend but because it is emblematic of the way Los Angeles artists regularly disappear from American art history." That line only became important to me in retrospect, when I began to realize the extent of Pittman and Knight's friendship. Had a major critic compelled me to think about the queerness of Kara Walker because he wanted to give a friend a fair shake? If so, I would have preferred to know that from the start. Then the review, already strange and impassioned, would have given a self-aware glimpse into how personal closeness affects expertise.

At the time our friendship began, the only work of Del Sol's that I had personally seen were cakes she had baked in the shape of heads. She had brought them to a charged panel discussion held in response to a controversial Marina Abramović performance, in which heads of low-paid performers served as centerpieces at a MOCA gala. Del Sol meant for the cakes to counter the animosity.

So in late 2014, when she began preparing for her first solo show at a commercial gallery, my idea of her art mostly involved spontaneous interventions. I had no idea how this would manifest in a gallery setting. The show, a multi-generational exhibition at [The BOX](#) in downtown L.A., would include art from her grandmother's gallery, some surprisingly confessional Conceptual work by her mother, and pieces of her own. Preparing for it proved an excavation. Del Sol dug through piles of her mother's drawings, including those from dream journals. She discovered that she and her mom had parallel recurring dreams involving a marble staircase in her grandmother's home. Both of them had hidden under it as children to escape the intensities of a family life in which psychological and physical abuses ran rampant. As late as May, less than two months before the show's opening, Del Sol still had no clear notion of what the exhibition would look like.

I spent one evening sitting on her couch and paging through sketches of that space beneath the stairs. She had wanted to make a version of that space that was dimensional, claustrophobic. I wondered whether a flatter, more minimal approach might work.

The night her show opened, I saw the shape of that work laid out on the floor in cool, checkered marble. I didn't feel any ownership of it, but I did feel connected.

Clement Greenberg, often privy to the processes of artists, never used the term "full disclosure" in his writing. He would on rare occasion say "a friend" (for instance, the clause "as one who was a friend of Pollock's" appears in an essay published in 1960, four years after Pollock's death). In the 1950s, artists used to invite Greenberg to come see their work a few weeks before an exhibition opened. He would tell them what he thought, a pre-critique from the best-known American art critic. He and painter Grace Hartigan had their first major falling out this way. He didn't like her new work when he went to visit her studio in 1954, before her second solo exhibition at [Tibor de Nagy Gallery](#). She had introduced vague traces of representational imagery – a regression, thought Greenberg, who saw abstraction as "advanced." In her journal, Hartigan describes hurling cups, saucers, and "glasses or whatever" after the critic as he left.

Because she considered Greenberg's then-lover Helen Frankenthaler a friend, Hartigan decided to send a letter to the critic to clear the air. "Admittedly my attitude toward you is loaded way beyond the point of intellectual disagreement," she began. "I had

unreasonable respect for you and your judgment. Plus whatever complications always exist between a man and a woman.”

That same year, 1954, Hartigan wrote in her journal about a dinner she attended at Greenberg and Frankenthaler’s home: “Clem got on his stick about ‘women painters’. [...] He said he wants to be the contemporary of the first great woman painter. What shit – he’d be the first to attack.” “Clem” never wrote about Hartigan again, and her friendship with Frankenthaler cooled until around 1957, when Greenberg and Frankenthaler broke up.

Perhaps in Greenberg’s eyes, Frankenthaler was the first great women painter. His 1960 essay “Louis and Noland,” he explains that artists Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland abruptly changed their approach to painting after seeing Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea* (1952), an expanse of stains on raw canvas that looked more like an avant-garde bouquet than landscape. Because of this anecdote, Frankenthaler has frequently been historicized as the forerunner of Color Field painting, or what Greenberg termed “post-painterly abstraction.”

Frankenthaler found this version of events discomfiting. When art historian Alan Solomon asked her about her influence on Morris Louis during a 1966 interview for National Entertainment Television, she said, “It’s very funny to talk about. [...] I have to do it delicately.”

It’s not a bad story to be part of, one in which a great male critic credits you with a sea change in 20th-century abstraction. But this narrative of influence puts Frankenthaler forever at the mercy of her then-boyfriend’s idea of lineage.

Young critics often perpetuate this sort of one-begets-another narrative, usually because they’re mimicking reviews they’ve read in art magazines. They validate an artist by calling up iconic references: “Picasso on acid,” “the Andy Warhol of the digital age,” “Robert Adams meets Martin Puryear,” etc. Endorsing new artists via already established ones demonstrates you know your art history; following the form used by established critics allows you to pose as an “expert” before you are one. It also means the same stories get told over and over.

In January 2015, I met a painter, Dustin Metz, for coffee. I had just written about a gallery show in which Frances Picabia and Jorge Immendorf paintings hung alongside “Post-Internet” art, suggesting the former begat the latter. Metz had a more critical take on the show than I did. He saw flimsiness in the younger painters’ craft, whereas I’d wanted to embrace the curatorial narrative of progress, a narrative that makes for a tight storyline (something we’re less interested in here, but you’ll bear with me).

Such conversations with artists have lately become a more intentional part of my writing process. I already distrust the conventions and biases that shape my judgments, so why not test them before committing them to print?

I received a text message from Del Sol in early June with a video clip attached: two of her grandparent's regal chairs in a boat on undulating water. She had been putting family valuables out to sea. The video, eventually installed in a concrete hallway outside The Box's main gallery, struck me as both homage and a purge. Traces of Eugenia Butler's iconoclasm were present, and stand-ins for patriarch and matriarch were floating away. I probably would have read this into the work even without the privilege of background knowledge. Certainly, I would have appreciated the deceptively serene aesthetic.

What my knowledge did give me was an added sense of vested excitement: before it existed, I had hoped this work could sensually convey the darkness and beauty of intergenerational influence. That it succeeded made me feel glad for a friend but also optimistic that conversations I'd personally engaged in could have wider reach.

In her 1973 history of early Conceptualism, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, writer Lucy Lippard treats friendships as part of her methodology. Relationships shape her work because she wants them to. She includes a collaboration with Douglas Huebler, and quotes artist-friends extensively. She revised the book's introduction in the mid-1990s, more explicitly foregrounding her personal position. She notes that she was married to Robert Ryman, a process-oriented minimalist, when her interest in Conceptualism began. Her close friends included Sol Lewitt, Eva Hesse, Sylvia and Robert Mangold; her larger circle included Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Joseph Kosuth. These friendships, along with her leftist politics, informed her belief in Conceptualism as a potential "tabula rasa" that could separate art from the "system" or "establishment."

In retrospect, Lippard realizes her thinking was naïvely utopian, but not entirely misguided. She holds out hope that the "most exciting 'art' might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art." In thoroughly detailing her own relationships, she attempts an honest picture of how much she wanted from the work her friends were making.

Del Sol's exhibition at The Box included a video game she'd made in a matter of months, with the help of a designer and a programmer. It was installed in a side gallery, on a monitor in front of velvety pink pillows for players to sit on. She initially meant for the game to be a Mario Brothers-style experience, with her grandmother as the avatar. This subject would progress through "levels" meant to correspond to artworld status markers (attention from museum curators, sales to international collectors). Instead, it became something of a dreamscape, where austere Minimalist fixtures coexist with sexualized fantasies and lunar landscapes.

The game ends when the silver, three-legged avatar falls over because the collaborators hadn't devised a way to get the avatar back up in time for the show's open. But a skilled player can keep moving through the vignettes indefinitely. There is no goal beyond this.

This aspect, and another one (a vignette featuring flying, cartoonish vaginas that caused some debate and stirred a protest within the gaming community) made for a good story. I pitched it to an editor, emphasizing the gender dynamic and body-phobia that exists in the artworld as well the gaming world.

What I wrote had a participatory feel to it, but it did not openly acknowledge my friendship with Del Sol. I had so little space to get the bones of the story across, I opted not to "fully disclose." This omission was problematic, though I didn't overthink it until after I'd submitted. I had an agenda in writing this piece. I associated the game with long conversations about how shame around vulnerability – including the vulnerability of sexuality – keeps us from speaking openly about how personal experiences affect our work. I wanted to learn how to narrate that dynamic accessibly. Omitting my own involvement undercut that goal.

Recently, over late-night drinks with another writer, I confessed my failure of transparency regarding this feature and a few others. My colleague said she thought writers should adopt a voice that conveys their personal stake, even just in the way it "sounds." I agreed with her. However, voice is not enough. We should also fully admit to our relationships, so that readers aren't left peering between the lines, detecting or projecting a bias of their own. Some writers do this quite well (Orit Gat with [efficient clarity](#), Bruce Hainley with his [heady flippancy](#)). Or there's Lippard, who manages to always sound serious even when she's naming friends. Those who do it best, however (Eileen Myles, Chris Kraus, Maggie Nelson), are often deemed "experimental." Their self-exposing approach veers too close to memoir.

Still, too much criticism is written in the rote way: the critic dictates the situation to the reader who, if not an insider, has little hope of knowing where the writer stands. By sticking to this form, we limit the depth of the conversations we can have about art.

Deep conversations are not easy. As I try again to write about Del Sol's show, I realize how little I understand about the ways my personal interests blur into my reading of her exhibitions. But it's worth slogging through. My intimate engagement is what I have to offer readers. It's where my knowledge, and probably my authority, sources its voice.

“Please Hold Your Questions”: A Culture of Asking Questions as Criticism and Authority

BY RENAN LARU-AN



Maurizio Cattelan, "Novecento," 1997. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin.

At the dinner table, my father asked the priest if he could pour him a warm Coke. The priest, a distant family relative and an occasional visitor, replied, "Coke is always served with ice." My father stared at him; the priest looked at his glass. The old man tilted the bottle of soda towards the young man's cup. Confused, the priest asked, "Do you have ice?"

*

Arts and culture claims questions as its truth-telling device. Questions are material. They concretize expressions and gestures of inquiry, resistance, criticality and reflexivity. They can be a gratuitous service to the project of emancipation. They call for action and solidarity, suggesting a quick connection to struggle.

It's good that there are questions. However, they must be qualified: Yes, questions are never wrong, but intelligible questions are right, better. Sometimes, they must be proper and appropriate in order to address something specific or someone familiar.

The arrival of a question at a terminus represents an answer, a solution, a conclusion. Questions that don't expect answers are theater without performances, lovers without bodies, an exhibition without spectators, houses without ghosts. Questions must reach their repository, and they should never be alone.

We wonder why questions are abundant, and where they are coming from. Maybe when Socrates met Phaedrus on a hot, summer day in Athens, questions came out of their pores! They were free and cheap indices of discourse. We can formulate questions at any time, in and with any condition. We may run out of them at a certain moment, but questions then figure themselves in the future – later, after the present. To field a question means to demonstrate discernment. We are discouraged to ask the same question twice: *That question has been asked*. A critique anchored in derivatives is not acceptable. *The universe is a question in itself; get something from it!* As long we have eros and heat, questions are limitless and tireless. We tap this, but never renew or recycle the fountain. We trust in questions. Socrates reminded us in *Phaedrus* to believe: discernment eventually arrives in the right way at the right time right in front of us. In case of unprecedented scarcity, we must not worry because questions will return.

The true art of questioning requires systematization. We are told that there is a place and time to perform them, where words can be properly enunciated and heard. *You ask your questions here, not there. You ask your questions later, not now*. Questions are cultivated inside the halls, surrounded by chairs, composed of warm bodies, and technologies of amplification. These are hospitable sites, accommodating. Questions sustain networks of care. But these mechanisms of support might also be subject to malevolent control. Speaking somewhere else is durational. No one can hear you, *from there*, so we follow a protocol. We ask questions after an event, after a lecture, an essay, after the keynote speech, approaching the microphone. It's rude to offer our questions before or during someone else's presentation. We are demanded to speak louder, to be clear and precise, to use the mic, listen to the answers, express our gratitude, seize the opportunity to ask, and stand at a designated podium or point. *Please limit your questions, so other members of the audience can ask their questions. Please come to the microphone at the center of the hall. Please ensure it's actually a question, and not just a statement!* It's part of our social contract as witnesses, as willing participants who agree to participate in an event, to be involved in an action, to be recipients. We call it a forum, a conference, a meeting, an assembly. There is care in this choreography. The stage is benevolent. We have been welcomed, amplified. All we need to do is to keep our work public, to never keep the labor of questioning to ourselves.

Questions are verifiable vectors in artistic and cultural practices. We consolidate our agency around an important question. We assert what we call an "autonomous" position when urgent questions assault our standing. Questions value the complexity of language and the complicatedness of speech. In a question, signs can be rearranged and replaced to elicit answers or responses. There is an order of words and urgencies in an interrogation. The question mark can strategically position a speaker's funda-

mentalism and essentialism, while convincing the audience of openness. This cloaking attracts us to questions. Questions appear in public with clothes. We sit through the show because we like watching the striptease.

Don't ask questions if you don't want to engage in a power play with the speaker. *I know where you're coming from, but... Please state your name and your (institutional) affiliation.* Questions are a rehearsal for infrastructure. Risking a question can bring with it accusations of cynicism, divisiveness, arrogance. Questions make you vulnerable to specific alignments. The efficacy of questions doesn't thrive in polarizing stances. These are weak points. To feel secure is important for questions. To dispatch a question indicates that a movement is really moving forward.

Questioning is turning into a regime. Cultural managers and self-managing workers have turned questions into the raw material of present-day production. Instructional: *I understand your question, but... Can you rephrase your question? Does that answer your question? We want the audience to ask questions.* Questions-as-criticism erode aimlessly in pedagogical markets. Flaccid criticality. Provocations: the rigor of privilege. Questions-as-criticism justifies questions-as-frontier. They are new territories of problematizing where previous tensions were integrated in misunderstanding. Flattened, business as usual. Interesting questions now share their currency with critique, doubling their primacy as subjects worthy of archiving, further study. The gold rush to the pedagogical turn in arts and culture defines a new form of ownership: that of questions. They are organized and managed within arts and culture, the hospice of questions. They trace the architecture of both benign and malignant networks. *We are growing. This is not the right time to ask such questions.* Truth-telling is not a function of questions anymore. Truth-telling belongs somewhere, not in our questions. Truth-telling used to be a province of the arts. Questions asked by and from the arts used to be incisive tools. With a dose of romanticism and nostalgia, we remember that questions used to facilitate collaboration and dialogue. (Maybe it's not true).

Asking questions, now, is a ministerial duty. *This is not the right forum.* Questions have been exhorted to constitute an elevated platform. *Do something with your question.* Residencies and workshops have reinforced the fantasy that questions are essentially a public commons. As pedagogical markets assume immunity, the affirmative solidarity of questions-as-criticism minimizes risk, vulnerability. Questions must promote concrete relationships and establish new platforms. We innovate questions because we want them to be sufficient, to already carry the answers, to charge us with histories, to map out our readings, to connect us to a future. We fail to apprehend the patterns of exchange, the politics of patronage that asking questions and performing criticality can often bring. We must imagine questions with question marks and answers.

In Search of Himself: Sky Glabush's Mimetic Practice Drifts Into the Neo-Modernist Trend

BY SKY GOODDEN



*Sky Glabush, "Storage Unit," 2015. All images courtesy of the artist and MKG127.
Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.*

Artists don't own the meaning of their work." *New York Times* critic [Roberta Smith](#) issued this controversial and affecting line to a full auditorium in Guelph, two years ago. It was, to my mind, her only assertion of value before she planted her elbows on the podium and submitted to questions like a student before a school nurse, seeking a probing that would confirm her sound body. This was the second [Shenkman lecture](#) in as many years to be delivered by a critic, and the second to fail its audience. (Dave Hickey delivered [a round offense](#) to the academe the year before). So Smith's claim gave me a private thrill, one that, as a critic, I kept quiet and prized.

[Sky Glabush](#)'s pursuit of mastery comes second to his pursuit of meaning, as he recurrently upends his practice to strike at essentializing questions anew. He's good at modeling himself after established forms (landscape painting, Fauvist self-portraiture, Modernist sculpture, naïve pottery and weavings) such that his success can be read as revolving mimeries within a conceptual constancy.

A [recent exhibition at Oakville Galleries](#) perpetuates this pattern. Showily departing

from the medium and genre he'd previously landed (large-scale realist painting in the style and tone of London, Ontario Regionalism, specifically that of Jack Chambers), Glabush grasps at neo-Modernist sculpture and self-taught tapestry weaving to ask a cardinal existentialism, "what is a self?" But the exhibition proves the potential fallibility of constant revolution.

Matthew Hyland, director of Oakville Galleries, walks me through the show's sun-streaked rooms and explains – with discernable hesitation – Glabush's spiritual motivations for the show, his Bahá'í Faith, perhaps his quest for selfhood within a religious community. (This aspect of the exhibition is notably missing from curator [Jon Davies's catalogue essay](#). It's touched on like a glancing). We circle modular sculptures cast beneath the warm natural light of Oakville's Gairloch Gallery (a romantic lakeshore landscape stretches out beyond the historic building's many windows. Artists push against these views or block them out, but Glabush has gamely embraced his environment). The artist's rough-hewn forms made of concrete, foam, wood, and tile, and his crude weavings with bleeding dyes, ground the galleries' domestic architecture.

Glabush doesn't own the meaning of his work, I remind myself. Whatever he laid down I am picking up strangely. *What Is a Self?* feels too distant in its earnest appeal, and, in its form, distractingly familiar. It's work that looks like work I've seen before, and its desire – his intent – to dive into Modernist forms in search of selfhood as opposed to objecthood strikes me as a misguided errand.

What do we do with Glabush's ability and will to change shape, to adopt with almost boastful ease yet another voice and another medium, when his latest mantle has him arriving late to a tired zeitgeist? How do we regard the mimicry of mimeses here, especially as we're directed to seek in this work essentializing truths? Is it possible to see selfhood, identity, even "purity" in echoing forms?

Part of Glabush's success, to date, has been sewn up in his biography. His tale risks becoming a brand, at this point, a compelling itinerancy, a narrative of self-evolution and reinvention, drifting and catching. David Balzer profiled him in a 2013 [Canadian Art feature](#) as "a man with an unruly and unorthodox childhood to match anything in Burroughs's memoir *Running With Scissors*." His story gets played out in a mosaic of exotic, unlikely sites, a maverick tale positioned in concert with an ever-changing practice. "Such stories may explain the itinerancy of Glabush's own career – jumping fearlessly and perhaps recklessly from one approach to another," Balzer writes. However, biography can be distracting.

And intention can be misleading. "As with many of his contemporaries, Glabush is engaged with the history of Modernism in art," writes Davies in his essay. A few problems obscure or pervert this Modernist citation, however, and the first of these is the volume and clamoring of Glabush's peers after this same referent. Too many artists are recently moving through the visual language of neo-Modernism (or its paler cousin, "[zombie formalism](#)") for this engagement to feel capable of "the push towards innovation" with which Davies characterizes its originating movement. There are others, too. Rachel

Whiteread, Louise Bourgeois, Doris Salcedo, Wade Guyton, Rachel Harrison, Alighiero Boetti: these names float through the rooms Glabush occupies. Concrete fills the negative spaces of chairs and tables (Whiteread); domestic furniture is buried in same, its ribcage peeking out (Salcedo); modular and iterative sculptures assume anthropomorphized postures, and suggest a ludic, haptic logic in their arrangement (Harrison). Slightly faded and wavy-patterned weavings hang near windows in a gesture to domesticity and process (a softening and personalizing of the Modernist grid and a blurring of boundary between art and craft). The list of associations to the contemporary and the historical risks crowding out Glabush's search for the self.

While Davies (both curator and author) recognizes Glabush's neo-Modernist cohort, he quickly gives way to the artist's idealistic motivations, quoting his desire to locate the individual within Modernism's abstract objecthood. The fact of neo-Modernism's contemporary currency – and the art public's growing fatigue with it – is largely unexamined. Instead the artist and his curator have decided to duck the reality of a trend and privilege the root reference, to drill down through the palimpsest to its foundation.

This wishful tactic underestimates our increasing literacy. We are adept at reading the pell of Modernist motifs, the cribbing of Modernism itself. We need an update but the references stay the same. Davies quotes Clement Greenberg (by seeming requisite) as being concerned with what was "essential, inherent, and irreducible to the medium in order to achieve a purity of form." But Greenberg grew out of his opinions, or contradicted himself, depending on the context. For instance he also wrote, "Art is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles." Perhaps this would have fit Glabush better?

Greenberg's relevance feels fairly moot, here. He's too often swimming around our contemporary moment without the mooring and context of his full argument, too often used to torque or ground, to burn and dodge, the Modernist image of the early aughts, to snare us some gravitas in a nostalgia as much driven by the market as our postmodern exhaustion.

Let's consider Glabush's personal seeking through a critic less materially essentializing, less obliquely revered. Remember when Jean Baudrillard issued the first critical upset of the new millennium with "The Conspiracy of Art"? He said something of relevance:

If everything becomes too obvious to be true, maybe there still is a chance for illusion. What lies hidden behind this falsely transparent world? Another kind of intelligence or a terminal lobotomy? (Modern) art managed to be a part of the accursed share, a kind of dramatic alternative to reality, by translating the rush of unreality in reality. But what could art possibly mean in a world that has already become hyperrealist, cool, transparent, marketable?

Baudrillard lays a card over Greenberg in the contemporary moment, reminding us that

Glabush's aesthetic lexicon isn't capable of "purity," at this point (and what an embarrassing word that is now, even). Modernism is silted with the oil of our fingers from too much handling, too much modeling after our own image. It strikes me as worryingly naïve or selfishly insistent to tag Modernism in the pursuit of seeking one's self, as though the world stopped turning at Gurdjieff.

But even if we burrow into Glabush's intention and nest ourselves in his project in the Modernist vernacular, I worry that we're working with the wrong tools for his end. Modernism arose as God was becoming dead. It gave rise as an alienated artist class, an apostasy embracing existentialism, that made objects they could hold onto, that they could measure against the fog of war and the chill of a machine-made century. Glabush's desire to locate spirituality or selfhood in this tradition renders these tools ineffective and uncharged. It also begs the question, "why?" Why work with these tools, and not make others?

It's hard to disregard the aspect of spiritualism in Glabush's intentions for this work, but it's difficult to root into. I think of Mark Tobey, a "mystic" American Modernist painter who converted to the Bahá'í Faith in 1918, though his images are marked more by his interest in Asian calligraphy than anything discernibly spiritual. Barnett Newman was insistent on his "zip" paintings' evocation of primal unconsciousness and the sublime – but also the Kabbalah, something that doesn't get discussed much in his oeuvre. There's a reason for this. Spirituality is elusive in the Modernist canon, partly because its allusion is almost certainly abstract, and partly because it jars with the aesthetic and ethos of the early Modernists' resolve.

What I *can* see in Glabush's effort is a man seeking home. It's the discernible rail connecting the strange shapes of his practice: his desire to acclimate to new environments, to communicate in different tongues, to root out the place where he could lay his head. Critics have been linking Glabush's mimetic practice to his peripatetic history for some years, now – because it lends itself to the easy narrative of a man in search of place. But in Glabush's most recent exhibition we see this desire not as a performed idea, not as a romantic hook, but as a determination so searing and unsparing it misled the work.

What *is* a self? I wish more exhibitions kicked a leg out over the cliff: that more shows felt this vulnerable in their intent (and not in that precious, over-long-titled, poetically-tilting way that so many pretend at). I wish we asked ourselves better questions and strained at real answers. But I mind the tired, over-worked channel that Glabush elected for his search. I wish it didn't read as something calculating, or corrupted, in its aesthetic cues. I wish Glabush wasn't working against a static canon for purposes so singular and grand; that he'd found a fresher field to set his tent.

The Renewed Focus and Acrid Targeting of Rachel Harrison at MoMA and Greene Naftali

BY MITCH SPEED



Rachel Harrison, "More News: A Situation," 2016. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Rachel Harrison's acidic colors, faux-finish surfaces, and otherwise unseemly media screech like saboteurs of good taste. Unlike a certain nascent presidential candidate, however, they don't mistake tackiness for sophistication. Instead, they scramble the two into a wonder of aesthetic neurosis, alive with self-knowledge. Now, in two simultaneous exhibitions, Harrison agitates an implacable social compulsion – that which forms between faith and material impediment. While one exhibition provides a setting for this conflict, the other offers an unsparing translation of its horrible convulsions.

A few years back, Rachel Harrison caught wind that the Virgin Mary had been spotted in a residential window, in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Jig-sawed by highways, New Jersey is an animate contradiction between the pastoral and poverty. When this apparition became news, Harrison set off for the small city, camera in hand. The resultant photographs skirt [Perth Amboy](#), and show the blessed window framed in cheap plastic and embedded in beige vinyl siding. Unlike tabloids, which cruelly lampoon faith, these photos subject it to kind of fabulist journalism. In each, human palms reach out to touch the glass, in the way of Baptist revivals. The faces attached to these hands

are hidden behind pooling reflections of cloud and sky. So the people become phantoms. Sometimes they reach through the window to touch its exterior side. In these moments they seem to be verifying their own architectural body – the only positive proof of social being in capitalist America. Made from cheap cardboard and dime-store bric-à-brac, the rest of *Perth Amboy* intertwines the spendthrift fantasy of childhood forts with a budget overture to Minimalist sculpture, and the quasi-spiritual gristle of consumer culture.

Half an hour South-West of MoMA, [More News: A Situation](#) finds Harrison coughing up the imbroglio of American politics, in a virtuosic nettle of readymade sculpture, social satire, and spatial fascination. Greene Naftali has the feeling of a stripped-down stock-trader's loft in some 1990s thriller. It's accessible through one ancient elevator, operated by attendants who seem unusually pleasant, considering the many hours they spend in an iron box. The gallery's secretive aura is emphasized in *More News*, with Harrison's name absent from press material. Some conjecture that she feels sheepish about this new work, which gapes at the most obvious subject – the stupidity of American politics. The exhibition is exquisitely dumb, like a pathetic party joke buoyed by perfectly droll timing.

As in *Perth Amboy*, Harrison's *More News* detects a knot of conflicted belief, and goes to work metamorphosing it. Now her subject is Donald Trump, and the piñatas caricaturing him that have provided a temporary bonanza – and poetic justice – for a niche group of craftspeople in Mexico and Los Angeles. Trump's stumpy bodies dangle like cured meat from a cats-cradle of fluorescent nylon cords. They are joined by toy cars in mesh nylon bags. Often the cords are pulled taught to the limestone floor by cinder blocks, and other times by chunks of foam faux-finished to mimic rock, and painted in caustic fades – a Harrison trademark. There are also red-painted tools, and Harrison's facsimile of Marcel Duchamp's readymade wine rack. Elsewhere, tiny Trumps peek out of a cardboard box, and an office waste-basket. Secret fantasies are whetted when he appears half-swaddled in a body bag of transparent plastic. This double resonance, between mass culture and a classical attention to vectors, rhythm, and spatial counterpoint, attends Harrison's work like an aura. But her sculptures have rarely been this focused, this acrid.

In his 2014 [New Yorker profile](#) on the artist, Peter Schjeldahl nimbly reflects the complexity of Harrison's work and her relationship to it. In language that would fit Auguste Rodin or Anthony Caro, he describes the sculptures shape-shifting in the round, as well as their "over-all, exacting rightness of form." But, what exactly is a "rightness of form?" It's as if he senses in Harrison's work an ineffable vision for gestalt, and is withholding further analysis, for fear of snuffing it. This perspective may seem quaintly religious until you notice the crowd of creedless young artists that swarm her. Following Harrison's participation in the landmark New Museum exhibition [Unmonumental](#) (2007), her signature rubble seemed to found art-school studios. I know this because I attended one at the time, nearly tripping over hunks of Styrofoam dressed up as psychedelic rock.

Earlier in the *New Yorker* profile, Harrison explains her scattershot dispersal of cultural material as a refusal to give us what we want, by which she means closed meaning. This ethos holds up in *Perth Amboy*, which mixes fabulated reportage and cynical realism, forming a complicated socio-geographical portrait. *More News*, on the other hand, edges very close to imaging the fate that bamboozled citizens inevitably come to want for dictators. The sculptures are the cartoon equivalents of morbid execution documents.

This lurking want for corporal justice was on my mind as I found myself at a fourth-of-July barbecue, falling into conversation with a Vietnam veteran. He explained that he had been struggling to write about the war. The problem wasn't PTSD. It was that an original reflection seemed impossible. "There are only so many ways to describe the sight of a man's head evaporating," he said, without humor. Harrison's Trump exhibition shares in this authorial conundrum. She has attempted to find a novel way of describing the most famous, and shamelessly hateful, talking head in America – and the desire to explode him is, perhaps, made too legible.

In taking on what appears to be a fool's errand, Harrison provides a cathartic release for so much political constipation. Aside from its hate, the problem with Trump's rhetoric is that its oily shapelessness slips all attempts at engagement. You can mock him, but you'll only be amplifying the spectacle. You can rage, but you'll just boil the waters that float his rhetoric. You can rigorously analyze, but you'll only enjoy the audience of a left-leaning choir. Smack whichever piñatas you like. Make their sweet innards rain. You'll never eviscerate them all. And even if you did, you'd be too busy gobbling candy to notice that the joke is still on you. Trump is not the source, but the symptom of a ghoulish social sickness. The cycle of implausible responses to his ascent makes your head spin.

Detractors of this show will say that in exchange for this catharsis, we lose the painterly nuance that has long set Harrison apart from her colleagues in the scrap heap of culture. But this is only true if you view the piñatas like thumbnails, as image culture has trained us to do. Closely encountered, they offer spectra of nuance. Sometimes, hair the color of Lipton noodle soup has been painted on. Other times, it's frilly-tissue appliqué. In one instance, the crossed arms of a white-faced whistling Trump dissolve like a relief into the blackness of his paper suit. His torso, in turn, dissolves into a chunky base the color of oxidized copper, turning the political gag into an essay about figurative sculpture, by way of the rough-hewn bases of Rodin and Michelangelo. So a plenum of aesthetic complexity is hidden, here, behind a very simple thought.

Also hidden are the identities of the artisans who crafted the cathartic bodies. Conceptually, this isn't much of a problem. But insofar as the credibility of Harrison's gesture is concerned, it could be. You have to wonder at the difference between appropriating a Duchamp readymade, and these handmade, culturally-specific objects. Maybe Harrison

kicked their makers a few extra grand in exchange for turning the objects into artworks that will likely sell for more money than these people make in months. Or maybe she didn't. How could we know?

Harrison's relationship to her materials betrays an elastic understanding of time and place. This is crucial to the work's fanciful levity. Back in *Perth Amboy*, a pile of fluorescent straws hidden behind one cardboard sheet could have been acquired in any dollar store, in 2011, 2003, or 1995. And then there's a miniature model of a robe-clad man gazing into a blue scholar's rock, which suggests a dual provenance: Canal Street shops, and a philosophical history lost on most visitors excepted as an Orientalist cliché. A bust of Marilyn Monroe, gorgeous in its wretched kitsch, peeks out of a cardboard box. Her hair is as orange as Trump's skin. Nearby, a generic model of a head-dressed Native American stares into a gaudily-framed landscape scene. Time folds, here. And the sparkle of American folk culture lingers at the borderline of innocence and social abjection. In one instance, Harrison calls up her inner Chris Marker, showing time slipping against itself through a pair of photos in which women analyze a tiny icon card of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The images are nearly identical, except for a slight perspectival shift. In moments like this, Harrison's facility with sensory nuance seems to unweight cumbersome topics like architecture, faith, and perception. She allows them to tickle, rather than smother, our attention.

One of the scariest things about Trump is that he does something similar, in his own way. Using a calibrated stupidity, he feeds voters their own fears, in a language that seems common – untouched by PR. This is what makes him such interesting material for Harrison. Always, her sculptures seem to witness the cramped and cluttered interchange between observant minds and reactive flesh.

Regionalism Vs. Provincialism: Agitating Against Critical Neglect in Artworld Peripheries

BY AMY ZION AND CORA FISHER



A 1948 Buckminster Fuller Architecture Class at Black Mountain College, Photo courtesy of whitehotmagazine.com.

In February, I sent *Momus* editor Sky Goodden a draft of a review of an exhibition in Alberta that I had pitched to her along with a note:

Dear Sky, This is not worth publishing. After spending considerable time in places like New York and Berlin, I feel comfortable analyzing group exhibitions there, but back home, there is comparatively little for the curator of this exhibition to be exposed to, and little for people to see when it comes to contemporary art in general. It doesn't feel right to treat it as I would an exhibition produced in a more privileged location.

Sky read the draft and agreed that the review was not suitable for publication but insisted: "I'm not of the opinion that Canadians should be let off the hook for provincial or sheltered exhibition-making. It's an international artworld, and even if travel isn't always

possible, reading is.” She then offered that I extrapolate on the larger issues haunting my failed review and make it a feature.

I agree that contemporary art can be accessed through publications. However, I can attest to the gross inequity of resources, even in the contemporary moment, between places like Edmonton and even Toronto, much less New York or Berlin, and how important face-to-face meetings with artists remain crucial in curatorial practice. To address this issue and elaborate on it, I engaged my colleague, Cora Fisher, who moved from New York City in 2013 to serve as curator of contemporary art at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in North Carolina. Here we discuss issues of provincialism and regionalism as they relate to exhibition-making and critical exposure in an international artworld that still privileges its centers.

Amy Zion: Let’s begin by summarizing how we came to the topic of criticality and visibility in non-art centers: we reconnected since you moved to Winston-Salem, NC, to become curator at the [Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art](#) (SECCA), and I was spending an extended period of time in my hometown, Edmonton, Alberta, after having spent years traveling and living in Europe. You and I had attended graduate school together in New York. Our present conversation converged around a shared problem: how is one to engage critically with contemporary art exhibitions produced outside of art hubs such as New York, Berlin, or London? (And in Canada, I would even map a considerable economic and geographic disparity between Edmonton and larger cities like Toronto or even Vancouver).

You want to cultivate more critical discourse around your exhibitions at SECCA. You lamented, as well, the considerable lack of attention paid by more mainstream, international art publications to exhibitions made in smaller cities outside of cultural centers.

I was having difficulty engaging critically with a local exhibition I had pitched to this same magazine, *Momus*, for review. My impulse was either to evaluate it negatively within an international context, or try to evaluate it simply “on its own terms.” In the end, I opted for the latter, and I highlighted the successful moments in the exhibition with no real argument about its overall success or failure. I struggled through several drafts, and then decided not to publish anything. I contributed to the deficit of rigorous critique in non-art-centers.

So first, can you flesh out the issues you encounter at SECCA and then I want us to probe what underpins these “regional prejudices,” for lack of a better term, and what is the most productive solution for critic, curator, and artist. Moreover, by the end, let’s consider what is the future of critical regionalisms in the artworld, given the homogeneity created by internet access and market forces – or whether it’s more productive for us to map the shifting global contemporary artworld as a “region” with its own provincialism. But first, SECCA ...

Cora Fisher: I’ll frame my present context, North Carolina, first and foremost as the home of Black Mountain College (1933-57), the unconventional incubator for some of

the most significant international and American artists of the twentieth century. Winston-Salem, home to SECCA, is a small North Carolina city that founded the nation's first local arts council in 1949, and SECCA in 1956. Previous curators produced notable exhibitions on subjects such as the Black Panthers, Civil Rights, and [a multi-year initiative](#) on Affordable Housing. Programs like "Artist in the Community" have brought artists like Fred Wilson and others to the region (my predecessor received the Emily Hall Tremain Award for innovative exhibitions and garnered coverage in at least one international trade magazine for that show). So I follow an institutional legacy aiming to produce high-quality exhibitions that are relevant both locally and internationally, with programs designed to inject new energy into the region.

We produce exhibitions worthy of reflection in international trade publications, but I wonder to what extent such critical attention puts us in a national and international dialogue. Typically, when we receive attention at all, it takes the shape of a short-form review. It would be a more substantial conversation if we could take regionalism into account in the conversation about what shapes local art production and shows.

By and large, I've noticed a sharp economic divide between art publishing in major US cities and smaller cities, one that continues to translate into an under-representation of museum shows outside NY, LA, and Miami. (Though [Burnaway](#), an online arts publication based in Atlanta, Georgia, has produced rigorous writing on SECCA's exhibitions since I've been here; and *Art F City* has mentioned SECCA in a couple travelogue pieces).

The internet's democratizing potential to support critical discourse on art could advance more circulation, but few are pursuing online blogging here professionally – whether for lack of audience for this topic or a lack of resources or perhaps both.

Does the local Canadian context of Edmonton work differently than the Southeast in this regard? Is the size of a place more of a structural issue that distinguishes it from anywhere else?

Zion: Canada in general presents a different problem because the geography is considerably larger and the population is roughly one-tenth of the US. But the funding structures for arts organizations, including art periodicals and blogs, is entirely different. Publications in Canada are eager to represent cultural production from further-flung places – especially if it comes their way. I worked as an editor at *Fillip* for eight years and our editorial team, lead by Kristina Podesva, had its own checklist for what constitutes diverse content in addition to what is mandated and enforced by one of our main funders, the [Canada Council](#). We made an effort to have 50% or more content by women, and promoted writing by emerging voices, people of color, and French Canadians, as well as content from places outside of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. We achieved this goal to varying degrees of success from issue to issue. Publications in the US are not publicly funded and therein lies a huge difference. In Canada, it's amazing how much people in the arts take ownership over the content in the country's magazines, because we are literally funding them through tax dollars, and our peer review

system determines how that funding is used. We are all involved in the Canada Council as jury members and/or recipients, to some degree.

The larger international trade magazines in the arts, on the other hand, are accountable to their readerships, but more so to their respective funding sources, namely commercial galleries. Those galleries are located in art centers, therefore publications have an incentive to pay attention to those regions. The issue is not entirely black and white, but these economic underpinnings provide a productive contrast.

But let's switch focus from why exhibitions in smaller cities get less press in the US and Canada and imagine that your exhibitions were offered regular, substantial, international press coverage. Can we both agree that although the internet and greater access to information and resources in general has had a huge impact (good and bad) on art being made in these smaller regions, there is still a great disparity that separates cultural production in Winston-Salem (and Edmonton) from, say, New York City? There are fewer exhibitions to see, fewer people talking about ideas, fewer people circulating within an international context, who inject the local scene with a constant stream of new thinking – the list goes on.

Also, there are disparities in the other direction, and, correct me here, but artists in the Southeast and non-art centers in general have a greater ability to develop practices without the intense pressure of international attention and scrutiny. The resources that are available are more accessible (meaning if someone wanted to spend time with Fred Wilson when he was in town, it was likely easier to jostle for his attention than it would be were he doing a residency in New York). The cost of living is greatly reduced ...

Acknowledging these differences, both strengths and weaknesses, what would be the ideal way of engaging an exhibition in the Southeast within an international, critical context? What's a productive way for a critic to acknowledge difference and not simply evaluate the exhibitions based on an ever-homogenizing criteria that may not apply to the Southeast?

Fisher: Your assessment of the pros and cons of living and working as an artist in these places is right on. I'm not sure how one of these bigger magazines could engage an exhibition in the Southeast, but I do think critique is vital to artistic development regardless of the location of your studio or post-studio practice. It would be more interesting for those magazines to stage trans-local conversations between artists in places of similar scales, thinking of socially-engaged examples like Theaster Gates's projects in Chicago, or Project Row Houses in Houston, as inspiration. We could be talking more about cities like Detroit and how and why they're using the arts as a tool for urban change.

To return to the crux of the issue: how do curators, critics, and artists cultivate a sustainable art dialogue – and not just polite conversation – in the smaller cities where they live and work? And how do they also enter into dialogue with global art conver-

sations that traffic through mainstream art channels? How do we cultivate a sense of place rather than parochialism?

A good critic gives balanced critiques but also tries to understand what is particular to a smaller art scene; they should do this in every city, big or small. In terms of cultivating conversation locally with further reach, leveraging connections with universities and other museums, and continuing to program with networked community-based arts models; and bringing in artists who have reached the highest levels of accomplishment internationally presents a viable, and I think very compelling model. I aspire to what has broadly been described as “critical regionalism,” to which you referred in your introduction: a theoretical framework for re-imagining the ties between place and culture. Douglas Reichert Powell describes this as a “deliberate use of region as a way to envision and critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives.” (Interestingly, Reichert Powell’s book *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* was published by UNC Press in North Carolina).

You spoke earlier of “regional prejudices.” Lucy Lippard so aptly describes the bias against regionalism by writing, “Today the term regionalism [...] continues to be used pejoratively, to mean corny backwater art flowing from tributaries that might eventually reach the mainstream but is currently stagnating out there in the boondocks.” Twenty years later, her observation remains an accurate description of the major prejudice against the non-art centers.

To counteract this prejudice we should recognize lateral connections that align smaller cities internationally. Amidst globalization and a “post-internet” moment, people in all cities are vulnerable to larger economic forces shaping places. To nurture a plurality of conversations that connect countries and regions of various sizes – like supporting exchanges among international and local artists through residency programs – would help people find forms of local resistance by sharing experiences. The cultural potential of local internationalism today is more ripe than ever.

One symptom of globalization (and the need for real cultural exchange that is not solely predicated on consumerism and trade) has been an obvious return to localism. Certainly in the Southeast and Appalachia this manifests as a renewed appreciation for traditional craft in food, music, and art. But, truly, to be in a global contemporary art conversation there needs to be both a reappraisal of the local traditions along with a big push to adapt and evolve new artistic forms and experiences. Otherwise, localism becomes a Romantic return to a mythical past. To avoid parochialism, Sunday painting, or whatever you want to call it, smaller cities have to work harder to cultivate a spirit of looking simultaneously outward and inward.

How do you think your writing should critically engage with smaller art scenes?

Zion: Well, I opted to trash my review for *Momus* because, in part, I felt it would have a destructive impact, locally. Although my lack of social ties to that region helps my critical engagement (I’m unburdened by the drive to “polite conversation” you mentioned),

I wasn't comfortable with something akin to parachuting in, tearing something apart, and leaving.

This was a salient issue when I lived in Vancouver. From a positive perspective, discouraging certain kinds or degrees of criticality can be a way of cultivating a supportive community, but it does so through consent rather than critique. This is not to say that Vancouver lacks criticality – on the contrary. But the palpable social and professional repercussions in smaller cities in general act as a critical deterrent. I'm thinking of a friend who got taken aside and "slapped on the wrist" by an older member of the art community after writing a negative review of a local show for a European magazine, or another who was blacklisted from viewing a semi-public, private collection after criticizing one of its artists publicly. The anonymity that larger art scenes engender unburdens critical reflection to some degree, but the more initiated you become into an international art discourse, the more it begins to look and feel just as provincial. To answer your question, my position now is that I should have written the critical "international context" version of the review but found a reflexive way of doing so. Meaning, I should have examined, simultaneously, what are these criteria to which I'm holding this exhibition? Where do they come from? Why do they matter? And how are these "international" criteria exerting influence on both my critique and the exhibition itself?

Which brings us back to the last point in our introduction: is it perhaps more productive to think about the dominant modes of curatorial practice and criticism in terms of having an international parochialism of their own? Back to Reichert Powell, a "region" must refer to a relational network of sites, it is not a specific geography and it has no flag; it's not a bounded autonomous place – it is a cultural history. So why can't the global artworld be thought of as a region? One that is producing an ever-homogenous string of thematic exhibitions, cycling through many of the same artists due to increased reliance on commercial galleries and perhaps also in an effort to appeal to "brand recognition"? (Michael Lobel has a great essay on this topic in "Drawing and the roots of Sturtevant's Art" (2015), in which he illustrates that this is not a new issue).

Last year, *The Art Newspaper* released a [watershed report](#) that found almost one-third of solo shows in US museums between 2007 and 2013 went to artists represented by just five galleries. That situation creates a unique opportunity for institutions like SECCA that are not toeing this "party line," and the same for museums in places like Edmonton, where for various reasons, it's not even an option.

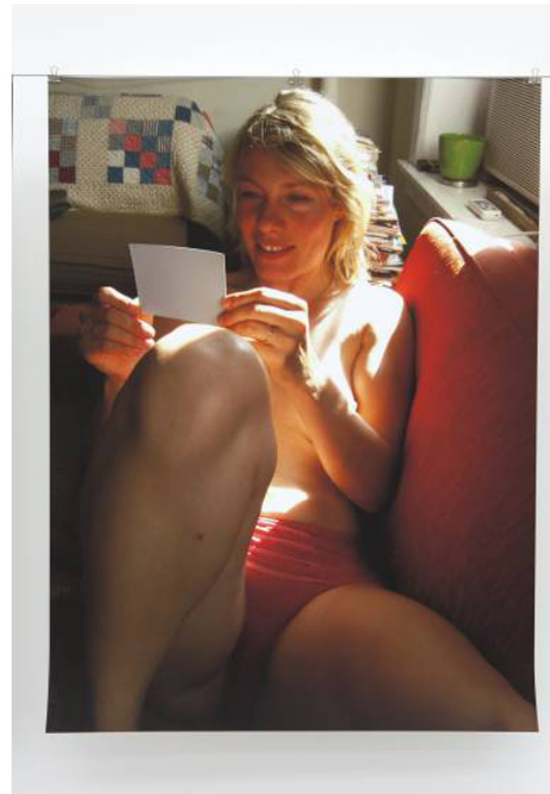
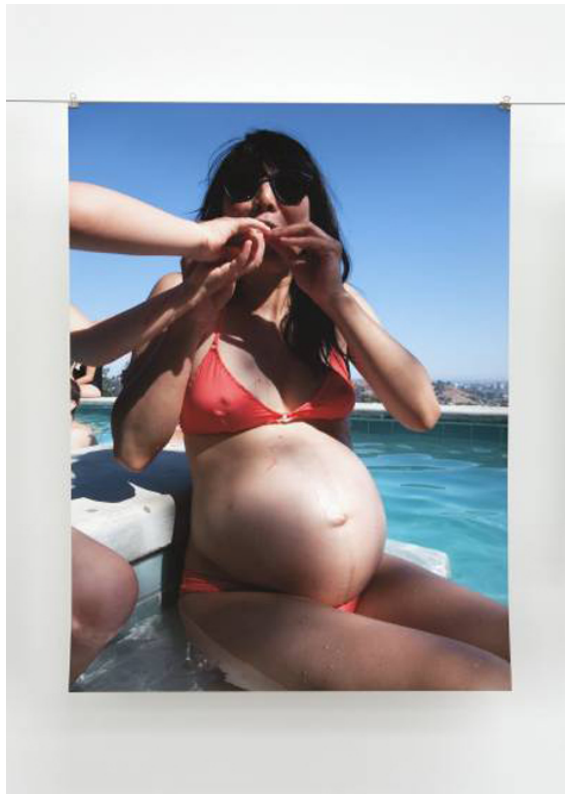
Fisher: We constantly need to respond to the local context rather than capitulate to dominant modes of curatorial practice or draw artists from the same five galleries – that's a staggering statistic. Certain exhibition types, like the international thematic group show, aren't going away but could become more responsive to place, combining regional and international artists whose work is in dialogue. Certainly, the onus is on curators to not replicate the models seen elsewhere. In terms of criticism, self-reflexive art writing is a way to create new, more site-specific standards of value. And we should consider how we can better extend a standing invitation to people in the bigger cities

to get out off their own block more, to bring more rigorous standards and interesting questions to places that need it, and to also recognize value beyond what's already been validated.

Zion: In the last decades, that invitation has taken the form of ever-proliferating biennials – Lahore being the latest addition. The biennial has become a predictable form and an example of international regionalism par excellence. But perhaps what is needed is a shift in thinking away from how I framed this discussion in the beginning as an interrogation of the false, binary relationship between center and periphery (or local vs. global) towards a model of multiple regions (in which the global artworld is simply one large and influential region) with distinct cultural histories that overlap and bleed into one another, and risk homogeneity in those moments of contact. Can we cultivate multiple regions and acknowledge the differences between them, including the unequal access to various resources, without setting them within this kind of oppositional relationship? There is as much violence in “saming” as there is in “othering.” I agree with you, that one way that can be done, and is being done, is through a network of international residencies; it just happens to be on a quieter, micro level. And that's where reading and criticism comes in – if you access contemporary art mainly through these international trade publications, and they are highlighting and rewarding certain modes of practice, it is inevitable that that will influence local production.

A.L. Steiner's Personal Archive: Underground Heroes, Everyday Lovers, and Global Catastrophe

BY ANDREW BERARDINI



A.L. Steiner, "Untitled (Anna eating)," 2014, and "Untitled (Layla looking at picture)," 2005. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe.

Underground heroes. I've had many.

Some of them I stole from the high shelves and long racks of chain bookshops. Novels and art catalogues, comics and poetry, CDs and essays. Too much religion and not enough money at home, theft was the only way I could possess these treasures (a debt I still owe and will one day find a way to repay.) Illicit material not carefully hidden was regularly confiscated by my mom. In each book and record, I found strength and force in punk anthems; awareness and education in philosophy and history; in literature there was freedom, pleasure, and provocation; in all of it, empathy, communion, and most importantly, hope.

Some of these underground heroes I knew. Broken-down poets presiding at coffee shops; old queer nudists that hit on me first and educated me later; burn-out punks clerking for minimum wage with the knowledge of scholars; trans grand dames with five o'clock shadows and stories for days; lesbian mothers that nurtured children both adopted and birthed; nurturers of plants and animals; tattooed feminists that

left smeary red lipstick all over my face and convictions in my heart; ne'er-do-well-has-beens and never-were's too broken by prisons and poverty to be anything but streetcorner sages; scientists studying, collecting, and speaking about all they found; animal-rights and environmental activists bearing pamphlets with terrible images and convincing empathy; sleepless lawyers defending the weak; gangsters with the grace of dancers; survivors with a vengeance for justice; drug-addicts nursing their diseases with hard medicines; and more writers and artists than I can count.

I loved and love them all.

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In the most aboveground of galleries, hanging along the walls, overlapping and collaged, a clutch of photographs shows humans, candid intimacies and aggressive poses, naked, fucking, dancing, joyful and angry, quotidian and occasional. In the center sits a series of birch drawers filled with mostly 4 x 6 inch snapshots, a professional archivist dispensing them to a table alongside for viewing, but the categories are poetically, accidentally, and incidentally organized, a file for a longtime partner, many for trips, some from a phone, my favorite title and file: "Angry, Articulate, Inevitable."

All of this is the work by [A.L. Steiner](#) and, in many ways, her community. A self-described "skeptical queer eco-feminist androgyne," Steiner has spent decades in activism and collaboratives that inform the poetic of her work, ranging from video and performance (most notably as a member of collective/band Chicks on Speed) to photography, often collaged into immersive installations. Bodies, her own and others, appear in all of their raunch and glory throughout her works, celebrating all of these individuals and their physicality, but also all of our bodies (with a particular focus on queer women) as sites of both conflict and pleasure.

The pictures are of her people, friends and lovers, colleagues and cohorts. The places she's lived and visited, the people she knew there, (and for this installation specific credit to Shinichiro Okuda who helped build the drawers and Jaye Fishel who works as the archivist). In these drawers is her personal archive, beginning in 1995, and apparently stretching into the future for a decade more. It's titled, *Selexxx: 1995-2025* (2015).

What unites these works besides the artist herself is love. A few framed works say it with their titles: *Love Changes the Lover* (2015), *Lovers Love Loving Love* (2015), *Change Loves Loving Change* (2015). The kind of love made from friendship, romance, common cause, and special sympathies. Most of the photographed are queer and trans humans from Steiner's community, huge troves of snapshots of lovers and partners. You feel Steiner's particular charisma in the look of the people that surround her; even in the most defiant poses, a certain love for the photographer shimmers in their eyes.

Above all, this projector beams some troubling numbers, ticking away.

It's usually a bit lazy to reprint lines from press releases, but this one has a flavor worth savoring: "Between the interlude of state-sanctioned exploitation and violence, the Amerikkkin project of mass incarceration and slavery, the uncertain future of California's viability, and planetary implosion, A.L. Steiner presents an overview of her photo archive from 1995-2015 at Blum & Poe."

As of Saturday, August 15, 2015, 5:35pm:

- Forests loss this year (hectares): 3,229,673
- Land lost to soil erosion this year (ha): 4,348,014
- CO2 emissions this year (tons): 22,506,830,572
- Desertification this year (hectares): 7,452,339
- Toxic chemicals released in the environment this year: 6,081,344

These are just numbers, abstractions that are hard to feel. An American football field is roughly half a hectare. So about 6.5 million football field-sized swathes of forest have been lost this year. We still have four months to go.

All of this. My life, Steiner's life, your life, happens under this, the destruction of the planet. It's literally illustrated with these numbers shifting ever upwards. With every struggle and celebration, with each orgasm and tearshed, the hours of depression and productivity, the phone-calls to our mothers and lovers, deciding which car insurance or variety of ice cream, the time you spend cruising social media and commuting to work. All of it happens while machines and men destroy the forests, one hectare at a time, and clog the skies with CO2 in every passing hour. Count all the hours you spent masturbating this year and conjugate that with number of hectares of forest destroyed per hour. However frightening, these realities are, of course, not directly related. But they are happening at the same time.

We breathe it with every breath, we drink it with every paper cup of coffee, we burn it with every gallon of gas.

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Nearly all of the underground heroes are forced underground by their spirits and proclivities, by the circumstances of their birth and genes or the content of their ideas, the illegality of their actions or the privileges denied them. A few chose their way out of lives of comfort, demonstrating a saying made by Eugene Debs, "While there is a lower class, I am in it; and while there is a criminal element, I am of it; and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Some might say that underground, like the avant-garde, is dead. This is a myth spoken to scatter and weaken those who might resist. They are all still there. Their dream en-

dures and their fight goes on, many have no other choice. Sometimes they are co-opted by the current regime to remove the rebellion from their content, but this isn't new. Many underground heroes have been absorbed into the canon after they're safely dead, with the pretense that their cause has been satisfied. The United States government surveilled and harassed activist preacher Martin Luther King, Jr., but once he was murdered, they named a holiday after him. King's cause, racial equality, still struggles on. Every day there are new casualties beyond the count of grief.

But the underground, those who live against the current regime and its injustices, includes, as Steiner does, those who fight against human *and* environmental degradation: the social and political radicals, weirdos and freaks, deviants and dreamers; they are all still here, still resisting in large and small ways, every day.

On occasion, the underground heroes I've come to know have overlapped with the ones I stole as a kid from the bookshop. I know mostly artists and writers, but also a few scientists and journalists, lawyers and advocates, each attempting to change the way things are to the way things could be. I know quite a few people, who simply by living openly and bravely every day, push our civilization forward.

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I've never been able to point a camera straight, so my personal archive of the heroes I've known is mostly in my mind, in words, lives, and struggles witnessed. I celebrate them all.

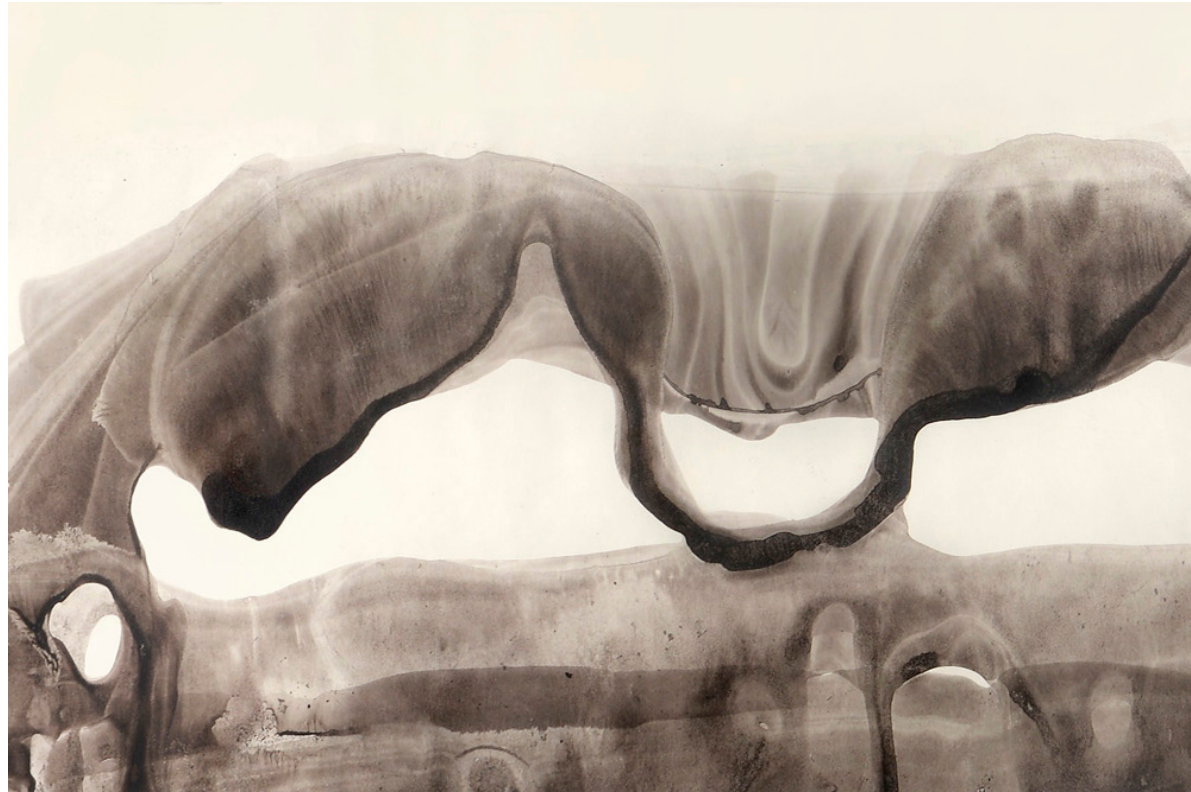
As soon as all people have equal rights and treatment, privilege and opportunity, and this otherness dissolves into an inclusive one-ness, and the planet is no longer being destroyed, and the suffering of all life is taken into account, the underground heroes can collectively retire to heaven. In the meantime, we can join them with awareness and action, cohorts to support, to help change, to witness, to nurture, to love.

Is A.L. Steiner an underground hero? Of course. And so are all of her subjects and collaborators. And so maybe are you.

An underground hero is someone to be.

From Exile to Acclaim, the Unlikely Story of Mu Xin, and China's Reformation

BY CAROL STRICKLAND



Mu Xin, "A Breeze," 1999. (detail)

Landscaping along the 87-mile stretch of highway from Shanghai to the ancient village of Wuzhen in southern China is a work in progress. On both sides of the four-lane road, slender saplings stand at attention every ten feet, each encircled by a tripod of supporting sticks and wire to ensure ramrod-straight growth. Clearly, the proverb "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree" holds sway in the People's Republic of China.

Which is why the elaborate celebration around the inauguration of the Mu Xin Art Museum in November was so surprising. The new museum honors the art, life, and legacy of the scholar, painter, and writer Mu Xin (1927-2011), an artist whose path through life defied the straight party line.

The latest deviation in his meandering course is the artist's emergence as a national treasure after nearly half a century as an enemy of the state purged from art history. In a recent interview, [Alexandra Munroe](#), senior curator of Asian Art at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, called this about-face a sign of reform. Mu Xin, accused in 1971 of "anti-social" behavior and "counter-revolutionary tendencies," is now seen, she said, "as a lost soul who maintained his integrity against all odds during the Cultural Revolution." By erecting a museum to his memory, Mu Xin's hometown of Wuzhen, she

added, is “reclaiming Chinese humanism by bringing him back to light after being so abjectly eliminated from the intellectual history of China for fifty years.”

Fourteen years ago, Munroe co-curated the first-ever exhibition of Mu Xin’s art, an exhibition titled *The Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Painting and Prison Notes*. At the time, the 74-year-old artist was living in self-exile in New York and had no name recognition in the artworld. Members of the Chinese diaspora knew him only as a writer and teacher. However between 2001 and 2003, the show traveled throughout the US, receiving high praise.

That sudden rise from obscurity to acclaim marked another zigzag in Mu Xin’s career. Viewers were astonished by the originality of thirty-three landscape paintings, all created during the artist’s house arrest in China. Between 1977-79, risking his life, Mu Xin painted at night by light of a kerosene lamp, determined to maintain his identity as an artist after the Communist Party destroyed 500 paintings and twenty volumes of manuscripts. “By day I was a slave. By night I was a prince,” he later said. [Toming Jun Liu](#), professor of English at California State University in Los Angeles, recalled his friend saying the secret paintings proved that “art has the capacity to resist any system that imprisons thinking and the body.”

Born to a wealthy family in the canal-town of Wuzhen, Mu Xin was part of the last generation to receive a classical education in the tradition of Chinese *literati*. What made his background exceptional was his access as a youth to the private library of a distant relative, the celebrated writer [Mao Dun](#). There, Mu Xin devoured great works of literature from the ancient Greeks to Western modernist writers. He also studied contemporary Western art and paintings from the Italian High Renaissance.

After the Communist Revolution brought Mao Zedong to power in 1949, Mu Xin tried to keep a low, apolitical profile. However, like all members of the educated class during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), he was condemned. Imprisoned three times, he was first held in solitary confinement in a Red Guard pen (the basement of a former air raid shelter, flooded with filthy water), then sentenced to seven years’ hard labor in a factory, and two years of house arrest.

During Mu Xin’s imprisonment from 1971-72, at age 44, he demonstrated his integrity. Given paper and ink to confess his sins, Mu Xin proved so adept at homework that the guards gave him extra paper, ostensibly so he could outline his plans to become a better Communist. In secret, he diluted the blue ink and, despite three broken fingers, covered thirty-three double-sided pages with miniscule characters in a series of dialogues with great thinkers whose writings he’d internalized. “It was,” he said, “my way to stay alive.”

In a filmed interview shortly before his death, Mu Xin said that when he descended into Dante’s inferno, he went there with Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, and other great artists. When released, Mu Xin smuggled his imaginary conversations with the likes of Aristotle, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky out of prison, on thin rice papers sewn into

his clothes. Now known as *The Prison Notes*, they are enshrined in vitrines in the new museum, their delicate calligraphy faded and nearly indecipherable. “I was rejected by the absurd world at the time. So I built a more reasonable but magic world in which I sincerely lived,” Mu Xin told his translator Toming in 2000.

Given China’s reluctance to acknowledge suffering caused by the Cultural Revolution (officially acknowledged as a mistake but still a taboo subject), this document’s visibility in a public museum is surprising. “It’s a remarkable testament to the perseverance of humanity and belief in the integrity of the soul against horrific odds,” according to Munroe. She speculated that the museum exists due to “an openness you could only find in the South,” adding, “You won’t find it in the official capital [Beijing] under the nose of the regime.”

What makes this museum unique is that it celebrates the work of a deceased artist who China hasn’t heard of. Even more unexpected, it spotlights an artist formerly considered, as he put it, “an intellectual with dangerous, decadent thoughts.” Mu Xin was seen as threatening in a society that values, above all, “social harmony” (the preferred term for collective conformity). “They can destroy my work,” Mu Xin said, “but they cannot destroy my talent.” Bringing this expunged chapter in social history back to life should be revelatory for a generation and newly vibrant middle class curious about the cultural past.

The museum in this thousand-year-old, well-preserved Ming village adds the zing of avant-garde art to its centuries-old houses that already bustle with masses of tourists keen for a taste of colorful tradition. The picturesque Wuzhen, undergoing a Renaissance, seeks to become a cultural destination like Kyoto, where big-city dwellers can get a taste of what life was like long ago.

The museum’s architects, Bing Lin and Hiroshi Okamoto of New York-based [OLI Architecture](#), did not create a contextual structure. In a walk-through of the building, Okamoto told me that Mu Xin had encouraged him to take risks, saying, “Let’s not be afraid of making a statement.” The nearly 75,000 square-foot museum is unabashedly modernist, a series of rectangular boxes floating on Yuanbao Lake.

The museum’s concrete shell is sleek and elegant, while its interior appears spare to the point of austerity, and resolutely dark. The pervading dim light feels necessary because of the fragility of the manuscripts and works on paper, but it’s difficult to evaluate the paintings, especially miniature landscapes in 22-inch wide, horizontal strips, with painted slits only two inches high.

When Mu Xin saw plans for the museum shortly before his death in 2011, he summarized its *esprit*, saying, “Wind, water, and a bridge.” Okamoto said he incorporated the bridge metaphor into his design because Mu Xin’s writing, art, and character were a bridge between past and present.

This hybrid nature of Mu Xin's painting demonstrates his inventiveness – another deviation from a straight line of descent from the Chinese ink painting in which he was trained. The best series of his works – including his finest individual paintings – are the thirty-three landscape paintings created in 1977-79, now in the collection of the Yale University Art Museum. (Unfortunately, the Wuzhen museum displays none of these paintings. We can only hope that Yale will eventually offer loans.) The series at Yale, titled *Tower within a Tower*, are like no other Chinese landscape paintings. Mu Xin fluidly merged techniques from the classical ink-painting tradition with the misty, jagged backgrounds of Leonardo's portraits and *frottage* and decalcomania techniques used by Surrealists like Max Ernst.

This innovative combination makes the work a singular contribution to Chinese art. Mu Xin apparently began by coating watercolor paper with a layer of thinned ink or gouache. Then he pressed another paper to the surface. Removing the top sheet produced amorphous, sponge-like forms reminiscent of geological strata or eroded craters on the moon. He then embellished these forms produced by chance with a brush, articulating them into landscape features.

What will be a revelation for new viewers are Mu Xin's early, never-seen figurative paintings. *Untitled* (1970s), featuring the profile of a woman executed in colored ink, is elongated like a Modigliani portrait. A very early charcoal study of a figure's thigh and buttocks has the muscularity of a Michelangelo sketch, showing Mu Xin's skill with line. A blue cloud study is radiant, frothy like sea foam.

The founding director of the museum is esteemed artist [Chen Danqing](#), Mu Xin's student when the older artist lived in New York from 1982 to 2006. Eager to enlighten the public about the life and legacy of his friend, he said in an interview, "Mu Xin is the grandfather for young people born after 1980." Mu Xin's most ardent fans, Chen pointed out, are youth who first encountered his writing in 2006 when it was first published on the mainland after his return to Wuzhen.

Chen was blunt about why the Chinese public needs a bridge to pre-revolutionary times. Born in 1953, Chen himself received a party education. "I'm from the Mao's kids' generation. We all had the same language, the same thoughts, the same value system and habits," he said, adding, "When I met Mu Xin [in the 1980s], it opened a window to see a different way, a lifestyle of the arts and philosophy."

The museum aims to educate, not indoctrinate. "Young men today, as well as my generation, we never really knew what happened before," Chen said. "Young people need to know what happened to our grandpa."

Toming thinks this filling-in-the-blanks of the recent past is already happening, thanks to Mu Xin's writings. Although the general public is still unaware of his visual art, which has never been on display until now, the new museum will reveal another facet of his

legacy. Together, his artwork and writing will foster understanding of Mu Xin “as a free soul,” Toming said, “who even though his life was filled with adversity, kept his spirit free. He used the hardships and injustice he suffered as a motivation to defy the forces of coercion by continuing to create.”

Despite evincing a new spirit of openness, the museum has not escaped censorship. The last gallery, intended to show the Bible’s inspirational influence on Mu Xin, was empty when the museum opened, apparently failing to meet with officials’ approval.

It’s hard to change propaganda-infused minds, which were funneled into the mold of Communist ideology. Yet perhaps the newly public visibility of an artist outside the official system speaks to the reality that, as Toming said, “In this day and age, it’s difficult to maintain a rigid ideological line.” As young people become more skilled at evading the “firewall” that prevents access to social media, he added, “more diverse forces are determining what the culture should be.”

“Reveal the art; conceal the artist,” the camera-shy Mu Xin often said, quoting the writer Gustave Flaubert. Chen believes the statement was ironic, that Mu Xin hoped others would look for him. “He likes to hide; he likes to be found. He’s even hiding in this museum.” Those who seek him – a consummate, non-ideological individualist – will find “a message from the past and from the West, a message of humanism,” Chen said. He added Mu Xin’s conviction that, “if there is any help for the culture and the country, the only thing that can help is yourself. When my generation says we have to learn from tradition,” Chen explained, “on his side, tradition never left him – both Chinese and Western traditions, not defined as two separate cultures. It’s all part of him, inside of him.”

Even before multiculturalism was prevalent, Mu Xin believed in the connectedness of cultures. As he told Toming in a 1993 interview, “Culture is like the wind and the wind knows no boundary or center.” The Mu Xin Art Museum, an embodiment of “water, wind, and a bridge,” may foreshadow a freshening current of change blowing across China.

Yet, even there, tall stalks of newly-planted bamboo are constrained inside cages made of lathes to ensure they grow straight and true. They clack together like blond swords when rippled by the breeze. In Chinese art, bamboo is a symbol of character, indicating how a person may bend in the wind yet not break.

Bending and twisting as the path of Mu Xin’s life and work has been, straddling artistic and generational divides, it now stands revealed in the straight lines of a new museum’s pavilions. Perhaps a hint of China’s cultural evolution, this homage to an unbowed artist signifies a gust of humanism that defies boundaries of time and space.

Battle Hymn of the Republic: The Measure of Kehinde Wiley in the American South

BY TAUSIF NOOR



Kehinde Wiley, "Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland," 2011. Photo: Max Yawney.

Though history is said to have been written by the victors, one might be forgiven for casting doubt on this particular adage in Richmond, Virginia. The former capital of the Confederate States of America and the current capital of its state, Richmond is littered with monuments that lionize the usual suspects – Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson – alongside lesser-known local heroes, such as Confederate J.E.B. Stuart. It's on this palimpsest that the [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts](#) rests, with a collection that boasts the likes of Matisse and Modigliani. Prior to the opening of the museum in 1936, the grounds housed a residential complex, complete with a chapel, for destitute Confederate veterans of the Civil War. Amidst this backdrop of Southern gentility and patriotism, contemporary black art takes on a unique verve that sheds light on the narrative of history and its traces in American life today.

Four-score and a few months after its inaugural opening, the VMFA is hosting one of the most celebrated black artists of our time. Kehinde Wiley's mid-career survey

(grandly titled a “retrospective” for the 39-year-old), [A New Republic](#), whose previous iteration at the [Brooklyn Museum](#) in 2015 sparked controversy (even its [criticism received criticism](#)), claims its hold in the South. The exhibition is slated to travel to four more museums in America, and each one comes with its attendant challenges. For the VMFA, the issue arrives in a question of how race, narrative, and history coalesce and collapse within its particular exhibition space. Wiley’s show presents the opportunity to consider how institutions must juggle their own pasts alongside increasing attempts toward diverse representation.

Wiley is, of course, no stranger to history. The Yale MFA-educated artist rose to dizzying acclaim for massive portraits of black male youth standing in for the subjects of Old Master paintings. Cast from the streets of Harlem during Wiley’s residency at the Studio Museum in 2001, the men were asked to select a historical painting, largely Baroque and Renaissance, to mimic or “inhabit.” The result is a shifting of the canon, a postcolonial nod to the absence of black figures in the long history of portraiture. The transparency and straightforward legibility of Wiley’s methodology, however, often flattens the complexity of his subjects, resulting in paintings that limit critical imagination, rather than extend it. Wiley’s revisionist history is, as Eugenie Tsai, curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, notes in her introduction to the catalogue, “corrective, even utopian,” insofar as he critiques a Eurocentric approach to art history and centers, instead, on its outskirts. These peripheries take on a global scale in his series *The World Stage*, for which Wiley took his street-casting practice from Harlem to more far-flung locales including China, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Israel, India, and most recently, Haiti and Cuba. Though he extends the scope of the project, Wiley maintains the signature style of his previous series: large canvases, ornate frames, and mostly black male subjects.

Truly, it’s difficult to fully commit to the idea that Wiley’s grand historical paintings are indeed corrective in themselves. The intricate backgrounds offset the subjects to flatly echo grandeur, power, wealth – but the disparity between the subjects and their staged settings prevents our ability to suspend disbelief. As Chloe Wyma [notes](#), the source paintings into which Wiley inserts his urban subjects are too far in the past to convincingly comment on the subjectivity of black males in contemporary America – and even less so of those in the various nations that inspired *The World Stage*. His subjects are simply figures ensconced in fictive spaces that are republics unto themselves, stripped of context and history, distanced from the viewer in their frames. This is Wiley’s ultimate shortcoming: by leaning on the trappings of historical portraiture and contemporary pastiche, he traps his subjects into a flattened visual shorthand for urbanism. Their subjectivities are defined by negation, to their opposition to the luxurious backgrounds and the historical context of their source paintings, stripping them of the very power and autonomy that he claims to imbue them with.

Wiley’s consideration for power and history, however, does lend itself to curatorial experimentation. In an effort to encourage visitors to view the museum’s larger collection in addition to Wiley’s spectacle-laden oeuvre, Sarah Eckhardt, curator of contemporary

art at the VMFA, provides visitors with references to works in the museum's collection that are of the same time period and style as the source paintings from his portraits. For the ordinary visitor, Eckhardt notes, it is "difficult to understand that conversation he's having not only in the exhibition but in just one work, and this gave us a chance to help people understand." Walking through the collection, it's easy to see where the historical quotations can make sense; the museum boasts African cloths from Ghana, large Rococo and Baroque portraits, and Indian miniatures – all germane to Wiley's machinations.

More difficult to draw from the museum's collection is the connection to black representation in Virginia's Confederate past – and perhaps, this is the point. The disconnect between the references to grand European portraiture and the more humble portraits of antebellum America sets in place a basis for contemplating the historical context of Richmond as it pertains to contemporary black art. Jefferson Gauntt's portrait of Violet Anthony from 1832 is the most direct and relevant comparison. Violet, known colloquially as "Miss Turner's old slave Violet," was one of the last slaves in Philadelphia, a northern city in which slavery was legal until 1847. Identifiable as West Indian by her coral necklace, Anthony's face is lined and wrinkled, her features and comportment given an attention to detail that is comparable to the sculptural quality of many of Wiley's subjects. The museum's contemporary collection, however, holds a more confrontational address to its provenance: Sonya Clark's 2010 work *Black Hair Flag* weaves thread in the form of Bantu knots and cornrows through a Confederate flag, tying together the complex histories of a black subjectivity and a nation that would flatly deny its presence. Clark's work, much like the work of her contemporaries Kara Walker and Sanford Biggers, engages the history of black subjects as the history of America, drawing upon the history of slavery to indicate that American nationhood itself is contingent upon the remembrance of black lives.

Wiley's parallel to Clark can be found in his early work, before he fell to the pomp and grandeur of his more commercially-viable painting. *Conspicuous Fraud #1* (2001) presents the viewer with a black man in a business suit, set against an aqua background, whose thick, knotted hair springs from his head and billows across the canvas like clouds in a gesture that suggests a boundlessness betraying the limits of a body. These earlier works tap into a nuanced understanding of black life in contemporary America, and none does so more poignantly than *Mugshot Study* (2006). Taken directly from a crumpled mug shot that Wiley found littered in Harlem, the painting is an exercise in precision and, more importantly, in compassion. Much commentary has been passed on Wiley's subversion of hyper-masculine stereotypes of the black male, particularly regarding their depictions against effeminate floral patterns. But the subject of *Mugshot Study* achieves a softness that the historical pastiches do not because they are stripped of the gaudy ephemera to reveal, plainly and quietly, what his more recent portraits seem to lack: an empathic speculation of an inner life.

In 1993, the Commonwealth of Virginia agreed to lease the chapel on the grounds of the VMFA to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who proudly flew the southern cross atop its cupola. When the lease was renewed in 2010, the museum stipulated that the flag be removed from the chapel, prompting a group of zealous Confederate sympathizers to protest on the sidewalk along the museum (they are forbidden from doing so on the actual grounds) with astonishing regularity, every Saturday since at least 2011.

It was on a warm Saturday afternoon that I saw these protesters – aptly dubbed the Virginia Flaggers – while I stood inside the second floor of the museum, having just exited the Wiley exhibition. It was at once jarring and eerily familiar, which is the way history usually functions, in this republic, and in those to come.

First Nations Art and the Matter of Its Politics

BY CLINT BURNHAM



Sonny Assu, *"Gone Copper! (Giving It All Away),"* 2015.

Is contemporary Aboriginal art necessarily political? Does art made by First Nations, Inuit, or Métis artists inevitably engage with such historical events and trauma as the legacy of Residential Schools, colonialism, or the missing and murdered Indigenous women? Are these questions themselves colonial? Are these not issues that concern us all?

Sonny Assu's copper works that reference the shameful history of residential schools, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's paintings of the "1%", Beau Dick's forthcoming show centered around his protests in Victoria and Ottawa, and Marianne Nicolson's land art all make the case that the strongest art by Indigenous artists confronts and works with Canada's histories of colonialism, racism, and exclusion.

Vancouver artist Assu's recent exhibition *Day School* ([Equinox Gallery](#), Vancouver) deals precisely with this history, especially in the two sculptures *Inherent* (2014) and *Leila's Desk* (2014). Both represent school desks, one, *Leila's Desk*, with a bar of soap on it, the other with the racist epithet "Chug" rendered in copper foil under the desk lid. Copper is an important medium to Assu's work (a young artist, his first solo exhibition

was in 2006): he fabricated 67 Starbucks-like coffee cups out of spun copper for the piece *1884/1951* (2009), for instance, which serially represents the potlatch-ban years (recorded in the work's title) on Canada's West Coast. Assu made records out of copper for *Ellipses* (2010), its 167 discs referencing the number of years since the Indian Act was promulgated in 1876, and an ethnographic recording made by Chief Billy Assu (Sonny's great-great grandfather) in 1947. In *Day School*, Assu has also mounted copper records on plaques, for the *Gone Copper* series. This ability to compress into an artwork traditional materials and contemporary issues is also evident in what may be Assu's best-known piece, *Coke-Salish* (2006), which, in the "culture-jamming" methodology of *Adbusters* (but also '90s skater culture) considers what it means to "enjoy" (or reside, or work on) traditional Coast Salish territory, an area that includes the Vancouver metropolis. Assu's strength is in making work that, by referencing objects we think we know (a brand, a coffee cup), then transforms our knowledge and exposes us to the new or the unknown: native territory, histories of the potlatch ban, ethnomusicology, the history of residential schools.

On exhibition in Vancouver at the same time were a few paintings by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, at [Macaulay & Co. Fine Art](#). Since the 1980s, Yuxweluptun has made art like few others, paintings that bring Dali and other European Surrealists into a stylistic barrage of political issues. *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990) posits climate change as an issue related to colonialism. *The Impending Nisga'a' Deal. Last Stand. Chump Change* (1996) similarly offers an acerbic take on land claims (B.C. First Nations, unlike much of Canada, never signed treaties with the federal government).

But what's most important about Yuxweluptun's work is how he takes the traditional "formline" and "ovoid" components of West Coast art and renders them in a contemporary style. A recent Yuxweluptun painting, *The One Percent* (2015), pictures four figures in business suits; totem-like heads vie with Western realism. S-curves may be Dali-esque mustaches, colors shade from orange-yellow to turquoise to bilious green. A figure on the right, most recognizably a white businessman, sports an earlobe expander, a reminder of how today's "urban primitive" hipster fads have deep roots in traditional cultures. Is the painting a reference to the corporate elite – the target of Occupy's "one percent" versus "99 percent" rhetoric – or to hierarchies more specific to First Nations peoples? What, then, of the manner in which Yuxweluptun "occupies" Western art, rendering an otherwise moribund tradition – tourist art – into a style both relevant and challenging to our polite sensibilities? These questions matter because of the trajectory of Yuxweluptun's career: he has famously decried anthropology museums "Indian morgues" because of how they contain and display relics stolen or appropriated from traditional cultures, even as those cultures were under legal and existential threats from the white man. And yet Yuxweluptun will have a major retrospective at Vancouver's [Museum of Anthropology](#) (MOA) in the summer of 2016.

Does this mean that Yuxweluptun has "sold out"? A productive troubling of this narra-

tive arrives in a forthcoming catalogue essay on Yuxweluptun by Vancouver writer Michael Turner, who spins a gossip-y bit of artworld yarn into a *detournement* of politics and resistance. He describes:

... [an] unpleasant event [that] took place at the home of West Vancouver collectors in 1998, shortly after Yuxweluptun debuted a series of acrylic canvases at a private Vancouver gallery. Entitled Ovoidism, the exhibition featured large paintings of single-color ovoids (sans interior formline details) floating over single-color fields. Seen from a distance, these works suggest hard-edge painting; but on closer inspection their minimal surfaces bubble, if not from the literal application of impasto, then perhaps as a result of an unsettled interior condition reminiscent of what Yuxweluptun refers to on his "bad days" as "post-colonial syndrome."

But it was in the response to Yuxweluptun's Ovoidism by those gathered in West Vancouver that the unsettled interior condition at work in these paintings finds its analogue, with lawyers and scholars incredulous, then furious, that Yuxweluptun should abandon narrative for lyricism, figuration for abstraction, admonishment for ambiguity. As much as this response was directed at an artist who has more than once declared "If Europeans can have Modernism, so can Indians," a deeper reason might lie in Yuxweluptun's VIVA Award acceptance speech earlier that year, when he reminded those in the audience "You're all squatters on my land."

Perhaps the most political act may be when a First Nations artist refuses to make political art.

Certainly a younger artist whose work explicitly troubles such distinctions is that of [Raymond Boisjoly](#). In such works as *The Writing Lesson* (2011), which uses black metal typography to reproduce First Nations place names (Chilliwack, Nanaimo), and *Intervals/Illumination* (2013), which scanned a Buffy Sainte-Marie video and preserved the visual "noise," the politics in Boisjoly's art lies, first, in the "content"/history of the source material (Buffy Sainte-Marie as Indigenous protest singer, black metal as anti-Christian insurgency), and then in the "politics of form" in their transformation/rendering. When I asked Boisjoly about precisely this, his answer was thoughtful but also direct:

I don't trade in topical political issues in my work, though a lot of my work concerns our capacity to know the thing the work is ostensibly about, and the works often resist easy meanings that would serve to fix them as "Aboriginal" simply due to the presence of Aboriginal content. I guess I would say my work is not didactically political. That said, I am an Indigenous artist reluctant to represent Indigenous people.

That reluctance is evident in Boisjoly's play with visibility: black metal lettering renders Indigenous words almost illegible, and photographic methods (as in *Rez Gas*, which began in 2012, where gas station images are printed on construction paper) are virtually irreproducible.

And so if Sonny Assu's work suffers from an over-directness, from a literalness that eschews the oblique "subtlety" preferred by contemporary art, Raymond Boisjoly veers in the opposite direction, displaying an obscurity via two or three levels of formal allegory, materials-based process, and pop-culture slyness. With Assu, you begin with the one-liner, whereas with Boisjoly, you end (if you're lucky) by putting the interpretive pieces of the puzzle together. Assu challenges and frustrates critics who don't want their allegorical reading made so readily apparent: copper Starbucks cups – genius! Taken together, these two artists represent the "next-gen" answer to Brian Jungen. Take one's pop culture and remix it with Aboriginal same into art. It's as if Jungen – whose work was so crucial to 1990s Vancouver art – split into two, one of his own runner-masks cut apart *again*, chairs re-stacked to be returned to Canadian Tire. Boisjoly is the technician, Assu the mechanic. Interestingly, though, neither is much interested in what is, arguably, next to such political issues as the residential schools or land claims, the largest system of belief for First Nations peoples – native spirituality, either for its own sake or as a postcolonial venture.

Which is not to say that smart contemporary art shies away from traditional spirituality (and is that political, or is it not?). It can be found in the work of Beau Dick and Marianne Nicolson.

I began with Assu's use of copper. On the West Coast, copper is everywhere in art, and in history. The material was traded up and down the coastline (historians speculate this originated with the Ahtna and Tlingit people in Alaska) and after contact with European traders. But more than a material for jewelry, copper especially became a symbol of wealth for the Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw people. Imagine it rendered in large shields (two or three feet in height), comprised of a square at the bottom and a flaring at the top, often with a T-shape hammered into the square, and designs carved or painted on the top. These were called different names in different coastal languages, and often, in English, "the Copper." (American art historian Carol F. Jopling is the great expert here – but Franz Boas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Marcel Mauss all attest to copper's importance to anthropology.) Coppers were named, had stories attached to them, and were

not only traded but made the objects of potlatches. An Edward Curtis photograph from 1914, for instance, shows Hakalahl, a Kwakwaka'wakw chief, holding a Copper named Wanistakila, "taking everything out of the house" for its immense value.

Copper, according to Jodi Simkins of the Nuyumbalees cultural center (in Assu's hometown, Cape Mudge, B.C.), also had to do with one's standing in the local "pesid" or economic hierarchy. The Copper was both an object and a representation. Jopling refers to the art historian George Kubel and his ideas of the "prime object," to be distinguished from the masterpiece or the original. But the very importance invested in the object (which was only registered in the stories related about the Coppers) meant that it also exposed a weakness or possible strategy. The Copper was a political object.

And precisely because of this importance – symbolic, economic, representational – the Copper was vulnerable as an object. The action of "breaking" or "cutting" a Copper – which ranged from cutting off or breaking a corner to throwing the entire plate into the sea or a fire (sometimes done by slaves, sometimes rescued after, sometimes via wooden effigies) was a gesture of rivalry between chiefs. The gesture then took on a different economic status when the "*nouveau riche*" (Simkins again), who had perhaps benefited from the sudden influx of goods during the trading period, upset the aristocratic status quo. For "status" – as in "status update" and all its social-media connotations – was always an important social value. The newly rich would destroy Coppers as a way of both displaying (or performing) arrogance and a critique of the existing order: an act of protest.

It's this form of critique that is preserved in Beau Dick's performances/protests, when he "cuts Copper" as an action to confront various levels of the Canadian government. In some ways, Dick is the archetypal revivalist of tradition: a shaman, a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw "secret society" of Hamatsa dancers, he carves masks and totems, stages potlatches and Winter Dances, every time-honored ritual of coastal First Nations. And yet, in February 2013, inspired, as he tells it, by his daughters and the #Idle-NoMore movement, Dick led a walk from Alert Bay, near the top of Vancouver island, to the provincial Legislature in Victoria, an approximately 500-kilometer trek. There on the lawn in front of their provincial parliament, Dick broke a corner off a Copper as a form of anti-colonial "social shaming." Dick repeated the political performance a year later in Ottawa (July 2014), and it's these two actions that will form the center of his exhibition at UBC's [Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery](#) in 2016.

The "breaking Copper" actions position Dick in a complicated way to Kwakwaka'wakw cultures; it's as if he were appropriating the revolutionary energy of the bourgeois (nineteenth-century *nouveau riche*) for his own, more progressive ends. That is, what is both conceptual and political about Dick's gesture is how it works with scale: taking what was an inter-subjective or community gesture and rendering it nation-to-nation. Like *The Mouse that Roared*, but also like the early twentieth-century appeal from Joe Capilano and other Coast Salish chiefs to the Queen in London; like Jimmy Durham in his attention to the object and materiality but also like Carl Andre or Gerald Ferguson

(think of the latter's *One Million Pennies* – more copper), in terms of sculpture and transformation.

Roy Arden, who curated Beau Dick's work with that of painter Neil Campbell at the [Contemporary Art Gallery](#) in 2004, has characterized the division between First Nations and non-First Nations artists as a kind of "[Æsthetic Apartheids](#)." And while the manner in which Dick's work bridges traditional Kwakwaka'wakw art and contemporary conceptualism is unprecedented, when we turn to our final artist, we find Marianne Nicolson working the leitmotif of the Copper in a strikingly similar fashion.

Like Dick, Nicolson was born in Kingcome Inlet, a native settlement some 500 kilometers north of Vancouver on the B.C. coast. In 1998, on a fifty-foot cliff on the inlet, she painted a large contemporary pictograph, a Copper design, telling the story of the area's settlement by the Dzawada'enuxw people of the Kwakwaka'wakw. Part rock-climbing endurance feat, part commemoration of a 1920s pictograph, Nicolson's work, like Dick's, is both conceptual and traditional, political and formal. And, again like Dick – and differently than Yuxweluptun and Assu – Nicolson's painting plays with the public and the private. Dick, for instance, reserves some of his carvings and methods for in-group knowledge; so, too, Nicolson's painting, [while viewable online](#), is public art for a certain public, for those of her nation, in her inlet. To understand Nicolson's monumental cliff painting of a Copper, one should understand how Coppers feature in so much Kwakwaka'wakw visual culture – from button blankets and other regalia to pictographs and totems.

To look at and think about contemporary Indigenous art also means to realize that standard questions about politics and form are inadequate. On the West Coast, at least – where the potlatch ban saw thousands of artifacts seized by government agents and sold to collectors – "traditional" works are the subject of very contemporary debates over repatriation and museology. A broken Copper signifies protest, but also the essential fragility of political hierarchies. Perhaps Aboriginal artists have always been contemporary, have always been modern; perhaps, too, we need to stop seeing the legible historical or political issue in Aboriginal art, and instead pay more attention (as, indeed, Nicolson urges us) to its material, form, and concept. Like a broken Copper, time itself folds into reboots of old attitudes, as Indigenous artists seize the contemporary, break history, and refuse to be reconciled to the state of the present.

Art and Architecture's DIY Practices and “Folk Politics”: Radical or Picking Up the Social Tab?

BY ALISON HUGILL



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A young architect in Berlin recently argued to me that working with refugees on a design-build project could lend it more credibility and political relevance than simply putting it out there under the name of his firm. For the current generation of architects, single authorship is a dead-end, and the discipline as it's traditionally conceived, with principal architects at the helm of every office, is teetering on the brink of collapse. This is not a lament but a testament to its possible resuscitation. Last year's [Turner Prize win](#) by 18-member collective Assemble, as well as [Pritzker Prize](#) winner [Alejandro Aravena's](#) curation of the [15th Venice Architecture Biennale](#), signals the direction of this changing tide, but it also presents a series of problems that arise when artists or architects conflate the public with the political.

Let's start with the last: many young architecture graduates are embracing diversified, horizontally-structured collectivity and opting to form large studios with artists, theorists, urbanists, and designers to challenge the limited outlook of a uni-disciplinary visual language. They're turning to DIY practices and “folk politics” – in the vein of

utopian architecture collectives like [Ant Farm](#) or Archigram, established in the counter-culture milieu of the 1960s – to reconsider the scope of the profession. In the face of this repeated pattern, it might be a good time to ask ourselves: are these kinds of collectivizing initiatives still radical, or merely evidence of localized individuals and groups picking up the social tab?

Last year, [Assemble](#) won the Turner Prize for their response to a design brief calling for revitalization of public housing in Toxteth, Liverpool. Together with the local Community Land Trust, the group initiated a grassroots workshop to reuse and refurbish elements of the dilapidated, turn-of-the-20th-century housing project. They incorporated parts of the building into marketable DIY furniture and interior design products, “Made in Granby.” The “social enterprise” that resulted now acts as a marketplace for locally-produced homeware as well as a meeting place for local craftspeople. As critic Fred Scharmen writes, rather polemically, in his article “But is it architecture?”: “Awarding an art prize for a nice adaptive reuse of half-demolished public housing is like giving an award for the prettiest Band-aid on a sucking chest wound.”

This is a damning critique of participatory or socially-engaged practice, but it gets at the heart of a real problem, which appears to be cyclical and symptomatic of capitalist crisis. In times of austerity, it’s no surprise that community groups – often with creative workers, artists, and architects at the fore – begin to take the reins on imagining and enacting their own living spaces, share and care economies, and urban gardens. The state or other regulating bodies lose the burden of meeting these basic needs. Grass-roots autonomous self-organization rises from the ashes of the welfare state. As these kinds of projects become more ubiquitous, they risk normalizing and fetishizing this pervasive lack of governmental assistance.

Take the recently-opened Venice Architecture Biennale as an example. It’s curated by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena of the “Do Tank” [Elemental](#), an architecture office that prides itself on creating projects “of public interest and social impact” through a “participatory design process.” This year’s biennale, entitled “Reporting from the Front,” called for architects and national pavilions to respond to an ostensibly political proposition: what, today, constitutes the front lines of architecture? Aravena’s own curatorial contribution, in both the Giardini and Arsenale, is research-heavy, and relies on various material cultures to get his point across. Unlike [Rem Koolhaas’s “Fundamentals”](#) – going back to the basics of architectural details – this year’s biennale purports to be future-oriented. Yet it draws on local references often appropriated from Indigenous cultures and repackaged to be palatable for the contemporary architectural mainstream.

A banner hanging above an installation in the Arsenale reads: *Does permanence matter?* On the floor below sits a roving projection of a series of buzzwords: #community, #energy, #refugeecrisis. Examples of temporary architecture from Burning Man and Glastonbury are juxtaposed with temporary settlements in India in an installation about “Ephemeral Urbanism.” A certain fetishism of the temporary, the nomadic, and the handmade pervades the Biennale, an indication of the curator’s own approach to archi-

itecture, which has been criticized as a “clever co-optation and conversion of struggle into social/financial capital.”

The question of how or whether art and architecture can affect political change is not new, nor is the conflation of participation and politics. The question “is it art?” has plagued the Turner Prize since its inception. The heyday of participatory, socially-engaged art in the ‘90s culminated in the publication of Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential book *Relational Aesthetics*. In 2004, Jeremy Deller – an artist best known for his piece *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), where he brought together members of a Yorkshire community to reenact a recent event in their political history, a clash between miners and police under the Thatcher administration – was also awarded the prize. In 2011, Claire Bishop wrote her opus against Relational Aesthetics, *Artificial Hells*, and Markus Mies-sen wrote a similar treatise from the architectural perspective, *The Nightmare of Participation*. Yet efforts like that of Assemble and Aravena continue to be lauded as radical.

Bottom-up community activism is important, but it’s not always the solution. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit the northeastern states of the US. Members of the Occupy Wall Street movement banded together to organize a relief effort, dubbed “Occupy Sandy,” for victims of the natural disaster. As Peer Illner notes in his recent talk “The Locals do it better? The Strange Victory of Occupy Sandy,” the ground-up initiative was so successful in distributing aid – spurred on by donations and volunteer power collected largely over social media – that it outperformed FEMA, the US government body expressly dedicated to disaster response and relief. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) praised Occupy Sandy and juxtaposed its efforts to the comparatively inadequate response of FEMA and the Red Cross. In 2013, and seemingly as a direct result of this inadequacy, FEMA saw a 14% cut to its annual budget. Many have championed this case as evidence that fluid, horizontal structures are better able to support victims in times of crisis.

There is a danger in reproducing this *modus operandi* – for example, by government bodies like the DHS – without an attendant structural critique. The Occupy Sandy example is evidence of a core assumption by nation states that, when their efforts fail, community groups will bear the cost. Many art and architecture collectives operating today – Assemble and Elemental included – favor this reform approach of incremental political change. On the other end of the Left spectrum, the accelerationist approach of refusal aims to cause a jolt in the system, forcing the state to assume responsibility or face inevitable collapse.

Speculative architect Liam Young recently remarked that “architecture is becoming increasingly marginalized in terms of its capacity to affect change ... But the things it talks about – spatial relations and how we engage with each other in cities – are really, really important. To only talk about that through a built medium is bizarre.” Temporary, community-driven design projects are often considered political by nature. Yet few of them address the given terms by which they operate: what defines a community? Who is the public? By focusing efforts at a local level, public art and architecture initiatives

often fail to imagine how the urban politics they embody can be scaled globally, in order to address structural economic, social, and political problems. Aravena's contribution to the Biennale this year, rather than marking a radical shift in the Biennale's political outlook, served to further entrench these kinds of projects in the canon of the for-profit architectural mainstream. And to make clearer than ever the troublesome conflation of the public and the political.

The Subtle Evolution and Marked Aging of Michael Smith's "Mike"

BY MICHAEL VASS



Michael Smith, "Mike's House" (installation with video "It Starts at Home"), Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982

[Michael Smith](#) belongs to the first wave of artists who made extensive use of mass-media imagery and formats in their work. His conceptually-minded peers in the so-called [Pictures Generation](#) (including Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Jack Goldstein) employed a wide variety of aesthetic strategies, but even among this diverse group, Smith's satirical work has always stood out as an anomaly. Indeed, a carefully-calibrated, slightly-out-of-sync quality has long been one of his signatures – an approach that's both distinguished his work and diminished the attention it's been paid.

Many of Smith's contemporaries were influenced by punk and other sub-cultural movements in the late 1970s, taking the route of excess, exaggeration, and provocation when critically engaging with popular media. Figures like Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, and Mike Kelley continued to mine confrontational aesthetics throughout their careers, often in more amplified and baroque forms as their notoriety and budgets increased. At times this proved a productive strategy, as in the disorienting sensory overkill of Kelley's late installations. However, in the contemporary context, in which "subversion" has become a genre more than an act, it can often seem like the path of least resistance. Consider, for instance, McCarthy's use of obscene spectacle with his lurid explorations of

pop-culture mythology in WS and *Rebel Dabble Babble* (both 2013), or Richard Prince's attempt to out-creep the kids with his Instagram re-prints, *New Portraits* (2014). Whatever its merits in terms of exposing societal hypocrisies and blind spots, the bleed-the-beast approach, which intentionally blurs the line between criticality and collusion, increasingly serves artists who wish to partake in the very culture they're supposedly critiquing.

Smith has explored some similar thematic territory as the artists mentioned above. In fact, one of his best-known works was a collaboration with Kelley. That project, *A Voyage of Growth and Discover* (2009), revolved around Smith's long-running character Baby Ikki, a man-sized infant in a diaper and sunglasses who Smith performs with unsettling verisimilitude (Kelley and Smith sent Baby Ikki to Burning Man, testing the limits of the festival's principal of "radical self-expression"). There is a punk-confrontational aspect to Baby Ikki, but it has more to do with challenging conventions of public behavior and interaction than media culture.

Although Smith has been performing Baby Ikki since the late 1970s, the majority of his work has revolved around another character, a painfully normal American everyman named "Mike." It's mainly through Mike that Smith has explored popular media. However, in contrast to some of his peers, Smith's media appropriations and incursions have focused on banality and failure rather than indulgence and spectacle. With Mike as his avatar/Trojan horse, Smith has aimed not to shock but to underwhelm, deflating the persuasive power of the media while exposing the fallacies of its appeal. Smith's slow-burn methodology doesn't stoke extreme responses or court controversy, but his work has been consistently original and incisive, especially in its cumulative impact.

An archetypal naïf, Mike is the definition of a static character, but Smith has proven remarkably adept at creating new situations and contexts for him that continue to yield fresh insights. Smith's latest "Mike" exhibition, *Excuse me!?!...I'm looking for the "Fountain of Youth"* at Greene Naftali, offered an iteration of Mike that built on the character's previous appearances while also extending Smith's thematic reach in surprising ways. The show also included a brief but significant appearance by Baby Ikki – a rare instance in which the two characters have been featured in the same work.

Mike has often been presented as an artist or entrepreneur who is frequently launching new creative/business endeavors that make use of emerging media. Smith's satirical method has generally been to let Mike articulate his doomed plans and comically low-ambition fantasies in such a way that their pathetic nature becomes transparent. As curator Annette DiMeo Carlozzi puts it, Mike is "a kind of ever-hopeful Candide, adrift in a world of rapid technological advances that he seems incapable of fully comprehending, and stymied by the depersonalization and isolation that have accompanied late-twentieth-century life." Mike seems to fail perpetually but never spectacularly, enduring his mediocrity through a mixture of obliviousness, delusion, and futile industriousness. (It's no surprise that Beckett is one of Smith's oft-cited influences.)

Smith's satirical target is not Mike himself but the cultural values by which he too in-

nocently abides. Mike is an affably empty cypher for the vacant notions about life that he's inherited from the world around him, and which he ineptly tries to put to practice. Smith's video works are often ostensibly self-produced by Mike, such as *Interstitial*, the artworld talk show Mike hosted on the public-access television in the late 1980s. Other works play more like TV-mediated expressions of Mike's fantasies about himself and his humdrum life, as with the music video *Go For It Mike* (1985) and the commercial spoof *MIKE* (1987). Smith is a master of skewering various media formats by filtering them through Mike's uncomplicated psyche and limited talents.

Although the "Mike" works usually have a narrative component, there isn't any overarching story linking them all together. However, there has been a gradual shift in tone over the years. Smith's style of performing Mike has become subtler and more nuanced, and his investment in the character seems to have deepened. Mike's appearances in the last two decades have usually taken the form of elaborate installations that come with extensive fictional back-stories, as with *Open House* (1999) and *QuinQuag* (2001). Projects like these downplay the earlier works' absurd stylization of media formats, instead creating more believable simulations for Mike to inhabit while also placing him in more specific social contexts. One factor in this shift may be the diminished role of television in American society. In the 1980s and '90s, Mike's view of the world, and our view of him, was mediated through TV conventions. This has clearly become a less relevant tactic. While Smith's later projects have involved the internet, he seems to have chosen to focus more on Mike's character than the medium itself. Mike has increasingly been presented with more pathos, and his imminent failures have become more realistic and affecting. Smith's satire, by turn, has become gentler as well as denser, filled with insidious details about Mike's world, and ours.

Excuse me!?!...I'm looking for the "Fountain of Youth" continued further in this direction while simultaneously making something of a departure. Through thematically-related works across various media, a loose narrative emerged from the exhibition: Mike, now an office worker and Sudoku enthusiast, embarks on a vacation, possibly a retirement trip, which becomes linked in various ways to the mythological search for the fountain of youth. On the more literal side of this conceit, two photo-essays present the puzzled Mike visiting youth-themed tourist destinations – a faux-historical site in Florida called the Fountain of Youth, and the São Paulo theme park KidZania, which offers a child-sized replica of a contemporary metropolis. However, the centerpiece of the show was a three-act ballet on video, which offered a more abstract, hallucinatory narrative in which Mike competes with younger co-workers around the office water-cooler, imagines himself as a medieval knight searching for the fountain of youth, and struggles to pass through airport security on vacation.

The intentionally amateurish ballet/video mixes middle-aged melancholy and befuddlement with awkward adolescence, featuring an ensemble of young apprentice dancers (apart from Smith, who is 64, no one in the cast looks much older than twenty). It plays like an anxiety dream about aging in which Mike finds himself in a PBS adaptation of a

community-theater ballet starring an all-teenaged cast that refuses to cooperate with the plot he thinks he's following.

Much of the rest of the exhibition presents work loosely related to the ballet. The main gallery space was decorated as a medieval foyer, with a sculpture of a water-cooler flanked by large medieval pennons decorated with images of Sudoku games. Hanging at one end of the foyer was a large wool tapestry containing a picture-book depiction of Mike's vacation/quest as if it was an old fable. On the walls beneath the pennons were flat-screen monitors showing video tableaux of Mike searching his pockets for his reading glasses, struggling to unfold a tourist map, untangling his earphones, etc. Smith's perfectly-timed deadpan performances elevate these routine gestures of a solitary man in public into Tati-esque comic pantomimes of loneliness and unease.

The exhibition had a more ageless feel than usual for Smith. The main theme seemed to be the infantilizing process of aging – the expectations and fantasies that accumulate as one leaves the workforce, gives up their social function, and enters the nebulous post-adulthood stage of life, with its many similarities between childhood and adolescence. For someone like Mike, whose identity is so directly linked to his perceived social role, this process would be especially perilous and transformative. What emerged was a portrait of a character for whom every journey (to the water-cooler, out the office door, through airport security) is a quasi-mythical quest for discovery and renewal, a veiled search for the fountain of youth. As such, every trip, every effort, is doomed to fail. Failure has been one of the central themes of Smith's "Mike" work, and here it took on more cosmic/existential overtones than ever before.

This was signaled in the exhibition by a crucial moment in Act 2 of the ballet when Mike discovers the fountain of youth and is transformed into Baby Ikki. Within the ballet, this functions as a kind of nightmare wish-fulfillment: Ikki is no one's ideal of youth. However, in the broader context of Smith's body of work, the moment brings his two long-running personae together full circle. Mike and Ikki have always been flip sides of each other, representing opposite kinds of innocence. Mike is receptive, Ikki is reactive. Mike is socialized, embedded in contemporary America; Ikki has no language or culture. Mike does what he thinks he's supposed to do, and looks to the future; Ikki does what he wants impulsively in the moment. But both have always been solitary figures as well as blank slates for whom any kind of lasting meaning remains an elusive concept, if not a pressing concern. Now these similarities seem to be overtaking the differences as aging as Mike approaches the other side of the oblivion from which the Baby recently emerged.

This new phase of Mike's existence was reflected by a striking change from his previous appearances: this time he was completely silent. Without his characteristically upbeat but unconvincing verbiage, Mike shakes off much of the ironic characterization that definitively separated him from Smith and that provided some plausible deniability for viewers disinclined to identify too closely with his sad-sack ways. But if Mike's silence made it harder to feel superior to him, it also put him at something of a remove. For

those of us who've become accustomed to regarding Mike as being more or less without an interior life, this was rather unsettling. On the other hand, for anyone unfamiliar with Smith's previous work, the character's silence, along with the muted quality of the show as a whole, may very well have registered as curiously sedate, if elaborately so. This is the trade-off of Smith burrowing so deeply into the character of Mike and his world. The richness of the work conceals rather than advertises itself.

One of the paradoxes of Smith's "Mike" works is that while they are usually positioned as comically out-of-step with the contemporary, they often come to seem prescient, in retrospect. When smart phones show up in *Excuse me?! ... I'm looking for the "Fountain of Youth,"* they seem both baffling and quaint, glowing toy-like objects whose elevated purpose feels like a mystery from another time. This, of course, is how they might well seem to a 64-year-old retiree like Mike, but it's also how they'll surely appear to everyone a few decades from now. By filtering the present through Mike's hapless perspective, Smith portrays his historical moment the way it will inevitably appear to the future – as obsolete.

Helen Molesworth Upends the Permanent Hang at MOCA LA

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY



“The Art of Our Time,” MOCA Grand Avenue. Image courtesy of MOCA LA, photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

Ruth Asawa spent the summer of 1948 making buttermilk for her teachers, Josef and Anni Albers, in Asheville, North Carolina. She was enrolled at Black Mountain College, where Josef Albers headed the school’s painting program. She didn’t like the buttermilk, but the Europeans who visited the college relished it, which is why the Albers assigned her this job. That same summer, she went running down a hill, carrying a torch – to the strains of Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* – with the young artist Robert Rauschenberg, also a student. Asawa, who arrived at Black Mountain not long after leaving a World War II internment camp, could not recall much else about this performance, when prodded in a 2002 interview, except that nothing caught fire. She more clearly, and wryly, recalled acting as an “alarm clock” for Josef Albers so he could wake at 6 a.m., before the fog came up, to photograph the landscape and then return to bed. And she remembered how mean Buckminster Fuller, the architect on faculty, could be. School was not perfect or free from messy egotism, but Asawa stayed three years. She could do what she wanted there. “If it didn’t fit,” she said in 2002, “they’d make a category for you.”

The Art of Our Time, chief curator Helen Molesworth’s reinstallation of the permanent installation at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles](#) (MOCA LA) approximates that permissiveness. The wall text near the entrance explains that students or faculty at Black Mountain College, which taught “no single style,” made all the work in the show’s

first gallery. This is one of few wall texts in the newly-opened reinstallation, and a helpful one at that because, in the past, MOCA visitors would have encountered familiar Modernist icons in this first room – de Kooning or Rothko.

Now they encounter an idiosyncratic mélange, where stranger, softer works temper the gusto of Modernist monuments, like John Chamberlain's jagged metal towers. A 1965 lithograph by Asawa currently hangs in that gallery. It's abstract and violently earthy at first glance, like an in-progress storm. Then you make out the image of an owl at dead center, and an unexpected cuteness interrupts the romanticism. It hangs with a crowd of smaller wall works next to a minimal, mostly white drawing by artist-composer John Cage, and a few yards from Rauschenberg's *Interview* (1955), a combine with a door down its middle.

Molesworth's reinstallation currently occupies the entirety of MOCA's main Grand Avenue building (a bull-headed, ambitiously-produced Matthew Barney show fills the museum's nearby Little Tokyo location). The exhibition exudes its art-historical savvy, but isn't beholden to any canon. Women artists have an unusually pronounced presence, especially in the first few galleries, which sample from the stereotypically male Abstract Expressionist genre. But these heady facts aren't the first things you notice. Because Molesworth has relied so deeply on intuitive visual affinities, or antagonisms, your gut often registers the effect of a pairing before your education catches up.

Visitors who turn from the first gallery to the second will immediately encounter a fuchsia-forward Lee Krasner painting rather than one by Jackson Pollock. It'll be flanked by two tall, gangly bronze figures by sculptor Alberto Giacometti. Pollock's familiar *Number 1* (1949) is off to the side. Next to *Betrothal I* (1947), an abstraction by fêted Arshile Gorky, hangs a dark 1959 drawing titled *Sketch* by oft-overlooked Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow. Rarely even discussed together, Gorky and Szapocznikow share a lithe rhythm, their rounded lines and organismal shapes connecting them.

This kind of intuitive open-endedness bucks a fairly entrenched trend. Permanent-collection exhibitions too rarely revel in the possibilities of unexpected juxtaposition. Instead, they seem to anticipate audiences with predictable (and too low) expectations. Examples of this can be found in the galleries at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), rarely rearranged; or the [Hirshhorn Museum's](#) 40th-anniversary installation, *At the Hub of Things: New Views of the Collection*, where the thrill arrives with recognition: Brancusi! Oldenburg! Weiner! At the newly-reopened Whitney Museum, the collection show *America is Hard to See* makes "seeing" America a relatively straightforward task. Works are grouped according to theme, with wall labels explaining the connections. A grouping titled "Scotch Tape" includes assemblages by Noah Purifoy and Al Held, which, according to the wall text, "appear built up or perhaps excavated from the base stuff of the world."

The permanent collection hasn't taken up this much space at MOCA since the museum's 30th-anniversary in 2010. The museum has undergone some very public upheavals since then. Molesworth, the museum's first female chief curator, was only appointed

a year ago. For two decades before that, the curator at the helm was Paul Schimmel, who championed experimenters and oddballs like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy but whose program skewed decidedly male. In 2013, Schimmel was reportedly summoned to the office of billionaire MOCA trustee and collector, Eli Broad, and instructed to resign. This followed MOCA's depletion of its endowment, the controversial hiring of New York dealer Jeffrey Deitch as director, and an odd MOCA-Mercedes Benz collaboration wherein a car appeared in the galleries. Many of MOCA's artist board members resigned (Ed Ruscha, Cathy Opie, John Baldessari), a few to return when French curator Philippe Vergne replaced Deitch as MOCA's director.

The politics aren't over. Molesworth's collection show intentionally coincides with the opening of the Broad Museum across the street. Funded by Broad, the museum will showcase an impressive array of blue-chip, post-war work from his personal collection. Takashi Murakami, Andy Warhol, and Jeff Koons figure prominently, drawing attention away from even Cindy Sherman's early film stills. "This is the art of our time," the aging collector said at the press preview for his museum. Those standing at the right angle when he said this could have glimpsed the oversized banner hanging on MOCA's nearby façade, announcing their version of *The Art of Our Time*. In that moment, the bland-sounding title of MOCA's show took on a slightly contentious edge.

Early on in the 1940-1980 portion of the MOCA installation (an exhibition essentially divided into two temporal parts), a small Roy Lichtenstein painting titled *Standing Rib* hangs beside a slightly larger drawing by Lee Lozano, *Untitled (Jason Crum)*. Lichtenstein's painting, made in 1962 and acquired by the museum in 1986, has his characteristic clean concision. Lozano's drawing, made in 1968 and acquired in 2005 after she began, posthumously, to emerge from obscurity, features messy graphite with crayon marks and a toothy, leering grin. Lozano was about to begin her gradual drop-out from the artworld when she made this drawing, and Lichtenstein was about to have a show at the Tate Gallery in London. While his fame was being cemented, she was rejecting what little fame she had. Yet next to Lozano's work, Lichtenstein's slab of meat resembles an upside-down frown, and appears seedier than it would if placed beside something like a Warhol silkscreen. Lozano infects Lichtenstein's pop precision more than he's infecting her.

The same month Molesworth accepted the job at MOCA, *Artforum* published [her review](#) of the 2014 Whitney Biennial in New York. The review functioned more memorably as an injunction against the slackness of current curatorial approaches than it did a critique of the biennial's particularities. The show had been organized by three curators – Michelle Grabner, Stuart Comer, and Anthony Elms – who installed work by different artists on three different floors. These floors explored, in Molesworth's words, "nominally different sets of aesthetic and/or political concerns." She continues, "I say *nominally* because, in truth, I came away from the exhibition thinking that it privileged similarity over difference – an experience that confirmed my nagging sense of the paucity of, dare I say, 'rigor' within the contemporary curatorial field." She sensed an insider feeling, that the artists had been pulled together as you might gather artists for a

fair, or guests for a party, hoping they would socialize well. Molesworth notes that A.L. Steiner's explorations of casual photography and sexuality had been placed in proximity to Morgan Fisher's minimalism on Comer's floor, and wonders what, if anything, this association is supposed to mean. As her review winds down, she proposes that, even if contemporary curators feel an aversion to the master narratives and linearity promoted by traditional art history, they needn't throw out the "compare and contrast" method that art historian Heinrich Wölfflin promoted early in the 20th century. "However it was deployed," she writes, "the underlying idea was that meaning is built through syntax, that syntax requires difference, and that difference is something to be staged or spatialized or, at the very least, invoked through the act of adjacency."

Molesworth's critique resonated, coming up repeatedly in news bits and interviews about her new MOCA job and making critic Ben Davis's "[best art writing of 2014](#)" list. It's easier to say than do, of course, and those who criticize their own fields don't always offer viable alternatives in practice. But Molesworth did employ a compare-and-contrast method in *The Art of Our Time*, and used it to convey immediacy. The groupings and pairings are meant to be experience now, together.

One room near the end of the show's 1940-1980 half includes only three artists. Dan Flavin's *Monument for V. Tatlin* (1969), a pyramid of fluorescents, stands against a back wall. Robert Smithson's *Mirage No. 1* (1967), a series of mirrors leaning against the floor and descending in size, is against a side wall. A series of black-and-white photographs of prisoners, taken by Danny Lyon in the late 1960s in cooperation with the Texas Department of Corrections, completes the set. In Lyon's photos, inmates are seen in a shower or out on the prison yard. Molesworth, during a walkthrough she gave in the second week of September (absorbing some of the press in town to cover the Broad Museum's debut), noted that Flavin wants to be on his own; that Smithson's mirrors make it difficult for viewers to see their own reflections; and that Lyon has special access to something outsiders – non-prisoners – rarely see. "Who gets to see what when," is how Molesworth described the feeling of this room. But it's also an unusual triangle of masculine tropes. Smithson plays the trickster, while Flavin's sculpture aloofly shine across from Lyon's pictures of tough men made vulnerable.

The second half of the show, filled primarily with post-1980s work, is not as consistently incisive as the first. Maybe it's harder to make unexpected, convincing pairings with work that's not so tightly tied to histories we already know. Or perhaps Molesworth has a less-developed relationship with some of these newer objects, and so there's less discernible mastery in their arrangement. The first room in this second half manages to communicate a "greatest hits" feeling, despite including artists like Manny Farber and Sam Durant (not well-known enough to have "greatest hits"). Another room, with seductive work by Elliot Hundley and Wangetchi Mutu, feels surprisingly matchy-matchy, like a designated space for the queerly decorative. Yet some rooms still have that virtuosity that grabs at the gut, then climbs toward the head.

The gallery in which John Waters, Cindy Sherman, Marlene Dumas, and Cady Noland

share the same wall pits punk portraiture against tenderness. Next to Dumas's watery, fleshy figure, Noland's photographic cut-out of Lee Harvey Oswald shot full of golf-ball-sized holes reads as particularly punk and unapologetic. A version of this work, *Oozewald Prototype* (1989), sold at Sotheby's for \$6.6 million in 2012, making Noland the most expensive living female artist. This was not a designation she liked, and in the years since, the notoriously reclusive artist has made it a point to monitor her auction sales. When she gave a rare interview to Sarah Thornton for her book *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, she arrived at a Pan Quotidian café in black hat and sunglasses, and discussed the *Oozewald* sale. Rumor has it the art consultant Philippe Segalot bought the work for Qatar's royal family. Noland told Thornton she doubted the royals could display the work properly, or that they would know what to pair it with. "Only certain works look good together," she said, implying that, always, artworks hung in proximity converse with one another, and that the kind of conversation they have matters.

I wonder if Noland would be pleased by the context Molesworth arranged for her. But regardless, it's an intentional one that suggests curatorial expertise can be a conduit for change. In a market-driven era, institutional expertise so often seems synonymous with sameness. A show that so shrewdly switches up the conversation feels delightfully defiant.

Who Was Edmund Alleyn? Rediscovering a Mercurial and Untimely Talent

BY SAELAN TWERDY



Edmund Alleyn, "Mondrian au Coucher," 1973–74.

Staging [a major retrospective](#) of Edmund Alleyn as a flagship summer show is a bold move on the part of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Alleyn, who was born in Quebec City in 1931, and died in Montreal in 2004, is almost entirely unknown outside of Quebec, and even within his home province the breadth and diversity of his work have been only sporadically exhibited. Despite two [substantial publications](#) issued since his death, Alleyn remains obscure.

In part, the artist's ambiguous position in Quebec's art history is a result of his eccentric career arc and contrarian disposition. Being born into an Anglophone household in Quebec City cast him as an outsider, a status compounded by a move to Paris in his twenties, where he remained for fifteen years, returning only to witness the changes wrought by Quebec's [Quiet Revolution](#) in the early 1970s. From shortly after his return until his retirement in the early '90s, he held a teaching position at the University of Ottawa, to which he commuted, maintaining his studio in Montreal. For much of his career, then, Alleyn had only one foot in the Quebec art scene, hampering his visibility within the very sphere most inclined to reward him.

Moreover, Alleyn seems to have always been adjacent to major historical moments while perpetually out of step with contemporary trends. Taken together, his series of abrupt stylistic shifts – from lyrical abstraction in the mid-1950s and early '60s, to “cybernetic” figurative painting in the mid-'60s, experiments with film and technological sculpture inspired by his participation in the 1968 uprisings in Paris; his proto-installation, painting-sculpture hybrid *Quebec Suite* of the '70s; and his eventual retreat into the moody private landscapes of his large-scale '80s and '90s paintings – appear as alternative proposals for what contemporary art could be, continually at odds with reigning tendencies. To take Alleyn's work seriously is to gain a new perspective on received narratives about recent art history.

In this regard, a retrospective is exactly the format required to appreciate Alleyn's varied output, and curator Mark Lanctôt has put together a fascinating, rewarding, and long-overdue survey (Alleyn's only previous retrospective was in [1996-97](#), and only half the size of this present show). The exhibition is full of surprises, even for those who thought they knew the artist. Titled *Dans mon atelier, je suis plusieurs* (*In My Studio, I am Many*), it presents a compelling argument for Alleyn's recuperation, partly on the basis that his dynamism and restless resistance to categorization are what make him contemporary. Untimely in his own moment, he appears unexpectedly fresh in ours.

Lanctôt's curating illuminates some of the under-examined artistic milieus in which Alleyn circulated, and situates him as a provocative investigator of painting's currency as contemporary art. Alleyn's attempts to wrestle with his medium's place in a world of technologically-mediated images seem particularly relevant at a moment when painting is resurgent and questions of technology are ubiquitous in art – a fact underscored by the MAC's concurrent exhibition of [Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch](#) – and, indeed, when the present relation between painting and “the digital” is a [very hot topic](#).

The first room of *Dans mon atelier*, devoted to the abstract paintings that Alleyn produced in Paris during the late 1950s and early '60s, is the most conventional. In a youthful incident that launched Alleyn to notoriety (undocumented here), he submitted a “fake” Automatiste painting to an exhibition curated by Paul-Emile Borduas, in 1954, creating a minor local stir. But despite his rejection of the regionally-dominant abstract style, his subsequent non-figurative canvases conform tidily to the tendencies then prevalent in Europe. The drab, earthy tones and rough paint application of his work up to 1962 accords with much *Tachisme* and *Art Informel* of the era. His increasingly animated, colorful paintings of 1962-64, whose ideographic and biomorphic forms derived from Alleyn's burgeoning interest in North American Indigenous art, share in the calligraphic flourishes common to much French *Abstraction Lyrique*.

The inclusion here of works from Alleyn's “native” period is notable, especially given that none appeared in his previous retrospective. It is likely that Indigenous iconography initially appealed to Alleyn's proto-hippie sensibilities, informed by a now-questionable mythology of the “noble savage,” as well as offering an inventory of forms that were neither European nor Quebecois, but pan-North-American.

This brief period of Alleyn's career came to an end when, as a discreet wall text explains, he encountered actual Indigenous artifacts on a visit to the National Museum of Canada in 1964. "There I realized that I was plundering, that I was trying to perhaps express a civilization that was not my own," Alleyn stated in an interview. Furthermore, he also began to consider that he was indulging in escapism, running away from "the reality that was beginning to make its way into my studio and trouble me, like the Vietnam War, like all sorts of social conditions."

Perhaps ironically, it was during the period covered in this first room that Alleyn enjoyed his greatest notoriety, twice winning a Guggenheim international art award and representing Canada (in group shows) at the São Paulo and Venice Biennials in 1959 and 1960. It is possible to see these laurels as a reward to a provincial artist for successfully replicating the "correct" international style. However, it was the "reality" and the "social conditions" troubling Alleyn in 1964 that would prompt the first of his dramatic stylistic evolutions, setting the stage for subsequent metamorphoses that led the artist further and further away from dominant trends and easy categorization.

Rounding the corner into the second room of the exhibition, viewers will encounter *The Big Sleep* (1968), a work so different from any of Alleyn's early paintings that it is difficult to accept as the work of the same artist. The piece is a large, wall-based sculpture that resembles some kind of science fiction console from a lab or spaceship, incorporating a "screen" with a painted illustration of a human brain (punctuated by blinking lights), a series of vials full of blue fluid, a reel-to-reel tape apparatus, a small projection screen that displays a series of still images, and an inset window containing a mannequin head with a mask-and-hose contraption fitted over its mouth. By pressing a button, viewers can activate the whole ensemble into blinking, flashing life. How did Alleyn transition from his work of the early '60s to *this*?

It's a question partly answered by the suite of paintings that fill the second room, which Alleyn produced between 1966 and 1973. If his "native" works showed the beginnings of a return to figuration, it exploded here in paintings like his massive untitled canvas of 1966, which depicts human bodies penetrated, probed, and conjoined with electronic and mechanical gadgetry, executed in Day-Glo and metallic paint with the use of stencils. It's a diagrammatic, machine-finish aesthetic light years removed from his expressive, impasto abstractions of only two years earlier. This sudden obsession with the alienating effects of technological society can be seen as the flipside of Alleyn's previous pastoral fantasy: the "social condition" that he was trying to escape and had now turned to face.

A number of other factors also influenced this new direction in Alleyn's work. Partly as a critical reaction to the influx of American Pop Art (and American pop culture generally) and to the turbulent political climate of the era (the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Algerian Revolution, etc.), a number of French artists in this period were also turning away from the dominant abstraction towards representational

painting as a way of addressing overt social content. This [Narrative Figuration](#), though almost entirely ignored by Anglo-American art history, was enormously important to French intellectual life. Important thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida all commented on artists associated with the movement, and [some have argued](#) that these encounters were germinal for the very idea of postmodernism. Alleyn was included in the *Mythologies Quotidiennes* exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1964 that launched Narrative Figuration, and his “cybernetic” paintings share the caustic, even dystopian tone that sets this movement apart from American Pop Art’s glib embrace of commodity and celebrity culture.

What is perhaps most striking about Alleyn’s cybernetic paintings, though, is that he chose to address the question of technological control through *painting* at all. In fact, his commitment to the medium would be increasingly shaken throughout the late ‘60s as he participated in the cultural and political upheavals of the era. In 1966, he became friendly with composer Philip Glass, who took him to an event staged by the Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) group the following year in New York. In 1967, Alleyn also appeared in both the Canadian and French pavilions of Expo ‘67, and was invited to Cuba with a group of French artists and poets to experience socialism first-hand. In 1968, he took an active role in the student strikes in Paris, helping to produce protest posters in the storied Atelier Populaire. Following this latter experience, Alleyn began plans for what would be perhaps his most singular work in a career full of outliers: *Introscaphe*, his only technological work other than *The Big Sleep*.

Eventually unveiled in 1970 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *Introscaphe* is a white, egg-shaped cockpit set on a platform, like a small spacecraft. Visitors were invited to insert two one-franc coins, upon which the unit opened up automatically. The visitor could step inside and take a seat in the vinyl chair, and the *Introscaphe* would reseal itself. The user was then subjected to a four-and-a-half minute experimental film (a condensed version of *Alias*, a short that Alleyn produced in 1969), projected on a screen in front of them and accompanied by surround sound, synchronized vibrations, and temperature variations within the chamber.

Though it was a sensation in Paris, where over 800 viewers participated, *Introscaphe* was short lived. While on exhibition in Quebec City in 1971, the machine malfunctioned and has never been successfully repaired. It appears in the current show as a purely sculptural artifact, while *Alias* – a psychedelic, quasi-Situationist pastiche of found footage, still photos, and original imagery that mashes up race riots, Vietnam combat, Communist propaganda, and critiques of news media and consumerism – is screened in a nearby black box.

The exhibition of these works today sheds new light on the under-studied convergence of technological art and late-Sixties protest culture – the latter being far more often associated with Conceptual art and related experiments with ephemeral and repro-

ducible formats like earthworks, performance, body art, text, photography, and video. However, *Introscaphe*'s breakdown also coincided with the decline of E.A.T. following their [failed pavilion](#) for Expo '70 in Osaka, as well as the [overwhelming negative](#) reception to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1971 *Art + Technology* exhibition. By the early 1970s, high technology was simply too associated with the military-industrial complex to be palatable to most of the counter-culturally-inclined artworld.

Though Alleyn did not continue making films or produce any further works on the model of *Introscaphe* – which he had originally conceived as a kind of platform or venue for screening other filmic content – it seems that his personal crisis had little to do with the fate of “Tech Art” more generally. Instead, it was his decision to leave Paris and return to Montreal that had the greatest impact on his work. Alleyn found his former home much changed, split by nationalist strife and blighted by urban decline following the brief heyday of the '67 moment. For two years after resettling, Alleyn made no art; during this period of soul-searching, he separated from his first wife and began teaching in Ottawa.

His next body of work, which occupies the third gallery space of *Dans mon atelier*, was inaugurated by his 1974 solo exhibition at the MACM, *Une belle fin de journée*, in which he once again surprised an unsuspecting public with an entirely new style. The *Quebec Suite* consists of realistic portraits of average Quebecers mounted on freestanding sheets of Plexiglas and positioned in front of large-scale paintings that integrate kitschy sunsets into motifs borrowed from Mondrian or Rothko. The portraits, based on photographs that Alleyn shot at La Ronde, a popular amusement park next to the Expo '67 site, were rendered with the aid of a slide projector and described by Alleyn as an “ironization of painting in relation to film,” characteristic of the interplay between the handmade and technically-mediated that characterizes virtually all of Alleyn's work from the mid-'60s on.

The figures are an ethnographic gallery of the era's signature fashions, featuring loud leisure suits, shaggy haircuts, and bellbottoms galore. Not unlike Duane Hanson's hyperrealist sculptures of the same period, they seem to revel in populist kitsch, both celebrating the vulgarity of typical *Québecitude* while also standing at an ironic distance from it. It's also worth mentioning that each Plexiglas-mounted portrait includes, on its rear face, a stencilled *fleur-de-lys* logotype reading “Made in Quebec – La Belle Province.”

Meanwhile, the sunset backdrops are a pointed jab at the neo-formalist geometric abstraction (such as that of Claude Tousignant or Guido Molinari) then prominent in Quebec. In this respect, Alleyn's *Quebec Suite* was a way of proclaiming his non-allegiance to all of the dominant local styles, whether *Plasticien* painting or the conceptual work being made by artists associated with Véhicule Art and the nascent scene of artist-run centers. Nevertheless, Alleyn's highly original combination of painted and sculptural elements – an early and perhaps accidental example of installation art – reflects the art-

ist's ongoing crisis of faith in the possibility of painting as *sufficient*, in itself, to secure its own relevance or contemporaneity.

This crisis is muted and perhaps laid to rest in Alleyn's works of the 1980s and after, as he recommitted himself to large-scale painting and painterly craft. If the *Quebec Suite* entailed a retreat from the overt politicization of Alleyn's previous period, it still grappled with the social life of its moment. By contrast, Alleyn's works from the late 1970s onward become increasingly personal and introspective. Tellingly, the human figure, central to Alleyn's output since the mid-'60s, slowly disappears from his paintings of the '80s, which are primarily landscapes and still-lives, pervaded with an atmosphere of solitude and bathed in melancholy shades of crepuscular light.

A bridge period, epitomized by Alleyn's *Blue Prints* of 1978, connects his *Quebec Suite* to his later paintings of the 1980s. Many of his mid-to-late '70s works feature bucolic images of lakeside vacationers subjected to effects derived from film or video processing: whole scenes or individual silhouettes are repeated, duplicated, and reversed. In *Carousel* (1981, the title clearly a reference to a slide projector), multiple small frames in shades of blue are overlaid on a central black-and-white image of figures lounging on a dock. These pictures, with their evocative cocktail of nostalgia blended with voyeuristic tension, also exhibit a sketch-like quality of experimentation: some are in graphite and colored pencil, some in gouache, and one, *L'Heure fixe* (1980), is Alleyn's sole silkscreen print.

A key event in Alleyn's late artistic development was his purchase of a summer cottage on Lake Memphremagog, Quebec, in 1977. It was this landscape that provided the inspiration for the aforementioned works, as well as many that would come after – and not only the scenery itself, but the images of it that came with the cottage. Alleyn bought the property fully furnished, which included the snapshots and slides left behind by the previous owners. These became fodder for his own work, which accounts for the disquietingly impersonal atmosphere of these images: though clearly tied up with representations of time and questions of memory, they are not based on Alleyn's own memories.

What is perhaps most interesting about Alleyn's '80s output is that he was returning to large-scale painting at the same time as the stand-off between Neo-Expressionist painting and the mostly photo-based practices of Appropriation art was defining the international discourse around postmodernism. Clearly, Alleyn was utterly remote from either of these camps, though it is not hard to see something quintessentially postmodern in both the mood and the subject matter of these works.

In his insightful curatorial essay, Lanctôt locates Alleyn's postmodernism by comparing his late paintings with Denys Arcand's films of the 1980s. He focuses on *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986), which takes place largely in a lakeside cottage and concerns middle-aged members of the Quebec intelligentsia who are critical of the idealism of their youth and indulging in private (mostly sexual) pleasures. The film's current of disillusion and retreat finds a strong echo in Alleyn's paintings, especially ones like

The Edge of Silence (1988), a deserted tennis court plunged in deep purple, or *Towards Amnesia* (1988), a twilight landscape compressed to an extremely narrow band of an otherwise black canvas, suggestive of the widescreen blocking of a film frame or the narrowing of a lens. Most of these paintings evoke a world de-realized by the blue glow of a television, experienced nocturnally and alone.

While Arcand's film was a major hit, however, Alleyn's *Indigo* paintings, despite being the artist's strongest and most fully-realized works as painting, were rarely seen. He showed none of them until the series was finished and finally exhibited altogether in 1990, in small shows at a Montreal Maison de Culture and New York's 49th Parallel Gallery. The year after, he retired from teaching.

Though prolific for the rest of his life, Alleyn's paintings of the '90s and early 2000s are, to my eyes, at least, less strikingly original than his work from the mid-'60s to the late '80s. As he continued to focus on unpopulated landscapes, interiors, and still-lives – such as his final *Éphémérides* series, which depicts collections of objects floating in black space, cancelled by overlaid brushstrokes – Alleyn's visual language became more steeped in personal symbology. His style became slightly caricatured, even cartoonish: a quiet, somewhat mannerist Surrealism. Though still distinctive, these paintings lose the productive tension between social forces, the pressures of mass-media image culture, and the artistic gesture, lapsing into the complacency of painting as an unchallenged default: in effect, returning to the cultural condition, if not the style, of his very earliest works.

If Alleyn's art could be summed up by these bookend periods of his career, he would hardly deserve the retrospective that the MAC has granted him. However the rich, complex, and often perplexing work of his middle period poses a real challenge to received history and offers the pleasure of something genuinely unexpected. At a time when artists are more subject than ever to the pressures of both promoting a personal brand and choosing among a seemingly infinite range of stylistic options, Alleyn presents an example of rejecting the constraints of a signature style without lapsing into the arbitrary. Each of his shifts was a profound re-evaluation of who he was as an individual and an artist in relation to his society and historical moment.

This dogged refusal of conventional self-promotion no doubt owed much to Alleyn's formation in the high existentialism of postwar abstract art – a factor that also contributed to his rejection of the conceptualist paradigm, which he regarded as inauthentic. On this count, Alleyn remains out of step with the ethos of much contemporary art, but, as Giorgio Agamben writes, those who are most contemporary with their own time neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. Alleyn's perpetual struggle with the prevailing currents of his day is precisely what makes his work exhilarating now.

Manifesta 11: What Artists and Curators Do for Money

BY LAUREN WETMORE



Mike Bouchet, "The Zurich Load," 2016. Photo: Camilo Brau.

It is a very small, and no doubt unintentional victory for the curatorial concept of [Manifesta 11: What People Do for Money-Some Joint Ventures](#) (June 11-September 18, 2016) that I found it more interesting to consider the biennial by way of its producers and coordinators than its curators and artists. The work involved in manifesting "joint ventures" between thirty contemporary artists and non-artist professionals must have been titanic, both in quantity and character. Certainly, it would have been more illustrative of the relationships between art and labor than the fruits of that labor. A case in point being artist Mike Bouchet's collaboration with Phillip Sigg, a process engineer at Werdhölzli Wastewater Treatment Plant. This commission brought into the first-floor gallery of the Löwenbräukunst a day's worth of Zürich's "human sludge" (i.e. 80,000 kilos of whatever the Zürichoisie are flushing down their toilets) formed into pseudo-minimalist cubes. I am less compelled by this one-liner – humans shit and other humans clean it up, thus is the world both functional and depraved – than I am in the fine print of the information panel positioned outside the air-locked gallery door: "All aspects of the art-work (research, logistics, installation, conservation, and disposal) meet the appropriate requirements for public display and environmental safety." The mind boggles

at the labyrinth of logistics and bureaucracy this project must have engendered for the biennial's producers and coordinators. Before they began tackling practicalities there must have been a significant amount of reverse-engineering – cajoling into existence, so that they can be met, official requirements for the public display of human feces.

This is perhaps the most challenging and illuminating part of the commissioning and exhibition-making process: when the unstoppably abstract meets the immovably practical, and all the resulting micro-incidences of political and ethical implication, emotional and physical absurdity, defeat and triumph. Once, when working on a site-specific installation at a zoo, I received a phone call from the Curator of Mammals, threatening to cancel the project because the artists' fabricator had climbed into the African wild dogs' enclosure in order to take measurements. After several minutes of politely hysterical dialogue (during which I received a crash-course in the, frankly terrifying, hunting and feeding behavior of sub-Saharan canids), I managed to secure the curator's green-light on the strength of the argument that the technician had meant no harm, evidenced by his only having entered the "outer defensive ring" of fencing, and not the "inner enclosure" of the little hut where the dogs slept. In the end, those measurements proved to be invaluable to the installation, but at no point did I seek to discern whether the zoo's concern was for the technician or the dogs. We each have stories about finding ourselves in this perilous zone between the "outer defensive ring" of the real-world's rules and the "inner enclosure" of the artwork's needs.

This is not to say that curators and artists do not play an active role in negotiating these zones – indeed, their level of skill and interest, here, is often integral to the success of a project. Presumably the Manifesta 11 commissions received more-than-average attention in this regard, given how closely the conceit of the biennial mirrors curator Christian Jankowski's own practice as an artist, which often finds him interlocuting outside the artworld. As evidence of the close interaction between the commissioned artists and their "professional" counterparts, the [What People Do for Money website](#) showcases candid photographs of just this: artist Fermín Jiménez Landa and meteorologist Peter Wick consider the Swiss skyline together, Michel Houellebecq reviews scans of his brain with Dr. Henry Perschak, and Torbjørn Rødland holds forth in Dr. Danielle Heller Fontana's office while gripping some sort of dental apparatus, etc. In fact, aside from the press downloads, these are very nearly the only images representing the commissions online. It is possible that this inattention to the finished product was born less of a desire to give primacy to the collaborative work of the projects, than it was the result of inevitable incompatibilities between the artists' timelines and that of the communications team. For a biennial, consistency between projects in their PR presentation is often valued over the quality/quantity of information available (never mind that each work may necessitate a different communication strategy). Therefore, although one work might be complete with web-ready photographs, another may be hand-wringingly behind schedule; and so the common denominator must be sought or staged. Thus is a biennial both functional and depraved.

These may seem like insignificant administrative details – distractions from reading the

actual exhibition. On the contrary, I have found that looking closely at what came after an artist or work was selected can quickly reveal how and why decisions critical to the artist and work were made. Unlike a professional framer whose entire visit to a gallery could be spoiled by spotting an overcut passe-partout, or the way an AV technician may experience the quality of a projection as directly linked to that of the projector, looking closely at what is going on around the works in *What People Do for Money* greatly improved my ability to understand some of its more baffling curatorial decisions. Consider again, for instance, the first floor of the Löwenbräukunst, which upon my visit contained the work of three artists: The aforementioned *Zürich Load* by Mike Bouchet, inflatables by Bhakti Baxter, and video works by Roman Štětina. Unfortunately, the overwhelming smell of human waste made it terribly difficult to give the latter two works more than a moment's attention. This was a particular shame in the case of Štětina's videos; precisely-composed meditations on the obsolescence of radio-play Foley artistry. Specifically, *Studio No. 2 (Slapstick)* (2013) is a 5-minute-long film that requires focus on the part of the viewer to parse the subtle aural differences between first- and second-generation audio after-effects. Needless to say, focusing my senses – aural or otherwise – was precisely the last thing I wanted to do while standing in such close proximity to eighty metric tons of shit.

So, on the one hand, pairing these two works appears to have been a poor curatorial decision; detrimental to the work of both the artists and the audience. On the other, the Manifesta 11 guide book (presumably printed before Bouchet's installation) indicates that three additional works were slated for this gallery: a slide series by Martin Kippenberger & Achim Schächtele, and elements of commissioned works by Evgeny Antufiev and Fermín Jiménez. It is not unusual that artworks should shift around at the last minute. This is the hazard of including floorplans in a guide book, printed before the show has settled into its final form. That said, this little glance at the intended placement of several prominent elements of the exhibition combines intriguingly with rumors (n.b. utterly unsubstantiated) that the magnitude of the stench was in fact not anticipated; that technicians were retching during the installation; that there are now concerns about the gallery walls continuing to "off gas" once the installation is removed, thus jeopardizing its ability to claim air-quality in keeping with high-level conservation standards. Rumors aside, the fact that a Kippenberger was planned for that gallery does seem to suggest that, at a relatively late stage, Bouchet's work was neither considered a threat to the safety of the other works nor the ability to properly experience them. However, once this changed (whether by decree of the curators, conservators, the artists themselves, or their dealers) that perilous zone must have cracked wide open, resulting in a series of negotiations and decisions that may have had very little to do with the finer academic aspects of curatorial practice.

Add to all of this the fact that that there was more than one curator in the mix: Jankowski was joined by Francesca Gavin, who co-curated *The Historical Exhibition: Sites Under Construction* – a sort of through-line of existing works that provided the opportunity to see loads of terrific art presented in a way that managed to be both didactic and

opaque. Štětina's work was part of this project as was Kippenberger's, while Bouchet was part of the program of commissioned works or "*Joint Ventures*." There were several points of clash between the *The Historical Exhibition* and the *Joint Ventures*, but what both projects seem to agree upon is a dichotomy between people who do things for money and the Manifesta 11 artists, who – to paraphrase the guidebook – "portray, question, and interact with the ideas and processes of occupations." Although Jankowski does acknowledge his "'changing guilds', from artist to curator," he doesn't appear to see the role of the curator as an overarching joint venture with the commissioned artists. Perhaps because curators are also not seen to be professionally occupied in the same way as, say, a waste-treatment engineer. There is a difference, apparently, one that Manifesta 11 labors to delineate under the auspices of bringing the two together. And maybe the only reason I was able to stomach this blind elitism was because I know exactly what artists and curators do for money: they produce and coordinate biennials.

Why Can't We Talk About Class and Art in Canada?

BY RM VAUGHAN



Image from a book parody of a children's first reader, "We Go to the Gallery: A Dung Beetle Learning Guide," authored by Miriam Elia.

A couple of weeks ago, an old friend posted a *j'accuse* on social media. It was brief and blunt and perhaps even rude. They asked, in the most forward and rough way (how un-Canadian!) why so many well-off artists in Canada continued to accept public funding, from either government grants and/or the new (and equally troublesome) model of public money acquisition, crowd-funding.

A reasonable enough question, one would assume (one not living in Canada, that is).

Now, I am not here to either defend or contradict my friend's posting(s). They speak well and loudly enough for themselves. What interests me are the reactions the original challenge generated: each was nasty, brutish, and short-tempered.

I've been through plenty of shit storms in my writing life, so I get it, from both sides. I get how one can become so overwhelmed by the shortcomings of the artworld that one lashes out in a less-than-genteel or tidy fashion. I also get that the artworld breeds unique anxieties – status anxieties, career mirror gazing, *what-about-me* complaints – and that provocations aimed at those anxieties, intentionally or indirectly, can cause

(shall we be contemporary and say “trigger”?) sniping, rage, and tongue lashings. ‘Twas ever thus.

But reactions can be as telling as the thing reacted against. The original poster, my friend, was accused of being bitter about their career, and then of stirring up questions best left alone, of disturbing the status quo (as if that action in itself was a bad thing). They were then asked for the names. *Names, damn it!* The post’s validity was questioned because the post’s author refused to identify the artists they thought were being over-rewarded, to “name and shame.” Both of these rhetorical strategies missed the mark by a country mile, as the author’s post was intended to provoke (I stress the word *provoke*) a discussion about a systemic problem in Canadian art, and that action, by its nature, does indeed disrupt the too-treasured, Cautious Canada status quo, and is hardly about individuals but classes.

Canadian art desperately needs to have a conversation about the role of class in art production. We will not be able to do so if the first instigators of that conversation are shut down and ostracized because they have not taken a baby-steps, academic approach. The pot won’t stir itself, but the muck inside sure does congeal.

Let’s begin by disabusing ourselves of some core fantasies. The first being that Art, like Love or Nature or any generalized conceit, exists outside of the base exchange of cash. Art is not free nor has it ever set anybody free. This rainbow fantasy of Art as being a combination of free expression, passion, and that equally-fraudulent construction called Talent is, or ought to be, easily understood as culturally idiotic and impotent as the generational spurt of *jejune* fancies that spawned it: namely, the hippie movement. (But these outbreaks happen every generation.) Enough already, nothing is free. Grow up.

The second misapprehension, and the more important to this discussion, is that Canada is a society organized by merit, especially as applied to the arts. How is it that Canadians believe this, and become furious when the lie is put to truth, but know in every other sector of society, merit is, at best, the ribbon on the gift box?

We know in Canada, and have no end of discussions about such, that class affects everything from access to education and health care to body size and employment opportunities – and yet, when a class analysis of any kind is applied to the trade and currencies of the artworld, suddenly ours is a “merit driven” society. However, even our public funders acknowledge that one’s socio-ethnic status can play a role in one’s career, and, to compensate for these discrepancies, funders offer unique programs for under-represented groups and include identity categories in which an applicant may identify themselves as a member of a minority in order for their projects to receive a deeper level of consideration. We acknowledge and attempt to address the bald fact that there is a dominant class on a socio-ethnic level, and I am glad that we do this; so why can’t we see the entire picture and recognize that dominance can also be economically enacted between peoples who (more or less) otherwise constitute a superficial hegemony, who may well mirror the dominant class but in truth do not reflect it?

Having money or not having money divides people as rudely, categorically, and with the same dagger-like precision as does race, gender, or sexuality, to name but a few of power's too-many targets. To put it plainly, if there's a tick box for your gender/ethnic/racial status, why is there not one for your economic status?

And yet, we can't talk about class in the arts without everyone freaking out and acting as if art is too holy to be about money. Nor can we state the obvious: if you are born into money, your art career will in all likelihood unfold at a very different pace than that of a contemporary not born into money, because, of course, you don't have to work at anything but your art. And with public funding for the necessities of art-making drying up (necessities such as materials, presentation infrastructure, and travel to accompany one's art should it get out of one's studio), those with independent means obviously do far better; the work looks more polished and gallery-worthy, they are properly dressed when presented to the right curators, they can leave Canada and establish connections that increase their international profile.

This is all so numbingly obvious, it's a bit infuriating to even have to explain – but all you have to do is look at the careers of two equally qualified artists, one well off, the other not, and the contrasts are startling, especially in expensive cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal.

And here's another well-observed reality not spoken of in polite art circles: the Canadian artworld is run by academics, academics with access to entire worlds of connection, funding, and curatorial power that stays neatly inside its diamond-hard shell. Many artists in Canada teach and function as academics. There is nothing wrong with that, but when it gets to the point, as it has now, that one cannot have an international or national art career without some backing from the academe, or, better yet, inclusion in same, then it's a problem because not everybody gets to go to university.

In any other occupation, we would call this out for what it is: class and education bias. Of course, there are examples of "outsiders" who do well without the support of the academic community, but the fact that we think of these artists as "examples" or "exceptions to the rule" is telling. The "rule" is the problem, not the fact that it can occasionally, and mostly by sheer luck, be broken.

Why, then, do we cling to the silly notion that, unlike any other sphere of human endeavor in our country, when it comes to art making and the making of art careers, there are no "haves" and "have-nots." What pathology fuels this dogged insistence that the Canadian artworld is, to quote the first Prime Minister Trudeau, a "classless society"?

I could zoom way out here and argue that when you build an entire nation from a set of colonial lies, everything false just tumbles forward, but I hardly need go global here. Let's stick to a more immediate history. The Canadian artworld was constructed, consciously, in the middle of the last century by a busy handful of well-meaning, educated people from "good families."

Part of that construction involved creating a near-utopian idea of creativity (and access to the creativity of others) for the masses. All of our major institutions and governmental arts bodies have this mission belief at their foundation. It's perfectly lovely, in the abstract. But seventy years later, we see how in reality this abstraction played out: the arts in Canada remain (almost to the exclusion of all others) for consumption by (and, as is the nature of self-feeding circles, the production by) the very same class who built the allegedly open systems in the first place.

The great "art for everybody" project failed. It's foolhardy to carry on as if everything is fine and everybody is doing as well as they deserve. The problem is not that the well-off (economically, academically) in Canada hoard the resources and protect each other – many of our nation's most exquisitely bred and to-the-manor-born artists are sweet and generous people. There is no need for paranoia here, Illuminati panics, or releasing of the hounds. But we must acknowledge that class, like power (they are twins, after all) replicates itself; same is always drawn to same. Canada is not and never was immune from social physics.

We don't need to shame rich artists for getting richer, we need to shame (and then radically overhaul) a broken system that over-rewards and easily favors those who already own a piece of the deep, plush turf misnamed the "level playing field."

The Incurable Distance of Gustave Caillebotte

BY BECCA ROTHFELD



Gustave Caillebotte, "Nude on a Couch," 1880.

Gustave Caillebotte has been curiously canonized: first as Impressionist, then as Realist, then as more of a collector than an artist. [Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter's Eye](#), an ambitious retrospective at the [National Gallery](#) in Washington D.C., re-positions the painter as a major artist in his own right, though his aesthetic allegiances and institutional commitments remain obscure. Caillebotte paintings, direct and searching engagements with the changing landscape of nineteenth-century Paris, speak to an uneasy habitation – to a sense of pervasive displacement that predates even his exclusion from the mainstream canon.

In the years following his death in 1894, Caillebotte was remembered primarily as a patron – a narrative solidified by his posthumous bequest to the French government of a sizable collection that would come to constitute the core of the [Musée d'Orsay's](#) Impressionist holdings. During his lifetime, he enjoyed a reputation as one of the foremost Impressionists, but here, too, he sat uncomfortably. He was wealthier than other members of the cohort, and he studied under the successful and somewhat conservative painter Léon Bonnat at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts during the 1870s, a move that betrayed his traditionalist sensibilities. Only when the young painter's 1874 submission to the official Salon was rejected did he definitively defy the mainstream to ally himself

with the Impressionist misfits. No one was sure how to classify the works that followed: Caillebotte was consistently deemed both the most and least radical of the group by his contemporary critics. His paintings were often considered too sobering to count as pure Impressionism, but he favors dizzying angles that scandalized the realist establishment. An uneasy and liminal painter, Paris's uncomfortable chronicler, Caillebotte borrows heavily from the realist and Impressionist traditions but belongs to neither.

It is perhaps for this reason that his work is imbued with such a pointed sense of isolation: every proximity comes at the cost of an equivalent distance. In paintings like *The Floor Scrapers* (1875), skewed perspectives create a sense of interpersonal space even within ostensibly intimate confines. The painting, arguably the artist's signature piece, positions the viewer above three shirtless laborers at work on the wooden floor of a luxurious room. Although the workers' motions are precise and contained, the space itself is giddily mobile: the ground appears slanted, as if the figures are at risk of sliding out of the frame and into our laps. In *Luncheon* (1876), Caillebotte employs a similar technique to depict three figures gathered around an exaggeratedly elongated table, alone together at what looks like a somber lunch. Even nominally communal spaces, like the family dining room, acquire a renewed privacy.

In the modernizing city, private spaces were rapidly becoming public. As Elizabeth Benjamin notes in her catalogue essay, the French interior had been an especially social space since the advent of eighteenth-century "salon" culture, but the public spaces in Haussmann's Paris were also permeated with a new privacy. It's this aspect of modernity – the intrusion of isolation into our every intimacy – that fascinates and preoccupies Caillebotte.

Two of his most celebrated paintings, *The Pont de L'Europe* (1876) and *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877) – both of which numbered among the highlights of the 1877 Impressionist exhibition – are darkly funny portraits of urban solitude. In *The Pont de L'Europe*, a woman and a man walking next to one another appear to be strolling together. On closer inspection, we realize that the man is several paces ahead of his companion, and their gazes, directed towards one another in the most general sense, in fact pass one another by. The visual joke consists in the defiance of our initial expectation: though the figures are positioned not unlike lovers on a promenade, their affect is decidedly icy. Like so many of modernity's metropolitan discontents, they are united only by their mutual alienation.

Paris Street, Rainy Day depicts a similarly bleak scene. Bourgeois Parisians in identical apparel amble across a wide boulevard in the rain. In the foreground, a woman and a man approach us. The woman's arm is twined through her companion's, but the line of her vision sweeps past him, and she walks slightly behind, almost beyond the scope of their shared umbrella. Absent the tenuous intersection of their linked arms, we might mistake them for strangers. In this picture, the schema of expectation established in *The Pont de L'Europe* is inverted: though we initially suspect the pair to be anonymous

idlers, they prove themselves lovers, participants in a romance as tepid and underwhelming as a polite nod to an unknown passerby.

Behind the couple, another pedestrian has adopted the central man's pose: he, too, crouches under an umbrella with one hand in his pocket. But though these two figures are visually twinned, clad in the same top hats and wielding the same umbrellas, they live their lives in parallel, never intersecting. In the foreground of the far-right corner of the canvas, we catch a glimpse of yet another man outfitted in the same dark coat and top hat. He enters the frame hurriedly, though his legs are severed by the canvas edge. To us, as to the couple he approaches, neither of whom acknowledges his advance, he is fragmentary. The grandiosity of Haussmann's Paris conflicts with the flitting chaos of its human inhabitants.

In another monumental work from the 1877 exhibition, *On the Pont de L'Europe* (1876-1877), we are presented yet again with the poignant contradiction of a private moment enacted in a public space: a businessman dressed in an elegant black coat and top hat turns away from us to gaze off the bridge at the distant cityscape, a blur of lugubrious blue-greys. The severe angles of the bridge's metallic railings cut across the painting, yielding a pair of strong diagonals that meet in the center of the canvas and irresistibly draw our gaze. But the businessman stands slightly to the left of this core intersection, defying the diagonal momentum of the work to pose a strong vertical counterpoint. The resulting antagonism – between the upright figure and his lateral environment, between the softness of a defiant human form and the harshness of an unyielding monolith – disorients, and we feel that we've witnessed a scene from which we are fundamentally excluded.

The stubborn enmity of the bridge is not anomalous for Caillebotte. His objects and built structures often seem to acquire a sort of hostile agency. And indeed, with the advent of social realism, class and its trappings began to overwhelm individuality in the eye of many French artists and writers. In her catalogue essay, "Paintings of Modern Life: Representing Modernity in Baudelaire, Balzac, Zola, and Caillebotte," Alexandra K. Wettlaufer notes that the novels of realists like Flaubert are "suffused with exhaustively detailed descriptions of faces, bodies, clothes, furniture, décor, and architecture." These works "capture the complex realities of the contemporary world through the subtle language of visual details and objects." Internal life bleeds into public life as interiors become markers of social status, arranged according to inflexible but unspoken codes. Furniture in particular acquired a new significance in this brave new world-order. "By midcentury," Elizabeth Benjamin writes, home furnishing "was considered an extension of the body, both physically and morally." In Caillebotte's interiors and portraits, we encounter figures especially beholden to their milieus and possessions.

In *Luncheon* (1876), the central table is laden with glass beakers, bowls of fruit, and silverware that ripple with color – but the lunchers, crouched mutely over their plates, blend into the dull background. The rich opulence of the densely furnished room stifles them, and the painting's distorted emphasis on food and ornament illustrates the

perils of a consumption that threatens to overtake the consumer. This logic, according to which human accouterments gain their own sinister momentum, extends beyond bourgeois residences and into the streets of Caillebotte's city. In the striking *The Rue Halévy, Seen from the Sixth Floor* (1878), an oppressive urban landscape bears down on its denizens. The pedestrians bustling around the avenue are small and indistinct, while the buildings and horizon loom menacingly. A raw but tender painting, *The Rue Halévy* animates the brooding hues of late November cold, bringing Paris chillingly alive.

Powerless before the indomitable mechanisms of the metropolis, the nineteenth-century Parisian's involvement in city life consisted less in acting and more in looking. The modern *flâneur*, or loafer, wandered the streets, watching without participating, "at the center of the world, and yet ... hidden from the world," as Baudelaire observed. Visually, the phenomenon of *flânerie* was encapsulated in the image of the window, a point of entry but also a point of exclusion, a symbol of impotent engagement. "From indoors, we communicate with the outside through windows. A window is a frame that is continually with us," wrote influential art critic Edmond Duranty in his 1876 pamphlet, "La Nouvelle Peinture," a text that implicitly championed Degas's and Caillebotte's tendencies towards social realism.

Caillebotte took Duranty's reflections to heart, and the window, presented as a symbol of moveable solitude, recurs throughout his oeuvre. In most of the resultant works, the frame of a painting is further circumscribed by the frame of a window, which intrudes along the edges of the canvas. Often, we observe a figure observing, as in *Interior, Woman at the Window* (1880) and *Man on a Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann* (1880), both depicting figures gazing out onto the street. We are reminded by these repeated insertions of a viewing figure that what we see isn't an unmediated landscape but rather the delimited vista of what Caillebotte sees, and in turn chooses to portray. The vista, as such, is displaced, and what we observe, finally, is a portrait of inaccessibility. We are both incorporated into these paintings and barred from them: their tight framings are mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, designed to initiate us into their worlds but also to keep us from the scenes that fall beyond their perimeters.

Duranty's metaphorical window performs this function even in the paintings that lack more explicit frames. In *The Pont de L'Europe*, a dog runs afield of a figure located outside the painting. The bottom of the dog's back leg, lifted as he trots forward, is cut off by the bottom of the canvas, linking him with us and issuing an initiation to follow him into the image. As in *The Pont de L'Europe*, the central figures in *Paris Street, Rainy Day* are abruptly truncated, inciting us to imagine the continuations of their bodies, which must extend into the external space of the gallery.

Although we are embedded in these pictures and sometimes even privy to their subjects' most personal moments, their inhabitants remain impervious to us. *Nude on a Couch* (1880) shows a disrobed woman lying supine on a sofa with one her arm over her face and the fingers of her other hand lightly tracing her nipple. This sensual scene produces a dual sensation of intimacy and estrangement: we can come seductively

close to its subject, but we cannot touch her. Even in *A Boating Party* (1877-1878), a painting in which we are positioned several feet across from a man in a rowboat, in a pose that is straightforwardly conversational, our interlocutor looks past us at something outside of the picture. The picture's composition is chatty, but it remains stubbornly and conspicuously silent.

Few commentators have explored the troubled temptations of a *flâneurie* that discloses only as much as it withholds. Our watching, like the flâneur's, is a mute but beguiling currency: to fulfill the fantasy of true voyeurism, a watching that affords us access to genuinely private acts, we must be willing to cede our desire for interpersonal exchange. But what good are these one-sided encounters, which allow us to know but prevent us from being known? Like his subjects, Caillebotte is maddeningly inaccessible. His presence is evoked and elided as he constructs scenes that recall his participation but decline to depict it. In his work as in his life, he refuses to place himself within a tradition or within an image, preferring to present his renderings of Parisian street life as observations without an observer – and himself as an eye without a body, a curiously placeless witness to the reconstruction of a place.