A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM

MOMUS

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Foreword

I confess to experiencing regular doubt, lately, about what art criticism can contribute to the fray when the conversations we need to be having, right now – the energy we need to be expending – is on a world order being tipped into disarray. (I write this in the midst of the horrific acts in Charlottesville, for instance, and the US President's inability to mouth the words "white supremacism." But what worries me most is that by the time you read this, something far worse will have taken root). I take comfort and strength in remembering, however, that just as art history provides the all-important subjective lens for parsing our histories, art criticism performs a similar function. In writing and publishing art criticism, we hold the contemporary moment up to the court of history, and lay claim to a stake for how we, and our time, will be understood.

Momus writers wield this responsibility and challenge with an embodied understanding of the urgency of writing cogently, clearly, and bravely about our contemporary moment and the art – and politics – it's coming to represent. Their voices have led our publication into a different tonal register, this year – a ratcheting up of meaning, a growing impatience with pat, tacit political understandings, or obscurantism of any kind. In this register, Aruna D'Souza grapples with grief over Jimmie Durham's legerdemain; Mitch Speed rides the subway with Zoe Leonard's heralding, heart-rending "I Want a President"; I move through a vulnerable social landscape in Los Angeles, following Trump's election and its protests; Kimberlee Córdova and Andrew Berardini confront the shaky ethics of contemporary art; Casey Beal struggles with his desire for "the now-ubiquitous high-decibel, all-frequencies static of political outrage"; Tausif Noor demands better transparency between art and capital; and Saelan Twerdy asks, "in this political-economic configuration, can we say that 'contemporaneity' is ending, too?"

Our writers have taught us, in recent months especially, that the work of a critic is less and less what 1860s critic Matthew Arnold said "to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches," and more and more what contemporary critic Peter Schjeldahl argued for: our "trying to move the world over and make it more habitable for [our] own sensitivity." So, criticism is not selfless. But, increasingly, it cannot waste space.

I'll heed this and simply say that, in a year where *Momus*'s readership crested 600,000, and saw us launch a podcast, and begin production on our first print publication (out this October), here is some representative writing from our strongest inning yet: ten writers speaking truth to power, in history's court.

- Sky Goodden, Publisher and Editor, *Momus*

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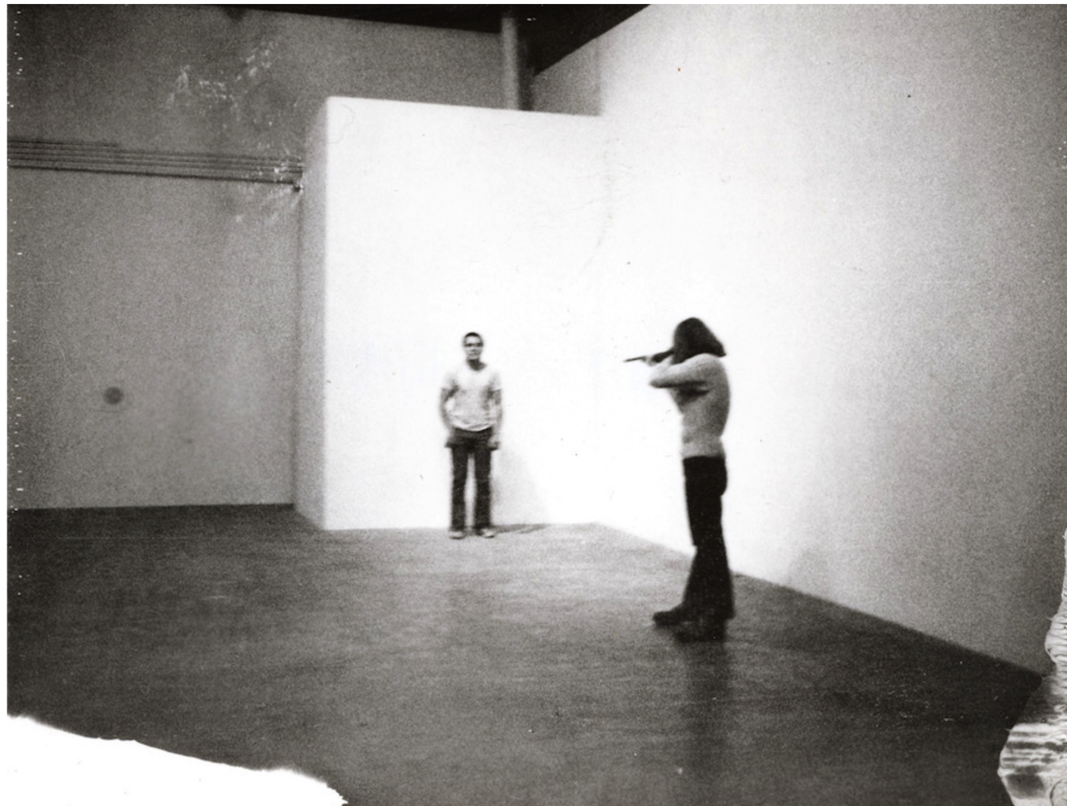
How to Act Ethically in Art

by Andrew Berardini



Chris Burden, "Shoot," 1971, © Chris Burden. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

Don't fuck the curator. Or the artist, the gallerist, the writer, or their editor. Unless, of course, you really want to. And, it almost goes without saying, they also really want to. But it's best avoided, really, as the power dynamics are messy. But so is love. So is desire. So, it turns out, is art.

There is no guide for what's right and wrong in art. Occasionally professors or curators are given a handbook, but even these often miss much of the important stuff, subtle real-world quandaries. But many of us aren't employees, but free agents and independent professionals. We're on our own to suss out our own personal code of ethics, observing what others get away with, what we personally find honest or distasteful.

I knew one critic who reviewed a show at a gallery she worked for. A lecturer that wrote a long profile in a prominent magazine about an artist who was about to decide whether he got tenure. A wealthy artist that quietly funded his own shows at museums. The collector that donated the fluff of his collection to dodge taxes from an auction. Many scholars are pretty sure that the most significant artwork of the 20th century, *Fountain* (1917) attributed to Marcel Duchamp, was stolen from

the female artist and poet, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who died penniless in obscurity. One of the worst, least ethical people I've ever met in art literally wrote the book on contemporary art and ethics. Go figure.

Even when community standards around art might feel clear, already-blurry guidelines shift. It used to be seen as kind of gross for curators and critics to work for art fairs; now it seems that high-level folks fight for the privilege. A few chief curators/museum directors quit to become art dealers and advisors. A few art dealers went the opposite direction. Museums lend works to commercial galleries. Non-profits have boards stuffed with art advisors. Many museums are overseen by at least a few speculators, oligarchs, criminals, or even the finest and highest level of the wealthy, those with money stolen so long ago it looks clean with age. Magazines knock on art dealers' doors for advertisements, but are also expected to operate without quid pro quo. And no, it's not okay to take money from young people who deeply indebt themselves to universities, but the work of teaching remains important. There isn't much virtue out there that still doesn't have just a little drop of poison.

It's so easy to get cynical: to see scoundrel after scoundrel achieve catastrophic success; to see the powerful prey on the weak; to watch those manipulators and double-dealers, cheaters and betrayers keep winning; and then to wonder when and if we will grow to resemble them if we don't simply quit. To be a great artist has never necessarily meant being a good person.

Let's say you advocate for an artist's work and then you become friends: is it a conflict to continue championing their work? What if they become your sweetheart? What if you owe them money? What amount is a conflict of interest? A drink? Twenty dollars? A thousand? Can institutional curators review shows at commercial galleries? How about organize them? Can critics? Does love or money cloud judgement? Where does a sense of quality or taste enter into the conversation?

Some of these questions might get covered by institutional handbooks, but most of them don't. Is it okay for the director of a large public museum to go to a commercial gallery dinner? It would often seem so: donor cultivation apparently outweighs the seediness of a public employee receiving certain perks. In fact, I rarely see museum directors at art openings except blue chip galleries, where they can't afford not to be seen. Should the critic, curator, administrator refuse such invitations on ethical grounds? It's hard to say. As you move up the hierarchy of perceived power, how do the rules change? Those fancy dinners feel awfully clubby, but sharing a meal with others is part of being in a community, and one of the ways we honor those that have made important contributions. And without them, there've been days when some of us might not have eaten.

It would be much less messy to neither fuck nor friend people we work with, to

never take money or food, and to act only out of a rigid set of moral standards. But for those of us who don't come from wealth, we can't always afford to make the most righteous choice.

And even though we may feel an old-school reluctance to work with naked commerce, this is a false piety. Many non-profiteers act unscrupulously and many art dealers act with fairness, grace, and generosity. So long as we toil under scarcity capitalism, why shouldn't we have kind, generous, principled people operating within it, and not just sharks? And maybe we might need a few sharks on behalf of the public trust. Who might be good or bad are hardly defined by their tax-filing status, but more by their honesty and care. Acting badly with another's trust has its consequences amongst equals, but so often we are not equals. One of the many ethical acts we can do is to help those who are not treated fairly to become so.

We do what we have to do to survive. There are limits even to this, of course, but after we've secured the basic necessities, we have important moral choices about how to act towards others in art. Some general principles apply: Don't fuck people over; act with compassion, honesty, and kindness; reward talent and originality over connections and clichés; take the struggles of others into consideration; do your best to balance transparency and privacy. When granted power, employ it as best you can to make space and give resources to others, most especially those who need it most.

You'll make mistakes, many even, but that's okay, too. Life is messy. Even though we're so often called to be professional automatons, we're human and other humans will forgive and even celebrate this. Maybe they'll even love you for it. However ethical or unethical that might be.

Mourning Jimmie Durham

by Aruna D'Souza

Jimmie Durham, "Head," 2006. Courtesy kurimanzutto.

In April, I wrote a review of an exhibition at the Hammer Museum at UCLA: "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World." I knew Durham's work only vaguely, having seen it in dribs and drabs, one piece at a time in group shows; but seeing a wide collection all at once, in his first large-scale solo exhibition in the U.S., was revelatory. The work tickled all my sweet spots – it was funny, self-deprecating, ironic, anti-essentialist when it came to the artist's own identity and the romantic stereotypes forced upon him by the artworld, and it was deeply critical.

The problem was, of course, that while Jimmie Durham's work appealed to me – a South Asian woman determined to work beyond the bounds of my identity – precisely because of his defiant rejection of attempts to box him into the category of "Cherokee artist," it turns out that it wasn't his box to claim or reject in the first place.

Doubts as to Durham's allusions to his Cherokee ancestry have been circulating since his days as an active member of AIM (the American Indian Movement) in the 1970s. They eventually led to his cutting ties with the organization in the late '70s, and leaving the U.S. altogether a decade or so later. The Hammer made these facts clear in the catalogue and supplementary material for the show, although it explained them as a principled stand by Durham: his "refusal to register" with any of the recognized Cherokee tribes was his protest of both the U.S.

government (which he said had no right to name him or his people), and of the presumably reactionary stance of the Cherokee "establishment," who were simply picking up where the state left off by insisting on arbitrating its membership.

To my eyes, this narrative made so much sense; Durham was not that different from artists like Coco Fusco and Kara Walker, steeped in a new form of critical race theory. Around the same time, these artists also faced accusations from their own communities that their art didn't correctly reflect their identities. (Walker seems to have alluded to this history's bearing on the current Durham brouhaha in a recent Instagram post: a photo of a protest pamphlet made by the artists Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell just after Walker won a MacArthur "genius" grant.)

The crucial difference is that while these artists have been charged with not performing their identities appropriately in their work, no one contests that Kara Walker is Black or Coco Fusco is Cuban. By contrast, an increasingly loud chorus of Cherokee and American Indian activists, artists, and curators is arguing that Durham is not Cherokee at all.

Their claim is based on extensive genealogical research, and the fact that Durham is never known to have engaged in any aspect of Cherokee culture. (His involvement in the AIM in the early 1970s was not related to the Cherokee community specifically.) Their long-standing objection to Durham's self-styling as a Cherokee artist gained traction in recent weeks, when the show moved from the Hammer Museum to the Walker Art Center. No doubt the mainstream artworld was more disposed to hear the concerns of American Indian protesters after a recent controversy saw Sam Durant's appropriative *Scaffold,* installed and then taken down at the Walker just a month or two earlier. In the face of this new awareness on the part of many non-expert bystanders, Durham's repeated, cheeky warnings not to call him a Cherokee artist – made both explicitly, in his statements, and implicitly, in the work itself – sound rather more literal than they first seemed.

My friend Daniel Quiles, as we watched the Durham affair unfold on social media, described the reaction by non-Native commentators as akin to cycling through Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. In my own case, this has definitely proven to be true. That I passed through these stages in public, on Facebook threads that will forever record my stubborn refusal to accept some basic truths about art, identity, and settler colonialism, is more than a little embarrassing. But, shame aside, I was lucky to benefit from a group of incredibly patient, open-minded Native American friends and strangers who took the time to school me – and trust me, they schooled me – through every one of the inevitable steps required to process such a major revelation.

At first, I performed *denial*: Just because Durham refused to register doesn't mean he isn't Cherokee. But of course, as my interlocutors informed me, there was no refusal involved – all the Cherokee tribes have refused to claim him because they find no evidence of his relationship to the community or the culture.

Then, *anger*: How can the Cherokee police their membership in such a draconian way? Doesn't it simply replicate the strategies of the U.S. government to control and at times eliminate American Indians? But what a strange and troubling slippage, to accuse an embattled minority, subject to genocidal attempts by a settler

colonial power, of reproducing those power relations by simply trying to contend with the fact that hundreds of thousands of Americans have mythologized their heritage to include Cherokee ancestry. In fact, the Cherokee have one of the most open conceptions of tribal affiliation of all the U.S. tribes – even people who can trace only a single ancestor back hundreds of years are invited to reconnect with a tribe and become recognized.

Next, *bargaining*: Okay, perhaps he's not technically Cherokee, but his work is still great and deals with important issues, and challenges essentialist identity politics. But of course this is nonsensical: how on earth can we imagine that an artist's identity doesn't frame our understanding of what they're doing? How would we react to Walker's play with racist stereotypes if she were a white man, for example, no matter how objectively excellent the work?

I made the briefest stop at *depression* – can't we just focus on the art? why are we always getting distracted by these other controversies? – but others have spent more time here.

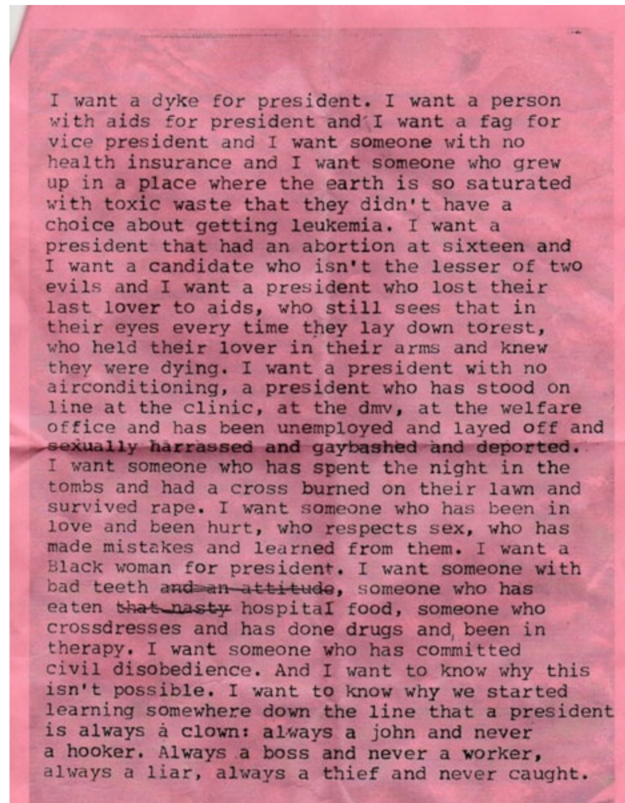
And finally, *acceptance*. I came to see no reason to doubt the challenges to Durham's identity, other than a selfish desire to retain him for my own personal artistic canon. To take seriously the notion of Cherokee sovereignty means to honor the Cherokee's right to define tribal membership. Whatever the future consensus about the value of Durham's art, any discussion about it from this point forward must start with the recognition that his claims to Cherokee heritage have been rejected.

The Native American protesters have only asked that the Walker and the show's subsequent venues (the Whitney in New York and the Remai Modern in Saskatoon) make clear in their didactics and publications that Durham is not a Cherokee. However, the artworld must go further, asking ourselves what the stakes are of promoting Durham's work when so few American Indian artists are shown in mainstream U.S. museums. To what extent has Durham's success been predicated on his talent as a trickster, and to what extent has it depended on what artists, critics, art institutions, and art audiences value? Are our critical assumptions leading to a situation where the only good Indian (artist) is a fake Indian (artist)? What are our collective "sweet spots"?

While some will try to frame this as another attempt to "censor" well-meaning artists working in difficult territory (cf. Dana Schutz at the Whitney, or Sam Durant at the Walker), the implications are in fact much broader. This is a question about whether our attachments to certain works or artists warrant setting aside the efforts of a community that has barely survived U.S. genocide to claim its sovereignty, and to survive under the conditions of a centuries-long occupation. If addressing ourselves to these problems makes us question our sacred cows in the process, so much the better. It won't be easy, but it's our obligation to do the crucial work of mourning, so that we can finally turn our attention to the long-standing, still-unresolved question of the place of Native American art in our vision of American art writ large.

Wu Tsang, Eileen Myles, and Me: Reading Zoe Leonard's "I Want a President"

by Mitch Speed



I want a dyke for president. I want a person
with aids for president and I want a fag for
vice president and I want someone with no
health insurance and I want someone who grew
up in a place where the earth is so saturated
with toxic waste that they didn't have a
choice about getting leukemia. I want a
president that had an abortion at sixteen and
I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two
evils and I want a president who lost their
last lover to aids, who still sees that in
their eyes every time they lay down torest,
who held their lover in their arms and knew
they were dying. I want a president with no
airconditioning, a president who has stood on
line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare
office and has been unemployed and layed off and
sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported.
I want someone who has spent the night in the
tombs and had a cross burned on their lawn and
survived rape. I want someone who has been in
love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has
made mistakes and learned from them. I want a
Black woman for president. I want someone with
bad teeth ~~and an attitude~~, someone who has
eaten ~~that nasty~~ hospital food, someone who
crossdresses and has done drugs and been in
therapy. I want someone who has committed
civil disobedience. And I want to know why this
isn't possible. I want to know why we started
learning somewhere down the line that a president
is always a clown: always a john and never
a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker,
always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

Recent art writing has been marked by a compulsion to cast every subject against an unfolding political crisis. Press releases, reviews, and essays implore artists to connect people within a brutally fractured social landscape. We seem to be searching our field for a monumental function, in a time when our old cenotaphs and memorials fail to move us.

Snaking through New York's burrows and bruised spirits, the city's subway system presents a more convincing paean to togetherness than any artwork. While delivering people to work, the doctor, the library, and the courthouse, the subway joins people, albeit briefly. How significant, then, that Zoe Leonard's 1992 poem *I Want a President* was installed last winter as an enormous poster on Manhattan's High Line – a former above-ground subway track now serving as a public greenway. A free-associated entreaty, Leonard's poem pleads for a president who has suffered sickness, social stigma, and violence, and so many other torments. The implication is that such a leader might have the empathic and ethical ferocity necessary to fight for the marginalized. Leonard's words rip open capitalist America's barbaric obsession with profit at the expense of feeling.

On November 6th, 2016, two days before an amoral narcissist was elected to the American presidency, twelve writers and artists, including Leonard, gathered on the High Line to reflect on the text and its evolving context. A book containing transcripts of each reflection was subsequently printed on cheap paper, bound with staples in a mint-green cover. Entitled *I Want a President* and sold for donations, the work portrays its interlocutors grappling with democracy's uncertain future.

My copy of this unassuming collection has now made its way back to Europe – a continent desperately resisting self-inflicted dismemberment. Through this journey, the book has come to feel like a protean monument. In contrast to stone and steel memorials, *I Want a President* works primarily in the space of thought. To read it is to confront manifold traumas intrinsic to America: not only wars, but complexes of neglect, dashed hope, and warped politics.

The reflections on Leonard's poem feel tightly knit: an intimate coterie of the woke. Leonard is often invoked among a close group of comrades, as when Sharon Hayes describes how "Zoe originally made the work in 1992 for the back cover of a queer magazine… [before] the text "moved slowly from friend to friend…" This collegial atmosphere echoes through collaborative writers Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's description of how "Zoe gets us started" thinking through the intractability of the current political situation: in particular the governance of Americans by "a sick, uneasy head in a hollow crown." Endearingly scattered, performer Morgan Bassichis searches through anecdotes, before concluding that "Zoe's piece is like a spell" akin to Natalie Cole's hit *Unforgettable* (1992). Also employing first-name-basis familiarity, Pamela Sneed writes that "Zoe's text acknowledges me as a dyke and as a black woman and helps me envision a future I don't really exist in yet." Sneed had "just begun to turn a corner on" the killing of so many young black men, had just begun to "not think about of it everyday / then the police kill this black girl in Texas / claim she committed suicide…"

This kind of jarring emotive turn is a recurring structure in *I Want a President.* Over and again, hopeful fraternity dives into horror, only to double back to a stubborn optimism underlined by the book's very existence. And now, as this goes to publication, optimism has once more been rendered a cruel joke, with the acquittal of the police officer who last year killed a pleading Philando Castille, in front of his pleading girlfriend and child. The verdict has left a hollow of morale; a perhaps un-mendable dissociation from the belief that some essential justness, resides in the core of American society.

Nowhere are oscillations between hope and despair mirrored more effectively, in this book, than in a chattering contribution from the poet and novelist Eileen Myles. Entitled "Acceptance Speech," the piece imagines Myles accepting the presidency of the United States (for which she in fact ran in 1992). The poet begins with a deceptively multivalent line that bundles mock enthusiasm, real hope,

and cutting realism. "First I want to say this feels incredible," she writes… "to run and run and run to not see an end in sight. But maybe have a feeling that there's really no outside to this endeavour this beautiful thing." But then, just as Myles has us snickering along with her, she drops into the brutal American gutter. "You know who the homeless are… They are the military men and women. Who fought our pointless wars, who came home after each stupid greedy war we have waged and they got less."

Prior to buying this book, the failure of cenotaphs had already been cycling in my mind. There is a website, *yolocaust.d*e, which combines photos of tourists happily posing atop Berlin's holocaust memorial with torturous images of the shoah's victims. Precisely because of its resistance to such spectacles, Leonard's humble paper collection seemed to hold a deceptive monumental potential. Sitting on the C-train and thumbing its tattered pages, this impression was shored as a young man – Latino, in his early twenties, with a ponytail and Yankees cap – entered the subway car. As commuters sat, he began a weary supplication that corroborated Myles observations on America's relationship to wars, and the people who fight them. Having been a soldier in Iraq, the man was begging for money to purchase baby formula. New Yorkers witness this kind of thing so often that bored numbness has become the default response.

There's no doubt that *I Want a President* relies upon an elitism. Despite good intentions, the book moves through a particular network of people who feel welcome in the culturally and economically lofty spaces of contemporary art. This predicament draws focus around the way that exclusion is not only perpetuated in financially inaccessible art objects, but in the relative levels of comfort and discomfort that certain people feel entering the white-cube spaces where this collection is offered. Despite being affordable and decidedly un-precious, non-white and economically disenfranchised people may feel unwelcome or even repelled by the very spaces that distribute the book – an ironic effect, given how it is meant to reflect oppressions that condition their lives.

Admirably, *I Want a President* also hosts the messy and sometimes stinging conflicts intrinsic to democracy. When Wu Tsang speaks truth to power, they address not only the government but also the more formidable contributors to this very project, who wield their own institutional clout. Leonard shows at Hauser and Wirth, for instance, a bastion of status and wealth. In turn, Myles's newly released novel and poetry collection – *Chelsea Girls* (2015) and *I Must be Living Twice* (2015) – are on shelves everywhere, while she's begun shooting a version of herself on the Amazon series *Transparent.*

Laudably, both Leonard and Myles have made singular contributions to their disciplines, while maintaining intense and sharply delivered political positions. But

perhaps because of the stability and insulation provided by their recent successes, neither finds the mettle that Tsang displays, here, rejecting the very premise of this book:

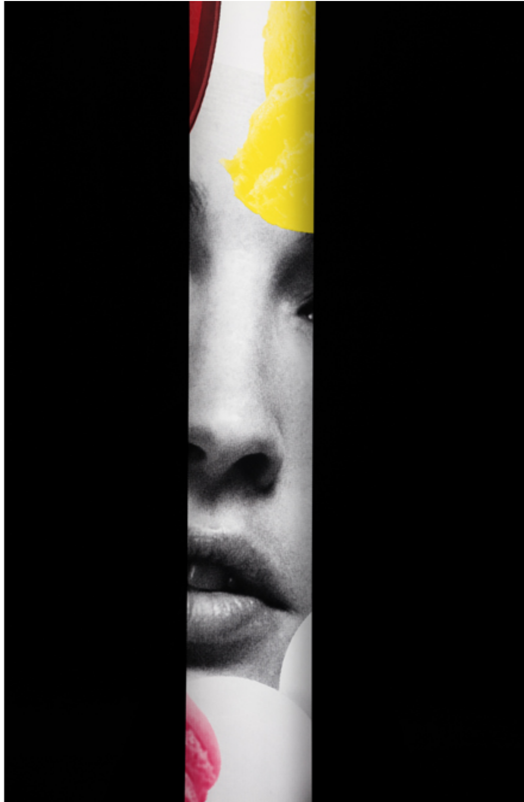
I don't want a president. I don't want a dyke for president. We may even have a dyke for president in the next decade or two, but she will probably be an Ellen-type rich, white lesbian who can check another box. I don't want Laverne Cox for president or any other marginalized person who has managed to gain enough mainstream visibility to perpetuate power the way it has always operated. I don't want a president, if running this country means sadistically destroying other peoples' countries with our paramilitaries and complicit dictators and globalized culture.

To some, Tsang's diatribe will seem foolish – a kind of self-defeating radical idealism. But for those oppressed from multiple angles at once, a non-compromising position might seem like the only tolerable option. As a self-identified transfeminine and transguy artist, Tsang's own increased freedom of expression comes with increased physical danger. "It seems," Tsang continues, "the more they celebrate us (or at least our bodies and appearances) the more they kill us…" The latter "they" in this sentence is not only trans and gay bashers, but also *we* – the readers and mute subway-car passengers – who permit violence by not mobilizing against it.

The collection's over-determined representation of trauma is necessary. Monuments are for everyone. But *everyone* is by definition a plurality, incommensurable with the monolithic bulwarks of national pride that sit lonely in our parks. In contrast, *I Want a President* travels with individuated bodies, mirroring and expanding their own experiences. At least within the artistic community, it stands a chance of holding us together through our differences: even as the book itself falls apart, in your bag, the subway, wherever.

Grieving in L.A.

by Sky Goodden



"Black Bars: Dejeuner No. 3 (Girl with Banana, Popsicle, Cherry, Lily, Geranium and Straws)," detail, 2016.

My first trip to Los Angeles started ten days after an election that diminished our assurance in something like a common good. I booked the flight before that fatal turn, of course, expecting something cool, maybe correcting in the city's artworld; imagining a community of shaggy game-changers who'd successfully mooted the binary between ambition and good sleep. I met, instead, a people bent, broken, groping for genuine, if inarticulate, exchange. Over five days of back-to-back gallery visits, openings, and meetings, I shared in pressed and fractured conversations about art and much else, that felt urgent and unlikely. I was nearly grateful for my timing.

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We want our artists to publicly bleed for us as quickly as we feel our wounds. An ever-renewing online media suggests immediate reflection (and when the editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker* can produce two of the most in-depth and affecting responses to Trump's election inside a week, why expect anything less?). However, recent publishing standards haven't overcome the time-lag that consideration requires.

It's important to remember that it takes a minute for good art to show up. That the strange, static awareness we feel after an upset – the something-like-silence where we're observing the noise and fog of our own breath and trying to read into it a message – is not rudderlessness or detachment, but the substance of responding.

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I moved through a slowed-down and vulnerable L.A., visiting the work that didn't mean to be the "after" picture of a suddenly-changed body. Wanting a response, I saw what was there, and acknowledged that it'd have to suffice: that I'd be seeking in its many-personed beings – however unfairly – some kind of sign, this artworld now burdened with newly-assigned meaning, and bearing a complicated weight.

Certain things buckled under this unsparing test, and it's educative to note what failed: for instance, Doug Aitken at MOCA LA is an impressive survey that's too celebrity-driven, medium-focused, and gorgeously vacant to deliver lasting comment. Similarly, the exhausted academicism on display at Kayne Griffin Corcoran (a polished gallery featuring the tiresome dance of the material-immaterial in an exhibition titled *Concrete Islands*, curated by Douglas Fogel and Hanneke Skerath) was overshadowed by its own architecture and light-infused galleries, designed by James Turrell. (I had a chance to sit in the gallery's office, where the ceiling houses a hole, and through it, the sky presses upon your eyelids like a wet, blue petal. Turrell has raised the bar perhaps impossibly high for that gallery to attempt any further aesthetic wins).

There were countless shows that felt important, of course, even historically overdue: Betye Saarthoughtfully showcased in something like an abbreviated museum survey at Roberts & Tilton. Paul Thek treated to a gorgeous, spare (and L.A.-first) exhibition at the young and ambitious Hannah Hoffman Gallery. Paolo Colombo curating on the theme of "sleep" at Ibid's newly-inaugurated L.A. space, including a specially-commissioned, massive Ed Ruscha wall-hanging, that, in concert with subtle works by the late Thek, Félix González-Torres, and Robert Gober, affected a posture of activity.

The exhibition that stood out as being particularly prescient and "ready" for our recent upset, however, was Kathryn Andrews's *Black Bars*, at David Kordansky. Even with its seductive production value – almost off-puttingly polished – Andrews calls up our central impasses with the media, government, and our own self-perception. Her show springs between populism and politics, and deals in sex and correction, reading as timely – especially when you learn that her first solo exhibition (currently touring between the MCA Chicago and the Nasher

Sculpture Center, Dallas) is titled *Run for President*, and features a reluctant clown hitched to a position of power.

Andrews lands her emphasis on censorship, and the suggested limits of its reach. She marks the margins of surveillance, and how contained things inevitably leak history, aura, and comment. Seen through this lens, the media and the government can appear (gratifyingly) ineffectual, and absurd.

Andrews affects this comment both overtly and subtly as she plays with the stuff of memory, art history, and political (and emotional) subjugation. Deep-framed wall works contain sculptures that peek out from beneath thick black stripes like redactions. Beneath these, cryptic figures stutter their citations. These elliptical referents are both diminished and made more seductive. Above them, the screen-printed stripes nod to a wiped-out Minimalism, and yet claim as their chief quotation: silence.

Authorship is unseated, and appropriation gets queered. The gaze, both denied and begged on, is complicated by desire and objection. However, what makes this artist (a long-time assistant to Mike Kelley) compelling is the way she solicits the auratic object. Even when it's reduced to a mere toe-hold, she calls on the storied, undeniable original to fight for its value. Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* appears in a work title, for instance, or American Apparel models (re-photographed by Andrews) wink through the slats, as do famed Hollywood props (a flipper from *Jaws*; a gun from *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*; a claw). Andrews demands of her nearly-rubbed-out subjects a larger profile than they'd be capable of summoning if sequestered to mere vitrines (or banner ads). She also demands that we work away at a censored space – to deny it, and fight for our perspective, however crooked or blinkered by history, experience, sentiment, and prejudice. She requires a fight from both object and subject, and makes clear that there are no blacked-out spaces, so long as we're political, keen, and constant.

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Los Angeles was generous – perhaps typically, or maybe apocalyptically. I'm sure that I visited its city in a rarefied moment, witnessing a break-down before the rebound. The people I met with were strange and expansive. Like when I visited with a blue-chip gallery director who stood with me in a parking lot for half an hour, seemingly unhurried, and channeling his younger self – a poet, it turns out. Or as when I heard a confession from the partner of a prominent museum director, that despite her spouse's insatiable interest in the news, she was experiencing a small trauma every time the newspaper hit their doorstep. (The museum director would later mention to me how she was giving her staff sick days, holidays, and, now, "activist days," too.) Like how I watched powerhouse queers and storied feminists ascend the stairs to a famed Silver Lake manse, where a

fundraiser for women in the arts would raise thousands to ensure our most endangered communities' continuance. Like how I toured through galleries with directors who were experiencing their shows anew, as though up-ended, turned-over, the work now leaden and reflecting. Or like how Yvonne Rainer privately performed with her formative collaborators, for me and fifty others, in what might be her last event, narrating something messy and playful that had the quality of a sadly literal *Waiting for Godot* – because we knew the waiting party was upon us, and it was, potentially, something worse than death.

Or like how an activist-writer drove me along a stretch of freeway and recounted how, when this artery was choked with protests, the central jail flickered its lights, the cellmates voicing their solidarity. This, above all, made me bend with grief.

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Regardless of art's slow generation, we experienced something stunning, this fall – a stunning I feel impatient to see reflected. But in the time it takes for cognition – and then our rectifying – we can visit with our mourning. Now's the time to bow our heads, to bend at the knees. To consider the pall cast over places that vibrate with light.

Sound/Off: Uneasy Listening at documenta14 in Kassel

by Tausif Noor

Maria Hassabi, "STAGING," 2017. Photo: Tausif Noor.

International art gatherings are loud affairs, and a trip through documenta 14 in Kassel rewards an ability to separate signal from noise. In a shift from fifty years of historical precedent, artistic director Adam Szymczyk situated this year's international fete in more than one city: Athens and Kassel. The curatorial theme "Learning from Athens" gestures obliquely to the cities' relative political and economic positions in the globalized market. Szymczyk and company have cited the austerity measures imposed on Greece by the European Union as inspiration for this year's theme, and the political ramifications of debt act as source material for many of the artists.

Learning from Athens, however, demands that the relationship between the two locales, and their broader relationship to global art networks, be made explicit: that imbalances of power be elucidated with transparency. Instead, the staged relationships between art and capital, between nations and their manifold networks of power, tend toward obscurantism. This is the failure of documenta's curatorial proposal: it presupposes that "learning" is a unidirectional venture – one

that can be done without properly listening. Under the general din of documenta 14, the kind of engagement that favors real complexity over mere representations of diversity plays clearly – if more quietly – in the various sound works scattered across Kassel.

Participatory and discursive performances formed a large part of the opening weekend, and included open studio hours at Narrowcast House, a venue located a short walk away from the main Fridericanum and documenta Halle locations. Conceived by German artist Anton Kats, the open radio and sound workshops zeroed in on the practice of disseminating media to a small, select audience. In the narrowcast radio case, this meant transmitting radio across an approximately one-kilometer radius using a simple three-watt transmitter. When I spoke to Kats, he emphasized that his work is site-specific, but not wedded to technology; he is not trying to shape an audience so much as tap into audiences that are already there. With its attention to carving out a form that is practical and accessible, Kats's highly localized practice is at odds with the globalizing message of documenta and other comparable gatherings. His work speaks to a necessary slowing-down of art practice: a more careful consideration of the particularities of its audiences.

Documenta 14's Radio Program extends this project to a larger scale. *Every Time a Ear di Soun* – the name taken from the dub poetry of Mutabaruka – consists of nine radio stations in Greece, Cameroon, Colombia, Brazil, Lebanon, Indonesia, and Germany; each program is a mixture of live acts as well as art pieces commissioned by the documenta team, and broadcast on specific local channels from April to September. The Radio Program is curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, and speaks to his statements during the official press conference, in which he warned of the "dangers of a nationalist ethos" and encouraged the pursuit of uncertainty and disorientation as ways of creating new forms of art. Refreshingly, radio here is reconsidered as a mode of artistic and creative production, and a democratic one at that – all the programs are streamed online. However, given that the projects span the entirety of the documenta run, it would have been more impactful for them to directly complement the visual works on display in Athens and Kassel, rather than operating as an independent and disjointed endeavor that takes a backseat to its more immediately memorable visual counterparts.

At the historic house of documenta, the Fridericianum, whose entablature (courtesy of the Turkish artist Banu Cennetgolu) reads "Being Safe is Scary," the prevailing theme was dissonance. Curator Katerina Koskina, director of Athens's National Museum of Contemporary Art (known as the EMST), populated it with works by international artists, many of them Greek and from the EMST collection. The muddled curatorial direction of the Fridericianum seemed to be a concession to Athens rather than a considered decision; visitors breezed past many of the Greek names in favor of more immediately attractive works, like Lucas Samaras's

reflective surfaces and Mona Hatoum's industrial installations. The redeeming piece – one of the best in Kassel – was Stefanos Tsivopoulos's performance, *Precarious Archive*. Silent women, dressed in black and wearing white protective gloves, sort through boxes of files containing documents of 40 years of Greek history, including covert operations by the Greek Junta, and images from the Cold War. Inspecting these images from a closer vantage point induces the performers to speak: the work becomes dialogic as the performers interrogate the viewer as to the identities of various political figures and locales depicted in the archival images. In this way, Tsivopoulos abets the archive in speaking for itself, rather than imposing histories upon the viewers. This was a welcome antidote to the arch overtures of the rest of the venue, and an endorsement of the notion that participatory art practices can be rooted in research and engagement, and needn't cater to spectacle or abstruseness.

Works in the Neue Neue Galerie tended more toward the experimental: particularly Maria Hassabi's *STAGING*, in which performers silently writhed and posed in colorful getups and metallic shoes. But the heart of the Galerie's programming was upstairs, where Irena Haiduk staged her expansive performance pieces *Spinal Discipline* (2017) and *Seductive Exacting Realism* (2015-ongoing). The former is situated in the "Waiting Room," in which members of the *Army of Beautiful Women* – young girls in cap-sleeve dresses – slowly walk around and balance books on their heads, all while wearing orthopedic shoes made in the former Yugoslavia (the shoes are available for purchase in the venue as part of Haiduk's *Yugoexport* project, which takes relational aesthetics to its capitalistic extreme). There is an air of anodyne stillness as the Army glides around in their comfortable footwear, alternately walking down a runway, sitting and reading, or staring blankly – their gestures fit perfectly in an atmosphere of passive expectation.

If the "Waiting Room" is peaceful purgatory, Haiduk's "Blind Room" is its polemical counterpart, one that presents nebulous, complex issues with the tone of a university lecture. For thirty minutes in total darkness, visitors listen to a recording of voice actors re-staging a conversation between Haiduk and Srđa Popović, co-founder of CANVAS, a consultancy group that aims, broadly, to aid non-violent revolution. We listen to the conversation unfold, touching on strategies for overthrowing governments, identifying issues of scalability, and debating whether politics constitutes art and vice versa. The heady dialogue has the tone of science fiction – the idea that a non-profit "consultancy" exists with such explicit political goals isn't exactly unprecedented in an age of neoliberal posturing, but there is something stilted or robotic, even, in this meditative conversation. The exchange, I later learn, is in fact voiced by Lin Qian, the voice of Siri for Asia, and Jennifer Estlin, who was chosen to mimic the voice of Rachel, the replicant of *Blade Runner*. This wry gesture hints at the ability for technological proxies to speak our own desires, elevating Haiduk's work from mere virtue-signaling in support of democratic axioms to one that asks: for whom are such principles relevant? Perhaps, however, the central gift of Haiduk's *Seductive Exacting Realism* is that

it requires listeners to stop and pause for the entirety of its duration. Sitting in the dark with no exits in sight – with nothing in sight – makes us listen closer, and more carefully, easing the disquietude of documenta's clamorous activity.

In an essay for the documenta Reader, Quinn Latimer expounds upon the political significance of voice. She takes into consideration the instrumentalization of sound and affect in the politics of gender and debt in Greek history. Latimer writes of "debt and economic violence and anxiety (the essential state of our age, were we to speak of the essential) as a kind of 'hearing voices', yes. I am thinking of a changing economy of hearing voices." In this system circulates particular voices, and certain ways of listening to them: having a voice is a "kind of fame … But voice suggests (expects, demands) a body. A presence, a meeting – a vessel and an audience." In other words, need shapes demand, and close listening is always in deficit. When this subtle auditory economy brushes up against the more nebulous economies of art and capital – Basel follows documenta by less than a week, to wit – it becomes more and more difficult to listen closely, but the impetus remains nevertheless. It's hard to pay attention, but far more rewarding to try and hear the quiet voices that are routinely passed over.

Jill Magid’s Post-Truth Diamond Proposal

by Kimberlee Córdova

Jill Magid, “The Proposal: The Dinner,” Museo de Arte de Zapopan, Guadalajara, Mexico, July 19, 2014.

As the spectacle of the 2016 United States presidential elections played out over the summer, Mexico hosted a surreal visit by a well-known, polarizing New Yorker. Mirroring Trump in her own way, Brooklyn-based conceptual artist Jill Magid brandished symbols of wealth and messianic messaging, while conducting a master-class in media manipulation. Much ink was spilt last year on her controversial mission to insert herself “into the life of a dead man,” with her four-year project *The Barragán Archives* (2012-16). The work was generally celebrated by standard-bearer publications and has been widely circulated on social media. In Mexico, however, the reception to Magid’s work has been decidedly more ambivalent. And broader questions loom: how are journalists to report stories responsibly when truth seems to matter less than attention, and the very fact of reporting becomes, itself, a post-truth prop? With hollow justifications of “alternative facts” ringing in our ears daily, it feels more than slightly uncomfortable to lift another skillful prevaricator upon our shoulders.

The dead man in question was Pritzker Prize-winning Mexican architect Luis Barragán, whose ashes Magid negotiated to have transformed into a one-carat di-

amond. This gem was set in an engagement ring, which she offered to Dr. Federica Zanco, the director of the architect's professional archive, in exchange for the documents' repatriation to Mexico from Switzerland. Titled *The Proposal* (2016), Magid's offering of the ring represents "the final climactic instalment" of *The Barragán Archives*, which sought to "understand what it meant for an artist's legacy to be controlled by a corporation."

More than a multi-media work *The Barragán Archives* is a "multi media-outlet" work. In the deployment of the project, Magid wielded impressive PR savvy, both to promote the exhibitions and to needle Zanco into cooperation. The artist adeptly marketed herself as the agent of the architect's spectacular transformation from ashes to diamond, by baiting publications and readers alike with romantic storylines drawn from wholesale fictionalizations of Barragán's love letters. After a favorable New York *Times* review, Zanco's responses to Magid's work noticeably shifted from coolly dismissive to cautiously amicable.

Keenly aware of the media as her collaborator in building the narrative arc of the project, Magid's published interviews patiently laid out the project's (doubtlessly artful) framework. In article after article, she seized the opportunity to spin a tale – a whopper, and the conceptual basis of *The Barragán Archives*, involving a love triangle between her, Zanco, and Barragán – as journalistic fact. Beyond the poetic license that Magid takes with the architect's correspondence, though, the real harm of the project lies at the level of representation: the devilish details that spoil the tidy fable.

The clumsy ideological framework of *The Barragán Archives* is based on oversimplifications and essentialisms that should give us pause. Reducing nuance to trite dictum, the work flattens the complex and fraught relationships between cultural patrimony and private property, the realities of institutional limits, and the balance between preservation and open access. Each player in the story is stereotyped: Zanco is a control-obsessed agent of a Swiss corporation, Mexicans are marginalized victims deprived of access to their own culture, and Magid, a romantic activist righting perceived wrongs. These idealizations reinforce a stubborn myth: contemporary transactions between people in Mexico and foreign entities can only be understood as a subaltern group being hoodwinked. They await their benevolent saviour.

As a whole, *The Barragán Archives* is based on problematizing the core elements of the archive imbroglio: private ownership of an important cultural symbol by a foreign corporation; restricted access in a facility in Switzerland ("The Bunker," as she calls it); and Zanco's enforcement of copyrights that she owns on images of Barragán's designs.

Magid's works wink at Zanco's intellectual property rights by managing to barely circumvent legal infringement. In the various exhibitions that comprise *The Bar-*

ragán Archives, Magid has displayed copies of the catalogue from the Zanco-curated exhibition *Luis Barragán: The Quiet Revolution*(2001), as readymades with pages framed in still-bound books as though they were prints. Life-sized replicas of Barragán-designed furniture were wrapped with moving blankets in a Paris exhibition, ducking European copyright law. However, as a critique of the corporate privatization of culture, these pieces are largely supplemental to the core work of the project, Magid's diamond ring proposal to Zanco: "the body for the body of work."

Magid has staked her career on an image of her practice as a series of negotiations meant to reveal the limits of authority. However, her characterizations of her interactions with Zanco, the Barragán Family, and Mexican bureaucracy are so blatantly self-aggrandizing that any sanguine attempt to restore Mexico's lost patrimony feels greatly diminished.

Again, inconvenient details confound the myth. In an interview with cultural media outlet GasTV, curator Daniel Garza-Usabiaga explains in detail Magid's troublesome mischaracterizations of the archive's administration. He balks at the artist's description of Zanco's relationship with the archive as "erotic;" her identification of one elderly and infirm family member as the negotiating representative of Barragán's extended family; and the sacrilegious act of separating the deeply Catholic Barragán's ashes to make the diamond. As with most spectacular post-truth: the further you press the facts, the uglier it all seems.

In any case, the *quid pro quo* of *The Proposal* is repatriation, not digitization or public visitation. So when Magid's main criticism settles on the archive's foreign location and ownership, her hazy promises of open access feel like a red herring. The exhibition catalogue proclaims: "If she [Zanco] accepts the ring, the archive becomes accessible to the public." As yet, though, we have no idea how this would look. Magid has made public no concrete preparations to manage the files whose return she so ardently demands. She noticeably evades the question when Zanco asks her directly. It's worth wondering whether her naivety about the limitations of public institutions in Mexico reflects blind optimism, or cynical repression. Is the work really so invested in its speculative mythologies that some Borgesian abstraction of an ideal library suffices to complete the picture?

Even taken as a purely symbolic gesture, there are problematic dynamics at play. Throughout the work Magid situates herself at centerstage: a Quixotic figure fighting on behalf of a defenceless abstraction of "Mexican People" deprived of their cultural artifact by a foreign corporation. And while questioning the private ownership of national treasures is a worthwhile cause; Magid's insistence on framing Barragán's legacy as a love triangle between a diamond architect and two adoring women in a bunker authors a cloying magical realism that she too-easily peddles as documentary. That she is aided so willingly by a press she knew she

could count on is an achingly familiar sort of indictment. Critically atrophied and hungry for page-views, they couldn't help but publish exactly the stories she wanted.

Compressing complex truths under romantic fictionalization and social media yields an ill-gotten gem: viral circulation of a fact-*ish* story goading clicks and shares, a well-worn device. As we all struggle in a dizzying time to understand the ethics of telling stories we've been manipulated to tell, it appears at least clear that the only artist's legacy that *The Barragán Archives* cares about is Magid's own. Press anything hard enough, and it'll turn into something that endures.

Gallerist Virginia Dwan, the Reluctant Legend

by Catherine G. Wagley

Virginia Dwan at Dwan Gallery, NYC, 1969. Photo: Roger Prigent. Courtesy of Dwan Gallery Archive.

"Any ideas of art history or significance were forgotten," wrote gallerist Virginia Dwan in 1990, remembering the first time she saw one of Yves Klein's all-blue reliefs through the window of Galerie Rive Droite in Paris. Within a year, Klein would be living in Dwan's Malibu beach house, making work to show in her Los Angeles gallery.

On March 14, 2017, five days before the opening of *Los Angeles to New York: Dwan Gallery, 1959-1971* at Los Angeles County Museum (LACMA), Dwan spoke about the excitement Klein brought her. He "has gotten a rather bad reputation of just taking nudes and scrubbing them around on canvas," she said, but that interested her less than his wilder conceptual imaginings. "He wanted to build architecture from jets of air coming out of the ground … He was involved with the whole universe, actually," the 85-year-old continued, "and very important to my thinking finally." Her affinity for Klein's ambitions is telling: Dwan cared far more about fostering adventurous urges, and engaging them, than her position in Important Art.

When Dwan moved her gallery from its first Westwood location to a larger storefront on Lindbrook Drive in 1962, she built an arched, tunnel-like entrance. This way, "people would leave the world as we know it behind and come to be with the art, really be with it." The first show, an exhibition by French-Armenian artist Arman, included clear receptacle sculptures into which guests tossed trash during the opening. Three months later she put on *My Country Tis of Thee*, one of the first Pop Art shows in the U.S. Four years later, she gave Robert Smithson his first show, and then funded his *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969). Her roster is undeniably and consistently important, canonically speaking, but what influenced her decisions more than these kinds of calculations was a hunger to see and experience differently.

With *Los Angeles to New York*, Dwan becomes the first of a group of quietly influential female Los Angeles gallerists to receive large-scale institutional attention. The exhibition, announced in 2013 just after she gifted 250 objects (by Smithson, Sol Lewitt, Agnes Martin) to the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington D.C., debuted there in November 2016. It documents the period from her gallery's 1959 opening, when she was 27 and had just inherited a portion of her grandfather's $3 million fortune, through to its 1971 closure. According to Holland Cotter's *New York Times review*, curator James Meyer had to persuade Dwan of the value of such a retrospective to "give visible shape to her half-hidden history." That she should need or want such visibility was apparently not obvious to her.

Since the 1970s, Dwan has given interviews sparingly. When she does, she emphasizes the transformative potential of the work, its bearing on lived experience. In contrast, her ubiquitous Los Angeles peer, Ferus Gallery director Irving Blum, readily talks game-changes, strategy, finances, and the "adventure of going West" when interviewed about his legacy. His narrative, like Leo Castelli's, is canon-ready whenever he recounts it. That Dwan's program had different motivations, and perpetuated different ideas of success, gave it its potency but also contributed to its relative obscurity. Doing justice to her legacy now means acknowledging, not downplaying, both her non-conformity and subsequent marginalization.

Unfortunately, the framing of *Los Angeles to New York* doesn't help with this. Instead, it plays into the disruptor narrative, as central to 20th– and 21st-century art as it is to Silicon Valley solipsism. Press releases and curators' essays cite, as reasons for her significance, the "increasing mobility of the artworld" and the novelty of Dwan's bicoastal program (she opened a second space in New York in 1965). But the diverse aspirations of the show's content thankfully belie such tidy framing.

The installation conveys a wide-open sense of possibility from the start. Upon entering the Resnick Pavilion, window-lit and the only single-story building on

LACMA's campus, visitors first encounter 1960s acrylic columns that New Mexico-based Charles Ross filled with clear oil to make the surrounding scenery perpetually shift. Behind the prisms hangs a photograph of Ross's architectonic masterpiece, *Star Axis* (1971-present), a fortress-like circular chamber up ten flights of stairs in the desert (Dwan gave Ross initial funding for the project, around the same time she helped Heizer begin his still-in-progress *City*).

Ed Kienholz's *Backseat Dodge '38* (1964), the life-size sculpture of a floppy couple making love in the backseat of an actual 1938 Dodge, occupies the back corner of the largest gallery. The L.A. County Board of Supervisors threatened to pull county funds from LACMA if the piece was shown back in 1966; now it's more satirical than salacious. Robert Grosvenor's *Untitled (yellow)* (1966/2017), a massive yellow cantilevered aluminum beam, juts downward from the ceiling, never touching the floor. Lee Lozano's tongue-in-cheek, text-record of *Real Money Piece* (1969), in which she offered guests real money in a jar "like candy," lies in a vitrine (Lozano is among a handful of women who showed with Dwan, though one wonders if her roster would have reflected greater balance had she remained open through the 1970s).

Perhaps because of the gregariousness of what she showed, Dwan preferred to let art speak for itself. When critic Jessica Dawson took on Dwan's legacy in a 2011 essay for *X-TRA*, written just before the Getty Research Institute launched its region-wide celebration of SoCal art from 1945-80, she compared the hunger for recognition of Ferus Gallery's Walter Hopps and Irving Blum with Dwan's reticence. "Why has Dwan gone largely uncredited in the development of postwar Los Angeles art?" Dawson asked, building toward her own theory: while Blum and Hopps positioned the Pop Art they exhibited as radically breaking from Abstract Expressionism, Dwan treated Pop – and most art she exhibited – as having historical continuity with past avant-garde movements. Dawson's is a fascinating theory because it suggests that the gallerist's marginalization stems from her own failure to proclaim her program as groundbreaking. Her oversight was a choice: "I did not approach this art as a movement," she wrote of Pop in 1990, "rather, I was engrossed by each person's unique vision."

In 1966, one year before Dwan finally and wholly moved her operation to New York, Riko Mizuno opened her gallery on La Cienega Boulevard. She was the second, after Dwan, in a series of women to take on programs that reveled in the experimental and gave artists opportunities they couldn't have elsewhere. At Mizuno's gallery, Chris Burden performed *Deadman* (1971), lying motionless on the street outside the gallery underneath a tarp until the cops arrived. Ed Moses removed the ceiling. Also on La Cienega, Eugenia Butler – briefly Dwan's assistant in the early 1960s – opened her eponymous gallery in 1968. In 1970, Icelandic artist Dieter Roth sent cheese in suitcases overseas to Butler's gallery; it remained in the cases, on display, until the health inspector arrived to shut down the exhibition. Claire Copley opened in 1973, and allowed Michael Asher to

remove the walls and expose her office and business operations for the duration of his 1974 exhibition. Dwan had demonstrated that a gallery could be an agile conduit for exploration; Mizuno, Butler, and Copley expanded on her model.

None of these gallerists made concerted efforts to be remembered and publicly recognized after closing their spaces, not because they didn't understand the art history game – they had other priorities. When asked what she was doing since her gallery closed, Butler told an interviewer, "I'm just doing, just living. I'm involving myself in work that is about life and about change." In a very brief video the Getty made about Mizuno's gallery in 2011, two of her artists do most of the talking as she sits by. "The gallery was part of life," says Vija Celmins, adding she considers her former dealer "a friend" as Mizuno turns away from the camera and leaves the room. "She wanted adventure," Ed Moses says a few frames later. Adventure and attention aren't the same.

One small show held during *Pacific Standard Time*, the Getty's massive 2012 survey, attempted to recognize Butler, Mizuno, Copley, and the dealer Morgan Thomas; but it was held in the single-room gallery of a private high school in Santa Monica. Eugenia Butler's granddaughter, Corazon del Sol, has staged two exhibitions about her grandmother's legacy, with non-profit LAND and the Box Gallery. Still, *Los Angeles to New York* remains the only substantial, establishment effort – motivated, of course, by Dwan's own gift – to thoroughly explore the influence of any of these women. The show, in spite of its "East Coast/West Coast" hook, makes delightful strides toward destabilizing those narratives of lineage and greatness that so often keep conversation about art self-referential. We need more such shows.

This exhibition does nothing to cement any reputations, as nearly every artist Dwan exhibited has a name, by now. Rather, it reframes, putting Minimalists, Abstractionists, Earth artists, Conceptualists, artworld drop-outs, and Pop painters together as essential ingredients in a mélange that's much vaster and richer than any one of them alone.

Dwan recalled during the panel discussion on March 14 that Walter Hopps, Ferus Gallery co-founder and later director of the Pasadena Museum, used to come into her gallery and explain the work on her walls to guests and potential collectors. She said, finally, "I have a real distaste for talking about art. I like the gestalt of the work, the whole experience of the thing."

Cassils and the Complicated Rhetoric of the Hero

by Emily Vey Duke

Cassils, "Becoming An Image." Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason. SPILL International Festival of Performance.

I used to have a student called Sarah Kench. Older than her peers, she was already in her 30s when she started at Syracuse University. Sarah fought harder to get there than anyone I've ever worked with. She grew up biracial in the projects in Syracuse, New York — a rust-belt town where, if you're black, you're more likely to live in poverty than in any other city in the US. Graduating out of foster care, she briefly joined the military right out of high school, had a child, went to community college, and then clawed her way to a full scholarship at S.U. And along the way, she transitioned from male to female.

In the fall of 2016, transgender artist and activist Cassils was Herb Alpert Fellow at Syracuse University. During the fellowship, they made a full-sized bronze cast of their sculpture *The Resilience of the 20%*, a one-ton mass of modeling clay shaped with fists and feet in a performance called *Becoming an Image* (2012-ongoing). While Cassils was here, Sarah Kench committed suicide by drowning

herself in a lake on the outskirts of town. The urgency – and contradictions – of Cassils's work could not have been more vividly invoked for me than by the suicide of my former student and friend.

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Cassils's body is as much their medium as clay or bronze: with expertise gained over 18 years as a personal trainer, they devote months of physical preparation to each performance. In an earlier work, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-13), they gained 23 pounds of muscle in as many weeks (a reimagining of Eleanor Antin's 1972 photo-documentary work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, in which she lost 10 pounds in 37 days). Both artists engage notions of the ideal body: women must be gracile, and attenuated; men should be yoked with muscle. But Cassils focuses on the notion of corporeal transformation itself, central as it is to transgender discourse.

All of Cassils's work questions the representation of trans bodies, but with *Becoming an Image,* they push back against the pornographic, dehumanizing gaze viewers have learned to associate with images of trans people. During the performances, viewers stand in total darkness around a clay monolith as Cassils pummels it – sometimes flying through the air to land on top and bash away from there. The only light is a photographer's flash, which goes off every minute or so, searing images of a singular body, flying and thrashing, with a retinal burn.

During a recent performance at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the artist also walked through the space and gently touched members of the audience. The denial of a full, unimpeded view of their body presented the trans subject in a nuanced way: less as an image and more like an agent, emboldened and in control. The soft touching operated the same way.

Physically, pouring a mold like the one for *The Resilience of the 20%* is incredibly demanding. At S.U., Cassils enlisted the help of a group of students, who also staged performances during the molding, casting, and chasing. One such performance unfolded thus: as the gold-bar sized ingots were melted down, two students used a set of letter punches to engrave each one with the name of a trans person lost to violence in the last ten years. In this way, the work was made to contain their absence.

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During Trans Remembrance Week, Cassils's class met out at the lake where Sarah died. While we were there, we pounded her name into a brass ingot and found a place to set it into the moss, in the woods.

Cassils is the only person I know who went to Sarah Kench's funeral (despite

having never met her). They said it was awful. Sarah was only referred to as Paul, and only shown in pre-transition photographs. Cassils's presence represented another way of seeing Sarah.

Sarah's experience of gender dysphoria started early in childhood, and she was punished brutally for its manifestations. She was a weird kid who just didn't fit in. And things didn't get easier when she reached adulthood. The biggest issue was her (justifiable) bitterness. After graduating from S.U., she floundered. She got a fellowship that allowed her to stay enrolled in classes at the school, but it was conditional on interning at a "community-engaged" organization in Syracuse.

Sarah lived in public housing on a miserly sum from social services, and upon graduating she had to start paying child support again. Unpaid internships were all she could find, and they didn't cut it with the courts. When she went before a judge to explain her situation, he laughed at her and insisted on calling her by her pre-transition name. Ultimately, she had to forfeit the fellowship.

Eventually she got hired as a prep cook at an Olive Garden, where the line cook was often particularly cruel to her. One day, a conflict — and her employment — ended with her shouting over the restaurant's PA system: "Line cook can SUCK IT!"

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The visual vocabulary of heroism features prominently in Cassils's art. In *Tiresias* (2010-13), their torso was pressed for five hours against a breastplate made of ice, carved in the shape of a neoclassical Greek male figure which critic David Getsy called "… the image of Classical ideality." In the endurance work *Inextinguishable Fire* (2007-15), Cassils was set alight for 14 seconds, using a technique borrowed from the Hollywood stunt world.

A friend expressed his reservations about Cassils's work to me like this: "too much body-perfect … another reminder that we use our ideals to crush us." This is not the only way their work bears the signature of Los Angeles, the world capital of crushing dreams. The use of spectacular physical beauty; the high production values; the flashbulbs evoking paparazzi. Cassils's conspicuous and subversive hero-play strains to restore agency to a subject frequently denied a voice. But we should pause here to consider allegiances: spectacular forms of representation are often used in service of uncomplicated stories.

My friend's caution has been circling around in my mind as I write about the life and death of Sarah Kench. I know I risk building an image that bears only some resemblance to the "real" Sarah, and I don't want to make that character solely a martyr to trans violence. Because this risks flattening her; it sands down qualities that were sometimes troubling or annoying – qualities that built up as a direct consequence of the challenges she faced as a trans person of color, living in

deep poverty in the United States.

When the state intervened in Sarah's life, it did so to confer punishment, not protection. And so her prickliness, her bitterness, her sometimes-misplaced resentments — these all evolved as ways to cope. When I describe her, I try not to portray her as too smooth, too high-functioning. Glossing over her challenging aspects somehow seems to exonerate the organs (school system, healthcare system, Child Protective Services, foster care, etc.) that failed her. An excess of myth-making is simply another way to call Sarah by the wrong name.

I see Sarah as I see Cassils: heroic, but awkwardly so. About a year before she died, Sarah and I went back to the neighborhood where she grew up, to the playground across the street from her elementary school. She was pretty emotional – angry and sad, but also triumphant. As we left, she turned back to face her school and thrust her middle finger into the air.

"I graduated! Suma Cum Laude, fuckers!"

Perhaps my friend is right to point out that Cassils is, oddly, too normative a hero, epitomizing, as they do, physical beauty and self-discipline. Sarah Kench certainly could have used a hero, but I don't know if she could have availed herself of one who modeled such perfect beauty and strength. She might have needed a slightly scruffier ideal in order to see enough of herself to identify. This is a sort of occupational hazard of the hero: only other heroic types can empathize with you.

But there is much more to Cassils's work than the flawless gloss that decorates its surface. It's rich in art-historical and literary reference, and it is moving. The touches they gave, for example, before performing *Becoming an Image* in Philadelphia – the squeeze on the shoulder that says "listen, be here with me now, in your body, while I do this crazy thing with mine." It's profound. It's sublime. It's the work we need right now.

Morbid Symptoms: In Search of the Post-Contemporary at the 2016 Montreal Biennial

by Saelan Twerdy

Anne Imhof, "Angst III," 2016. Photo: Jonas Leihener. Courtesy BNLMTL.

In the aftermath of Donald Trump's nauseating election victory, hard on the heels of this year's earlier Brexit vote in the UK, it has become clear that the post-1989 era of neoliberal globalization is over. Given that contemporary art as we know it has been defined in relation to this political-economic configuration, can we say that "contemporaneity" is ending, too? If so, what might art look like after "contemporary art"? The 2016 Montreal Biennale, presented in the midst of these upheavals, is symptomatic of this uncertainty.

In the press preview for the biennial, curator Philippe Pirotte was at pains to distinguish his exhibition from other recent large-scale exhibitions that, in his opinion, made excessively sweeping pronouncements about the contemporary moment and the likely future. In particular, he criticized the recent Berlin Biennial ("The Present in Drag") and the 2015 Venice Biennale ("All the World's Futures"). However, his implicit, unmentioned target was perhaps the previous installment of the

Montreal Biennial itself, which was titled “L’avenir (Looking Forward)” and concerned itself with the broad question of “what is to come.”

That exhibition, though quite warmly received, struck me at the time as the best product on offer from a system that was increasingly dated. I had started to think of this model as “establishment” contemporary art: the kind of curatorially-driven, theoretically-informed, post-conceptual art whose performance of “good” politics often papers over the privilege concentrated in its elite institutions and middle-class audience. This version of what “contemporary art” means has arguably been staging a rear-guard battle since some time around the 2008 financial crash.

In the years following, elites in Western countries have attempted to maintain neoliberal policy in the face of populisms on the Left and Right. At the same time, the contemporary artworld has struggled to preserve the intellectual framework that held sway between the end of the 1980s and the end of the 2000s – what Lars Bang Larsen has called “the long nineties.” Meanwhile, the growing influence of art fairs and speculative collectors has eroded the legitimating function of biennials and museums, as did the massive shifts in visibility enabled by the internet, while new theoretical currents and political imperatives (affect theory, speculative realism, accelerationism, resurgent Marxism, and identity politics) have both nourished and challenged contemporary art’s discourse.

Pirotte’s biennial, assembled with the help of three curatorial advisors (Corey McCorkle, Aseman Sabet, and Kitty Scott), responds to this juncture by turning away from the contemporary *per se*. If the current moment is unbearable, and the future unpredictable, on what authority can a curator presume to judge, critique, or predict? Pirotte seems to argue for abdicating such responsibilities, calling for a deeper look into the past as a remedy for present-ism and for an ethos of pleasure and hedonism in place of political moralizing.

Effectively, the 2016 Montreal Biennial signals a crisis in the established model of contemporary art without attempting to define any new paradigm – on the contrary, Pirotte studiously avoids fetishizing newness, as evidenced by his inclusion of an enigmatic portrait painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1540, along with a handful of other non-recent works by contemporary artists (for instance, early drawings by Brian Jungen, and a David Lamelas film from 1974).

The exhibition’s spiritual guide is the rebel playwright Jean Genet, whose 1957 play, *The Balcony*, lends the biennial its title (“Le Grand Balcon”). Genet’s script stages a series of meta-theatrical power games in an upscale brothel while revolution and counter-revolution rage in the streets outside. As a model for art, this might sound uncomfortably like proposing to fiddle while Rome burns, but allied with the biennial’s focus on images of “deep historical resonance,” it results in a dense and sensual exhibition that, though indeed often perverse, is far from nihilistic.

That said, Pirotte's embrace of digressive meandering over conclusive statements seems to leave the exhibition stranded halfway between the old and the new.To the extent that Pirotte's attitude *does* align with a pervasive, emergent sensibility in art, it remains mostly unarticulated, and the selection of works often falls back on established norms.

The contradictions of Pirotte's curatorial brief are particularly well-embodied by the athletic figure of Luis Jacob's *Sphinx* (2015), a cheeky take on the headless classical nude that greets viewers in the MACM's rotunda as a kind of unofficial biennial figurehead. Cast in marble resin and posing with a "framing hands" gesture that suggests a photographer setting up a shot (or an iPhone holder about to snap a selfie), the sculpture bridges the ancient and contemporary while its physical perfection (Jacob has notably avoided the classical tendency towards modest genitalia) associates the act of looking with an erotic charge. At the same time, *Sphinx* is a perfectly *contemporary* work: produced with the aid of a fabricator, it is exemplary of sculpture as conceptual gesture.

Another work by Jacob is equally emblematic of Pirotte's themes of eroticism and historical parallax, couched in a quintessentially contemporary idiom: *Album XII* (2013-14), presented at Galerie de l'UQAM, is an image bank of found photos in 148 panels. Loosely organized around categories of the (nude) body and architectural containment, it's a sexy, erudite take on the trope of "archival" art that's been familiar for well over a decade.

Many of the film and video works in the biennial employ a similarly archival approach to the sedimentation of personal and political history. Moyra Davey's new video, *Hemlock Forest* (2016), offers a poignant tribute to the work of Chantal Akerman that also reflects on Davey's relationship with her son; the collective Thirteen Black Cats's video essay, *Corpse Cleaner* (2016), relates an epistolary exchange between an air force pilot involved in the bombing of Hiroshima and a German anti-nuclear philosopher whose day job involved cleaning film props in Hollywood; and Luke Willis Thompson's *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016) replicates the technical specifications of Warhol's "Screen Tests" to depict black subjects whose families have been the victims of police brutality, thereby calling attention to the almost complete absence of visible minorities in the original series – only five out of Warhol's nearly 500 portraits featured a non-white person.

As Thompson's work ably demonstrates, these plunges into the persistence of the past in the contemporary moment punch hardest when they touch on histories of exclusion, oppression, and colonization. Tanya Lukin Linklater's video installation/dance performance *He was a poet and he taught us how to react and to become this poetry* (2016), handles such freighted subject matter with a lyrical touch. To realize the piece, the artist worked with a group of dancers on a com-

position based on the life of Maria Tallchief, a protégé of George Balanchine who was America's first prima ballerina *and* the first Native American to hold the rank. The dance component is performed on a low stage, which also acts as a screen for the projection of a video about the ethics of cultural translation. The fact that the dancer's bodies (and the oblique angle) both obstruct the viewer's line of sight further elaborates the theme.

If all of the above works, however strong individually, represent the persistence of "contemporary" modes in an exhibition apparently focused on that period's eclipse, the other works installed in the same room as Linklaters's offer a potential glimpse of a newer sensibility. Ravishing pieces by Shannon Bool and Celia Perrin Sidarous present a more formalist approach to the sensual materiality and historical reflexivity to which Pirotte's curating aspires. Bool's *Michaelerplatz 3* and *The Five Wives of Lajos Birò* (both 2016) are monochromatic, digitally-designed tapestries that employ decorative patterns in reference to history of modernist design. The former is an image of the marble entryway to the "Loohaus" designed by Adolf Loos (who infamously declared "ornament is crime"), a touchstone of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese modernism, in which Bool has inserted a mirrored female mannequin whose quicksilver body descends into a *mise-en-abyme* within the tapestry's fabric.

Celia Perrin Sidarous's still-life photo installations also exploit the seductive power of decoration. Like certain other artists of her generation (Sara Cwynar comes to mind), Perrin Sidarous makes art in the mode of a gifted art director, arranging and styling assortments of objects and images that combine the contemporary and fashionably vintage with the ancient and timeless: plants, ceramics, candles, Greek landscapes; vegetable, mineral, cultural. *Notte coralli* (2016), her contribution to this show, is the most sophisticated realization of her vision to date, utilizing a quasi-architectural armature of supports and a 16mm film that deepens her investigation into the tactile pleasures of display and their semiotic resonance.

The investment in materiality and objecthood inherent to Bool and Perrin Sidarous's art reflects an approach widely shared among the sculptural work in the biennial, from Haegue Yang's animistic objects to Valerie Blass's recent *trompe l'oeil* figures to the *au courant* assemblage sculpture of Ben Schumacher, Elaine Cameron-Weir, Lena Henke, and Nadia Belerique. The inclusion of heavyweight figures like Cady Noland and Isa Genzken (to my knowledge, making her first appearance in a Canadian museum, if you can believe it) seems calculated to establish a lineage for these younger artists, but the most significant factor that unites the emerging generation is the mutual connection and visibility that's been enabled by the internet.

Indeed, though Pirotte never explicitly frames it this way, the vocabulary of precarious assemblage, sensuous, materialist formalism, and Instagram-ready per-

formance that defines parts of this show is, simply, what a lot of young art looks right now. Nothing in the biennial is more emblematic of this than the most recent iteration of Anne Imhof's much-talked-about *Angst* performances. In these durational, four-hour "operas," a cadre of performers in health-goth attire desultorily enact tragic gestures in cavernous, fog-shrouded spaces suffused with a combined atmosphere of FOMO-tinged anticipation and vague threat. Though it was performed for the public only once at this biennial (whereas the recent iteration at Berlin's Hamburger Banhof included eight performances), Imhof's *Angst* encapsulates the discomfiting pleasure of Pirotte's hedonistic politics: an incontrovertibly relevant distillation of contemporary anxieties enacted through the invitation to spend four hours spectating impossibly attractive young (and mostly white) bodies.

It's clear, then, that this biennial has at least one finger on a sensibility that is actually new, one which we could provisionally label "post-contemporary." On this account, Pirotte's disparaging remarks about the DIS-curated 9th Berlin Biennale are a regrettable blind spot. Despite his contention that BB9 was obsessed only with the present (and specious predictions of the future), that exhibition advanced the idea of the post-contemporary as a legitimate theory of time and history. This idea was referenced throughout BB9's framing materials (i.e., wall texts and the brand identity videos created by Babak Radboy) and had been elaborated in a special issue of DIS earlier this year, co-edited by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik.

Moreover, the idea of the post-contemporary actually aligns, in a number of ways, with Pirotte's complaints about the biennial circuit's obsession with intellectually dissecting the immediate present. Suhail and Avanessian contend that, with the organization of society on the basis of *speculation* (especially in regard to financial capitalism, but also predictive analytics in marketing, policing, and military procedures), the future has invaded both the present and the past, and can no longer be successfully anticipated on the basis of either. What they argue with regard to contemporary art is that the present moment has been fetishized as the site of possible change and resistance to the neoliberal imposition of the speculative model, with the result that the future is continually foreclosed: "contemporaneity" extends indefinitely as the hope for meaningful change continually fails to achieve traction on the present.

Suhail and Avanessian's argument is essentially a philosophical one. Intriguing as it is, I'd like to propose a simpler historical explanation for what the "post-contemporary" might mean. A number of commentators have argued that the idea of the "contemporary" as a period came fully into being around 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the explosion of globalization, and the collapse of any major barriers to the worldwide circulation of neoliberal capital. Since this formation began breaking up after 2008, the most characteristically new forms of art have been the post-internet phenomenon and neo-formalist abstract painting.

The 9th Berlin Biennale was arguably a kind of commemorative headstone for post-internet art, a survey of the last six or seven years of work in that mode that mostly testified to the closing of a period of fervent experimentation, though its overall coherence presented a monument to how much participants in the orbit of the DISosphere have managed to shift what matters in art. The boom in process-based abstract painting also appears to have peaked.

Arguably, these forms represented a transitional period between the contemporary and what comes after it. For perspective, it might be instructive to compare our current moment with the mid-1980s, which also marked the end of a market-driven painting boom sponsored by an out-of-control financial class. Zombie Formalism is our Neo-Expressionism, and post-internet art has rather a lot in common with the Simulationist/Neo-Geo art of the '80s (ie. Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley) – for example, a preoccupation with the technological mediation of reality and an ironic perspective on commodification and branding. With their obsession with postmodern theory and climate of entrepreneurial disruption, the '80s formalized the passage (nascent in the '60s and '70s) from modernism to contemporary art.
But will the decline of contemporaneity result in any durable new paradigm? In the era of Trump, will art be able to mount any sufficient resistance, or will its already-exclusive community be conscripted to dress the windows of a fascist regime? The post-contemporary aesthetic, as it stands, shows scant resources for withstanding the pressures to come.

Consider the artistic model that's emerged alongside post-internet art and speculative painting without really being either: it originated in the diffuse aesthetic pioneered by VVORK, was carried on by Contemporary Art Daily, and is currently being elaborated by emerging artists through venues like Art Viewer, AQNB, OFluxo, and numerous other blogs. It's optimized to look good in installation shots on your screen but isn't necessarily *about* the internet; it might combine organic or non-art objects in stylized assemblages, or mix slick, hi-tech objects with vintage or ancient ones; it might include live bodies (or images of them), and they'll likely be young and white, but they also might not be; this art is more open to race, gender, and queerness than (bro-ish) post-internet was, but is still generally more formalist than analytical; it resonates with new materialist philosophy and affect theory without necessarily deriving from them; it's not meant to be interpreted or decoded because it's not really about language.

The defining characteristic of this sensibility is the extent to which it is defined by the way that it's constructed to fit the platforms in which it circulates, which include museums and biennials, but also DIY venues and, especially, the screen-based territory of social media and art blogs. This is the sensibility I see in a large portion of this BNLMTL as a whole, and it's one version of what the post-contemporary looks like right now, if we're willing to entertain it as a label.

Ultimately, Pirotte's choice to base his curatorial strategy on Genet feels like a recourse to the likely milieu of his own intellectual formation: the theory-infatuated early '90s, when transgressive thinkers like Bataille and Sade were heroized by Deleuzianal students. On the one hand, this return feels out of place, detached from the intellectual sources of current art. On the other, his invocation of hedonism does align with the desire, apparent among many younger artists, for a more vibrant, less academically-constrained art, more in touch with everyday sources of pleasure and meaning, and better-equipped to appeal to a larger audience. On November 19th, the artist Faith Holland tweeted: "thinking about what direction my art needs to take post-Trump and i think it's time to double down on pleasure." At a time of historic anxiety and despair, the idea that art should emphasize what makes life worth living is far from trivial.

All the same, the post-contemporary aesthetic can still be as inscrutable as institutionalized contemporary art and, moreover, its predominant modes seem as likely to increase art's exclusivity as to ameliorate it. Though the current vogue for materiality in all its forms has provided a way of working through anxieties about environmental collapse and issues related to gendered and racialized embodiment (among other things), it's also been an avenue for artists to pursue varieties of formalism that feel all too much like a privileged escape.

Indeed, since the neo-feudal conditions of precarity that afflict the artworld right now mean that any artists who aren't independently wealthy have to hustle every minute to survive (and, of course, prohibitive conditions means those who can afford to be artists are increasingly from the affluent strata), the pressure to reduce art to luxury commodities and curated experiences is running high.

In this situation, Pirotte's call to perversity is as dangerous as it is telling. For those with the luxury, art can become a retreat to an interior world (whether a gilded palace or something more slummy). For everyone else, a certain amount of either sadism or masochism might prove necessary for survival.

Antonio Gramsci famously wrote, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." With Trump's ascendance, contemporary art's symptoms are beginning to look terminal. Can something new still be born, and should we welcome its coming?

What Kind of Criticism Do We Need Now? Coming to Terms with Teju Cole's "Known and Strange Things"

by Casey Beal

Teju Cole on the outskirts of Ramallah during the Palestine Festival of Literature, June 2014. Photo: Rob Stothard.

"We look at them for the way they cooperate with the imagination, the way they contain what cannot otherwise be accommodated, and the way they grant us, to however modest a degree, some kind of solace."

– Teju Cole, "Object Lesson"

Remember the curious vignette from John Berger's "And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos." We view a small town at 11AM on a sunny day: see it photographically as the future will, as belonging to a "distant past." Berger sketches a blind man who knows his way down to the town's square. He can't see the faces of the townsfolk, but pictures the totality of their lives regardless. He has recently died. But, impossibly, he remains on the street in Berger's snapshot. His bees produce more honey than anyone else's, and he can walk the four kilometers from home to this center without error. All these paths are familiar to him, and his presence is deeply comforting.

I'm restless as I leaf through Teju Cole's recent essay collection *Known and Strange Things*. Lulled and nearly hypnotized by an oneiric quality in the writing,

drifting through the pieces, my mind indexes something: an itch. An irritating sense that I'm missing something that I crave. What we resist in our dreaming can be as telling as the dreams themselves.

Cole's main preoccupation as a keen observer – and, in fact, a photographer – inflects all his writing. His first novel *Open City* (2011), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award and brought him significant critical attention, might well be described as ambulatory prose. Its momentum depends on the protagonist's ruminative urban wandering. *Known and Strange Things*, published in the summer of 2016, collects a decade's worth of similarly peripatetic criticism. though perhaps in a more abstract sense. Cole writes *about* his topics (politics, race, art, travel), in the way one takes a stroll about a neighborhood – aimless, observant, unrushed.

And true to this spirit, Cole privileges note-taking over narrative (tellingly, in an interview with poet Aleksandar Hemon, he opposes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction). These notes pay dividends in the detailed composition of scenes, which always takes precedence over genre convention.

Cole holds the dense, cluttered vocabulary of institutional art criticism at bay. The now-ubiquitous high-decibel, all-frequencies static of political outrage has no place here. And now I recognize: the enervated part of me wants these essays to perform what the laziest part of me has lately become accustomed to reading: easy outrage. My impatience at Cole's pace derives from the same set of urges as a daily impulse to check CNN a dozen times for fresh chills amid a shockingly banal dystopia. Pandering to this desire isn't how good criticism works, nor is it Cole's style.

Timely maybe, but not submerged in its moment, essential criticism runs alongside, against the day, usually arriving late and unapologetic. it reminds us of the truths (and untruths) behind daily myth and platitude. It uncovers overgrown trails into fresh, challenging places, and it checks long-secure footholds for weathering-away. It knows the timeline of erosion is slow, and that it must write slower to keep up.

At its best, the writing in *Known and Strange Things* embodies this spirit. "Death in the Browser Tab" wrestles poignantly with the visibility, virtuality, and ghoulish *share-ability* of Black suffering in the age of social media. "The White Savior Industrial Complex," "Unquiet Skies," and "in Alabama" are all more than equal to the difficulty of their intensely fraught, contested subject matter. Each of these essays manages to present complex critical sentiment that is somehow both unhurried, and urgent. They sacrifice none of their political sharpness by unfolding gradually, oscillating between personal reaction and historical reflection.

While Cole's political criticism is slow, careful, nuanced, it's often also searing. He channels anger into a quiet focus that hits hard. The real blood on the page casts a harsh light on my impatient yen for cheap thrills. Among the strongest of these pieces is "The Reprint," an experiential journey through the day that Barack Obama won his first election – a lifetime ago – in 2008. He withdraws from the easy narrative of Obama's victory and, in real time, tries to get a handle on his hesitations even while partly swept up in the moment. He reflects on the "American longing for simplicity," and "a love of clear narratives and optimistic story arcs," evinced in the euphoric crowds singing "'We Shall Overcome' on the heels of a massively well-funded and astute display of machine politics."

The measured, even-handed approach fueling the slow burn of Cole's political pieces reads very differently when it infuses his art criticism. Rarely does Cole disagree with his aesthetic subjects. In the main, he writes about works he likes, and why he likes them. He sets the stage and helps us find our way to our seats. These expert recommendations cover, among other worthy examples, Krzysztof Kieslowski's film *Red*; photography by Wangechi Mutu, Seydou Keïta, and Roy DeCarava; writing from WG Sebald, VS Naipaul, Derek Walcott, and Tomas Tranströmer. To read, watch, and listen to Cole's favorites is to be enriched by a breadth of taste more impressive than Spotify's panoptic algorithm.

However, much as Cole champions his subjects, his art writing seldom challenges them. *Known and Strange Things* gives no testament of artworks that he contested. Given that this, his first anthology, devotes so much space to treatments of things that he enjoys, it's worth asking whether this kind of work means to function therapeutically. It's often a pleasure to hear someone of excellent taste thoughtfully describe their sources of inspiration: a balm against an abundance of toxic cynicism. But is Cole taking it easy on us? And is this not an irresponsible presentation for a talented critic to assume in fraught times? He's painting obvious studies with a brush suited for finer work.

In fairness, Cole does handle the decidedly unsafe: in his writing on drones; surveillance; race, violence, and politics. There are two articles boldly addressing movement restrictions in Palestine. One couldn't accuse Cole of being unconcerned, or of sidestepping difficult terrain. But his art criticism sacrifices the provocation that I value in critical writing, opting instead to offer solace and sanctuary. What we gain in this trade is a deeper field of colors. Cole's essayistic photographs render more shades, coax gentler insight, in a meditative tone where nothing resolves quickly. Sometimes nothing resolves at all.

An odd piece called "Two Weeks" stands out as a microcosm of the collected works. It's composed of brief snapshots from Cole's diary, and captures the subtle, occasionally frustrating allure of his writing. Intricate little scenes that hold a lot: Ennui seethes during a writing residency in London as he visits disappoint-

ing galleries; then dislocated alienation in a hotel room after a warm reception at a Midwest American writing festival; later, quiet outrage at checkpoints in the West Bank, and at the inability to navigate the minefield of conversations about these checkpoints. And there are tranquil moments, like the one at a quiet ruin near a once-bombed village in the Golan Heights, that rest on the simple perfection of careful composition.

Cole never dwells long enough for a resolved critical point to emerge from any of these places. He isolates single frames for us to countenance unquietly, on our own. From the anxiety in this incompleteness, instructive turmoil ensues. We're left to sort out: Is this enough? Is this what Instagram does to writing – places it in a feed of fragmented, recontextualized images? Shouldn't critical writing aspire to do more than the snapshot? But then, perhaps, this is to underestimate what is potential in an image, and to lazily deny the bright, imaginative part in ourselves that exists to constellate. Perhaps the open space of Cole's fragments is precisely the undecided territory this kind of criticism needs to thrive.

We've had a rough year. For some, there's a deep need for the comfort of favorite things: security blankets whose worn-in auras now function as sleep aids. Perhaps the function of media like this is no longer primarily to shake, challenge, or confront. For me, Kafka's infinite hopelessness, Tarkovsky's gauzy alienation, Herzog's comic gloom reappear, weirdly, as salves. Returning to them now feels like going home. Maybe therapy is irresponsible at a time when it would be more human, more vital, to feel ill at ease. Surely there are moments when it behooves us not to feel at home.

Then again, we might have become complacent and failed to arrive at this question, were it not for Cole's haunting of familiar streets. John Berger's old man returns to me here. Before he was allowed to disappear from the frame, he signified the virtue of sustaining a fragile composition, unresolved, suspended over what Cole might call "the subterranean truth of things." Like this man, Cole is momentarily fixed over nothing, a great unnamed lake, a bulwark against a void of uncaring, or forgetting.