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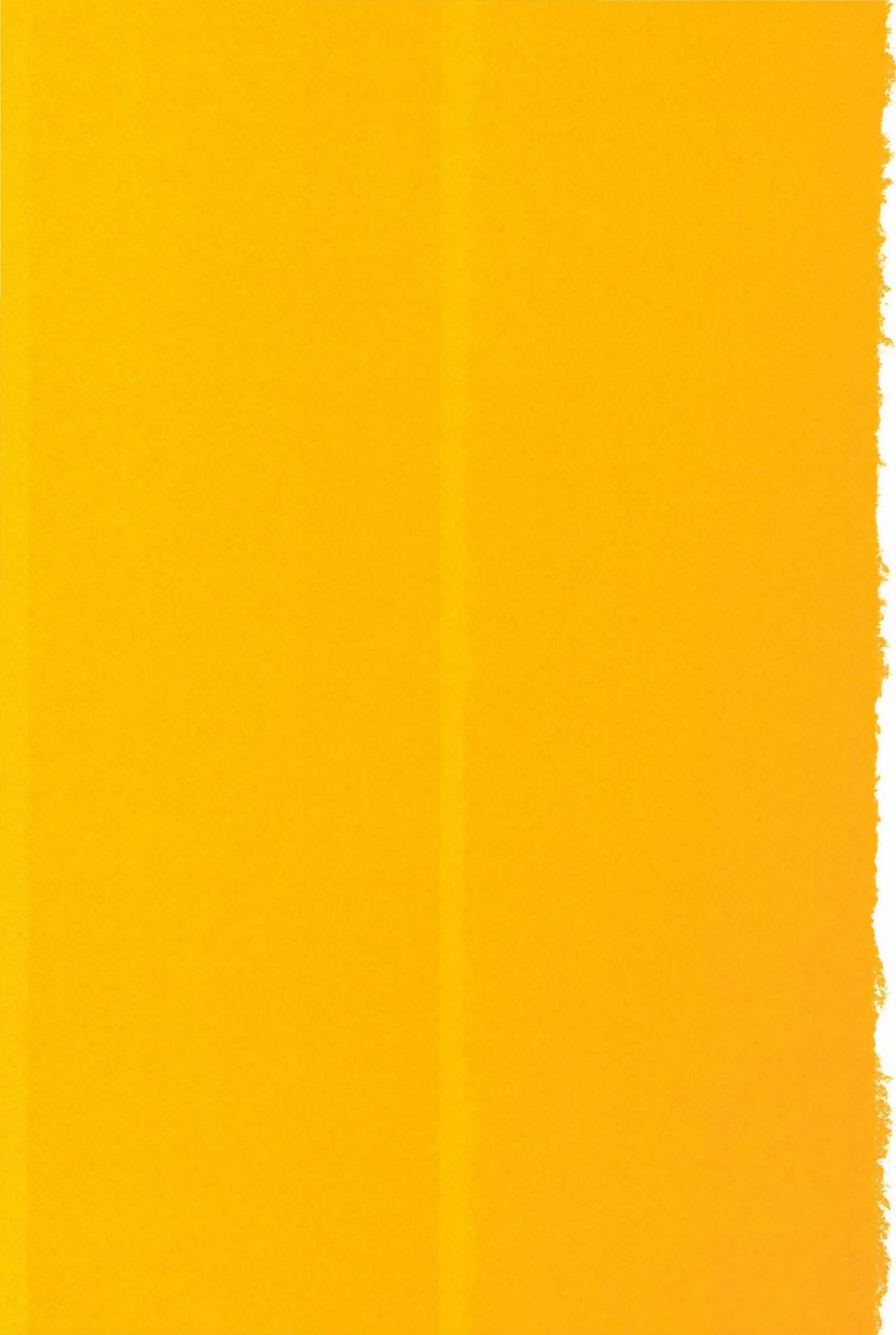
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Paul Chan

Selected Writings 2000—2014



Paul Chan

Selected Writings 2000 — 2014

Edited by George Baker and Eric Banks,  
with Isabel Friedli and Martina Venanzoni

Introduction by George Baker

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Edited by George Baker and Eric Banks,  
with Isabel Friedli and Martina Venanzoni

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# A New World Demands a New Language

by George Baker

Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.

—Walter Benjamin

Who has not looked up at the sky, in desperation,  
for a sign, for something.

—Paul Chan

Categorical instability plagues the work of the pantheon of key artist writers of our times: Robert Smithson. Dan Graham. Martha Rosler. Allan Sekula. Mike Kelley. John Miller. Moyra Davey. Jimmie Durham. Andrea Fraser. Gregg Bordowitz. Sometimes political in nature, sometimes instrumental (the description of an artwork or project), sometimes poetic, sometimes fictional, sometimes historical—even art historical: writings by artists embrace a heteronomy that destabilizes the act of writing itself. This may be the great promise of the kind of writing produced by artists in recent years—a challenge to the place of writing in our culture, to its function and purpose—and surely such instability characterizes the writerly activities of Paul Chan.

Every collection of an artist's writings threatens to destroy or mitigate such heteronomy. I want to begin, then—as a gesture of exacerbation—by simply recalling the extreme diversity of Chan's engagements with language, not all of which can be represented here, in this collection of essays, statements, and language-based work.

My first encounter with a language piece by Chan occurred in 2004, in his exhibition at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York that centered on the projection *My Birds... Trash... The Future*. On a pedestal, the artist had positioned a revolver, a pistol fitted with a speaker spouting words. To hear them clearly, the listener had to raise the weapon to his or her head, one's ear aligned

with the barrel of the gun (*Untitled (for Antigone)*, 2004). In its performative and imagistic character, in its desperation and black humor, the piece may serve as an emblematic work. I subsequently came to know earlier projects that played with fonts, the *Alternumerics*, transforming the basic building blocks of language in both legible and illegible ways that continue in Chan's art to the present day. Such language pieces seemed to congeal into a concerted practice of writing, increasing in urgency and frequency as we approach the present, and the artist's essays now betray an engagement with philosophy of a depth rarely seen in the domain of art—perhaps never seen, on this level, before.

But they also include an illustrated children's book, *The Shadow and Her Wanda*, 2007, though one based on a philosopher's text (Nietzsche's 1880 "The Wanderer and His Shadow").<sup>1</sup> There are other stories, short fictions, as well as dialogues and collectively authored plays.<sup>2</sup> Some texts are peppered with borrowed passages, with appropriations of voices and authors, while others seem pure inventions. Some of the texts originated as speeches, at ceremonies or public celebrations (to live on as audio "broadcasts" on the artist's website [nationalphilistine.com](http://nationalphilistine.com)), while others emerged as positions taken in public debates, as spoken arguments. Some of the writings engage politics, most frequently the war in Iraq, while others think about religion, churches, the spiritual realm. There is some porn. And perhaps some poetry. And not a few aphorisms (when we are speaking Greek), the text fragments known as maxims (when we are recalling Latin), with their almost lunatic concentration and their shimmering brevity. And then there is a prolix history of meat and its consumption in modern day societies.<sup>3</sup> A deep reflection on the role of light in Western representation and consciousness. A lecture, on Duchamp (another Duchampian!), that also serves as an excursus on freedom, and that then calls itself a "comedy." Conspicuously absent are the instrumental forms of writing characteristic of artists in the past: the political tract and the avant-garde manifesto.

(It is not a “writing,” exactly, but this might be the place to state that my favorite publication by Chan—a catalog of his work—has a cover that glows in the dark. The first time I realized this I gasped. And so now I leave it out, near my writing desk, propped up in front of a bookshelf. It is often the last thing I see before I go to sleep, its now-familiar iridescence sparking memories of bedrooms long ago and far away, a return to childhood.<sup>4</sup> All books should glow in the dark. Perhaps they do, Chan’s catalog suggests, and we simply haven’t noticed.)

And then there are the references that crop up within the writings themselves. Chan has written essays—like an art critic or historian—on other artists (Rachel Harrison, Sigmar Polke, Henri Michaux), on filmmakers (Chris Marker, Paul Sharits, Pier Paolo Pasolini), playwrights and writers (Stuart Sherman, Saddam Hussein [!]), and theorists or philosophers (Theodor W. Adorno, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière). But the artist’s larger body of writing magnifies this seemingly incoherent list of reference points exponentially. We encounter a world populated by Maurice Blanchot and the rapper Jadakiss, by outsider artists like William Hawkins or Henry Darger and politicians like George W. Bush or political theorists like Carl Schmitt, by Mark Twain (Chan dubs him “America’s greatest philosopher”) and Jam Master Jay, Hegel and Insane Clown Posse, Plato and the Marquis de Sade, with recurring favorites such as William Faulkner, Karl Kraus, Georges Bataille, Robert Bresson, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, St. Paul, Yvonne Rainer, Philip Guston, and Empedocles making their appearances along the way. In this, the writings collected here follow directly from the strange groupings and quite specific literary or historical references that characterized Chan’s early projected-image works: Charles Fourier and Henry Darger inexplicably fused in *Happiness (Finally) after 35,000 Years of Civilization (After Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)*, 1999–2003; or Biggie Smalls, Pasolini, the Book of Leviticus, William Blake, and Beckett orbiting together in *My Birds... Trash... The Future*.<sup>5</sup>

It is the lamentable curse of the critic, the dismal fate of the edited anthology, to bring order to such profligate disparity. (“[A]ny system that reduces a world,” Chan writes in his text on the *Alturnumerics*, “...is tragic. Think Diderot’s Encyclopedia. Think Socialism.”) Here, in this collection, the editors have divided Chan’s essays up into types, a kind of basic descriptive grid: philosophical essays on aesthetics and politics, writings that emerged in relation to specific works or art’s production, and texts explicitly about other figures, reserving a fourth section for a selection of the language works that resist the form of the essay—and perhaps even of writing—altogether. Within these broad categories—leaking and ruptured continually, it must be admitted, by the nature of the texts themselves—a kind of nonorder then obtains, the “zero degree” of order that is sheer chronology, what Chan might himself call in an oft-used, implicitly anarchist phrase, a list of essays arranged “in no particular order.” Each section has been structured, however, around an opposition—or perhaps simply a pairing, a collision, two disparate terms, but momentous ones, and for the most part familiar to the point of cliché: Aesthetics and Politics, Theory and Practice, Artists and Writers, Fonts and Works. In this, the book’s categories have the virtue of echoing the groupings staged by the writings themselves, if not their range and sometimes jarring disparity.

The reader might by now have guessed that it is the writings’ disparateness, the work of grouping and incoherent collecting of both traditional form and content they perform, that I see as the great if paradoxical unity of the writing itself. In his essay on Sharits, Chan calls the range of references we confront in the artist’s propositional drawings “the constellation of ideas and discourses that constitute the intellectual ferment of the pieces.” One is tempted to understand the range of reference and the galaxy of figures that appear in Chan’s writing in a similar way. Such figures represent an artist’s pantheon, the pungent stew of



ideas and images that inspire the work. But I think the consistent activity of grouping and appropriation, the collecting of positions and voices implicit in Chan's word "constellation"—Darger with Fourier, Biggie Smalls with Beckett, Blake, and Pasolini—has a deeper function within the artist's work. We could, in fact, say this: The labor of language, the work of writing, has become for Chan the endless production of *constellations*, which I would immediately characterize as thought or the idea erupting into a form that involves multiplicity, into a shape that creates new arrangements, into a set of unexpected relationships—into, indeed, visual images.

Outside of the writing, beyond Chan's early projections, one can trace the development of the tactic of the constellation throughout the artist's projects. Prior to his seeming recent "abandonment" of art-making to become a publisher of e-books with the press Badlands Unlimited, Chan hawked a series of "Free Audiobooks" on nationalphilistine.com. Calling the project *My Own Private Alexandria*, 2006, the artist created a collection of "free DIY mp3 audio essays," a series of recorded readings of texts—some sixteen hours in total length—by philosophers, artists, critics, and writers. There is "Happiness in Slavery," by Jean Paulhan; the recent essay "The Author as Receiver" by Kaja Silverman; a text about the "coming social metamorphosis" by Charles Fourier; "A Truce for the Creatures" by Colette; an essay on "the birth of art" by Maurice Blanchot; the "Theologico-Political Fragment" by Walter Benjamin; the philosopher Martin Heidegger's "The Thing"; the story "Lust for Loss" by Lynne Tillman; and a treatise on "Kissing" by Voltaire—some forty-five texts in all. Read for the most part by Chan himself, though friends help out at various points, the writings when performed seem to involve a reanimation of the essays' thoughts, a physical embodiment of thinking, and the website catalogs the misfortunes that befall the readings along the way: Chan's terrible French ("mispronounced," "mangled"), the "odd

rhythm of reading” that plagues a difficult text, a book “falling apart, damn,” a “cough,” “some chuckling,” or “uncontrollable laughter” in the case of a pretentious *New York Review of Books* essay by Alexander Cockburn titled “Gastro-porn.”

Presented at first in a jumbled “master list” that the website labels as “in no particular order,” *My Own Private Alexandria* can be reshuffled and reorganized by clicking a set of candy-colored boxes at the webpage’s head. Reordering the master list first along the lines of sheer quantification “by date” and “by length,” the listener is then presented with a dizzying series of other options to group and regroup the texts. We are offered clusters of readings “related to aesthetics,” or by “authors who are still living,” or that “mention animals” or “the erotic,” or that are “haunted by God” or “by Freud,” or that perhaps “activists should listen to,” or that are the “most melancholic,” or that “contain recipes,” or were “written in the midst of war.” Each grouping changes the selection of texts, creating lists and series of authors of a different character, as if what was most important about the free audiobooks was the activity of grouping them itself, the constellation of thoughts and thinkers that they create. In *My Own Private Alexandria*, the library becomes a potential constellation, a kind of malleable playlist set to a nonrandom shuffle where ordering and reordering, arranging and rearranging might be supported by the digital platform but also seems to have become an essential part of the act of thinking itself. To reanimate and then reorder: such is the work of Chan’s audiobooks.

The digital-as-platform, we could say, had previously erupted into constellation forms in Chan’s earliest font works, the *Alternumerics*. Involved broadly in processes of translation, *Alternumerics* “mutilate,” in the artist’s words, the alphanumeric keyboard through new and disparate fonts that “both reduce and expand its power.” Several early fonts created by Chan entertained the spatialization of alphanumeric language into images, a characteristic we might say of the constellation as a form, a

kind of writing that compresses itself into an image. *Blurry but not blind*—after Mallarmé, 2002, turned to the modernist history of the spatialization of text in the work of the foremost poet involved in such dynamics; *The Wave, Gone*, 2005, and *The River, Gone*, 2005, transformed letters into lines, words into abstract paintings, as fonts dedicated to the linear forms and pictorial elements utilized by painter Agnes Martin.<sup>6</sup> But it would be the font *The Future Must Be Sweet*—after Charles Fourier, 2001, that most directly engaged the tactic of the constellation. Fourier, Chan explained, “thought the world should be organized around our pleasures: every one should have equal access to affection, justice, and exquisite food.” With each individual letter reconceived as a grouping of words linked by diagrammatic lines, clusters of ideas, and utopian notions, the font “reinterprets Fourier’s philosophy into a textual graphic system and gives form to the unique connections Fourier made between radical politics and utopian desires. Different relationships between the letters (and words) develop based on simple changes in word processing: point size, page width, leading and kerning.” To type in this font is to create a web of interconnected words, a diagram of pleasures, hopes, and ideals. “Fatty duck.” “The social compass.” “Pleasure.” “Civilization.” “Bright pastries.” “Philanthropy.” “Multiple lovers.” But the technical-seeming diagrams produced also inevitably call up a more primordial language of myth, the astrological form of the constellation, a star map of radiant words naming ever-changing but lost utopian dreams—words and ideas erupting into a series of constellated maps of a conceptual cosmos.

In 2005, Chan actually created a work that he named the *Constellation Series*. Here, at a time of desperation, he turned explicitly to the stars, looking up and at the mythic meanings attributed to the night sky, in response to the question and answer so often posed in political demonstrations: “This is what democracy looks like.” Now the lost utopia charted and endlessly

transformed into cosmological images in *The Future Must Be Sweet* would be literally cast out into the heavens. Imagining that “America will not survive as a democratic experiment” thanks, if nothing else, to the devastations of climate change, the artist wondered: “But does this mean that America must die on Earth?” Creating a series of ink-jet drawings of familiar astrological constellations saturated with new shapes and deep, saturnine colors, Chan proposed: “Let us rename the stars and constellations to remember the things we have lost and the things we have yet to gain. ... America should live on, as a myth, and a promise, to be fulfilled at a later date, on another planet perhaps.”<sup>7</sup> The works were given titles like *A free press* (formerly *Ursa Minor*), or *A jury of peers* (formerly *Aquarius*), or, comically, *Separation of Church and State* (formerly *Gemini*). And then, using glowing points and dotted lines, the artist traced fantastical images across the formerly iconic constellations of stars, messing with Orion (no more belt here, but a myriad of lines that traced curves and potential letters), scribbling and looping wildly between the dots that once formed Ursa Major. The constellations—the stars—had been occupied, renamed, and then redrawn.<sup>8</sup>

The other site where the constellation as a form arises explicitly in the work is in fact a book, in the drawings that accompany Chan’s children’s story *The Shadow and Her Wanda*. Here, with images that resemble the shapes explored in the *Constellation Series* and point to the forms used in the artist’s major project *The 7 Lights*, 2005–2007, the text tells of a girl named Wanda, who fears the night. Echoing Goethe and Adorno (and perhaps Blanchot), Wanda faces a night sky full of stars, replete with dotted lines, exploding with new shapes and forms: “I pity you, unhappy stars,” she says, somewhat precociously. “You weep in the dark without tears.” Turning her back on the night, Wanda comes to face the void once more in the form of her shadow, with whom she speaks throughout the book. But as Chan draws this shadow taking on new shapes again and again, its darkness

comes eventually to be filled with points of light, the night in a new form, with the sparkle of stars and their spider's web of dotted connections, constellations pulsing in the depths of the abyss. In the book, they become the harbinger of transformation: "The shadow passed by a man. In the night of her shadow"—the book shares a drawing of a shadow replete with stars—"Wanda saw the man change." As the field of stars in the shadow's blackness continues to grow—eventually taking over whole page spreads within Chan's tale—we hear this song of transformation: "The shadow passed by a window. In the darkness, the window changed." And then: "Wanda was changing too," the text relates, giving up an image of her shadowed silhouette filled to the brim with stars and constellations, like words without language, a writing of endless new shapes and forms, a web of relations and connections.<sup>9</sup>

In taking up the notion of the constellation, we sense Chan engaging with one of the most mysterious but also transformative concepts attributed to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, to Benjamin and Adorno—the latter perhaps the most important thinker for the formation of Chan's beliefs in the writings collected here. Originating as an idea for Benjamin in his early book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, borrowed by Adorno to shape his own philosophy from an early lecture such as "The Actuality of Philosophy" to the later *Aesthetic Theory*, the tactic of the constellation would serve as the central strategy of Benjamin's magnum opus, his tragic and unfinished *Arcades Project*. In words often cited and almost never understood, we read there:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to

the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical.<sup>10</sup>

In earlier formulations, Benjamin had presented constellated groupings of irreconcilable figures as a key to knowledge: “To encompass both Breton and Le Corbusier—that would mean drawing the spirit of contemporary France like a bow, with which knowledge shoots the moment in the heart.”<sup>11</sup> But the idea of a thought constellation became for Benjamin a more general historical method, a refunctioning of the aesthetics of montage into a tool of knowledge, a “caesura” in the flow of history and events whose discontinuity and regrouping could function as a potentially revolutionary image of “awakening.”<sup>12</sup>

In both manifest and latent ways, the idea of the constellation has become as crucial for Chan as Gilles Deleuze and his notion of the “minor” once became for an artist like Mike Kelley.<sup>13</sup> As the constellation served as a precursor to Benjamin’s idea of the “dialectical image,” we are not surprised to find the formula of the dialectical image—“image is dialectics at a standstill”—peppering Chan’s own pronouncements. In “39 Sentences,” we read: “A thing is a web of relations at a standstill.” Or previously, in “Inner Law,” there is this: “Cumming is the moment at a standstill.” Duchamp is described, in “Duchamp, or Freedom,” as making art “as a moment at a standstill.” A Sharits drawing, similarly, finds itself understood as a figuration of “restlessness at a standstill.” Erupting repeatedly in Chan’s aphorisms—with the writing, in general, itself erupting repeatedly into implicit aphoristic form, so many strangely compelling and owlish pronouncements—this phrase describes something crucial about the aphoristic shape of the writing in question. For an aphorism, we might say, carries the strength and simultaneity of the image into writing. It is a form in which writing and image cross.

An aphorism, moreover, seems a constellation of forces, a text under compression, like the dialectical image was for Benjamin. These forces might be considered as those of attraction, given the aphorism's potentially fragmentary nature, its openness, its call to the reader's involvement in further thought, in a process of decipherment and thus deeper reading. But simultaneously, the aphorism seems perfect in its nugatory self-enclosure, a force then of attraction and repulsion both. This irreconcilability has everything to do with the strategy of the constellation for Chan.

The term *constellation* is used explicitly in the essays that follow—but infrequently, referring to many different-seeming things. In “What Art Is and Where it Belongs,” Chan describes the arrangement of items in a home, “including artworks,” as a “constellation,” creating a “network of uses and meanings that connects us to a place and grounds us in a sensible reality.” In a jointly authored essay not included here—but echoed by many texts that are—the artist understands political organization via the same term: “Preferring not to ‘get with the program’ can also take the form of congregation, of association, of creating constellations that create some space and time to breathe, to be, and to think.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more important than these references, however, the idea of the constellation multiplies into many cognates as the writings develop, or can be sensed in other places and in other ideas crucial to the writings, even though it might not explicitly be named.

At times haunting Chan's many descriptions of subjectivity and memory—reconceived in a multiplicitous shape—the metaphor of the constellation ghosts almost all the artist's descriptions of art, of artistic composition and aesthetic form. In the essay “Miracles, Forces, Attractions, Reconsidered,” for example, Chan entertains an analogy between art and physics. Descriptions of magnetism will recur throughout the texts, always calling up the grouping and relation of forces of the activity of the constellation. Art, Chan states in “Miracles,” has the potential “to work

like a magnet, where it pulls elements from the empirical world toward itself in such a way that its composition suspends their typical configuration and enables their reordering to generate new forces of attraction.” One is reminded of an early appearance of the idea of the thought constellation in the writings of Benjamin: “Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other.”<sup>15</sup> And indeed, Chan continues, “Art is more than an attraction. Art’s power has as much to do with how it keeps the world at arm’s length.” Moving from implicit metaphors of gravity and magnetism to aesthetic theory and philosophy, to ideas of autonomy and freedom, the artist concludes: “When art refracts its inner elements into an order of irreconcilabilities, art’s essential polarity changes from something that strives to attract, to one that can’t help but repulse. This aura of repulsion enables art to levitate above its own grounding.”

In the same essay, we encounter one of the other great analogies that run throughout Chan’s texts (and work) and apparently another attempt to bring the idea of the constellation to bear on art and the social world alike. The essay begins with the lyrics of the rap group Insane Clown Posse, reflexively describing music and its forms:

And music is magic, pure and clean  
You can feel it and hear it, but it can’t be seen

For Chan, music becomes a structure to be put in dialogue with the idea of magnetism, a field of attraction and repulsion, a web of relations. “Music exemplifies what is most miraculous because it pushes and pulls us without physically existing. It acts like a physical force: magical, otherworldly and seemingly beyond any human calculus. So do magnets.”

But music is there at the origins of Chan’s activity as a writer. As with the first abstract painters of the early twentieth century, it has never left his side as an engine for further aesthetic thought.



It was evoked in the title of one of his first essays as an artist (he had early worked as a journalist), the catalog text “A Bitter Meat Symphony.” It rears its head in all the writings’ evident desire to assimilate Adorno, the great and harrowing philosopher of modern music, whose writings Chan describes in his essay on the thinker as “a siren sonata”—another force of attraction, as in the mythical reference to the *Odyssey* throwing out seductive ropes of connection and attachment to a listener. The films of Paul Sharits are described similarly as “shadow sonatas,” and indeed, here, in Chan’s essay on the filmmaker, subjectivity and memory alike are aligned with the potentially polyphonic and explicitly multiple formal structure of music. “On the social stage we sometimes call life,” Chan laments, “[the] radically different voices within us are trained to stay in key and sing in merciless harmony.” But then the artist’s metaphor changes, the relational form of the musical itself altered when we move from “life” to “art”: “The force of mediation as aesthetic construction gives permission to these voices to stray way beyond their octave and range. They find new resonances within the new dissonance, and sing in the new harmonics of the new noise without succumbing to chaos or order, a condition surely more real than reality.”

Reordering and regrouping once more becomes the order of the day. And if Chan has described this process through a musical metaphor in other artist’s works, such has been the task of the entrance of musical form into the artist’s own work. This became explicit around the time of Chan’s major projected image cycle *The 7 Lights*, where the last work in the series took the form of a score for a kind of music to come. But to look at Chan’s *Score for 7 Lights*, 2007, is to gaze at the meeting place, explicitly, of music and the idea of the constellation. For here, notes and musical notation are now transformed into shapes, images, a series of torn black paper voids dotted with gaping white inner holes, calling up stars glimmering in the night. As collage and visual art infect the musical score, we seem to face a destroyed

composition, an order and a kind of artistic language effaced by the visual image. But music itself now seems remade in this effacement. For the score erupts into the image not just of the cosmos or the heavens but of a landscape, a worldly space, with hills, and mountains, and valleys. It evokes the archetypal image of fleeting clouds, passing through a gridded sky. It calls up a netherworld of shadows, given the larger project of *The 7 Lights*. But these are now shadows strung together into the multiple form of the song, a musical language becoming an image world, a new way of imagining and collecting—like a constellation—images, shapes, and forms.<sup>16</sup>

If such image-text transformations have their musical counterparts for Chan and occur frequently throughout the work (one thinks of the similar and Arp-like destroyed paper collage works proliferating as the shape-shifting “footnotes” to Chan’s essay “The Spirit of Recession”), it might be because the image-writing of the constellation seems dedicated to the idea itself of transformation. This perhaps initially strikes us as strange, given the backward-looking drive that characterizes the tactic of the constellation, the manner in which the very idea taps into myth, into an ancient way of organizing knowledge and belief. And if the constellation has truck with transformative potentials, these seem tied up with almost mystical ideas of destiny (the astrological constellation, the divining of one’s “future”). In Chan’s essay “The Spirit of Recession,” however, a similarly mythic “kernel of unreason” will be located in the artist’s connection of the contemporary economic recession to the ancient church ritual known as a “recessional,” the act of “leaving and singing” that ends certain forms of church service, after the priests have departed. Not coincidentally, we face another dynamic informed by music and by song. “A church without authority is blessed indeed,” Chan offers. The recessional “marks the moment of ... turning,” one that comes “when power recedes.” And then he concludes: “It is the emphatic image of time shaped by the invis-

ible currents of something both passing and coming. It acts like a lyrical farewell and charges the entire space with the anticipation of new tidings that only real endings can bring.”

In an analogous manner, Chan’s tactic of the constellation also acts as a point of “turning,” a mythic kernel set against a contemporary condition, the forms of relation that the artist has long christened the “terrible connectedness,” the “burden of connectedness”—the network, “social” media, digital “communication.”<sup>17</sup> In the imagistic and imaginative regroupings that humankind formerly found in the heavens and the stars, Chan embraces an underbelly to an era we might call, in corporate-speak, the Age of Communication, the time of Infinite Connection. In the essay “The Unthinkable Community,” the artist takes on such capitalist connections quite directly. Communication does not equal connection, the essay asserts. “Making connections is a serious business,” one in which “communication is being industrialized.” To “live fully in the present,” Chan mourns, “means to be in constant communication: The self as net-work. *Communicatio ergo sum.*” The reader can discover the constellation-like manner in which Chan then goes on to describe—against this self as “net-work” idea—the “figure” of a true community, an image or form of appearance the artist ties explicitly to the possibility of transformation and change. But the regrouping of the constellation, the multiple form characteristic of music and song, the attraction of physical magnetism all come together in a further essay collected here, one dedicated to the idea of change itself, and that the artist has titled “Wanderlusting.” “It is often pleasing,” Chan tells us there, “to be part of something more powerful than oneself, and to hear what one wants reverberating in other voices.” The musical metaphor deepens: “Calls for change are like the siren songs, drawing those who hear them into the company of those who sing them. A community is, in a sense, those songs sung together, like a chorus.”

Called upon to write his own introduction to another cultural figure's writings—the curator and force of nature named Hans Ulrich Obrist—Chan chose to share an origin story for language itself. I will end with it here. Characteristic of a body of thought that turns back, that reconnects with unreason and with myth, Chan's origin story finds echoes and resonances throughout the writings. But its general lineaments are familiar to us by now:

In the beginning, language originated in song. And music and speech were one. People spoke by singing words, and the world was made meaningful one note at a time. But there came a point when language split from song. Each went their separate ways afterwards, touching at times but never fully embracing. And it was then—at the moment when music and speech became distinct from one another—that a new concept was born: tragedy.

It may be overblown to imagine Chan's writings as a valiant attempt to invent a new form in which language and song could reunite in our times. "In these great times," to cite Chan citing Karl Kraus, no such redemption is likely or possible, however beautiful it might be to consider. But Chan's origin story points us to the new forms of the writing presented herein, where as we have seen song has its particular role to play. If my essay has hunted the idea of the constellation throughout the artist's writings and his larger body of work, we should now attend to the manner in which the writings and works themselves—in their operation, their activity, their truck with rearrangement and regrouping—stantiate the forms that I have here been calling that of the constellation. Not as content, but as a new form: we witness the *Alternumerics* and font works colliding Agnes Martin with "mortgage refinance spam," the Marquis de Sade with Goldman Sachs. The dialectical image created by the staging

of a Beckett play in the streets of a devastated American city in *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, 2007. The extreme dissonance of reconnecting with Adorno and his project of aesthetic theory in our anti-aesthetic times. All are constellations, forms pulling our present and our past into new configurations.

“A new world demands a new language,” Chan has stated, “and we are all equidistant from the potential to imagine a new language for this new world.”<sup>18</sup> Resonating with thoughts broached in some of the essays here that treat freedom and equality—specifically Chan’s text on Jacques Rancière—the artist’s statement once more appears to describe the spatial configuration of thought and language embodied in the idea of the constellation. But now, it seems, the constellation form extends from the artist as author to the reader and audience; it describes, in fact, a community of thinking, a potential community of thought. This marks something crucial about Chan as a writer, and about the writings collected here. Constellations, of course, are figures that must be read. They call out for recognition. They need decipherment. They can be constructed, like a game of connecting the dots, child’s play it might seem—but in this they also embody a kind of utopian condition. For the points of a constellation can be endlessly shifted, endlessly reconstructed, endlessly seen anew. They provide maps, collections, particles, image-shards that are actually invitations to imagine and to see things differently. A collection of essays such as those that follow represents, I think, what the artist would call a siren song, a work of seduction through words pulling others close, but also a force of attraction and repulsion (try spending time with Chan’s Sade fonts, reading the texts created with them like a mantra or a koan) that acts as an invitation and a rejoinder. The essays are a summons to make something of the images and constellations gathered before us here. For creating a constellation is always and already a process of reading. Any potential reading of them cries out for further creation, for new arrangements—a different imagining of what is and what could be.

*Remember, as children, when you used to lie upon the ground in the darkness. Before the time came when the great night sky faded, drowned out by the spreading electric glow of a civilization that will not sleep, with no time for dreams. The grass smelled young. And you used to gaze at the stars. You yelped with joy when an image emerged, when you recognized Orion, or the Big Dipper, or Taurus the Bull. You pointed, and you cried out. But such recognition was short-lived. The sky seemed so much larger than the images that you knew, that anyone has ever known. Then you grew silent. The smile fell from your face. The darkness closed in, with all its immensity. For the stars had no shapes. The shapes came from elsewhere.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Paul Chan, *The Shadow and Her Wanda* (London: Serpentine Gallery and Koenig Books, 2007).
  - <sup>2</sup> Two examples of the latter, not included here, would be Paul Chan and Jay Sanders, "A Dialogue About the Moving Image," *Lyon Biennial 2007*, exh. cat. (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2007), and Paul Chan and Melanie Gilligan, "A Dialogue Between Strangers," performed at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 2007.
  - <sup>3</sup> Paul Chan, "A Bitter Meat Symphony," in *The Meat Show*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Dogmatic Galley, 1998), not included in the present volume.
  - <sup>4</sup> The catalog is *Paul Chan* (Frankfurt am Main: Portikus; Stockholm: Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, 2006).
  - <sup>5</sup> I have discussed these early projected works in some detail in my essay "Paul Chan: The Image from Outside," *Paul Chan: The 7 Lights* (London: Serpentine Gallery and Koenig Books, 2007).
  - <sup>6</sup> As with my invocation of iTunes and the experience of shuffle and playlists for *My Own Private Alexandria*, the *Alternumerics* make wilder or more vivid the experiences we are increasingly familiar with on the platform of our computers. Throughout the writing of the present essay, the Microsoft Word "autoformat" function consistently attempted to transform "Paul Chan" into "Chancellor Gene D. Block," the leader of UCLA to whom I usually only write in protest; and for "Agnes Martin" my computer insisted on inserting a defunct e-mail for artist Martin Creed (with whom I have never corresponded).
  - <sup>7</sup> Paul Chan, *Untitled (for an America to come)*, in *Constellation Series* (2005)
  - <sup>8</sup> Chan made ten new constellations for the project; in addition to the three already named, the series included: *Freedom of speech (formerly Centaurus)*; *No cruel and unusual punishment (formerly Perseus)*; *Right to peaceably assemble (formerly Cassiopeia)*; *Distributive justice (formerly Orion)*; *Democracy to come (formerly Ursa Major)*; *Right to keep and bear arms (formerly Cancer)*; *No taxation without direct representation (formerly Andromeda)*.
  - <sup>9</sup> Chan describes the text on which his children's tale is based, Nietzsche's "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in the essay accompanying *The 7 Lights*, "On Light as Midnight and Noon."
  - <sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 463. N3,1.
  - <sup>11</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 459. N1a, 5.
  - <sup>12</sup> Using a musical metaphor that brings us back to Chan's frequent use of the same, Benjamin would further write: "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought." Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 475. N10a, 3.

- <sup>13</sup> See Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Chan and Sven Lütticken, "Idiot Wind: An Introduction," *e-flux journal* 22 (January/February 2011). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/idiot-wind-an-introduction>. This was the introduction to a special double issue of *e-flux journal* edited by Chan and Lütticken on "the rise of right-wing populism in the U.S. and Europe, and what it means for contemporary art," to which Chan contributed the essay "Progress as Regression," included here.
- <sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 37.
- <sup>16</sup> The score returns as an explicit tactic for Chan both in his Paul Sharits essay and in the project *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, where the artist worked with a kind of drawing that he describes in the essay "X jxm vlr rpb pelria ilpb vlr": "This is not a map. But it is something that I drew which eventually became an emblem of sorts for Godot. It is barely a drawing and hardly a score. Still, it's all here. Gogo and Didi. Pozzo and Lucky. The boy. Whenever I had a spare moment during the production or when no one was around, I would take this out of a battered manila folder to look at it, and wonder. Allegro? Moderato? Tutta Forza? Perendosi?"
- <sup>17</sup> I refer the reader to the early and important interview with Nell McClistler, "Paul Chan," *Bomb Magazine* 92 (Summer 2005), accessed online <http://bombsite.com/issues/92/articles/2734>. Chan explicitly talks of the "responsibility" of "being a good star in the constellation of the past" in direct connection to the discussion of networks and mass communication broached during this interview.
- <sup>18</sup> The statement, and thus the title of this essay, comes from my interview with Chan; see George Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," *October* 123 (Winter 2008), p. 207. The phrase recurs in similar forms in the writings collected here, in some of the earliest writings in fact, such as the essay "The Rewriting of the Disaster."





**Aesthetics**

**and**

**Politics**



# The Rewriting of the Disaster

On Independent Media, New Media, and the Work of Mourning

Let me begin with a confession: I do not feel up to the task of speaking to you today after what happened in New York, where I live. It is as if everything has changed. Even time is different: it feels both terribly intimate and infinitely distant. It is hard to describe. It is also a unique quality of the disaster, which I will return to later.

Maurice Blanchot (who shadows this text from title to the final period) wrote, “Weakness is grief weeping without tears.”<sup>1</sup> And there is still much grief. Numbers and analysis are of no use to me, either to dispute or confirm facts. The interconnections between the horror, the politics, and the propaganda are complicated—almost overwhelming. I feel reluctant to act in this orchestrated descent, with each action and each turn contributing to another fall from an illusionary democratic grace. As if the Seattle police or the National Guard in DC weren’t brutal enough, this civil discourse of force descends into a boisterous rule of the mob.

I was invited here to speak about the work of the Independent Media Center. But given what happened in New York, it seems hardly the right moment to talk about political organizing or art, or whatever it is we think we can do or make to push for social progress. Besides, I would never speak for or represent IMC in general. This is neither modesty nor strategy. It’s simply the diffused and diverse nature of the Independent Media Center that makes representation difficult.

But I am here. So let me try to make the most of it.

The Independent Media Center began as a coalition of media activist groups covering the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests. From the first Seattle IMC, activists adopted the IMC model, which is itself founded on the history and experience of other independent media groups. Today, IMC is a global grassroots network of media artists, producers, and activists committed to using media production and distribution as a

tool for promoting social, cultural, and economic justice. There are now over fifty IMCs worldwide, with chapters in Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Australia. Every chapter maintains a website and a few even have office space. Each website supports a system of self-publishing that lets anyone send text, photos, audio, and video onto the site and within seconds have it appear on the front page for anyone to see, reply, and add onto. Indymedia—short for the Independent Media movement—has been called a new ecosystem of democratized media. I prefer to call it something less grand but just as remarkable: the Associated Press of the people. Its network of websites constitutes the world's largest chain of anticorporate community newspapers.

I am an artist. And artists are, one way or another, obsessed with form. It is the question of how we give shape to meaning that we obsessively ask. When something as intangible as an idea is put into the service of our desires to create a poster, a photograph, or a digital video documentary, a transformation takes place. Good form not only pushes that idea into a higher order of meaning. It also gives the material that shaped that idea a new reason to exist. I consider this the closest thing to magic.

For the IMC in particular and independent media in general, technology has been the key to this magic. Specifically, the evolution of the personal computer, the global advance of the Internet, and the continuing development of open-source programming make Indymedia not only possible but vital. The NYC-IMC website is powered by an idiosyncratic variant of an open-source programming language originally written by an Australian anarchist collective—a motley crew of anarchists, Marxists, Libertarians, Greens, hacktivists, liberal apologists, and one progressive Mason volunteer to keep the countless donated computers and devices like scanners, laser printers, zip drives, and routers in running order. We work off three different operating systems and everything is connected to a dedicated T1 connection donated by 2600, quite possibly the world's oldest hacker collective.

All these vectors of technology combine to give activists a multitude of forms with which to express, educate, and agitate: from online radio to streaming video, from interactive archives of protest reports to downloadable digital newspapers. This is what is called “new media,” where the cross-pollination of media and content generates a multiplicity of forms, all of which can be refashioned into each other with relative ease; and where all the forms are inextricably connected to the global distribution mode of the Internet.

It is both dreadful and exciting, this new media. On the one hand, it heralds a new, more democratic means of media, making it easier to produce and distribute work. On the other hand, we cannot escape the idea that the technology we use is inextricably connected to a network of forces and transactions that fuel the very powers that make globalization possible.

This is of course, not new. Technology has always played a major role in the expansion of global economics. But this expansion has not only pushed outward, connecting corporations with nation-states to monopolize the channels of information that are the source of new capital. It has also expanded inward, creating new layers of technology to mediate every personal mode of communication and production, making it impossible to disassociate the enabling powers of technology to connect, produce, and agitate, from its connection to a political economy that privatizes information, erodes civil liberties, and reduces cultural and social differences to the level of transmittable commodities. This dialectic of technology has proved to be very productive for activists and producers connected to the movement against globalization. Not without irony, we have globalized democratic media. The work continues but the focus has shifted, at least for us in New York. Because some time ago, a force in the form of a disaster ruptured the social fabric we had worked so hard to disrupt ourselves.

We who survive the disaster do not survive unscathed. An event so unique in its horror and intensity leaves its mark on us

by taking away the very thing that could connect meaning to experience: our language. We are left utterly speechless, unable to make our way out of this aftershock that the disaster creates in its wake. No articulation of speech, no order of language, seems able to contain, much less represent, the reality, and more elusively, the meaning of the disaster. This is why Blanchot believed the idea of the disaster is that which is excessive to language, that which escapes the reason and form language imposes on experience. Blanchot writes, "When the answer is the absence of any answer, then the question in turn becomes the absence of any questions. Words pass, return to a past which has never spoken, the past of all speech. It is thus that the disaster, although named, does not figure in speech."<sup>2</sup> Speech fails us. No amount of words can bridge the gulf between us, the survivors, and this meaninglessness, which is not the opposite of meaning but its broken shell. Yes, speech fails us, but everything has a limit, even failure. And so we find a surrogate for our lost speech: the media, which in turn speaks for us, to us. What kind of speech does it give us? Not information, since its accumulation does not amount to anything we would remotely call knowledge. Under the pretense of the new, we are instead given the echo of information, which is always "breaking" but always already never new, like the painful repetition of a flashback that revisits the disaster without ever knowing it. This phenomenon that immobilizes us with an endless testimony of an echo without meaning or history has an illustrious name: it is trauma.

Media is traumatic. As a network of networks that produce the news by reproducing what they want us to think is new, the media speaks incessantly what we already know, that the disaster is unspeakable. This becomes repeated in endless variations: news bites, color commentary, expert analysis. This is also why it is so intoxicating, for the repetition lulls us like the sound of ocean waves crashing on shore. It gives us a sense of knowingness. Even empowerment.

Everyone says it, from the New Black Panthers to the new Morgan Stanley commercial: Knowledge is power. It resonates with an echo of truth proper to any cliché. Perhaps it's more than an echo. Does it empower us to know that the Afghan people have been enduring our freedom for quite some time now? Does it help us to make sense of this void of speech, which is also a void in time, to know that Al Qaeda was funded by the US government for the express purpose of driving the former Soviet Union out of Afghanistan? Or that our government's connection to radical fundamentalist groups like Al Qaeda is much more politically intimate than we would dare imagine during this battle between civilization and barbarism? Perhaps. The voice of independent media has been reminding us of other histories and other people for quite some time. For as long as media proper, that is to say, corporate media, has practiced the fine art of selling trauma, independent media, or media independent of its own sordid history, has engaged in generating participation, rather than trauma, by enlightening, enlivening, educating, and above all empowering. To know that under the guise of preserving freedom our federal government has passed legislation essentially criminalizing political dissent is to empower us to fight against this domestic war to destroy the freedom of speech being waged under its own name. To know that Operation Enduring Freedom is both illegal, under the United Nations Charter of International Law, and irrational, in its aim to root out a small network of terrorists by carpet-bombing a whole country, gives us the courage to say no in the face of this bloody absurdity. Indeed, knowledge is power. There is no denying the echo of truth we hear.

But like any self-respecting echo, there is a certain emptiness in its sound. I believe this comes from a simple fact: we are not masters of the universe. Even those of you who have read everything Noam Chomsky has ever written, including his work in linguistic theory, cannot claim to know beyond the pale of history. It makes no difference whether you are a Marxist or a

Freemason: knowledge has its limits. Worse, only knowledge that can service the progress of power is considered knowledge proper. What is unknown or unquantifiable is not useful because it cannot be transformed into a purposeful end and therefore falls outside the purview of our attention. Knowledge is power only when power dictates the horizon of that knowledge. This is dangerous, and Blanchot knew this. In his book *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot writes about the limits of our knowledge as it grapples with events so unspeakable they leave us speechless. He writes about the dangers of this collusion between knowledge and power, an equation that provides us an illusionary answer and a false sense of security. "Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in relation with the most insupportable aspects of power."<sup>3</sup> The question for Blanchot, and now us, is how do we come to understand a disaster, this rip in reason, without servicing a power that will come to use this understanding for its own end?

Only when trauma recedes can mourning begin. The work of mourning is grief's way of giving expression to an offense to reason made real. And it is perhaps the closest we, as survivors, come to an understanding. But this understanding does not come as knowledge. Instead, mourning works to give shape to trauma through the medium of remembrance. In New York, the most poignant reminder of what took place on September 11 is not ground zero, or the smell, or the maddening persistence of police sirens. It is for me the flyers. Thousands of letter-size missing-person flyers in a mosaic of styles and colors continue to haunt the streets of Manhattan, on lampposts, sides of buildings, mailboxes, even subway cars. They usually show a picture of the missing from a family album. Or they use a snapshot taken by friends. The captions that accompany the picture are invariably simple and direct: name, height, age, type of clothing they last wore, what floor they worked on in the Twin Towers. But what I



find most telling is the consistent additional caption of who survives the missing person. Does it help the search for the missing to know whom they have left behind? I don't know. But this is what makes the flyers more than something utilitarian ("please help me find my father, my mother, my lover, or my friend"). They are also acts of remembrance ("please help me remember my father, my mother, my lover, or my friend"). The call to act and the need to remember each speak in a different voice that together gives semblance to an experience beyond language. Knowledge cannot do it alone. It is up to memory to remember what knowledge cannot grasp, so we do not forget the questions that we cannot answer.

The promise of a kind of media that is truly new, independent, and progressive depends on this space between act and remembrance. The work of imagining this space has historically been taken up by art, literature, and that old horse, philosophy. Can we perhaps recruit media for this task as well? A new world demands a new language. Technology has given us the reach and the means; politics, the will. What remains is the cunning and imagination it takes to make a gift of the disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Blanchot, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Blanchot, p. 82.

# Portrait of a Day in Baghdad

December 28, 2 AM

My first drink of *arak*, an Iraqi liquor that tastes like licorice and stings like rock candy. The poet Farouk Salloum told me he was drinking *arak* at his house when the missiles hit Baghdad in the first Gulf War. After his first glass, he prayed the attack would end quickly. After the second, he wished he had more *arak* at his house because there was no way he was going to get more during an attack. After his third glass, he screamed at the missiles to bring it on.

9 AM

I remember now the party last night at Farouk's house. Members of the Iraq Peace Team were invited along with musicians, journalists, and poets. Farouk was dressed in casual black. He had sleepy eyes. He was gracious and demanding, ordering that drinks be constantly filled, especially for the women. The socialist Baath Party banned public drinking in 1995. Ever since, Iraqis have taken their drink underground and at each other's homes. Farouk's second daughter is named Reem, which means one who is as graceful as a deer running. She doesn't have her father's eyes.

A droll pianist and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war in the early '80s played Bach and a jazzy funeral march. Earlier in the evening he had told me that he had killed six men in the war and that the men and women of Iraq are all trained in combat and will take to arms and stones if necessary to stop the Americans from entering Baghdad. I ask him if his experience in killing shaped, in any way, his piano playing. No response.

NOON

A word about *kubbe* in soup. At the Al-Shadbandar Café, where the Iraqi literati come to drink tea and speculate about the war and who is the number-one poet of the week, Almad, a young sculptor, invites me for *kubbe* in soup. It is nearby and it is good,

he says. Fair enough. I'm ready for it. Before I had left the States, Aviv, a dear friend and member of New Kids On The Black Bloc, an artist political collective in Barcelona, asked me to seek out *kubbe* in soup. "I know you're not going to Baghdad for a culinary tour, but promise me you will try it."

*Kubbe* is a meat dumpling the size of my head swimming in greasy soup. The skin of the dumpling is thick and wheaty. Inside, a mixture of ground meat of unknown origins and cinnamon. Other spices too, but who can tell. The soup is hot water with onions. Sometimes with tomatoes.

Almad wants me to come. But Haider, another sculptor, says it may not be a good idea. It will be crowded, he says, and the water is not so good for foreigners. Okay, I say to Almad, next time. I drink my lemon tea and dream of dumplings the size of my head. A film critic enters the café. He's the number-one film critic in Baghdad, Haider tells me, because he is the only film critic in the city. He jokes to Ellen, my travel companion for the day and a full-time peace activist from Maryland, that he would like to do a cultural exchange with her; she can take his post as the number-one critic in Baghdad if he could get a visa and go to the United States.

3 PM

We wander around the booksellers' row, a souk (open market) next to the Al-Shadbandar Café. Former engineers sell their collection of books on statistical analysis and whatever else they can find in their house. Books are indiscriminately piled on the sidewalk for people to browse through. Iraq had, before the sanctions, one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East and the greatest number of PhDs. This is why you find not only books on mathematics and structural mechanics but also Hegelian philosophy, Pop art, and absurdist drama in Arabic, English, French, German, and even Chinese. I find a nice copy of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Also a beautiful book on Islamic calligraphy.

We have what's called a magic sheet. On one side of this piece of paper is an explanation of what the Iraq Peace Team is about and why we are in Iraq. On the other side, the same thing in Arabic. We pass this out and hope to enlarge our family. It does work like magic, and a bookseller quickly becomes a friend (because, not surprisingly, everyone is against the war). It is only paper, but it has the weight of gold.

I meet a poet named Suha Noman Rasheed. He is slowly selling his collection of poetry books on the row, to live. He has published three books of Arabic poetry and promises me he will bring a copy of one of them next week. A writer friend in the US asked me to bring back some books in Arabic so they can be translated into English. This is our rescue mission, he tells me.

4:50 PM

Walking back to the hotel, Ellen and I notice the pristine quality of the Iraqi police cars. Some of the plastic coverings haven't even been taken off the seats. Ellen, who served for four years in the US army, and I agree that one can tell the health of any regime by the cleanliness of the police cars.

6 PM

An action-planning meeting for the Peace Team. Productive. There will be an action on December 31 titled "Resolutions and Celebrations." The goal is a party to get Iraqi mothers, fathers, kids, poets, writers, and peace activists together to make New Year's resolutions that would replace the UN resolutions now serving as the litmus test for war. I am in charge of the visuals. I imagine ten thousand Iraqi children dressed in white suits and dresses, singing and waving their hands up as if surrendering. Musical accompaniment: Aretha Franklin. Special guest: Subcomandante Marcos. I don't tell the others about the plan. Let's see what I can do in four days.

7:30 PM

Found out George is leaving the team because his father in Massachusetts is in serious conditions after he broke his hip. I'm very fond of George. A Lebanese man who also stays at the Al-Fanar hotel, who may or may not be a war profiteer, said George has a heart of gold. I believe him. He's been to Iraq nine times and supports eight families here. On this trip he brought two suitcases of medicines and toys. Baghdad is the city of infinite need.

8 PM

Saddam is on television. He is sitting on a white leather couch. The reception is bad. Just now there is a cutaway shot to the crowd listening to him speak. It is immense. But there is never a shot of the crowd and Saddam together. Did you know that the Russian KGB was the great-grandfather of Adobe Photoshop? Not only did they make people disappear, they made their appearance in photographs disappear as well. With a razor blade, pen, and ink they would retouch photographs with such precision, it was as if the person had never appeared in the original photograph. Now the cutaway is the standard, whether it is used to subtract or add people. Reality has never been so elastic. Followed by a music video of children singing and images of Saddam at various state functions.

11 PM

Saf, a young student who I play dominos with sometimes, asks me if I have any aspirin for him. I tell Saf, tomorrow.

11:50 PM

Every night at 11:30 Iraq television plays a movie. Tonight it's the 2000 film *Red Planet* starring Val Kilmer. Kilmer, incidentally, came to Iraq in 1998 as a part of a campaign called America Cares. One of the members of the AC board was Barbara Bush.

The campaign was set up to take the media spotlight away from former attorney general Ramsey Clark's delegation called the Sanctions Challenge, which was in Baghdad at the same time. It worked. No one paid attention to Clark and his crew, who were campaigning to stop the sanctions. All eyes were on Val and his vague promises to bring democracy and bad movies to the Middle East.

I AM

Cannot sleep. The wild dogs of Baghdad are out, barking and laughing at the few cars that are still on the street. I find the following quote in a book about Lao Tzu, the mystical Chinese philosopher, that seems appropriate to the times: "Vulgar people are clear, I alone am drowsy. Vulgar people are alert, I alone am muddled."<sup>1</sup>

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Originally published in *Sarai Reader 04: Crisis/Media*, ed. Shuddhab Sengupta, Monica Narula, Ravi Vasudevan, Ravi Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi, Awadhendra Sharan, and Geert Lovink (Delhi: Sarai, 2004), pp. 306–309. Reprinted by permission of author. In December 2002, Paul Chan spent a month in Baghdad as a member of the Iraq Peace Team, a group initiated by Voices in the Wilderness, a Chicago-based, Nobel Prize–nominated independent international campaign that attempted to end the economic sanctions and warfare against the people of Iraq. The Iraq Peace Team began in September 2002 in an attempt to prevent a US attack on Iraq through the use of nonviolent actions. During Chan's time in Baghdad, he wrote about his experiences.

<sup>1</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press of Hong Kong, 1965), p. 31.



# Sublime Humility

On Outsider Art and Outsider Politics

Let us reject the blindness of isolationism, just as we refuse the crown of empire. Let us not dominate others with our power—or betray them with our indifference. And let us have an American foreign policy that reflects American character. The modesty of true strength. The humility of real greatness.

—George W. Bush

Never let 'em know where you live  
Never let 'em get familiar wit your dough or your kids  
Put the toast to 'em  
Always stay quiet, humble  
But don't be scared to take it to the knife or the  
gun in the rumble

—Jadakiss, “We Be Like This”

William L. Hawkins. Born 1895 in rural Kentucky. Moves to Ohio in 1910 to escape the reconstruction that never came. Mops floors, drives a truck, runs a small brothel, and paints. Starts to sell his work around 1930. Paints. Suffers from a stroke in 1989, which leaves him partially paralyzed. Still paints. Dies several months later at the age of ninety-five.

I do not mourn the passing of William Hawkins until the year 2000, when folk art scholar Lee Kogan shows me a slide of his work. The painting is entitled *The Last Supper #9*, 1987, and it is. Bright reds and yellows that swirl in an obscure pattern frame the traditional grouping of the apostles and the triangular focus on Jesus that is the hallmark of the genre. It is faithful to the pictorial demands of this famous scene, albeit in the vibrant colors and aggressive line quality befitting a painter who was



also a janitor, a truck driver, and a pimp. But something else. In front of Jesus there is a plate of fried chicken. And more. Collard greens. Mash potatoes. Rib tips. Judas stares at a peach cobbler.

I don't remember what Leonardo da Vinci and the others served Jesus in their Last Supper paintings. But it doesn't matter. I'm transfixed. And now, something changes. What Jacques Lacan calls an anamorphic shift takes place, where a minor detail that supplements the whole becomes the anchor point from which the whole obsessively revolves. The Last Supper is transformed. And it becomes beautiful to me, perhaps for the first time. Not because I love peach cobbler, just like Judas, but because I feel and see the weight of what is depicted and, at the same time, the lightness of the intervention that messes with the matrix of the formal and historical tradition of the painting and, still at the very same time, continue to feel that weight. It is actually heavier. Hawkins did not want to make light of the Last Supper or make it somehow more contemporary. He wanted to honor and obey the law of the Last Supper. Above all, he wanted to love it, in an excessive way, which is to say, in a personal way. And surely you know one loves the other by feeding the other a good meal. Even if you know the other will betray you. Perhaps it is precisely because the other will betray you that one has to make the extra effort to make great gravy and give the extra helping of greens, before the betrayal. Certainly before the redemption.

\* \* \*

There is no humility without an element of humiliation. In the Old and New Testament, humility is an essential characteristic of true piety, of men and women who are right with God. God humbles men in order to bring them to himself (Deuteronomy 8:2). The state of grace that frees one from pride and arrogance, the quality of mind that fixates on unworthiness and imperfections for a greater good, does not result from the practice of

faith or the accumulation of knowledge. It comes from the act of submission. Humility is learned at the end of a whip.

It is important to note here that the state of humility that comes from the grace of humiliation is not a cycle one studiously avoids. This cycle is, in fact, very pleasurable. It also serves a long tradition. There is, of course, the legendary institute for the research and practice of debasement and Eros, also known as the Catholic church. No less grand is Georges Bataille's work, a cross between theology, Marxism, and bathroom graffiti. Bataille writes, "Since it is true that one of man's attributes is the derivation of pleasures from the suffering of others, and that erotic pleasure is not only the negation of an agony that takes place at the same instant, but also a lubricious participation in that agony, it is time to choose between the conduct of cowards afraid of their own joyful excesses, and the conduct of those who judge that any given man need not cower like a hunted animal, but instead can see all the moralistic buffoons as so many dogs."<sup>1</sup> And of course we must mention Jean Paulhan's introduction to the classic story about the erotics of humility and humiliation, Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*. Paulhan begins by describing a slave rebellion in Barbados in 1838, where the slaves, once they fought and freed themselves, returned to their former master weeks later and demanded that they be taken back. Paulhan's essay is entitled "Happiness in Slavery."<sup>2</sup> Pleasurable yes. And hence popular. Evocations from President Bush and Jadakiss aside, the production of a state of lowliness of the mind and the perpetual reminder of our fundamental imperfections for the service and consolidation of power constitute a venerable tradition in America. Can we not make the case that the reason the United States has the lowest voter turnout rate of any democratic nation in the world is that the people of the United States have been thoroughly humbled? Isn't the idea of true humility what motivates pop sensation Britney Spears, in a recent and bizarre interview with CNN, to answer a question about her opinion

on Bush and Iraq, “Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes and we should just support that.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is humility not missing in the general discourse, it virtually blankets the whole of our social milieu with its terminal smog of faith and goodwill. Humility, as the pleasure from the passivity that duty demands, calls us from every US department of whatever and every cable news channel as insistently as the Islamic call to prayer that echoes through cities in Jordan, Syria, and what was once Iraq. A smarter and no doubt less contrary bird might say, “But Paul. Why heed the call at all? You’re not Christian! You don’t even know how to spell Deuteronomy! Why not make like Ulysses’ crew, and put some wax in your ears and sail safely beyond the siren song?” True enough. But the problem is that I am not the only one who hears this call. Beyond our borders both national and religious, others hear it too. And this call binds us all in unexpected ways. In Baghdad, when I visited with families and friends, the topic of religion always came up.

Historical footnote: it is hard to imagine this topic coming up as frequently if the two Gulf Wars and the UN sanctions didn’t take place. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was a model of the modern secular Arab state. Islam and Christianity were both practiced and both were separated from political affairs. It wasn’t until after the first Gulf War and the beginning of the crippling UN sanctions that Hussein actively promoted Islam. The social fabric of Iraq was unraveling. Islam reconnected the people with the state and provided a framework for rebuilding civil order. End footnote.

So when Iraqis asked me what my religion was, I would answer none. This answer was beyond comprehension, unacceptable. I quickly realized Christianity was the only viable option, since answering Islam is tantamount to treachery and Buddhism is not a recognized form of religion. Christianity, however, given its small but significant population in Iraq and the historical connections between the saints of Christ and Mohammed, made

it acceptable. For Marx, religion was the opiate of the masses. For me, religion was the temporary visa to the masses. I played the Christian, and the role gave me something in Baghdad more precious than aspirin: trust. As a Christian, Iraqis engaged with me in a kind of dialogue worthy of that trust, on topics like truth, suffering, food, the proper age for marriage, peace, and above all, justice.

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On the one hand, the cycle of humility and humiliation, a movement that serves to consolidate power and binds us to a contract not unlike a slave to a master. On the other hand, a complete disavowal of this unsavory cycle and the risk of political and cultural alienation. Is there a third way?

I thought I saw a glimpse of it in Hawkins's painting. No church, Catholic or Protestant, would in my estimate, hang Hawkins's *Last Supper* in their house of worship and risk questions like, "What is the meaning behind the humongous plate of rib tips next to Jesus?" But Hawkins did not paint the Last Supper for a laugh. The reverence of the painting betrays an intent beyond parody or critique. Hawkins's painting, rather, resonates with a kind of excessive love that results from a profound embrace of the duty toward the depiction of Christ and the ideas motivating that depiction. It is as if Hawkins imagined he was the only painter with enough experience, knowledge, and love to represent this pivotal scene in Christianity. He cuts out the middleman, so to speak, and paints the core of the Last Supper with what he had and what he knew, in a loving excess above and beyond the law, which is to say, the church, to answer the calling of another master, another law. His painting is his answer to this call. And it is dutiful, excessive, sublime, humble.

The sordid history of outsider art is a long apologia for misfits and crazies, which is not unlike the sordid history of insider

art. But there is a kernel of difference between the two worlds of work. For outsider art, the duty is to the law, not to the new (or more precisely the longing of the new), which is the calling of contemporary art. In other words, the transgressive nature of outsider art is not the pursuit of novel forms and expressions that yield and articulate new pleasures and possibilities. It is, rather, the total embrace of the established forms and traditions that elevate those forms from mere things to “objecthood” or art. The embrace, however, is so tight that it threatens to collapse the forms themselves in a suffocating excess and, in the process, transform the very traditions that elevated those forms in the first place.

The weight of the embrace. The honoring of the form. The excessiveness with which they answer the call of a law beyond themselves. Aren't these the hallmarks of the great outsider artists like Henry Darger, Lee Godie, and Howard Finster? And do they not point the way toward a kind of humility that ruptures the Christian cycle of humility and humiliation? A kind of sublime servitude to the law above and beyond the established earthly embodiments of that law and, finally, against the powers that speak for the law, because the true servants of the law know that the law does not speak. It is silent. And it must remain so, humbly, if it is to keep its promise of a more just future to come.

Perhaps this is the crucial difference between true and sublime humility: one serves the present, the other serves the future. Are there other servants of the future besides painters from Kentucky and homeless portraitists wandering the streets of Chicago? Yes, I think. They are in our midst, like traitors waiting for the right moment to betray the law that speaks only of power and the appalling freedom of the blind. At this very instant, while 130,000 soldiers are serving the will of literally five lonely men in power, seven Americans are in Baghdad serving the goodwill of the American people and the ideals that founded our

republic. Members of the Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness have been serving both the Iraqis and the Americans since 1996, openly breaking the unjust United States–backed United Nations sanctions against Iraq, bringing medicines and toys into that country, and reminding the rest of us quietly, gently, that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are ideals worth fighting for beyond the fifty states. Members of Voices are now working in the middle of a war zone once known as Baghdad to bring an end to the occupation. Unreasonable? Yes. Crazy? Yes, yes. All guts. No glory. Not even a decent paycheck. Still, they practice their outsider politics and serve us, with us, perhaps even against us.

They are not the only ones. Before Voices in the Wilderness, there were the Quakers and the Mennonites, the liberation theologians, Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker*. And way before them the Antinomians, the Levellers, the Ranters, the Diggers, the Ishmaelites, and maybe we can also ask our founding fathers to join this quintessentially American list of humble radicals who bring trouble, honor justice, and serve the law against power.

This is perhaps why I was so moved when I saw the Black Bloc at the March 2003 antiwar protests in Washington, DC. The Black Bloc is a loose anarchist collective that is universally dismissed as a fringe star in the constellation of contemporary activism. They are young. They dress in all black. They tattoo anarchy symbols all over their ratty backpacks and hoodies. They are blamed for everything from broken windows to injured cops. They're wild and they endanger the legitimacy of the movement, they say.

But they're also the ones who wrap live tear-gas canisters thrown at protesters by cops with strips of cloth dipped in vinegar so nobody gets stung by the fumes. I have seen them form phalanxes to crash through barricades so demonstrators could escape the billy clubs and rubber bullets. They serve the movement while remaining excessive to it, and in doing so transform the very nature of that movement.

And you know what they did back in February of 2003? They wore these funny hats. I didn't recognize the hats at first but then someone clued me in: they were the black tricorns worn by George Washington and his rebel crew during the American Revolution. And like Hawkins's painting, the gesture did not feel like parody or critique. It felt, rather, like a kind of honoring. A radical embrace. A mere 220 years later, the Black Bloc dons the same symbol of rebellion that founded our country, fifteen or twenty of them, patriots all, facing down a nervous battalion of riot cops, by themselves, trying to expand the perimeter of the protest on the street—for us, with us, against us, beyond us.

Some of us wept at this sight. I won't say who.

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- <sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 101.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean Paulhan, "Preface: Happiness Is Slavery," in Pauline Réage, *The Story of O*, trans. Sabine d'Estree (New York: Ballantine, 1965).
- <sup>3</sup> Britney Spears, on *CNN Crossfire*, September 3, 2003. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/Music/09/03/cnna.spears/>.

# Debts Not Paid

Address to the Undergraduate Senior Class  
of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

I have been invited to give you some words of advice for the coming year, and perhaps even beyond. But before I do, I want to share with you a secret. When I was asked to do this, I thought it was a trap. You see, I have never paid back my student loans. And I thought this invitation was in fact a way of tracking me down, so they could start billing me again. Someone once told me an education is priceless, and I agreed. And since you can't put a price on something priceless, I thought it must be free. I have used fake names, fake addresses, and fake phone numbers to keep the school and the collectors at arm's length—for years.

So I suppose this is the first piece of advice: don't think about your student loans and ignore them when you graduate. This must not be the kind of advice the student loan department wants you to hear. So let's say at this point that you should take my advice metaphorically. The greatest gift you have, besides your youth, and your beauty, is your freedom. And making work in the service of freedom is the greatest gift you can give. In other words, making work without the burden of debt—of any kind—gives you the potential of making better work.

A perfect example of this happens every year. And that is the graduate exhibitions. I think the graduate students' work always pales in comparison to the undergraduate show precisely because grad students have bigger student loans to worry about. Fear impoverishes art, as well as us.

There is another kind of debt you should be wary of. And that is the kind that seduces us. When we are attracted by a movie, or an installation, or even a person, I believe we feel, in a way, indebted. The elation we feel when we like something, or someone; the joy we feel when we are exposed to something truly worth the word *art*, can be expressed by another word: gratitude.



We are grateful to have experienced something outside ourselves that expresses something in us that we cherish, or perhaps long for, in a way we haven't been able to. And we usually honor this debt and repay this experience by embodying it.

When I was young, I loved Spiderman. So I covered my hands and feet with Elmer's Glue, climbed on top of a ladder, and lunged at a brick wall. More than once, in fact. I am convinced that when we look at art that bores us, it is not because we don't understand it. It is that we understand it too much. In other words, we see explicitly the debt that is being repaid. And the art becomes only an echo of the compositions, ideas, and movements that the artist felt indebted enough to repeat, if only to remain faithful to that initial exposure: out of love, perhaps even out of fear.

You should ignore this kind of debt as well. Like I said, your freedom is a gift. And this means the freedom to transform the things that are into things that are not, or vice versa. Sometimes this means letting go of the debts we feel we ought to carry with us that have made us who we are, and changing them: making them silly, absurd, or confounding, even to ourselves. This is harder than it sounds and more illuminating than you will know.

In these great times, when orders are being imposed on us from every direction—from student loan officers to secretaries of defense—the idea that we can change the order of things is truly ridiculous. Luckily, we traffic in the ridiculous. We are artists.

Good luck.

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Delivered as an address to matriculating undergraduates at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2006

## The Spirit of Recession

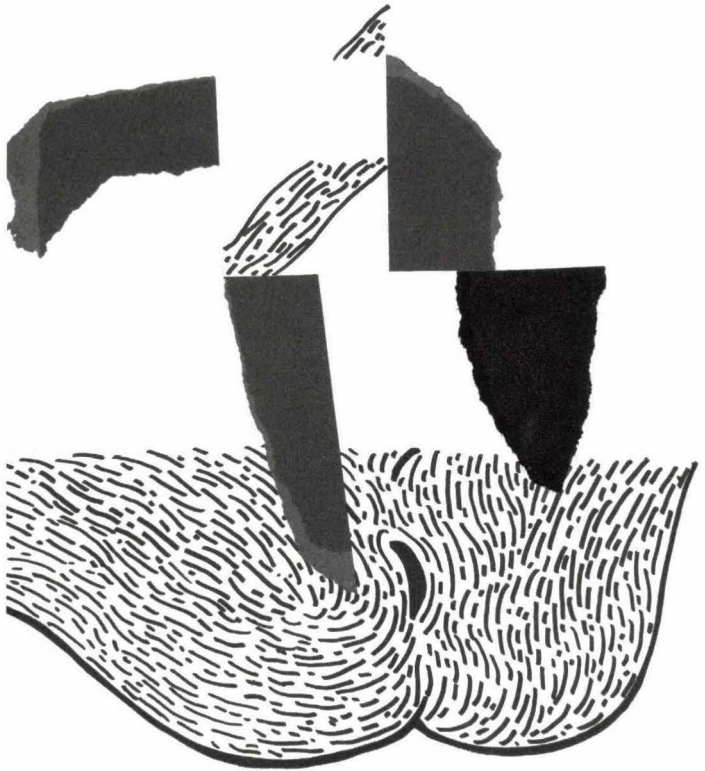
In 1991, I was at once too poor and not poor enough to be caught up in the last great American recession of the twentieth century. Living far from the coastal epicenters of culture and capital and being too young and naive to know, much less care, about life beyond my meager horizons, the idea of a phenomenon that throws entire societies into dire phrases like *negative growth* and *economic depression* was as abstract and remote to me as the actual reasons behind the appearance of a recession are in reality. That summer, a decline in gross domestic product for me meant saying no to yet another McDonald's quarter pounder with cheese. Survival had nothing to do with measuring the rise and fall of economic indicators but with the cunning of living in between these inhuman quantifications and finding novel ways to be unmoved and unmoored by their movements, in any direction. Progress was not chasing profit but standing firm wherever you happened to have found yourself, against the forces that bull or bear either way.

But one learns rather quickly that standing firm doesn't guarantee that the ground one stands on will do the same. The McDonald's where I went now and then closed toward the tail end of the '91 recession; so did other businesses in the area. At the time I didn't think much of it, and if I did, I thought it strange. The place had a lot of customers because the neighborhood it was in didn't have a real grocery store or day care or any semblance of a community or job-training center. So inevitably, that McDonald's became all of them—at once. People gathered and sat in those obscenely uncomfortable plastic chairs, slowly poisoning themselves with nitrates and chemically flavored meats, waiting for a mother, or a friend, or a paycheck, or the promise of the day's only hot meal.

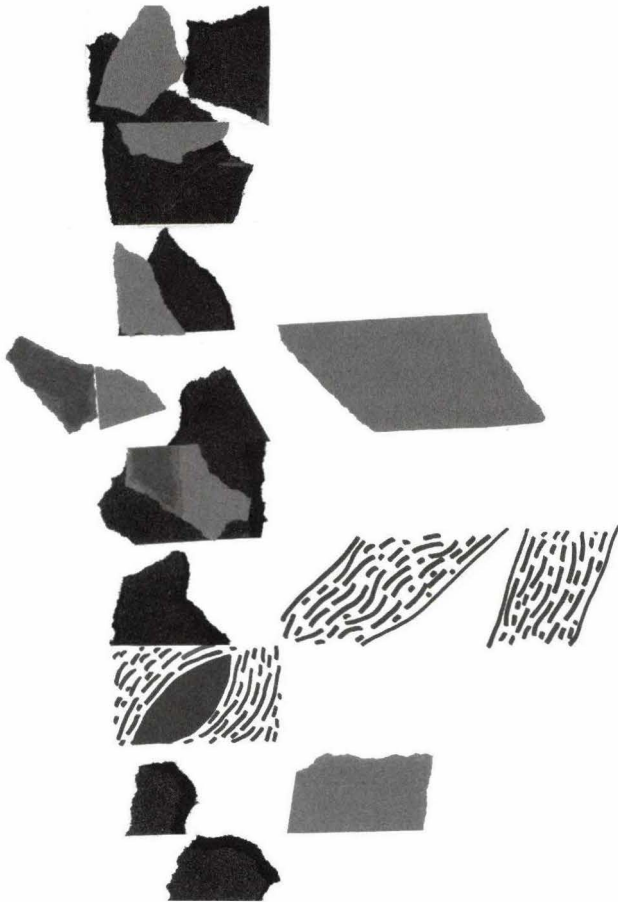
No one mourned the McDonald's closing, but it was missed. And it became a harbinger of other closings and cutbacks. Friends and family of friends lost jobs. And even those who did not lose



anything still understood, without comprehending, the turning that was taking place. It was a rare moment when the course of the world seemed to reveal itself on our streets. History became available as an experience in the here and now through the uncanny alignment of the local and the national, both of which expressed this new course in a negative light, that is to say, as the experience of the way we were being impotently dragged along in its wake, regardless of our own will and power of resistance.<sup>1</sup>



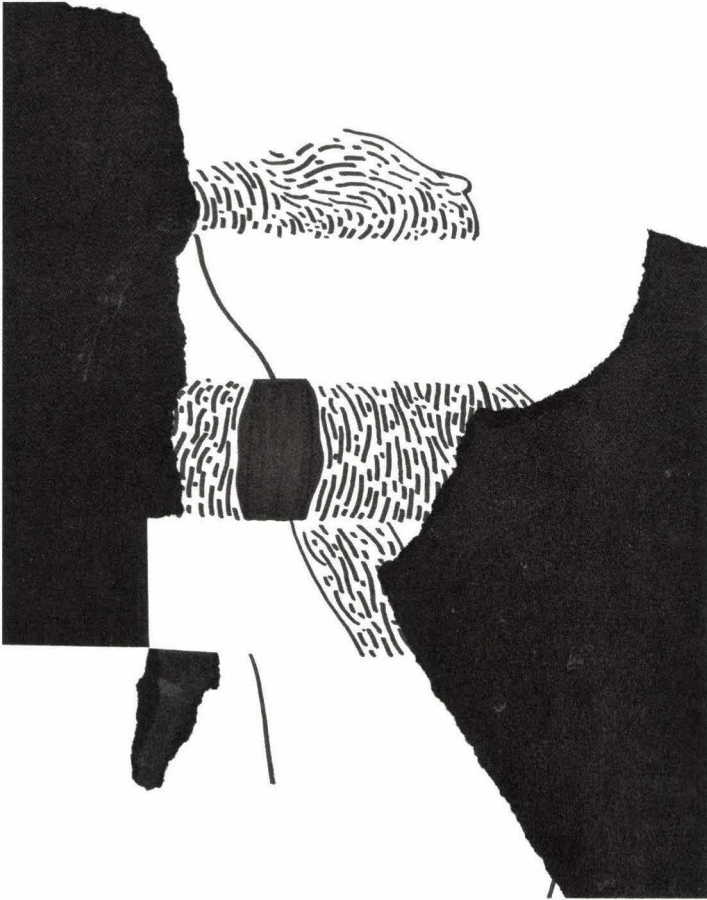
That feeling of forces pushing the course of the world onward like blind and unavoidable fate would not feel so blind and unavoidable if not for the fact that these forces also express themselves through us.<sup>2</sup> They speak in attitudes and forms of thinking that compel, from within, an elective affinity that accepts these forces not only as right but more acutely as natural to the ways of the world. I was not directly affected by the '91 recession. But I still manifested the same tendencies and drives



that made that time so tense. And this was because, in the interest of self-interest, I had to understand the ways in which social conditions were shifting, either to get in or out of their way. Yet the more I understood those conditions, the more I felt like I was being conditioned by them, so that over the course of surviving, I reproduced, rather than resisted, the impulses that were aligned with those forces throwing an entire epoch into a state of petrified unrest. But what are you supposed to do?<sup>3</sup> Self-preservation

is the only game (in any town), because even if you don't play, it doesn't mean you can't get played. The urge to join the game is strong, and not necessarily because everybody wants to win but because nobody has the luxury of losing.

The predatory nature of the social forces that work on us from above, and the individual's instinct that survival through self-interest is the only course available to meet the demands of the day, are two aspects of the same thing that I have been trying to describe in both concrete and abstract ways. This thing, which is hardly a thing, and more like a speculative principle, in fact demands the interdependence of the concrete and abstract to realize itself. In 1991, there was plenty of concreteness to go around. There was, of course, my local McDonald's closing, which was itself the leading edge of a downturn, starting in August 1990, in investment, hiring, sales, and production in the private sector and cuts and freezes in social services like health care and education in the public sector. In other words, a recession.<sup>4</sup> But a recession does not simply appear like a perfect stranger. It has friends and lovers to help it along. In 1991, there were principally two. First, there was the lingering savings and loans scandal, in which members of Congress, including Arizona senator John McCain, received money from lobbyists in exchange for helping investors avoid federal oversight in order to exploit a sleepy sector of the banking market and lend money to themselves with impunity so as to profit from high-risk junk bonds and home loans.<sup>5</sup> The second friend was a war, initiated by President George Bush, against Iraq, to punish Iraq's aggression against its neighbors and bring democratic stability to the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> So a trinity of events in 1991—a banking scandal, a war, and a recession—revealed the course of the world in both abstract and concrete ways, which is to say, above us and through us, at the same time. They revealed that an unforgiving logic was at work that held us in its calculation despite our volition to do otherwise, and that if there was a way out, it was through. That is to say, one had to take the course



and endure it. This speculative form of revelation that unveils the seemingly inevitable course and consequence of a society progressing over time by virtue of an unending conflict that pits itself against its own best—which is to say human—interests, has an illustrious name in the history of ideas. It is called Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

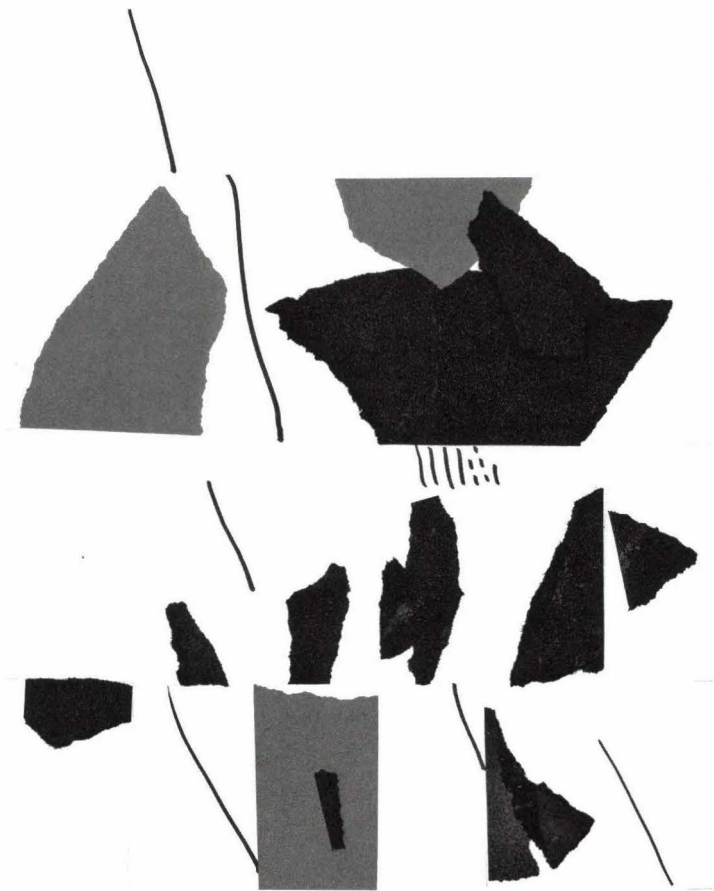
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Mark Twain, whom I consider to be America's greatest philosopher, purportedly said, "History doesn't repeat, but it does rhyme." It seems hardly worth mentioning because it is so terribly obvious: despite the turning of a new century, things have not turned around. We still dance, with three similar beats, the same regressive rhythm: another Iraq war, another banking scandal, another recession. And if it is true that we can discern differences between now and then in how we live, how we communicate with one another, or whom we elect, it is truer still that those differences simply put into sharper relief the lack of freedom we continue to feel over the course of our own lives above and beyond the course of the world. In other words, Spirit continues to subject us to it and to each other under the law of self-preservation. Survival is another name for the dues paid to this antediluvian labor union of the living.<sup>8</sup>

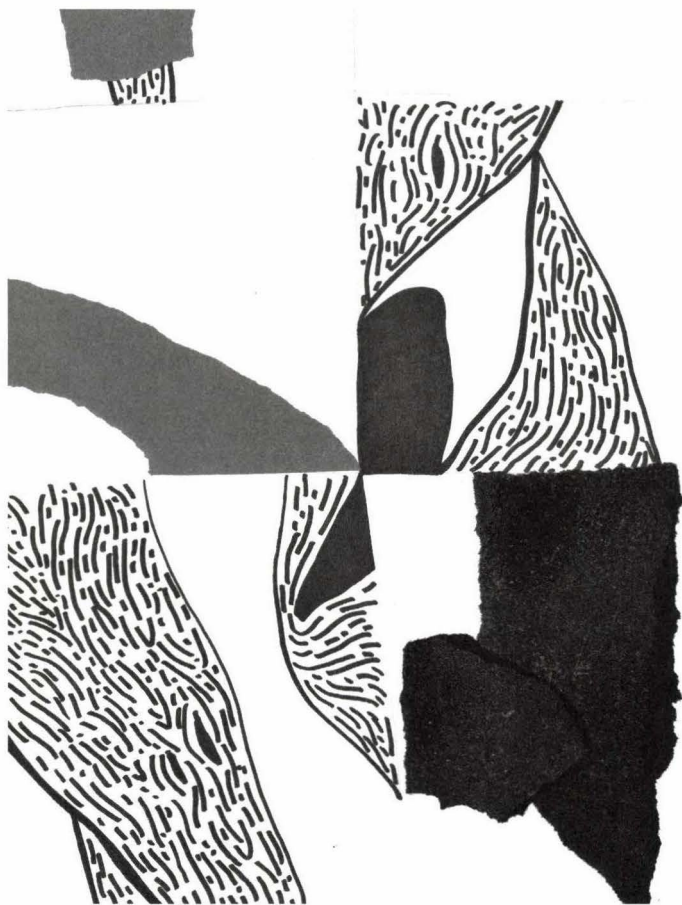
The dues are now higher. The job losses, home foreclosures, and bank collapses that signal the growing recession of 2008 only highlight in spectacular form what has been happening under our feet and in plain sight during the night of the world. In spite of an expanding national and global economy after the 1991 recession, there has not been, as predicted, a corresponding expansion in wages and benefits for the vast majority of those living and working today. According to the Economic Policy Institute, real take home wages in America actually fell last year, and this was during the boom times.<sup>9</sup> In stark economic terms, growth in the economy has been "decoupled" from a shared social prosperity. Rising productivity since 1991 has progressively impoverished the producers, so much so that life is beginning to be decoupled from the living. Two weeks ago, the *Washington Post* reported that for the first time since the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, life expectancy for American women is falling, and is now shorter than it was in the early 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

This is progress as regression.<sup>11</sup> It is no secret and there is no magic. It is merely the image of reality today, where advance-





ments in ways of living coincide with the diminishment of life as we want it to be. This is not the only course imaginable, but what is striking is that it seems to be the only one available. The advent and passing of events both major and minor only confirm, in their transience, the fundamental marching order that directs the relentless pace of survival from above and from within. Over and over again this order states that to see the day through, a ruthless rationality must prevail, and that the more this rationality pre-



vails, the more right and natural it becomes. It becomes natural to sacrifice the lives and livelihoods of others in the name of prosperity, which is another word for progress, which is itself a modern term for the primitive idea of cunning at the service of self-preservation. Sacrifice then becomes as natural to the process of creating value as the sun is to making light.

But this is not natural. It is not even human. It is, in other words, religious. What was once called capitalism has always

harbored a religious dimension. Marx began his critique of the commodity fetish by describing the theological niceties that imbued the commodity with a mystical, transcendent character.<sup>12</sup> Max Weber's classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* brings Marx's insight to America and documents how modern capitalism grew and flourished here in part because specific Protestant faiths, influenced by a Calvinist reading of the New Testament, sought to answer the call of God not through "good works," which are the ethical practices one must follow to lead a religious life, but through the sanctification by works, where profitable labor and the pursuit of economic activity were redescribed as a furtherance of divine glory.<sup>13</sup> Religious values were created for constant and systematic labor in a secular calling and became a noble ascetic path and at the same time the greatest guarantee of proof for the genuineness of faith. For only through a complete transformation of the meaning of one's entire life in every hour and every action, in the course of tireless and purposeful labor, could this sanctification by works be effective in lifting men and women out of a state of nature and into a state of grace.

Weber's insights become essentialized in a fragment written by Walter Benjamin titled "Capitalism as Religion."<sup>14</sup> Benjamin declares that modern capitalism was not merely the secular outgrowth of American Protestantism but is itself a religious phenomenon. God is not dead, as Nietzsche proclaimed, but lives on in the sacrament of exchange relations, where every sale and every purchase is a celebration and where every celebration takes the form of labor. In other words, capitalism is like a holiday work party where the boss refuses to let you leave. Secularization has not separated or freed us from divine authority but has instead retooled it. It left its authority intact and simply moved it from one place to another, displacing a heavenly hierarchy onto an earthly one. So grace becomes redescribed as progress and sacrifice is elevated to a divine right. In our modern



transfiguration, every exchange is an unwitting prayer for the continuance of the economic miracle.<sup>15</sup>

The miracle has ended, but the celebration is never-ending. The image of progress pushing the recovery and sustaining the prosperity of the American economy after September 11 has given way to the reality of an impoverishing downturn in vast sectors of economic and social life. It is a downturn many are a party to, even though very, very few actually participated in, much less

profited from, the brutal and calculating upturn, which caused the about-face in the first place. Since this January, when the Public Art Fund invited me to give this talk and I decided to talk about something I know virtually nothing about, the number of headlines about this current recession has swelled: food rationing due to inflation; job cuts; wage freezes; bank collapses; federal bailouts. And even if these headlines have no direct bearing on your life, surely you can see that they have nevertheless set a new scene for the social imaginary, one characterized by scarcity, anxiety, and fear. It is neither tragedy nor farce. It is a rerun. Or better yet, a painful pop song that won't get out of your head. You may not know all the words, but you can't help but know the tune. That is the nature of Spirit.

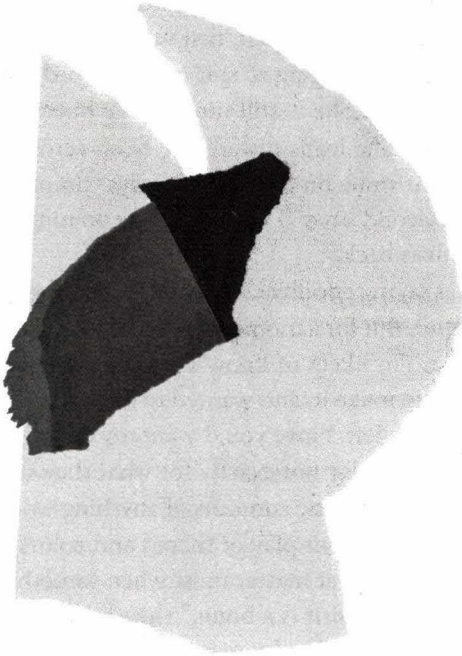
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A recession is more than an economic and social phenomenon that must be endured. It holds within itself a kernel of unreason that promises to release it from the constraints of rationality, so that new possibilities can come about, in its use and meaning.<sup>16</sup> That unreason is its religiosity. For the other definition of recession has to do with the church, namely, the time after the service when the clergy departs and the people who make up the congregation are left to themselves. As the church authorities leave, a hymn is sung. This is called a recessional. And it is here, in the act of leaving and singing, that the idea of a recession gains its transformative potential. For a church without authority is blessed indeed. The end of the service announces the beginning of another kind of time: no more commands for sacrifice and expressions of faith; no more sermons from the book of Progress; no more exchange of prayers. Time holds no more duties and returns to the people a sense of being neither guaranteed nor determined, an inner composition unburdened by the anxiety of influence, and a sense that finds its own shape only when



power recedes. This is the time when thoughts turn away from the authority that captures their attention from above and from within, and toward the radical demands of life after church.

The recessional marks the moment of this turning. It is the emphatic image of time shaped by the invisible currents of something both passing and coming. It acts like a lyrical farewell and charges the entire space with the anticipation of new tidings that only real endings can bring.<sup>17</sup>



Strangely, all this reminds me of a dinner. A year ago, in a restaurant not far from here, I met up with a friend I had not seen for some time. And as we ate, she filled me in on the details of her latest writing project, how her roommate, who also happened to be her ex-boyfriend, is a depressive mess, and this is why she can't work at home, and so on.

I keep eating, and nod, and listen. She begins to tell me about the class she is teaching and the virtues of instilling fear

in students, when she stops mid-sentence. She goes completely still. Her eyes widen. I ask if everything is okay but she doesn't answer. I look at her plate where the fish used to be. I panic. It must be a bone, now stuck in her throat. I don't know what to do, so I do what I know: I yell, first with a gnarly guttural noise, and then finally managing to spit out the word "waiter." I look back at my friend. She is still motionless, but not tense. She is perfectly calm. She leans toward me from across the table and with a singular smile on her face, she says, simply, "I love you." And adds, a second later, "I want my book on nineteenth-century slave narratives back."

She was saying goodbye. She didn't end up going, thanks to a clever waiter. But for a moment that froze in time with as much of eternity as I'm likely to know about, my friend thought she wasn't going to make it, and wanted to say what words mattered most, before she left. I love you. I want my book back. I remember these words today not exactly for what they say but for how they inform the aesthetic contours of anything worth making; in other words, the urgent play of shapes and colors and lines and spaces and sounds that matter most when something is stuck in one's throat. "The spirit is a bone," the philosopher Hegel once declared. I see now what he meant. To find the courage to say the very last words and to make them sing like the recessional to the very last service, this is what I call art. And then to muster the strength to stand firm, not leave, and endure through Spirit, this is what I call the creative act today.

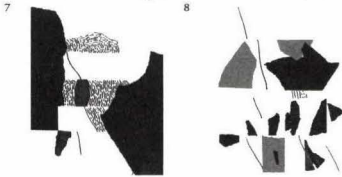
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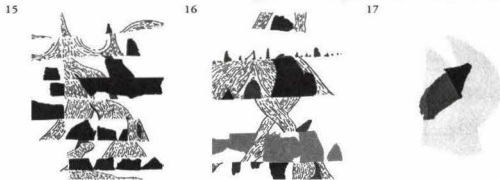
- <sup>4</sup> There are other words for what a recession is. Wikipedia tells us “a recession is a decline in a country’s real gross domestic product (GDP), or a negative real economic growth, for two or more successive quarters of a year. In the US, the judgment of the business-cycle dating committee of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) regarding the exact dating of recessions is generally accepted. The NBER has a more general framework for judging recessions: A recession is a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales. A recession begins just after the economy reaches a peak of activity and ends as the economy reaches its trough. A recession may involve simultaneous declines in coincident measures of overall economic activity such as employment, investment, and corporate profits. Recessions may be associated with falling prices (deflation), or, alternatively, sharply rising prices (inflation) in a process known as stagflation. A severe or long recession is referred to as an economic depression. A devastating breakdown of an economy (essentially, a severe depression, or a hyperinflation, depending on the circumstances) is called economic collapse.”
- <sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the entire savings and loans scandal, see Kathleen Day’s *SeL Hell: The People and the Politics Behind the \$1 Trillion Savings and Loan Scandal* (New York: Norton, 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> There are many books that deal with the 1991 Gulf War. I suggest Kathy Kelly, *Other Lands Have Dreams: From Baghdad to Pekin Prison* (New York and London, AK Press, 2005).



- <sup>9</sup> See the Economic Policy Institute’s Issue Brief #240, *Real Wages Decline in 2007*, by Jared Bernstein, January 16, 2008. <http://www.epi.org/publication/ib240>.
- <sup>10</sup> “Life Expectancy Drops for Some U.S. Women,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/21/AR2008042102406.html>.



- <sup>12</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992).
- <sup>13</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001).
- <sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marco Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), pp. 288–91.



## What Art Is and Where It Belongs

The first piece of art I ever bought was a small painting of a dead DJ. Walking down a street in New York one day, I came across a man selling small- and medium-size portraits of slain hip-hop artists, casually displayed on the sidewalk. They were painted in bright, simple colors. The one that caught my eye was *Tribute to Jam-Master Jay*, which I assumed to be the title because it was written in thick gold paint on the lower left corner of the painting. Months before, Jay, the DJ for the pioneering rap crew Run-D.M.C., was shot and killed inside a recording studio in Queens. In the work he once again stood proudly, wearing the iconic black T-shirt, fedora, and standard-issue gold chain, thick as a boa constrictor. I bought the painting for thirty dollars.

It took me months to figure out where to hang it in my bare apartment. There was plenty of wall space: nothing was up. But no place felt right. One wall was too bumpy and another too water-damaged. The kitchen area looked too cramped and the space next to the worktable was too dark. Jam-Master Jay had nowhere to go. I had no clue as to where the painting could fit. Only much later did I realize why. It had never occurred to me that art belonged in a home.

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Things belong in a home. Tables and radios and stuff you find outside. But art? I have more up now. And the truth is that art exists in countless homes large and small. Art is not diminished by its place in a home. On the contrary, some art glows anew in the presence of other things, like a strange lightbulb that draws energy from the inert matter around it, to radiate from within its essential shape. Not all art does this. But the works that fail to do so are no worse for it. They stand, or lean, or hang with little fanfare, next to the coat rack, or the bookcase, or over the couch,

waiting to be noticed. The constellation of things in a home—including artworks—creates a network of uses and meanings that connects us to a place and grounds us in a sensible reality. Things are things because they help us belong in the world, even though their place in our lives can sometimes dispossess us of the sense of being at home with ourselves.

Art is made of things: paints, paper, video projectors, steel, and so on. The things used in making art ground it in a material reality, without which art would simply be an unrealized wish. Even works that claim to be dematerialized need material support to realize themselves. Performance, for instance, may not see itself as composed of things. But the focus of the work needs a material frame to condense all the elements into an event. The space, the performers, and the props (if any) all work to make performance appear as experience. Art uses things to make its presence felt. But art is not itself a thing.

If art is, in truth, art, it feels as if it is too concrete to be mere appearance but not concrete enough to exist as mere reality. In other words, art is more *and* less than a thing. And it is this simultaneous expression of more-ness and less-ness that makes what is made art.

How is art less than a thing? A thing like a table helps us belong in the world by taking on the essential properties of what we want in a table. It does not matter whether it is made of wood or steel or has one leg or four. As long as it is endowed with purpose, so that a table inhabits its “table-ness” wholly, not only to give us a surface on which to eat or write or have sex but also to substantiate that purpose as the external embodiment of our will. In a sense, a thing is not itself until it contains what we want. Once it becomes whole, a thing helps us differentiate it from all that it is not. A chair may act like a table, enabling us in a pinch to do all the things a table can. But it is only acting. A thing’s use is external to its nature. And what is essential to a table’s nature is that all the parts that make up a table become wholly a table, and not a chair, or a rose, or a book, or anything else.

In art, the parts do not make a whole, and this is how a work of art is less than a thing. Like the perfect crime or a bad dream, it is not apparent at all how the elements come together. Yet they nevertheless do, through composition, sometimes by chance, so that it appears as if it were a thing. But we know better, since it never feels solid or purposeful enough to bear the weight of a real thing. This is not to say that art does not really exist or that it is just an illusion. Art can be touched and held (although people usually prefer you not to). It can be turned on or off. It can be broken. It can be bought and sold. It can feel like any other thing. Yet in experiencing art, it always feels like there is a grave misunderstanding at the heart of what it is, as if it were made with the wrong use in mind, or the wrong tools, or simply the wrong set of assumptions about what it means to exist fully in the world.

This is how art becomes art. For what it expresses most, beyond the intention of the maker, the essence of an idea, an experience, or an existence, is the irreconcilability of what it is and what it wants to be. Art is the expression of an embodiment that never fully expresses itself. It is not for lack of trying. Art, like things, must exist in a material reality to be fully realized. But unlike things, art shapes matter—which gives substance to material reality—without ever dominating it. All matter absorbs the manifold forces that have influenced how it came to be and the uses and values it has accrued—and emanates the presence of this history and its many meanings from within. In a sense, form is just another word for the sedimented content that smolders in all matter. Art is made with sensitivity to and awareness of this content. And the more the making becomes attenuated, the more art binds itself to the way this content already determines the reality of how matter exists in the world. This reality, or nature, is the ground art stands on to actualize its own reality: a second nature. But it is never real enough, since the first nature will never wholly coincide with the second.

What art ends up expressing is the irreconcilable tension that results from making something while intentionally allowing the materials and things that make up that something to change the making in mind. This dialectical process compels art to a greater and greater degree of specificity, until it becomes something radically singular, something neither wholly of the mind that made it nor fully the matter from which it was made. It is here that art incompletes itself, and appears.

The irony is that because it cannot express what it truly wants to be, art becomes something greater and more profound. Its full measure reaches beyond its own composition, touching but never embracing the family of things that art ought to belong to, but does not, because it refuses (or is unable) to become a thing-in-itself. Instead, art takes on a ghostly presence that hovers between appearance and reality. This is what makes art more than a thing. By formalizing the ways in which objective conditions and subject demands inform and change each other over the course of its own making, a work of art expresses both process and instant at once and illuminates their interdependence precisely in their irreconcilability. And it is as a consequence of this inner development that art becomes what it truly is: a tense and dynamic representation of what it takes to determine the course of one's own realization and shape the material reality from which this self-realization emerges. In other words, whatever the content in whatever the form, art is only ever interested in appearing as one thing: freedom.

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The death of art has been declared since at least 1826, when Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote that art would wither away because its role in expressing the universal spirit would be superseded by religion, then by philosophy. In the late 1960s, Theodor W. Adorno began his book *Aesthetic Theory* with the following:

“It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”<sup>1</sup> Philosophers (and philistines) are not the only ones to question art’s reason for being. Artists themselves have attacked it for at least the last hundred years. In the twentieth century, the true vanguard of art was neither a work nor a movement but the death wish for art itself.

Today, it is self-evident that art is not dead. In fact, artistic production has spread into all corners of life. But even though the pronouncements of the end of art turned out not to be true, there is truth in the feeling that something in art has died. Or, at the least, in the sense that the proliferation of art has no bearing on what kind of power or potential it actually holds.

Artists have always taken on the responsibility of reflecting on and manifesting the many facets of life. It is no different today. What is new is the speed and breadth at which life lives now. Increasingly, contemporary life has been dominated by the progress of a socioeconomic globalization that has woven an unprecedented and ever-expanding network of production and exchange between people, territories, and cultures. And what has emerged is a social and sensible reality that values above all else the power of interdependency, as both an ethical substance and a material goal. Contemporary art gives expression to how we welcome, ignore, resist, or try to change the forces that push this reality into and over our lives. The best works do this all at once. This is what art of the moment always tries to do: capture a flash of friction in time and make it burn as bright as the night is long.

But the more an artwork responds to the exigencies of the moment, the more it gets entangled in a process of development that directs it away from its singular way of becoming. The demand to make sense of the contradictions that breed conflicts and mire social progress at every turn should be met: life ought to be more livable for the living. To its credit, contemporary art has sought to connect diverse bodies of knowledge

with aesthetic concepts to conjure a kind of critical thinking in sensuous form. Art of this kind imagines itself primarily as an instrument, to be experienced as something that sharpens reflection and encourages resistance. On the other hand, contemporary art has advanced another kind of engagement, one that mirrors the expanded means of social, cultural, and economic production that has made life the unimaginable entanglement it is today. By using the same technologies and organizing principles employed by industries to increase production, marketing, and exchange, art attempts to give this industriousness a novel face. Here, art functions as the embodiment of an inhuman social process becoming conscious of its own legitimacy as the expression of human progress.

Whether as critique or reflection (or both at once), art in contemporary times has sought out a new relationship with the life it once wanted to transform from within the boundaries of its own making. In the past, the imperative to reimagine the whole of life through art compelled it toward a rich and productive unreasonableness. No matter what forms it took on—whether it was an ever-purer expression of formal spiritualization through excessive austerity or an ever-greater earthly immanence through perverse juxtapositions—art situated itself as the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it and not evidently useful in it. The freedom that art made potential in the development of its own realization gave substance to the idea, especially hard to see in dark times, that we too could create the inner resources necessary to organize ourselves against the general drift of the world, in order to redirect it.

It was in reality a ridiculous idea. But in art, the only ideas worth realizing are the truly untenable ones. This is what is most dispiriting about contemporary art: it no longer represents the shape of untenability. By suppressing social and economic differences and dissolving the space that once separated things, globalization has made everything uniformly near and equal-

ly reasonable. Art, by allying itself with contemporary life, has found its purpose as a cunning system of mediation, capable of pulling into its compartment anything that exists in our social and material reality. Art exerts its power by rationalizing the elements into a vivid relationship and emanates beauty and strength through its semblance of a synthesized whole: art becomes a thing. But this whole, which masquerades as the triumph of the artistic spirit over the disorder of things, is really the affirmation of a deadening totality that stands in for reality. Objective forces manifest themselves in art today as subjective acts without an actual subjectivity, to express the power of inhumanity to define what is most human. In other words, the power of art is not its own: rather, it comes from the will of a greater socio-economic authority, which uses art to ennoble the power it exercises over the global arrangement to which life is increasingly beholden for sustenance.

If art has any insight into life today, it is that we have no other interior than the world. And the relative ease with which the things that make up our reality interconnect and cohere in art without any sense of inner tension or contradiction reflects the momentous pressure exerted by contemporary life to make everything join and work together like the best and worst of contemporary art itself. A numbing peace has been achieved. Art and life would rather belong to the world than be free in it.

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It seems that buying anything today involves giving away more than money. When I bought a fan at a store recently, the clerk not only took my cash but also wanted to know my first, middle, and last name, mailing address, home phone number, cell phone number, e-mail address, birth date, and favorite holiday. Becoming a member of the store means huge discounts and the chance to meet other members at in-store events, the clerk told



me. No thanks, I said. “It pays to belong,” he insisted, as I walked out of the store. Belonging is increasingly part of the nature of transactions. I am not a joiner, and I try to ignore the offers and specials that businesses use as incentives.<sup>2</sup> The carrot is a stick.

Businesses profit from building communities around what they sell, and communities grow by fulfilling the wants of their members, who run them with the expediency of a business. This is the feel of how things work now. And the experience of belonging is inextricably tied to this process, but in a way that blurs the distinction between sharing a commonality and owning a thing. Part of what makes contemporary life contemporary is how they are exchangeable yet unequal. The balance is skewed toward what is yours and what is mine—in other words, it is skewed toward the experience of ownership as the grounding for the expansion of individual connections and the development of our social reality in general. To belong today is to be possessed. In belonging we actualize ourselves by possessing what we want to possess us and find fellow feeling in being around others who own the same properties. And by properties, I mean not only tangible things, like shovels or tangerines, but more important, the immaterial things that give meaning to an inner life, like ideas, desires, or histories.

This is not the only way to belong, but it is the prevailing one. And it is clear enough that it reflects the dominance of exchange relations as the means by which the social world is being constructed and maintained. But what remains obscured is the similarity this dominion bears to a fundamentally religious concept that was made modern by a philosopher at the root of a cast of thinking, which together heralded Western modernity. If Descartes announced the birth of modern existence and a withering away of a notion of being framed by God with *cogito ergo sum*, and Kant established the modern notion of reason unfettered by theological constraints, it was Hegel who synthesized a modern sense of being with the autonomy of reason to produce a social and speculative

philosophy that described how people could find both freedom and belonging (precisely freedom in belonging) in the social world. His work envisioned the coming of a universal union that rivaled the one promised in the “good book” if only we lived under God.

Reconciliation is the concept Hegel used to frame how belonging works, and it forms the beating heart of his thinking. Socially, it is a process that overcomes the sense of alienation that divides us from ourselves and from all the things that exist beyond the boundary of our own skin. In his approach to reconciliation, it is closely related to dialectics, the essential idea that drives Hegel’s entire philosophical system. Dialectics set forth the way in which opposites or contradictions that abound in the world can be resolved and transformed into a higher state of articulation without losing the differences that defined the separation in the first place. This higher state finds its most realized form in reconciliation, which Hegel described as the feeling of being at home in the world. It is what he means by freedom.

Like many of Hegel’s key terms, reconciliation is a secularization of a theological concept. In Christianity, it means the advent of a new and vital peace between God and humanity inaugurated by the life and death of Christ. God was made flesh in Christ, and his sacrifice restored the original relationship God enjoyed with men and women before Adam and Eve committed original sin and condemned humanity thereafter to a fallen state.

This is far from the reconciliation Hegel had in mind for modern men and women, who he believed could no longer count on God to bring heaven to earth. But the seeds Hegel used to construct his philosophy for a more perfect union in an emerging modernity were already sown in Christian doctrine. Consider, for example, a commentary on the Psalms by Saint Augustine:

Men were held captive under the devil and served the demons, but they were redeemed from captivity. They could sell, but could not redeem them-

selves. The redeemer came, and gave the price; He poured forth his blood and bought the whole world. Do you ask what he bought? See what He gave, and find out what he bought. The blood of Christ is the price. How much is it worth? What but the whole world? What but all nations?<sup>3</sup>

The language of salvation was already steeped in the figures of property exchange. From Saint Paul to Martin Luther, reconciliation was represented as the payment of a price, or a ransom, or as the sacrifice made for the forgiveness of a debt.

Hegel discarded the blood of Christ but kept the dialect of commerce to think through how a new reconciliation could be achieved without the intervention of holy ghosts or angels. His philosophical system amounted to a complete rethinking of how the world was created and how it would develop. He imagined that the animating force that turned the world was an inner necessity that emanated from all things and which finds its fullest expression in a humanity that constantly and rationally strove for greater independence from the constraints of objective reality and, at the same time, sought a grander integration within that reality. For Hegel, Spirit was an unending process and God an unyielding reason.

This is Hegel at his most modern. He placed his faith in the development of reason as the binding force that could actualize the unification between the innumerable particularities that make up individual lives and the general shape of the social world. But his modernity does not feel so decidedly modern in light of how property relations, which Christian doctrine used to spell out humanity's relationship with God (and Satan), return in Hegel as the anchor point for how we ultimately find reconciliation. By possessing property, Hegel claimed, we externalize our will through what we own and manifest an outer existence that grants us the rights and recognitions of being a member of

a social order. In possessing property, one becomes individualized and socialized at the same time. Whereas in Christianity it was Christ who bought humanity out of the bondage of sin and into salvation, Hegel imagined that the power of reason had the potential to buy men and women out of alienation and into reconciliation with the world.

Hegel died in 1831. By 1844, Marx had absorbed enough of Hegel's philosophy to begin dismantling it. His critique of private property as the power the *ancien régime* wielded over people transformed ownership into a form of dispossession and turned Hegel upside down. The beginning of Marxism was, among other things, a repudiation of Hegel's worldview and the establishment of a competing philosophy that would lay the groundwork for building another kind of worldly union. And if the Marxian vision has fallen into disrepute today, Hegel's vision has not fared much better. History cannot claim to be moving forward with more reason and less irrationality with every passing day. There is no absolute spirit compelling humanity toward an understanding of itself as the ideal embodiment of a universal rationality. The only disciples of Hegel left seem to be psychoanalysts from Ljubljana.

Yet if Hegel's aim was widely off the mark, somehow it remains true. His philosophical interpretation of how the social world works is more relevant today than the various philosophies and theories that sought to change it. Property relations continue to hold sway over how men and women individualize and socialize themselves in the world. A semblance of reconciliation is found, even if nothing feels terribly reconciled. And what Hegel foresaw as the power of reason pushing forward the development of an ever-expanding interdependency is eerily prescient.

Globalization, as the rationalizing structure underlying our social and material world, has created what I call a state of belonging. This state has largely replaced the three institutional forms Hegel thought would, in concert, provide the ways and means for people to actualize themselves in a modern world:

the family, the civil society, and the nation-state. Although all three still exist, they are no longer grounded in the histories and experiences that once gave them substance. Conflicts that have flared around what constitutes a family and the vocal and sometimes violent disputes about national identity and immigration are symptomatic of the ways people are reacting to the state of belonging as it uproots and transforms familial, civil, and national forms of belonging into properties that can be exchanged and possessed like any other thing. What's more, the idea itself of community has been purged of any social bearing and redescribed as an empty and abstract network of disembodied interests that merely reflects the dominance of consumer sovereignty over actual freedom in determining the inner and outer shape of one's life.

That there are innumerable communities online and off for nearly every worldly difference is the most concrete expression of this state of belonging. But the innovations that have produced ever-new forms of belonging have not ushered in a new era of commonality and mutual understanding. Instead, they have created a progressively stratified sense of being in the world. For what is affirmed through community in the age of globalism is that the essential nature of belonging is defined not by the relationships established and maintained by actual living people but by the connections made through the things that people possess, or do not possess, or want to possess, inside and out.

It seemed sensible enough for Hegel to imagine that reconciliation is the state of being at home in the world. But perhaps what he did not see coming was that the home being erected in the image of the world only had room for things to fit inside it.

This, I feel, is part of the curious string of associations I had when I first intuited that art does not belong in a home, namely, because art is not a thing. This is a pretty unworldly belief, situated somewhere between the existence of unicorns and the coming socialist revolution. There is no real way to substantiate

it, and in fact the opposite case is clearly the reality today. Art is found not only in homes and the usual places where we expect it to be, like galleries, nonprofit spaces, museums, corporate lobbies, and such. Art has appeared on the sides of buildings, on abandoned grounds, in the sky, in makeshift kitchens, on river barges, at demonstrations, in magazines, on human skin, as souvenirs, and through speakers and screens of every imaginable shape and size. Art belongs here.

This should be welcome news, especially for artists.

Still.

This only brings to mind Groucho Marx, who once said: "I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member." If art is made to belong, it seems to me that it is the poorer for it. This is especially the case when art is made to belong to art itself. Echo reconciles. By forsaking the freedom realized in its own inner development, art affirms the illusionary reconciliation brought on by the state of belonging, when in truth it holds the greater potential of expressing, in a kind of nonjudging judgment, just how unfree this belonging really is.

Art is, and has been, many things. For art to become art now, it must feel perfectly at home, nowhere.

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- <sup>1</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Sometimes I humor the cashier by filling out the membership form with Dick Cheney's name and his last known home address in Virginia.
- <sup>3</sup> See Augustine on the Psalms. [carm.org/augustine-on-psalms-93-98](http://carm.org/augustine-on-psalms-93-98).



# Miracles, Forces, Attractions, Reconsidered

## I.

“Miracles” is the title of a 2010 song by Insane Clown Posse (ICP), an American horror-metal hip-hop group. For over a decade now, Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, the duo that make up ICP, have produced a steady stream of middling rap songs that glorify violence (1999’s “I stab people” and the 2000 follow-up “Still stabbin”), adolescent sexuality (“I stuck her with my wang” in 1994), and horror-film grotesqueries (“Carnival of carnage” in 1992 and the classic “Amy’s in the attic” in 1994). They wear clown makeup onstage and in photos. Think Bruce Nauman’s *Clown Torture*, 1987, performing in George Romero movies to a 4/4 beat and you’re close.

“Miracles” has been a huge hit for ICP, despite the fact that it expresses none of the usual lyrical theatrics the group is known for. There are no dead bodies. No bitches. No one gets stabbed. “Miracles” is in truth a thoroughly religious song. A sample:

Take a look at this fine creation  
And enjoy it better with appreciation  
Crows, ghosts, the midnight coast  
The wonders of the world, mysteries the most

The song goes on to list more things ICP is thankful for: kids, rainbows, pelicans, and so on. It is a pop prayer for the glory of creation and by extension, the power of the creator that makes everyday miracles possible. ICP seems to have found God, or at the least, found praising God good for business. This is a typical shift for entertainers in the pop industry, especially in America, where the entanglement of religion, profit, and power is a venerable tradition.



For ICP, everyday things are miracles by their sheer existence. But the most miraculous things are those that exert a special influence over the course of our lives. Music, for instance:

And music is magic, pure and clean  
You can feel it and hear it, but it can't be seen

Music exemplifies what is most miraculous because it pushes and pulls us without physically existing. It acts like an invisible force: magical, otherworldly, and seemingly beyond any human calculus. For that matter, so do magnets.

Water, fire, air, and dirt  
Fucking magnets, how do they work?  
And I don't wanna talk to a scientist  
Y'all motherfuckers lying, getting me pissed

In "A Warning against Vain and Worldly Learning" (1418), Thomas a Kempis takes a similar position. He writes, imitating the voice of Christ, "He whom I teach will swiftly gain wisdom and advance far in the life of the spirit. But those who seek curious knowledge from men, and care nothing for my service, will discover only sorrow."<sup>1</sup> For Kempis, empirical knowledge sullies the divine and diminishes the glory of God, which weakens God's influence over humanity. Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope feel the same way about the mystery of miracles. Like the power of magnets.

2.

The relationship between magnets, the miraculous or divine, and the influence they exert over people's lives, appears in one of Plato's early dialogues. In *Ion*, Socrates engages with an eponymous performer who greatly admires Homer. In fact, Ion recites

Homer's works only when performing and claims that he is the only poet who matters in the ancient world. Socrates listens to Ion and speculates on the nature of his poetic inspiration: "What moves you is a divine power, like the power in the stone which Euripides dubbed the 'Magnesian,' but which most people call the 'Heracleian.' This stone, you see, not only attracts iron rings on their own, but also confers them a power by which they can in turn reproduce exactly the effect which the stone has, so as to attract other rings."<sup>2</sup>

Socrates believes Ion is attracted to Homer in the same way a Heracleian stone (what is now called a ferromagnet) attracts iron rings. And once "magnetized" by Homer, Ion also possesses a similar—although weaker—power to attract others through his work. Inspiration, according to Socrates, acts like the invisible force magnets display in the natural world. But the force itself is not natural. It is divine: "[these] fine poems are not on the human level nor the work of humankind, but divine, and the works of gods, whereas the poets are nothing but the god's interpreters, each possessed by his own possessing god."<sup>3</sup>

Socrates goes on to claim that poets have no skills or volition at all and function merely as vessels for messages from gods. Inspiration is really an elevated form of incapacitation. But that is the price poets must pay, according to Socrates, in order to create works that radiate the magnetism necessary to attract attention and adoration.

3.

A painter friend and I once argued over whether art can be alive. She makes works that hold different traditions of painterly abstraction in suspended animation. Outlines of shapes that echo a shoe Guston might have drawn float in a rich wash of olive green and brown ochre, like an unfinished corner of a Josh Smith. And so on. She believes that by bringing these elements

in proximity and in conflict on canvas, a reaction takes place—materially as well as conceptually—that is almost alchemic, generating new forms of life.

As much as I respect her work, I disagreed. I replied that her paintings couldn't be alive because paintings cannot truly die. They can be destroyed, or abandoned, even eaten, but paintings cannot shed their mortal coil because they cannot experience mortality. And besides (I added), to imagine the work as being alive is essentially saying that a thing is a being. And if that is the case, what is to stop one from reversing the spell of the magical thinking and treating a person as a mere object? A slippery slope.

What I said wasn't wrong, but I've come to realize it wasn't right, either. Or rather, that fight years ago did not really have anything to do with whether art is capable of being alive. My friend knows the difference between a living being and an inanimate thing. She is not an artistic animist. But I think what she was advocating was the potential of art to work like a magnet, where it pulls elements from the empirical world toward itself in such a way that its composition suspends their typical configuration and enables their reordering to generate new forces of attraction. Her view that works can live seems to me now as another way of describing the inexplicable and invisible power some works possess, drawing us closer, holding our attention, as if they were alive and beckoning us to feel the mystery of their own making. It is less a matter of producing inorganic life and more in line with imagining a materialist *élan vital*.

4.

But a work is more than an attraction. Art's power has as much to do with how it keeps the world at arm's length as how it pulls it closer. By repelling the advances of those who want nothing more than to make art embraceable, relational, and understandable, art gains a semblance of autonomy and acquires the power

to evoke in the person experiencing the work—however fleetingly—those moments in one’s life when actual freedom was tasted and felt. And by insisting on the return of the unresolved conflicts of reality as immanent considerations of form, art severs the chain of thinking that binds its import to an aesthetic tradition that pictures the image of wholeness and cohesiveness as the expression of holiness and reconciliation. When art refracts its inner elements into an order of irreconcilabilities, art’s essential polarity changes from something that strives to attract to something that can’t help but repulse. This aura of repulsion enables art to levitate above its own grounding.

5.

Diamagnetism is the property that an object acquires when an external magnetic field close by causes it to generate an opposing magnetic force to resist that field’s pull. In recent experiments, scientists succeeded in levitating drops of water, a hazelnut, and live frogs by using the natural diamagnetic properties inherent in all matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Inner Life*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Early Socratic Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, p. 56.



# The Unthinkable Community

In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two men wait by the side of a country road for a man who never comes. If done right, that is to say, if done with humor, fortitude, and a whiff of desperation, the play remains as contemporary, funny, precise, courageous, and unknowable as I imagine it was back in 1952, when it premiered in Paris.

When I worked with others to stage *Godot* in New Orleans in 2007, we took many liberties to make it succeed at that place and that moment in time. We set the entire play in the middle of an intersection for one set of performances and in front of an abandoned house for another. The actors let the musical cadence of New Orleanian speech seep into the dialogue. We used trash that was left on the streets as props. But there was one thing I wanted to do but decided against. I wanted Vladimir and Estragon, the two main characters, to wait for Godot with people loitering around them. So the country road that was supposed to be empty would teem with strangers walking by, sitting on the grass, or wandering aimlessly while talking on their phones, all ignoring the plight of these two homeless and luckless tramps. I think it would have worked. And this is because in 1952, being alone literally meant not having anybody near. But today, one can be surrounded by, and be in contact with, anyone and everyone, and still feel inexplicably abandoned.

## Communication ≠ Connection

One of the great mysteries of our time, besides the reason the United States is still in Iraq after seven years, the magical thinking that enabled banks around the world to sell bad debts as good investments, and the enduring significance of Jeff Koons, is how the ever-expanding methods we use to communicate with one another—from cell phones to SMS, from e-mail to

Twitter, from Facebook to Foursquare—are alienating us from others and ourselves.

There is no doubt that advances in technology have fundamentally transformed the nature and reach of communication in social life. These advances have also generated new forms of economic empowerment, cultural exchange, and ultimately new modes of living. Making connections is a serious business. And this business is, in turn, transforming the way such connections shape one's sense of self.

The desire to communicate, to conjure in speech or sound or image or movement an inner experience that expresses what we want or who we are (or whom we want and what we are) is being repurposed to serve a need beyond the will to convey and understand. Telecommunication and technology industries have capitalized on the demand for communication by producing ever more robust and specialized platforms for making connections. But this is not necessarily so that we communicate and understand one another more, but rather so that there is simply more speech-material to gather, transmit, quantify, and capitalize. In other words, communication is being industrialized. In the economic scheme of things, forms of expression are now a natural resource, to be tapped and exploited for profit, like oil. And a productive life is today inextricably linked to generating more and more speech for others to hear, see, and read. To live fully in the present means to be in constant communication: the self as a network. *Communicatio ergo sum.*

But having more social contacts has not made for stronger social bonds. All the texting and friending may expand the number of people in one's life, but the links do not deepen the quality of the arrangements. Common interests bring people together. But what keeps them together is neither common nor easy. It takes an evolving awareness of the differences that naturally develop between two individuals and a commitment to allow those differences to take root, so that common connections grow

into singular bonds. The open secret to this process is time, the only dimension capable of registering the moments and ruptures that define the growth of an individual abiding an unbridgeable difference to become one for the other.

Time deepens connections, whereas technology economizes communication. This is why, despite the growing number of ways for people to be seen and heard, teletechnologies have paradoxically made it harder for people to comprehend one another. What matters in communication—understanding, relationality, interchange—has somehow gotten lost in the transmission. Cell phones, wireless devices, and the proliferation of social media online have revolutionized the ways in which we communicate and at the same time compressed what we say and type to such a degree that intelligibility is sacrificed for the sake of reach, ubiquity, and consumption.

Just as a language compels certain ways of describing the world that is naturally sympathetic to the worldview where that language originates, the kind of connections made over these ever newer and farther-reaching communicative forms carries an instrumentalized quality, as if all the different ways in which we make contact with one another only confirm that the only thing worth talking about is business. Even play. The messages transmitted and relayed begin to feel optimized solely to get things done, grab some attention, or build an audience. Communication becomes synonymous with advertising. It is advertising: expressions expressing nothing other than the desire to peddle influence and promote \_\_\_\_\_.

As we experience communication in this way, something curious happens to time. Rather than strengthen connections, communication over the course of time actually weakens them. Instead of being the essential element that potentiates more durable social bonds, time works as a force of entropy. It is as if the longer a line of communication is open, the more inauthentic and weak the connection becomes.



A voice that desires a reply sounds different from an echo that wants attention. If the connection between two people merely creates an echo chamber, each resounding the other's need to be seen and heard, the quality of the connection would likely deteriorate over time, since there is no singular presence on either end to engage with or listen to. Perhaps this is some kind of law of social physics at work: the strength of the connection being proportional to the amount of friction and difference that connection can bear. Or it is simply that the kind of communication trafficking back and forth does not merit the focus and care that genuine communication demands and dies off as quickly as it materializes, which in turn calls out for even more communication to be generated to compensate for the loss. Or maybe this is merely what being contemporary means: the inner experience of being relentlessly present for all but accountable to none and tethered to nothing by the industrial powers that network the rest.

### A Short History of The Front

As a part of the *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* project, I spent the fall of 2007 living in the city and teaching at two universities: University of New Orleans (UNO) and Xavier. Both schools had lost teachers because of Hurricane Katrina. So I made them a deal. I would teach whatever classes they wanted in their respective departments and forgo pay as long as these classes were open to all artists in New Orleans. I also requested that the classes be cross-listed so students from other colleges and universities could attend them as well. At Xavier, I taught a Thursday afternoon class called Art Practicum, where I worked with students on their portfolios for graduate school applications, helped them write resumes, and lectured on how critiques work. At UNO, I taught a Tuesday evening contemporary art history seminar. Every week, I lectured on an artist and his or her work.

On the last day of the art history seminar, I skipped the planned lecture (on outsider artist Henry Darger) and instead talked about art and organizing. The *Godot* performances (there were five in all on two consecutive weekends in early November 2007) had happened two weeks earlier. And while the experience was fresh on their minds, I wanted to talk about the different processes and ideas that went into the organizing. The lecture was freewheeling and associative. I talked about Beckett's history of working with prisoners to stage his work, my own experiences as an organizer, first in labor politics in Chicago in the 1990s and then with the antiglobalization movement in the early 2000s. I discussed the art of negotiating and the politics of being obstinate. I covered a brief history of artist communities and collectives and ended the seminar with a conversation with New Orleanian artist and visionary architect Robert Tannen.

After that last class, some of my students, a motley crew of MFA students from various schools, art teachers, and artists unaffiliated with any institution, decided to organize into some kind of collective. Rather than wait for *Godot*, or any other project to bring them back together, they wanted to build their own reason for sharing and showing work, for themselves and others in the neighborhoods where *Godot* played. They wanted a community of their own.

By organizing themselves, they were already working in a tradition of contemporary visual arts in New Orleans. At least since 2000, artists in the city have been moving into the Upper and Lower Ninth Wards and the Bywater neighborhood to start galleries, build studios, and make a place for their friends and their work. Around 2000, KK projects, a contemporary art space and nonprofit arts foundation, started on North Villerie Street in the Eighth Ward. Sometime in 2002, L'Art Noir (billing itself as "the premiere low-brow art gallery in New Orleans") began doing shows in the Upper Ninth Ward on Mazant Street. In 2004, artists Kyle Bravo and Jenny LeBlanc set up Hot Iron Press, a

small contemporary art and poster printing shop, in the Bywater. Artist groups and community spaces continued to open even after Katrina: Barrister's gallery, Farrington Smith gallery, and Antenna gallery in the Bywater, L9 arts center in the Lower Ninth Ward, The Porch in the Seventh Ward, Good Children artist collective and space on St. Claude Avenue.

Kyle and Jenny were among those who attended my seminars and decided to get together with others to create an artist collective that eventually became known as The Front. Starting in December 2007, and for the next eleven months, they gathered their resources and gut-renovated a building on the corner of St. Claude Avenue and Mazant Street. On November 1, 2008, The Front had its first group-show opening. It has gone on to mount a show every month since, with readings, screenings, and performances along the way. This essay, which was written at the invitation of the collective, will serve as the introductory essay for The Front's first self-published catalog, a book that will celebrate and remember in words and images its brief and incandescent history.

## Community

To want something new is a way to remember what is worth renewing. The Front's presence not only renews the history of New Orleans visual arts for a new generation, it also connects it with the venerable tradition of artist collectives that have sought, and continue to seek, what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has coined a *compearance*: the public appearance of a group of individuals working together that makes visible for the first time their "co-appearance," or "compearance." In order to compear, all the members of the group play a part in building a composition that, over time and through mutual cooperation, becomes substantial enough to stand in for the members as a whole, like a figure that represents others to be counted. The figure that compears is what one calls community.

In a sense, community can only be recognized against a background from which it differentiates itself: a figure needs a ground to stand against. In the case of The Front, that ground is post-Katrina New Orleans. The devastation the hurricane left behind and the subsequent negligence by local, state, and federal officials painted a bleak picture of a society abandoned and people left to fend for themselves. The emergence of The Front and other groups in the city (artistic, political, religious, civil) is a testament to the will of the people to self-organize against the drift of a natural disaster slowly turning into a societal tragedy precipitated by political inertia, poverty, and racism. What matters here is not how directly these groups confront or try to bring about an end to the wrongs, although this is a vital concern. Rather, it is significant enough that they chose to risk disturbing the seemingly entropic drift of things by organizing themselves against the current.

Like clockwork, epochs turn and return with the tumultuous cycles that produce economic bounty and human misery in equal measure. For the collective, the figure of community holds the potential for saying and doing it all differently. So what ultimately distinguishes community from society is the difference between imagining reality can be transformed and realizing that it can only be managed. Politics is in essence a form of groundskeeping. To rise above the ground and stand with the strength of common purpose gives the communal figure a definitive shape and enables the collective to remake the existing politics to serve a future life where substantive relations are the rule rather than the exception. The compearance of a real community expresses what actual society ought to be.

In self-organizing, members strive to create a living model of genuine social difference. This is the utopian aspect of any collective enterprise that is truly collective rather than merely managerial or commercial. This is also how collectives like The Front echo, however distantly, utopian projects of the past. For in a sense, the golden age, where communication is unfettered

and relations are substantial, is never in the here and now but always behind us. It is the past that provides the myths and models for how an ordinary and unbreakable bond between people once existed in the world: from the natural family to the Athenian academy, from the Roman republic to the first Christian communities, from the Paris Commune to May '68. Every collective reimagines for itself (knowingly or not) the lost or unfinished work of the past as theirs to complete, in order to lay the groundwork for a community to come. And what matters most is a collective vision, or better yet a consensual blindness, that allows the collective to recognize, perhaps for the first time, that nothing is settled, that everything can still be altered, that what was done but turned out badly can be done again.

There are no axioms one can apply to the human calculus that makes the emergence of social relations any more predictable or transparent. No amount of good will or careful planning can guarantee the outcome of a collective's work. It can always fail, or turn bad. Or worse. I am sure you have witnessed examples of collectives, no matter how well intentioned or experienced, endeavoring toward a figure of community only to see their work fall apart because of internal divisions, irreconcilable differences, or inertia. Or, on the other hand, collectives that mindfully spiraled out of control, to a point where the community they attained became a monstrous testament to the human capacity to be inhuman.

Still, the desire for substantive relations persists. The connections people make that grow into ties that bind remain the most meaningful way for individuals to partake in the tremendous waste that is time's passing, and the moments that erupt in time from simply being together, which makes the passing not so wasteful after all. But these bonds also enable something else to be shared: the strange sense of incompleteness at the core of one's self. For what makes an individual singular (as opposed to merely different) has nothing to do with personal qualities or

senses of style. The singularity comes from the unique shape of what has yet to take place, lodged in the heart of the figure of a self, that makes space for what is to come, and what has yet to be done, in order fully to be.

This empty center, formed inside the cast of historical and existential experiences that has settled and hardened into the likeness of an identity, is neither seen nor heard but felt like cold wind against the skin. This void from within emanates the spectral presence of the unfinished, the half formed, and the unimagined as a reminder of just how far one is from being complete and wholly self-sufficient. And it is only through social bonds that this essential incompleteness becomes exposed as the secret all singular beings share and must stubbornly hold onto in order to remain uniquely and fully present in the world. The sentiment evoked in lines like “you complete me” or “I’m nothing without you,” sung in curiously robotic R&B ballads by the likes of Keyshia Cole and R. Kelly, has ontological truth. They express the tremendous burden of one’s singularity, of being utterly incomplete. By loving, or struggling, or some other kind of intense engagement, one has the chance to ease the burden by forging a bond deep enough to fill the singular void and feel a semblance of inner completeness.

Community, then, is what happens when we complete us. Through purpose, members of the collective come together and merge with the work they have agreed to accomplish as one. And the more the collective realizes what it has set out to do, the more the members internalize the work as a greater living embodiment of themselves. It is this communal fusion that powers the collective. It is also what makes the experience so intense. It is in fact the intensity that makes it fulfilling. From the smallest collaboration to the grandest nation-state, the concentrated pursuit of a common cause is what draws individuals into being members, and members into becoming a more perfect union, of and through themselves.

In essence, what is at stake is the notion that one is only an individual in this larger life. This does not mean that somehow the experiences of living outside the bounds of collective striving are of a lesser quality or less authentic, only that it is a life not wholly determined by one's own design. Contingencies make a mockery of one's sense of control and shape the course of a life as much as volition. What a collective offers, then, is shelter us from the heteronomous forces that get in the way of actualizing our fuller selves. An individual, through membership and community, takes on a determinate individuality, shaped by a general will and motivated to act in harmony with a common purpose that, in being realized, becomes the external manifestation of one's own inner nature. A community concretely realized is tantamount to an individual life finally fulfilled.

But if this individuation depends on the figure of community to take shape, it becomes necessary for both the individual members and the collective as a whole to employ social, political, and psychic processes that serve the common purpose by preserving and defending the well-being of the whole over the welfare of the parts. This emphasis, in turn, compels members to come together in such a way that commitment becomes a matter of surrender and surrender a radical form of commitment: the more common the bond, the greater the whole. And the essential incompleteness that differentiates one from the other in the first place, which holds no direct use or value for the coming community, becomes redefined as an inner contingency that must be fixed, or a sin to be banished, or a tendency to correct, or a hole to fill.

But a life is more than the sum of its intentions and wants. The whole of our inner experience cannot be willed into existence or worked into a plan. The richness of one's ever-evolving subjectivity depends not only on the mental stuff that furnishes conscious life. It also relies on what is unreasoned, or undreamed, or unrealized—in other words, all the latent memories, experi-

ences, neuroses, and desires that silently haunt the entire conscious conceptual edifice of an active mind. Unthinking shadows every thought. It is the force that embeds in every act of expression an imprint that authenticates a singular presence. It is the siren song that draws us toward the empty center of our own unique and purposeless singularity. And it is this curious music that one cannot help but play that the community tries to silence, on behalf of our greater self, in the guise of a common will.

Lovers. Criminals. Artists?

For better and for worse, the notion of a common will shaping people's lives feels as contemporary as a rotary telephone. No one likes being told what to do, like some commoner. The power of consumer sovereignty is today largely the force one exercises to become individualized and socialized. And this is reflected in the explosive growth of online social networks, where communication and sharing blur with data collection and advertising to create and sustain connections that brook no distinction between telling someone something and selling something to someone. What is in effect a point of contact is in truth a channel of distribution, for individuals to pick and choose goods, services, friends, all the parts that suit one's inner and outer needs. The network is a community as a marketplace.

As such, the contemporary community has an even, temperate quality, like a pleasantly air-conditioned showroom. Differences between members may spark friction, but rarely do they produce heat or, for that matter, the kind of social combustion that generates enough intensity to potentiate inner change, the kind collectives empowered by a common purpose demand of their members before any figure of community can emerge. The process of determining one's inner worth by establishing a greater social identity through collective striving no longer holds purchasing power for anyone invested in living in the present



tense. The individual today is made off the shelf and over the counter. In the vernacular of contemporary community, change is exchange.

Is this why the most intense (and potentially, if not actually, dangerous) collectives that appear today tend to have an anachronistic quality about them? From Islamic and Christian fundamentalist groups (religion), to the Tea Party movement (nationalism) to The Invisible Committee (Anarcho-Marxism), it is as if the lives sacrificed during the course of globalization returned as vengeful specters dressed in the garbs of crumbling empires and fading ideologies, to haunt and disrupt the march of progress on the contemporary stage. And as wildly divergent as their political purposes are, what they hold in common is the wholesale rejection of the contemporary community globalization has created, a commitment to building another community grounded in the ecstasy of communal fusion, and a dedication to renewing the social contract that once made the emergence of an individual contingent upon the actualization of a self-made community.

Perhaps to those for whom time is out of joint, this can only be so. "The past is never dead," William Faulkner wrote. "It's not even past." Against the backdrop of the contemporary, these movements want community as it was once envisioned: a crucible through which a more purposeful and accountable individualism can be forged. But religious zealots, homophobic and racist anti-statist nationalists, and neo-Marxian activists are not the only ones who want this.

For Georges Bataille, erotic love was the key to creating a community intense enough to generate communal fusion without sacrificing the singularity of the members. Bataille, who experimented with establishing different kinds of communities and philosophized about them in the 1930s, believed that a substantive existence determined by touch and forms of communication concentrated on expressing the power of libidinous

contact was the only authentic way of countering the modernist tendency of reducing living beings into “servile organs” for state and society. Bataille also thought the community of lovers was a kind of resistance—however small and ultimately hermetic—against two movements gaining political ground in Europe at the time: Stalinist communism and Fascism. For Bataille, the ecstasy of erotic love immunized the lovers against political madness.

The Marquis de Sade, on the other hand, infamously declared lawlessness the common purpose of his imagined community. In his novel *Juliette*, Sade founded the Society of the Friends of Crime. Made up of libertines of various class and social distinctions, they conspired to become lords of debauchery against an already corrupt state ruled by a religious and aristocratic powers. Crime, for Sade, was both a political expression and a philosophical embodiment. In crime, law is rendered ridiculous and shown for what it is: a capricious rule established by existing forms of authority to maintain power and control. By committing crime, members of the Society use the cunning of reason to make a mockery of authority. Sade though, is not satisfied. If reason can be employed to destroy the laws of man, can crimes be committed to break the laws of nature? In *Juliette*, characters wonder aloud what it would take to snuff out the sun, paradoxically in order to fully reconcile themselves with Nature and her implacable spirit of destruction.

Lovers. Criminals. Artists? At its core, The Front is a communitarian experiment. Like erotic love for Bataille and crime for Sade, The Front is trying to establish a community using an utterly precarious material. Twelve artists living in the aftermath of a city that went under decided to try their hand at building some shelter for what they want to make and see. In an urban landscape that to this day lacks basic civil amenities, they wanted art. This is the work. Simple enough. But what drives this work, and what forms the heart of a collective like The Front, is neither simple nor ever enough of anything to inform anyone in

particular. For what makes art art is precisely how it embodies an uncommon purposelessness.

Art bears the signature of something inescapably singular, that is to say, something utterly and compellingly incomplete, like us. Without this signature to authenticate its presence, it is merely an illustration, a luxury item, propaganda, a tax shelter, an investment, a spectacle, an event, decoration, a weapon, a fetish, a mirror, a piece of property, a reflection, a tool, a critique, a prop, medicine, a campaign, an intervention, a celebration, a memorial, a discussion, a school, an excuse, an engagement, therapy, sport, politics, activism, a remembrance, a traumatic return, a discourse, knowledge, an education, a connection, a ritual, a public service, a civic duty, a moral imperative, a gag, entertainment, a dream, a nightmare, a wish, an application, torture, a bore, policy, a status symbol, a barometer, balm, a scheme, furniture, design, a mission, a model, a study, an investigation, research, window-dressing, a social service, an analysis, a plan, a publicity stunt, a donation, an antidote, poison, pet. With it, art is none of these. And more.

This is what binds art to being. Both share the burden of embodying a singularity born of the incompleteness at the center of their respective forms. To give space and time and money and effort and whatever else one can muster to build a community that protects and preserves that singularity, when the whole point of a community is for individuals to find a semblance of completeness by becoming fulfilled with an other as one through the spirit of a general will, might give the impression that what is being created is not a community at all. Or at the least, an unthinkable one.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparation/The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence,'" *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992), pp. 371–98.

## A Time Apart

The Greeks had two notions of time: *chronos* and *kairos*. Chronos, which we are more familiar with, is the concept of time as measure, a quantity of duration that changes in a uniform and serial order. Chronos is, in a sense, empty, without content or meaning beyond its own linear progressing. It is when nothing happens, and goes on not happening.

Kairos, on the other hand, is a kind of time charged with promise and significance. It is time that saturates time. The dimensions that characterize kairos are neither uniform nor predictable. The phrase “the fullness of time” evokes the kairological, in the way it expresses the idea that empty time can be fulfilled and made anew through a profound change or rupture, making what happens thereafter radically unlike what had come before.

Kairos and chronos are not opposed to each other. One of the most interesting definitions of kairos comes from the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. It reads, “chronos is that in which there is kairos, and kairos is that in which there is little chronos.”<sup>1</sup> The two kinds of time are part of one another. Chronos transforms into kairos by becoming a compressed form of itself, embodying a temporal disruption that dispenses with uniformity. Hegel touched on this kind of change in his dialectics, through his concept of the “transition from quantity to quality.”<sup>2</sup> This is where something—such as time—acquires a substance that sets it apart and makes the thing literally unaccountable to the sequence from which it derives. Quality is a force that “aparts.” In kairos, time is not kept: it is unleashed.

“Right timing” is another way the Greeks referred to kairos. For them, qualitative time can be achieved only through human intervention. The power to act and take advantage of a special event or action that appears over the unfolding course of things is crucial to the nature of kairos. But this cannot happen at any time. Only at opportune moments, when time holds the most

potential for change, is kairos possible. But again, only if the opportunity is seized and acted upon. Kairos is that critical point in time when a crisis or rupture opens up and is catalyzed with human will to create new potentials.

A long tradition exists connecting kairos to art. It is fairly boring and mainly attributable to Plato. Platonic aesthetics is based on principles of harmony, symmetry, and measure. The beautiful, for Plato, is that which in words, images, sounds, or movements attains a unity-in-plurality. The idea of kairos as right timing is reimagined by Plato as aesthetic and ethical propriety, or the power of proportion to harmonize elements into a proper balance. The beautiful, once achieved, is really the idea of goodness, wholly embodied. For what the beautiful offers the world is a vision of life in harmonious balance with itself and the divine.

Echoes of Plato's aesthetics resound in art. They can be heard every time something "comes together." They are heard in the demand (by artists and critics alike) that all the elements that make up a work play their compositional part to produce a meaningful, that is to say coherent, idea.

But art that works best does so by making a mockery of meaning. Art is art when what is made unmakes itself in the making and realizes, in barely recognizable form, the discordant truth of living life.

Against Plato, this notion of art actually relates to an even earlier designation of kairos in Greek thought. As far as we know, the first appearance of kairos was in the *Iliad*. But Homer did not use it to mean the power of proportion or qualitative time. Rather, it denoted a vital or lethal place in the body, a place that demands special protection. Kairos is the place where mortality resides.

What is the relationship between mortality and time? Maybe it is that time holds import only when something ends. The phrase "all good things must come to an end" is half the story (and not even the right half). For what makes something good may not be the beautiful—pace Plato—but how a thing happens

to apprehend its own end. Being mortal means the end is ever near. Realizing this charges every moment with promise and significance. And it makes what matters less dependent on the power of fate and more on the inner imperative to find a shape of one's own, before it is too late.

Being mortal means making good on the task of fully inhabiting one's own demise. Time becomes meaningful only in this way. The same holds true for art. To make something by subjecting it to the same forces that make life unlivable, and to do it as if its aesthetic life depends on it, charges what is made with an incalculable urgency. Art acquires a quality through this process: it becomes mortal.

Art's essential discord today may come from artists struggling to achieve a form that is mortal. Everyone is an artist, the story goes, and everything can be art. True enough. But not everything that is art is mortal. There are crates and barrels of work being made that act as if they hold the secret to the good, that is to say the eternal, life. They express in endless formal variations the values that define tradition in art and history. And by tradition, I mean the habits of authority: the patterns and practices associated with a certain way of life that imagines progress as domination.

These works bid for a place in that tradition by molding into new and fresh shapes the motives, references, and experiences that tradition promotes as timeless: the tried and true. By sensualizing tradition into contemporary forms, these works become valued by an economic and social order that treats novelty as evidence of its commitment to innovation and progress, which in turn becomes a form of self-justification to naturalize the right to advance its rule in perpetuity. As if it was destined. And inevitable. Like time passing.

There are many kinds of art today. Or at the very least, two. If chronological art stands for the endless, and ultimately empty, serialization of a few traditional ideas that serve to enforce the values of the good life (this is especially the case with art that

debases those values for the sake of romanticizing them through their sacrifice), then what does a kairological art look and feel like?

At a glance kairological artworks look no different from any other works. They use the same materials and show in the same shows. They say and mean nothing in particular. But it is how they say it (and mean it) that sets them apart. They embody a desperate immanence, as if what is given is not good enough but will have to do. They seize time the way a beat holds a song, to evoke the vertiginous feeling of seeing something emerge by being made and unmade at the same instant. They last as experiences by not staying whole as forms. They radiate an inner irreconcilability about what they are and what they want to be with serious and unrestrained abandon, which is as close as it comes to an honest insight about the plight of living today. This radiance is what makes them pleasurable. Lively.

And this. They break time out of joint.

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This is why they rarely console, as art perhaps ought to, in these great times. They remain, in the end, comfortless, as a reminder to anyone willing to engage them just how little time there is left, for anyone, and all that has been lost, how close it all is from disappearing, and what it takes to go on.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 68–69.

<sup>2</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

## Forget September

About ten years ago, I was hiding out in a large house in the country with my family. One day, there was a knock on the front door. I opened it and found a group of uniformed men with guns. The men dragged me out of the house and ordered my family to come outside. They complied and huddled next to me. The men then lined up in a row facing us and drew their guns. A large mustached man standing at the end of the row to the right said, "Ready." "Aim." I am dead. Suddenly, I heard shots. They came from the other side of the hill overlooking the house. The men, confused, drew down their guns and ran toward the hill. My family rushed back into the house. But I ran away, toward the creek bed nearby. Once I reached it, I stood there, motionless. What I remember most, standing there, is the feeling of elation. But this peculiar joy did not spring from having escaped death: it came from not escaping it. I did die. Life was behind me. And I felt elated.

Seasons of hells have come and gone, and I want to forget them all. Pleasure brings no relief from the grind and is no longer so pleasurable. Was it ever? I don't know. Belonging brings fulfillment. But never has the whole felt so unfulfilled, like an apple that will never ripen—only rot. There is no difference between living with history and living in the past. The drunken boat has sailed on. Why stay? The bar for what passes for progress here is so low because quality is becoming quantity for the sake of mere life.

At one time, the story goes, history progressed by virtue of an Absolute Spirit. Stories can be true and still be wrong. Now we know that Absolute Spirit is neither absolute nor very spiritual (tell me if this is old news). Herr Absolute Spirit has, in any case, abandoned history and found a home instead in lonely, young, armed men (tell me if this is old news). Young is a relative term (at heart is good enough). Do you know what a disciple is? Someone who hasn't gotten the joke yet.



Man is the greatest abstraction. The second is debt. Mondrian is not even close. Debt is the essential creator of credit and production in the contemporary world. The notion that what one owes is potentially more socially valuable and productive than what one can make, or who one is, expresses a kind of transvaluation of value that separates how we do our business today from times past. Our age is defined by the dominance of the power of lack in sustaining life. The bindingness of what we owe to ourselves and others grounds the making of what appears as the present. What we want is, in a way, what our debt wants us to be. The apocalyptic tradition in Christianity and other religions, in literature, in certain genres of heavy-metal music speaks to those for whom the notion of debt as the primary creator is abhorrent, even monstrous. The apocalypse, as the representation of the end of all things, expresses the desire to cancel the debt that brought forth those things by destroying them. Most dreams and acts of annihilation originate in some way from this wish to annul a debt.

I have never been pregnant. But I am told that if I were to become pregnant, my senses would change. I would be able to distinguish the smell of Chanel No. 5 from, say, No. 6. I would find most bottled beverages disgusting because my heightened palate would make me sensitive to all the artificial additives in the drinks. I might even be able to differentiate, for the first time, subtle changes of color on the surface of fruits that signal the presence of toxins or pesticides. The theory is that during pregnancy the body refines and sharpens the senses to help an expecting mother more ably protect the child growing inside her. In a way, being pregnant is like being an aesthete. So many stories have been told about how taste is a product (or symptom) of class or social or political interests. But someone also wrote once that a story can be true and wrong. Perhaps the faculty of taste, which holds the power to distinguish the right thing from the rest—the beautiful from the merely luxurious, the sublime

from the simply vulgar—can protect not only the aspirations of a class or the promise of a politics but the eventual arrival of another kind of life.

A friend sent me a note the other day. I cannot agree with her more. She wrote, “ahhH ulp... oooh slsh slrp ahhh mmf mmd mhn mmor, ... mn sshh ahhh slsh ahhh... slrp mhn ... mmf ohhoo ... oooh slsh slrp ahhh mmf mmd yeess ... OOOH ohhoo... slsh ahhh ohh ahhh ohh hmm ahhh slsh sssht... ohhoo oho oho ohhoo mhn slrp mn slrp ohhoo mmf ... slrp mhn ... mn sshh ahhh ... mn slsh slrcch ahhh... oooh slsh slrp ahhh mmf mmd mhn sshh slrp oho yeess .....

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## Progress as Regression

Despite ideological differences, the various factions that make up the political right in America—from the grassroots to the Astroturfed to the corporate—found common ground after Obama’s 2008 victory.<sup>1</sup> This ground is the past: an arid patch of mythological land that has become home to a growing organizing effort driven by anti-tax sentiments, elements of nationalism, and a vicious streak against a laundry list of undesirables.<sup>2</sup> This movement only knows one way forward: back.

Consider the recent time warp at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. David Wojnarowicz’s video *Fire in My Belly*, 1986–87 was removed from an exhibition mounted by the Smithsonian, the gallery’s parent institution, after complaints by the Catholic League and Republican congressman Eric Cantor that the work was “antireligious” and therefore a form of hate speech.<sup>3</sup> The video itself shows no semblance of a critique of religion. In fact, the work uses Christian iconography as it was historically intended, as the lingua franca of suffering and redemption in dark times, like the medievalism of the early age of the AIDS crisis. But Cantor and the Catholic League did not see this, if they saw the work at all. What they did see was an opportunity to reignite the culture wars of the late 1980s—in which Wojnarowicz was also a target—by attacking gay visibility and acceptance in order to wage a proxy battle against the repeal of the military ban on serving openly in the military and the increasing pressure to legalize gay marriages in all fifty states.<sup>4</sup>

Are the 1980s not bygone enough? One of the consequences of the Republican takeover of Congress after the 2010 midterm elections has been that Texas libertarian congressman Ron Paul now chairs the Financial Affairs Subcommittee on Domestic Monetary Policy in the House of Representatives. And Paul recently reiterated that he wants the United States to go back to the gold standard, essentially pinning the value of the dollar to the

fixed weight of gold.<sup>5</sup> This was US monetary policy up to the 1930s, when there was a nearly universal belief that gold was the only value paper money represented. A nation's economy based on the gold standard is essentially beholden to miners for their money supply. FDR took the United States off the gold standard in 1933.

Are the 1930s still too modern? One can revel in the musty pageantry of the Tea Party protests that continue to fly the freak flag across the country. Standing for Taxed Enough Already, the Tea Party self-consciously echoes the rhetoric and sometimes the dress of early Americans resisting taxes imposed on the colonies by King George III.<sup>6</sup> The Boston Tea Party, in which colonialists dumped a shipment of tea imported from England into the Boston harbor in 1773, has since become a beacon for the idea that taxation without representation is tyranny.<sup>7</sup> For the Tea Party of 2009, this idea has become a call to arms, gathering libertarians, Ayn Randers, evangelicals, Christian nationals, militiamen, strict Constitutionalists, 9/11 truthers, neo-Birchers, and people who still do not believe President Obama was born in the US (known as Birthers) to form a noxious alliance composed of homophobic, racist, xenophobic, and nationalistic elements that imagines itself to be the second coming of the American Revolution.

Not to be outshone, Tea Party favorite Sarah Palin takes it all the way back to a prelapsarian state of nature in her reality TV show that premiered this fall, essentially an eight-episode promo for a 2012 presidential run.<sup>8</sup> In *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, she kills moose, hunts for fossils, climbs glaciers, and teaches her kids and the viewing audience about how grounding one's life in wilderness enables a way of being that is unfettered by the trappings of contemporary life—like reason, or the presence of other people not from Alaska. The show implicitly casts her compulsive irrationality and outsize political ambitions as lessons learned from the wilds of her native state, as if her demagoguery is an organic expression of the laws of nature. Palin speaks for nature's nation, because for her there is no difference between her

love of nature and her patriotism. For what she finds in nature (which, if one were to watch an episode, is really anything that can be shot at, cut down, or driven over) is the image of a country worthy of admiration, that is to say, a country as silent as an unspoiled forest, rendered speechless by the purging of foreign voices from its land, and made pristine and whole again, as the Good Book promised.

This is more than nostalgia. The campaigns and protests against the expansion of civil rights, environmental protection, financial reform, and health care for all Americans are part of a larger struggle to rebuild the United States through strict adherence to the “original values” that founded this nation. But this call to legislate and lead solely from the eternal wisdom of the ages—with what has always been—masks the demand that is being made. Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* that the concept of origin signifies the “seigniorial, the confirmation of him who stands first because he was there first; of the autochthon against the immigrant, of the settled against the migrant.”<sup>9</sup> To evoke the concept of origin is to assert a demand for first rights. In speaking for origin, the primacy of history is claimed, but it is the unquestioned sovereignty of who is speaking that matters. It is as clear as it is cruel: he who speaks on behalf of origin proclaims dominion over that which follows him.

Appealing for authority by renewing ancient rites is an ageless sport. But it is not ahistorical. And it is this perspective that best captures what this populist insurgency represents: a contemporary manifestation of a modernist notion that history amounts to nothing but the domination of nature and society insofar as domination is the true face of progress. The way forward is by going back. And what is modern about this cast of modernity is how power is exercised to rule in the name of origin.

One can read it in the signs that are held up at the rallies and protests. “Let the failures fail.” “Free markets! Not freeloaders.” “Give us liberty, not debt.” The anger and resentment against

all forms of taxation and with every office of the federal government (except the military) follow the classical contours of libertarianism. But the demands for more individual freedom and less government betray something else. Not only must the state be reduced in order to maximize freedom, but that freedom must be paid for by sacrificing those who are enlarged by having a state in the first place. Libertarianism here begins to show its authoritarian face, as efforts to increase individual liberty turn into enmity toward those for whom a nation must be greater than a collection of private interests and who want more than the invisible hand of the market to protect rights and due processes that ultimately enable private interests to become something greater than the right to goods and services.

Freedom follows a form of lawfulness. It is crafted by individual reason but finds its course in sociality as a principle of self-sufficiency. But the populist right imagines this sociality as an obstacle that must be abolished. This is why, for this movement, freedom is merely a cipher for unrestrained authority. The will exercised over others becomes the principle by which a self becomes whole and sufficient.

When freedom amounts to mere force, the only value that gives it currency is sacrifice—the power to substitute the work of another for one's own gain, or to wrest something of a lesser value for one of greater worth. Through sacrifice, authority preserves itself. And it is here that a politics so devoted to the expansion of personal liberties and to putting an end to governmental tyrannies reemerges as a rationality for barbarism, as it has always been. Freedom isn't free: somebody has to pay. And the more sacrifices are made, the more it becomes necessary to vindicate its self-preservation as self-consuming progress.<sup>10</sup>

It is telling that one of the Tea Party's founding moments came as a televised appeal to sacrifice homeowners who had fallen behind on their mortgage payments for the greater good of the American economy. Rick Santelli, a former futures trader

and financial commentator, delivered what came to be known as “the rant heard around the world” on CNBC, a business-focused cable channel. With the bluster of a man angry at having to pay for the sins of others, Santelli railed against Obama and his proposed legislation to help struggling homeowners during the 2008 recession. Standing in the middle of the Chicago Stock Exchange, Santelli challenged the proposal on behalf of “the silent majority”—who happened to be the business interests literally surrounding him, the very people who created and enabled the predatory lending practices that intentionally misled millions of Americans into signing up for mortgages and loans they could not afford. The government is promoting bad behavior, Santelli insisted, by bailing out these people. Instead, he reasoned, the White House should create a website to let the people vote online to decide whether taxes ought to be used to “subsidize the losers’ mortgages.” “This is America,” Santelli roared.<sup>11</sup>

He was in the wrong, but he was right after all: this is America. The debt is infinite and someone must pay. This is the *élan vital* of the Tea Party and other reactionary groups in the United States. Progress here amounts to the right to dominate others in the name of an origin that speaks only of sacrificing others to justify the right to survive and thrive through domination, because that was what was done in the first place. Progress is regression.

But there is no going back. There is nowhere to go back to. The concept of regression points toward a phantom past, but it also touches on what is most urgent and real in the present. For the desire to dominate is fundamentally rooted in the need to reconcile social contradictions that were never fully resolved in the first place. The great financial collapse that took place two years ago revealed terrible inequalities many Americans were living with in the wake of two ongoing wars, ever-deteriorating governmental and civic infrastructures, and an unprecedented redistribution of wealth toward the highest income earners, all orchestrated by neoconservatives in the White House and



Congress that allied the profit motive with Protestant evangelical social interests.<sup>12</sup> And this was just the last eight years. Add to this the experience of globalization in the late 1990s, which decimated US manufacturing and productivity and increasingly forced the health of the economy to depend on the expansion of a domestic consumer base. This put consumers—who were supposed to drive the economy forward by buying things—in a bind, since they were also workers whose median earnings were steadily decreasing, because the only jobs being created domestically in an economy that aggressively outsourced manufacturing and production overseas were low-wage service-sector ones.

Reality hardly seems real in a climate so hostile to genuine social and economic need. But rather than address existing inequalities, the Tea Party and their reactionary counterparts in the Republican Party organize against the disenchantment of American contemporary life by promising to deliver the nation back to a time before the irreconcilability between citizen and country came into being. The populist rhetoric demonizing politics as an insider's game rigged from the start and the perennially fashionable sentiment that government has lost its semblance of being for, of, and by the people are testaments to the fear that self-rule no longer involves a self. The rage against governmentality expresses the inability of struggling Americans to recognize themselves in the mirror of democracy today.

But then, it is hard to recognize American democracy in itself. Since Obama's election in 2008, the vision of a kind of governance led by a commitment to deal with real issues facing Americans has dimmed. Enter Obama the technocrat. Whereas as a candidate he promised leadership through reason, what has emerged from his White House has been rule by experts. The most egregious example has been in financial regulatory reform, in which those who crafted the policies that were designed to protect the country's economic welfare from the illegal financial practices that caused the recent recession in fact came from the

same banks, private firms, and policy think tanks that proliferated those practices in the first place.<sup>13</sup> Obama has consistently relied on similar types of experts to determine the course of action on matters of domestic policy, as if he places the greatest trust in the advice given by those who know best, even though what they know best of all is how their own interests stand to benefit. There is no real public to promote or protect beyond a set of private motives that must be balanced in order for the whole to function with maximum efficiency, which seems to be a working method for solving social conflict that does not actually solve anything.

Substantive progress has been made in the last two years to offset the poisonous emissions of the previous eight. The repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” marks the latest step forward. So did the passing of the Health Care Reform Act. They enlarge the country to better fit with the shape of our times. But there are two more years in Obama’s presidency, and after the beating the Democrats took in the November 2010 midterm elections, he now faces a Republican-led Congress and a handful of Tea Party representatives. Obama shares the blame for the defeat. But it has less to do with the backlash against policies like “Obamacare” and more with a political gamble that he made, and lost.

At the start of his presidency, Obama wagered that he could create a government the American people could believe in, even as he promoted and amplified the idea that politics is despicable and should be disavowed.<sup>14</sup> He speaks about “Washington” the same way people react to syphilis: with displeasure. Obama thought that by empathizing with disaffected Reaganites and Bushians and encouraging their antipolitical feelings, they could in turn recognize an image of themselves in him. He lost the bet, and the disenfranchisement he sought to embrace and bring into the fold instead developed into a movement that has since been weaponized by money from right-wing corporate interests, blatant racism, and a general fear that the country is being run by an authoritarian cabal.

The art of politics consists of organizing others before they organize you. It takes speed, cunning, and the ability to divide your opponent in order to buy time to keep organizing. Obama's political instincts did not lead him to see that the end of Bush was merely the beginning of a retrenchment of what Bush's legacy represents. The neoconservative ideology dictating profits for the few to be a social good, regardless of the cost, has enabled a strain of populism to flourish that brooks no distinction between unfettered accumulation and American sovereignty. This is what makes the Tea Party so vehement about reducing taxes and getting "the government" off the backs of Americans. Profits act as the medium of freedom. More so than freedom of speech, the right to financial profit assumes the status of the very first amendment. The regulative powers of the federal government have been steadily and programmatically dismantled since Reagan, and the privatization of all aspects of social and civic life has itself become standard governing principle. And yet the new patriots remain largely silent on how the United States is now, as everyone knows, run by the authoritarianism of unrestrained corporate greed and focus instead on getting rid of the gay, foreign, socialist, poverty-stricken aesthetes secretly controlling the government, which no one believes. Karl Kraus once wrote, "Let him who has something to say come forward and be silent!"<sup>15</sup> The sound and the fury emanating from the surging reactionary right in the United States drowns out an aspect of their thinking that soundlessly defines them most: the belief in the sanctity of life as revenue. They may disagree with how you make money, but they will defend to the death your right to do so.

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- <sup>1</sup> Astroturf is the brand name for plastic grass. Politically, it designates a class of organizing with the appearance of being led by a "grassroots" effort when in fact it is wholly funded and controlled by institutional or corporate interests.
- <sup>2</sup> Undesirables should not be mistaken for the unwanted. When something is undesirable, it reverberates with feeling the alien in oneself. Or, put another way, the undesirable is a remind-

er that what is foreign may in fact be what is missing in the incomplete puzzle of the self. This is why it is so alluring. Or put yet another way, undesirability is the pleasure principle of art.

- <sup>3</sup> For an account of the Wojnarowicz incident, see Frank Rich, "Gay Bashing at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> From a private conversation with Gregg Bordowitz.
- <sup>5</sup> See Nin-Hai Tseng, "Will the Fed Be Able to Survive Ron Paul?," *Fortune magazine* online, December 14, 2010.
- <sup>6</sup> See Jill Lepore, "Tea and Sympathy," *The New Yorker*, May 3, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
- <sup>8</sup> *Sarah Palin's Alaska*. <http://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/sarah-palins-alaska>.
- <sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), p. 155.
- <sup>10</sup> See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Origin Is the Goal," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 1–22.
- <sup>11</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-1goOZJldk>.
- <sup>12</sup> See James Moore and Wayne Slater, *The Architect: Karl Rove and the Dream of Absolute Power* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).
- <sup>13</sup> See David Bromwich, "The Fastidious President," *London Review of Books*, November 18, 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Karl Kraus, *In These Great Times*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 71.



## A Lawless Proposition

There is a Daoist saying that goes, “Whatever can be taught is not worth learning.” It is a sobering thought, perhaps even a little cruel, as any insight that rings true feels. I don’t take it to mean that one should stop listening to others. Philosophically, Daoists are realists: they want to see things as they are in the world. And the reality is that, just because you stop listening, doesn’t mean people will stop talking—to you, at you, about what to do, how to do it, when to do it, whom to do it to, and so on.

If it is a given that people will always have something to say about your business, how does one turn the jabber into something worth learning from? For Daoists, experience is key. Knowledge is not knowledge unless it is embodied in the stream of lived experience. The daily practice of living is what crystallizes the learning into concepts and ideas that inform one’s external acts. The aim of knowledge is experience insofar as knowing something substantiates a material reality for how a person comes to live as someone. Experience, on the other hand, is the origin of knowledge to the extent that a person’s reality is the grounding where one discovers and learns what makes life matter—from the inside out.

This Daoist notion that emphatically binds knowledge to experience is not unlike what ties artists to their work—at least in the case of artists for whom art is a matter of making work that remakes them. Of course, not all artists work like this; there are as many ways of making art as there are artists. But true as this may be, the truth is that artists all tend to follow the same basic assumption: artists make art and not the other way around. Artists make art as a means to tell us something: about themselves for instance, or others, or things that are important and useful to know about, the history or scene they wish to belong to, and certainly what is worthy of being art. Work like this can be experienced in a flash, because the form is merely a mannequin

for what that “something” is, which drapes over the form like a dress on sale, waiting to be noticed. What matters most is the moment when one “gets it,” as if the value of the work depends on the recognition of whatever benefits and gains there are from what the artist is getting at. It is the art of advertising.

What happens when it is the making that instructs the maker? What happens when the art makes the artist? When I make a work, there is sometimes a turning point, a moment when the conceptual and sensuous materials bind in such a way that the composition begins to resist my attempts to shape it according to my original intentions, and develops, against my will, its own sense of what must be done in order to be itself. It doesn't happen all the time. But when it does, I feel relieved, because it means the minutes, days, or years of working up to this point were worth the effort. But there is also a degree of despair, because the initial conception of how the work ought to be no longer holds sway in how it will continue to evolve. I am no longer the prime mover of the work. My directions are no longer followed. Beyond this certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached.

It only sounds supernatural. Robert Bresson once said, “The supernatural is the natural precisely rendered.”<sup>1</sup> What is being rendered is not an image or an idea but a process, which produces a feeling of autonomy in the work, as if the work has as much say as the maker on what to do and how to do it. By following the contours of this internal reasoning, a work takes on an uncanny quality that comes from it being an outgrowth of the experience of something becoming aware of becoming itself.

The essence of this concept of artistic development is informed by the nature of art as rooted in the historical idea of nature itself. In the West, the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles was the first to make an explicit connection between art and nature. He wrote about how human beings were created by mixing together the four elements, not unlike the way

an artist mixes colors to make a painting.<sup>2</sup> Art has hewn itself closely to nature ever since, not only to re-create it in images and objects but also to mirror it as a force that animates inert matter into living forms. Art appropriates the power of nature to create works by mimicking the process that nature uses to engender life.

For Empedocles, life was divine because nature was ruled by gods. Art was used to enshrine the realities of life as an expression of the divine. Today, life is anything but, even though it is ruled by men who think they have inherited the power of gods. The law of nature evidently serves and protects only one percent of reality.

Against this, art becomes enlivened by internalizing the process that expresses the rest of what is real. By using the compositional struggle between what the artist wants and what the material is willing to be as the basis and principle for aesthetic development, art begins to follow another way. Over time, this internal tension transforms both the artist in mind and the matter at hand; it pushes and pulls the work toward becoming something neither fully intentional nor completely accidental. And yet by ending up being what it isn't supposed to be, a work becomes something more. It manifests a reality more real than any representation can ever hope to achieve, because it embodies the irreconcilable tension that animates contemporary life itself. This spirit of irreconcilability is the telos of artistic form.

By way of illustration: human beings carry a faint but discernible electrical charge simply by being alive. Plants, animals, and all living things produce bioelectricity in order to store metabolic energy. Human beings generate a relatively low amount of bioelectricity compared to, say, an electric eel. But this is not always the case. Several years ago, researchers found that some people produced more electricity than others, and some generated still more electricity in times of stress and other states of intense feeling. In both cases, there was a strong enough electromagnetic field around these people that they disrupted electronic devices nearby. Mobile phones dropped signal. Laptops



wouldn't boot up. Calculators refused to subtract or divide. Nothing worked around these people. They were living forms of civil disobedience.

This is what art is like. Art appears when what is made feels as if there is a profound misunderstanding at the heart of what it is, as if it were made with the wrong use in mind, or the wrong idea about what it is capable of, or simply the wrong set of assumptions about what it means to fully function in the world. A work works by not working at all. By not obeying the law of any system or authority external to the process of its own making, a work emphatically expresses its own right to exist for itself and in itself, and questions—by merely existing—the rule of law that works to bind all to a semblance of the common good. Art is a lawless proposition.

But no artist creates lawlessly. The freedom the artist exercises in making work turns on the idea of law as an inner tendency rather than an external rule. Think the law of nature as opposed to the law against littering. Artists follow their own intuitions as the right of artistic freedom they grant themselves in obeying the law of one's inner essence. Cézanne may have had this in mind when he said that the ideal of earthly joy is "to have a beautiful formula."<sup>3</sup>

The case can be made that the history of Western thought revolves around one question: which law to follow? Plato, for instance, believed in the power of human law to shape the course of social and political life. But he conceded that the law of nature was more binding, because this kind of law was divine in origin. Thomas Aquinas would absorb the metaphysical discourses pioneered by Plato—later expanded by Aristotle—and make them into the basis for his treatise on the essence and structure of law under Christ in the Middle Ages. Hegel renewed this tradition at the same time he upended it in the Gothic cathedral-like system of his philosophy in the late eighteenth century, invoking reason as the universal spirit that ruled over men and nation-states alike.

Whatever the philosophy or theory, law—as what binds men to a greater order than themselves—is itself always bound to the grace and authority of a higher power. Carl Schmitt would come to define this entanglement in the twentieth century, arguing that despite modernity's progress and the separation of church and state, all modern theories of law derive their power from secularized theological concepts.<sup>4</sup>

If nature or God does not compel people to follow the law, violence is usually up to the task. Look at what has been happening for the last several months in New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Portland, Chicago, Atlanta, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and so on; on campuses, on streets, on bridges, in parks, and elsewhere. Police maintain order by inciting chaos. Inalienable rights of speech and assembly are revoked in the name of the state. The times resound with songs for change and the law responds by restoring the same.

By being violent, the state remains hard on the heels of life. The point of political violence is the restoration of a past that no longer takes part in life as it is lived. This violence institutes new law to assert order against calls for change. But a paradox lurks: the new is essentially the old. In the coercive act, the law constantly becomes new law. To maintain power, the state must be both lawful and violent, a refuge of the old law and a source of the new. Caught in the dynamic to preserve and renew itself, the state reveals its own particular nature: a compulsion to repeat this traumatic cycle of law-giving and violence-making, to cling to a continuity with a past that alone legitimates its authority. Law represents the border that separates what the sovereign past justifies and what the frontiers of a more just future might hold. This is why political movements that embody new and substantive calls for more justice, liberty, and equality must act without fear of being unlawful. Otherwise they would not remain true to what first inspired them to act: the promise of a time to come, where law has no jurisdiction.

Crimes are committed every day, many by bankers during normal business hours. But even criminals follow the law as dictated by the nature of their own self-interest. Anyone who has ever been arrested can attest that a crime may be unreasonable, but it is never without reason. What the legion of moralists, philosophers, and legislators since Aquinas fear most is that what steers man toward criminality is more binding than the law that ties him to the state, the common good, or God. The fascination with crime comes in part from the idea that one can live rightly by following real needs and desires, against the rule of an external authority that declares what one ought to have and must remain. By following impulses where they want to go, and aiding and abetting them with knowledge and experience, one transforms those needs and desires into a law that rules from within. What is perhaps most satisfying about committing crime may be the feeling that one is following a superior law while doing so. In a sense, this is what autonomy is: self-rule. And this is why criminals are so captivating: they are ciphers of independence. On the other hand, the self that rules may not be a self at all but the force of an inner nature that governs by compulsion. Who has not experienced the utter lack of freedom that comes from being ruled by various passions and urges? One feels no longer in control, with no will to determine the course of one's life, as if the self just split and left. And yet, isn't there always also a curious pleasure to unfreedom, as if what secretly pleases one most is being told what to do?

Life without law lives outside the grace of authority. But true lawlessness would amount to disregarding both the commandments of external law and the law legislated by one's inner nature. Perhaps the most paradoxical and compelling account of what it means to live against all law comes, ironically, from Christianity's first great institutional organizer, Saint Paul. In Letter to the Romans (7:7), Paul links the notion of law in general to sin and decay and suggests that death lives first through law.

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.

What Paul is describing is not a literal death. I think he is saying that the law not only regulates and commands but also agitates and excites as well as how this excitation produces a deadening. But it is not a deadening that renders one still and lifeless. Rather, the force of law burdens the one who follows it so much that anxiety seizes a person's waking life, and takes hold of his experience in the world, and shakes him into a kind of petrified unrest. It might be more precise to say that what happens is an undeading; like being turned into a zombie, or other varieties of the living dead. Seen from this vantage point, death is life paralyzed by power, and sin becomes the inability for a life to take on more life by the only process that renders more life possible: change.

Law, for Paul, makes life unlivable by instilling a manic dimension that disrupts the potential for inner development, for that life has been too captured (or captivated) by its own repetition-compulsion to follow and fulfill the law.

Paul is wrong, of course. Many people today live in petrified unrest and enjoy very full and productive lives. Scores of artists manically follow the law of their inner compulsion to make innumerable works and employ many more to do the same, all in the name of artistic freedom. It is their right, perhaps even their nature. The works they produce are art insofar as they are made by artists. But little else emerges from their material pres-

ence beyond the feeling that what has settled into form before us was made “by the book,” so to speak: forms of expression that embody—more than anything else—the manic energy generated by the anxiety and restlessness of being a law-abiding subject through and through.

I began to write this with what I thought was an image of lawlessness in my mind. It is not one of the countless images of protests and revolts that have appeared, although it could well have been. It isn't Che or the Outlaw Josey Wales. It isn't late, late Matisse or the films of Chris Marker, although either would have fit. I thought it was a moment that occurred recently, where three mountains were in view, with the sun shining dully behind the drama of slow-moving clouds, but thinking now, it wasn't that either. The image is gone, and with it, the contours of a reason that led me here. But here is not so different than back there, where I began, except for the appearance of these words, the time spent writing them, and what remains to be said and done, now that these words have come to an end.

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- <sup>1</sup> Cited in Régis Debray, *God: An Itinerary*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (London: Verso, 2004), p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> See *Early Greek Philosophers*, trans. Jonathan Barnes (London: Penguin, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> See Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 140.
- <sup>4</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

## On Art and the 99 Percent

It is no doubt important to think about how art expresses what is worth living for in contemporary life. This is why I accepted the invitation to be here. But to tell you the truth, this isn't the real reason I came.

I'm here tonight because the debate sponsors offered me a free ticket to fly home. *Business class even.* The leg room and free champagne were almost too luxurious for someone like me, who either by nature or nurture prefers more Spartan accommodations. But I'm not complaining, because being here, with you, gives me a reason to be home. New York is where I live. But Hong Kong is where I was born and raised.

Being home though does not necessarily mean one feels at home. I have not been back for years, and in many ways, I am a foreigner in my own hometown. The interesting thing about the notion of home is that it is as much about a feeling as it is about a particular place in one's life. It is the feeling of being in accord with a place that embodies the most of who we are and who we want to be. In other words, home is where we feel we belong. As far as I can tell, the great German philosopher Hegel has never been accused of being an emotional man. But even he evokes this feeling to characterize one of his key concepts: reconciliation. It is excruciatingly difficult to summarize but fairly simple to describe. Reconciliation is the state where one feels at home in the world.

On the other hand, what does it feel like when one does not feel at home? I want to suggest it is the feeling of being excluded—of not belonging. Last September, in my other hometown of New York City, the Occupy Wall Street protests erupted as a movement that expressed how a vast, vast majority of Americans—99 percent of them, in fact—were being systematically excluded from the ways and means that historically enabled them to be the most they can be: economically, political-

ly, socially. People lost jobs and places to live and were shut out of opportunities that make contemporary life genuinely livable. Destructive forms of social inequality make it impossible for one to feel at home in the world. And the fact that Occupy protests have spread around the globe is an indication of just how widespread social inequalities have become.

In a sense, tonight's motion has nothing to do with art at all, insofar as it is something thought about, and made by, someone like me—an artist. Rather, what animates the motion is the idea that art is art insofar as it is shown at art fairs like the one at this convention center, or sold by dealers, or bought by collectors, or written about by magazines, or exhibited and venerated by museums. In other words, it is the image of art as it expresses and reflects the experience of a set of social relations seemingly untouched by the suffering caused by social inequalities, and in truth may even indirectly thrive because of them.

Marcel Duchamp was famous for declaring that the onlooker has as much say about what a work of art means as the artist who makes it. For Duchamp, art is defined socially. And it is society that ultimately determines how art looks to us as it relates to our lives. So now, a simple question: what does art look like today, socially speaking? It seems to me pretty clear: it looks luxurious.

When art makes news, it is usually because of the staggering amounts of money it fetches at auctions. When art is an event, it is typically now at fairs like this one, or the one in New York a few weeks ago, or the one in Basel, Switzerland, a few weeks from now. When art brings people together, it is by way of glamorously choreographed dinners, parties, and galas like the ones you have *not* been invited to. Perhaps this is all too anecdotal. In which case I submit to you the most concrete evidence I hold: I flew business class. I have pictures. I haven't flown business class in, like, six hundred years.

It seems to me that whatever art is today, its importance—that is to say, the interest it holds in the social imagination—

comes largely from how it expresses what constitutes the good life, or what is now known as the life of the 1 percent. I want to be clear here: I have nothing against the good life. I think everyone deserves expensive champagne, relaxing vacations, great places to live, and chances to feel at home with contemporary art, by partaking in the glamour and excitement of those social relations that value art most. It is good because it is the kind of living that is more than merely surviving, which is perhaps a more accurate description of what it is like to live in the 99 percent: meal by meal; day by day; paycheck by paycheck.

If art excludes the 99 percent, it is, I think, because it takes time and energy to include art in one's life, not to speak of money to devote to art in ways that would make it meaningful. And the truth is that 99 percent of people are simply too busy trying to stay afloat, or alive, in what is turning out to be the grimmest and most volatile global economic landscape in living memory. Anyone with a job, or two jobs, working forty, fifty, or sixty hours a week, or who recently lost a job and has kids to feed, or parents to take care of, or mounting debt, or is unemployed, or even homeless, can tell you this. Probably better than I can.

This is because experience is the greatest teacher. Knowledge gained through experience substantiates thinking in ways that makes facts and figures as abstract and boring as they actually are. Up to now I have been talking about how I believe things appear and what I understand the situation to be. Now I would like to tell you what I think is true through my experience as an artist. Tonight's motion—that contemporary art excludes the 99 percent—does not go far enough, because it doesn't have a particular kind of contemporary art in mind. I want to emend tonight's motion, so that it reflects a more discriminating and accurate artistic reality, because only mediocre contemporary art excludes 99 percent of the people. Great contemporary art excludes 100 percent of them.



This, now, here, everywhere, is not the best of all possible worlds. The reason artists make art is because the current state of affairs is simply not good or interesting enough. Imagining what else is possible through forms of expression is how art renews the feeling that there must be better ways to do things. And the more ambitious the art, the more ruthless and uncaring it is about what actually belongs in this sorry excuse for a world. This is why the greatest works tend to feel otherworldly, even though they may be as simple and down to earth as a painting of apples on a wooden table, or a play about two men waiting for someone who never comes, or the sound of silence that lasts exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

They are composed of things we are all familiar with, but they're made in such a way that they seem to follow another set of rules entirely—if they follow rules at all. This is why they feel otherworldly: real freedom always feels alien at first and hard to comprehend.

The art I admire most is the kind I understand the least, and keep on not understanding. It shows, uncompromisingly, that another world is possible, and that neither the world the 99 percent struggles with, nor the one enjoyed by the 1 percent, are good enough to settle for. I want to be clear here: I have nothing against this world. It is pleasant enough. I'm happy to belong here and be included in practically anything that doesn't involve meetings or the police. This is home. On the other hand, this is not it. Not even close.

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Originally delivered at the Intelligence Squared Asia debate, May 8, 2012, which coincided with the opening of the 2012 Hong Kong Art Fair. The title and theme of the debate was: "contemporary art excludes the 99%." Chan was arguing in favor of the notion, while artist Joseph Kosuth and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor argued against it.

## 39 Sentences

The appearance of art is itself social.

Art participates in the world as a medium of transfiguration.

Every artwork is socially defined more by what it anticipates than what it is, none more so than ones that expect revolutions tomorrow.

From heap to whole: that is the social promise of art.

What gives art quality is the force of its nonjudging judgment.

Art becomes spiritualized when what is made is more real than reality.

Those who misunderstand, denigrate, or ignore what is made are also collaborators in making it.

What does not belong in this world is the only thing worth making.

A thing is a web of relations at a standstill.

An artwork is a form of relating as both instant and process.

Art tends toward worldlessness because it is more and less than a thing.

Expression is engagement as interference.

Politics is art's exchange value.

The most useful art is advertising.

The most useless political activity is advertising.

Practically speaking, the art of politics consists of organizing somebody before somebody organizes you.

To be obsessed with politics in art is to forsake society. The revolution without people. A movement without members. A community without community.

Art exhibited as a solution to political conflict is an illness offering itself as medicine.

The worst sort of artistic egoism masquerades as aesthetic altruism.

You must know politics to be able to prevent it.

Speed and mystery makes up for the lack of materials and resources.

When you are anxious to produce something, let no one perceive it until it is made.

There is nothing practical about praxis.

Critique is colorless kitsch.

The cunning of art is how it manifests the irreconcilability of it all without resorting to myth or nihilism.

Art made that is complete is ideological in nature.

What passes for engaged art is often just ambition dressed up as redemption.

When art is presented as evidence of social truths, it usually gets everything wrong.

Only outsiders produce new ideas.

Hope in art often masks a secret despair.

A political aesthetic divides the adversary in order to gain time.

Social engagement is founded on a community of shared risk.

A public is never found: it is always built.

The more a form mimics social reality, the less hold it has over people's minds, and the farther it is from it being a practical activity.

A composition is organizing by aesthetic means.

Using people as artistic material enlivens art but strips them of personhood.

In matters of art, humankind is always absent. Present is man, this fellow or that.

The nature of nature is law as tendency.

An artwork is a model for a new nature.

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**Theory**

**and**

**Practice**





# Holiday

The specter of scarcity haunts us. We live in perpetual fear of running out of everything. The true mark of our modernity is in fact this fear, which eats away the plenipotentiary that is our living shape until we become skin and bones, in spirit and in form.

We think scarcity is a sign, telling us the end is near. This is reasonable, after all. When a runner is exhausted, it is toward the end of the race. When our patience runs out, it is usually the end of the affair. Today, the day ends not with the setting sun but with our bodies depleted of energy and sense, spent on the day's work. We can say there is a relationship between the idea of the end and our diminishment. We can even say that we only recognize the coming end in the quiet approach of an emptying that clears the way toward it.

The path left in the wake of this clearing some call history. As the clearing careers to a stop and the uneven path terminates, history ends. A few call this revelation.

No one has seen revelation, although there have been educated guesses. Is it full of light? How is the food? No one knows. The end has never come. Epochs and events flow in and out of our time, carrying with them the debris of every prophecy and every catastrophe that promise to reveal to us the nature of things. But the end never comes.

We only know how tired we feel. And this knowing charges us with a feeling we register as a kind of strange and petrified restlessness, like the anxiety of anticipating a call. We feel this and know the end must be near.

But sometimes we don't know. Either by works or by faith or sheer dumb luck, we come toward the end not knowing we are near the end, or that we are in fact at the end. This is called power.

Now I have a story to tell you.

A girl woke up one morning not knowing she was estranged

from the world. She opened her eyes from a night of restless sleep—if one can call that sleep—and saw that everything was as it should be. So she had a modest breakfast of juice and bread.

What she did not know was that the night before, people around the world lucky enough to have e-mail received an urgent message. It read, "Attention please. Based on some statistics and measurements and a few lengthy meetings we have realized that we are in hell. Don't be alarmed. Nothing will change. Go about your business." Normally, an e-mail like this would cause great panic. But because this e-mail was received at night, when people were tired or relaxed, everyone reacted calmly and with a certain pragmatism. First, those who received the e-mail phoned and informed people who didn't have e-mail. Those people in turn wrote notes explaining the situation to people who had neither phone nor e-mail and slipped the notes under their doors. No one knew what going about your business in hell meant. But people were confident they could figure it out.

For some reason the girl did not get the e-mail, or the phone call, or the note. (It happens!) So when she woke up she had no idea and went about her business. Other people went about their business too, but this proved difficult. The donut man at the bakery, for instance, took an extra hour just to make his chocolate batter. People drank coffee and read the newspaper, as always, but now everything that everyone did—no matter how trivial—was done with a kind of diligence and wonder. "Is this what I'm supposed to do in hell?" they asked themselves.

The girl knew something was different walking down the street. She knew everyone was just a little slow as they greeted and cursed each other, but she didn't know why. How could she? At work, it was the same. People sat in front of computers, typing and shuffling things about on their desks. And yet how thoughtful they were with their tasks at hand. She marveled at the full presence of mind embracing the stream of simple, repetitive work.

This state of thoughtfulness did not lift. At first, the girl tried to fall in line. She pondered very hard when she looked at things and concentrated with all her might on every task. But soon she became tired and could not keep up with the general state of affairs.

One day, the girl came across a pencil left on a park bench. And it was then that she realized she could no longer take the burden of having to reflect on so many things. She picked up the pencil and stabbed it into her left eye. Then, her right eye, with the same pencil. The girl then let out a howl only trees in a haunted forest hear and sat down on the bench.

She was startled at first. The pain and the blindness were all new to her. But soon she settled into herself. And happy that her condition left her unable to reflect on anything of significance for any amount of time, she began to cry.

The girl told herself, "If my eyes ever heal, I will do this again." Without much fuss, her eyes healed in a week. So she did it again, only this time, she brought her own pencil. Others joined her, stabbing themselves and howling. They do this now, once a year, in the park.

This story is titled Holiday.

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Originally published as "Response to a Request," *The Wrong Times*, 2006. Reprinted by permission of author.

## Judas Was an Aesthete

Betrayal inspires me. When a friend becomes an enemy (or is it the other way around?) or when a maker turns against her own work, the bond that once seemed so natural and inevitable is severed, granting without guaranteeing—on either side of the cut—the potential for reconciliation that is always already the image of the new, which is in reality the image of what is truly worth renewing.

Rimbaud gives up poetry to renew it by other means. Jean-Luc Godard's "didactic" turn and eventual work in Mozambique. Beethoven's late style. Philip Guston in 1970. There are many episodes.

They recently unearthed the Gospel according to Judas. In it, Jesus commands Judas Iscariot to turn him over to the Roman authorities so that he may fulfill the sacred mystery. What is so startling about this document is that it is proof that Judas did not betray Jesus, as it is recounted in the other Gospels. It is precisely because Jesus trusted Judas so much that he turned to him in the first place. Judas obeys Jesus's order and willingly becomes the ultimate symbol of treachery and betrayal for the sake of the one he loves. It is in this cut, which confounds easy notions of sacrifice, betrayal, and love, rather than the promised gift of human salvation that has yet to be delivered, that one finds renewal, in life and in form.

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# On Light as Midnight and Noon

Today

The electric flicker of moving images lights every corner, wall, and room devoted to contemporary art. Innumerable surfaces have been transfigured into luminous screens. Even the facades of buildings now serve the telos of video and digital projections. The push of moving images into the field of art has become a shove, exhorted by technologies that perpetually renegotiate the terms of the visual and a political imaginary that desperately believes the fusion of art and technology can magically conjure an image of progress. Exhibitions today that try to present the currents of art without a major presence of moving-image works—whether video installations or DVDs played on monitors—seem simply not so current.

Strange, then, that the state of the moving image in contemporary art feels neither very current nor very contemporary. One hundred and ten years after the Lumière brothers introduced film to the world, seventy years after the birth of video, moving-image works continue to be framed much as they were at the dawn of film: in the image and spirit of a window. The rush of pictures appearing and disappearing on walls and emanating from screens remains the essence becoming the appearance by way of a rectilinear frame through which we see what we imagine we cannot see outside this frame, untouched by this light. The art of the moving image in the twenty-first century continues to draw from the wellspring of a late-nineteenth-century model of vision, despite the myriad advances in technology and philosophy of the image. An analogue to this may be another invention that transformed our perception of movement and time around the same period: the automobile. Cars today get roughly the same gas mileage as Henry Ford's Model T, first built in 1908. The look and feel of the car may

have changed, but the essential mechanics remain eerily similar. Likewise, the fundamental structure of moving-image art has remained static: the idea of the window—whether the cinematic window, the tele-video window, or the computer window—still dominates what and how we see. No wonder that, in our digital age, the dominant and most widely reviled computer software for accessing and viewing information is Microsoft’s operating system, known as....

## Windows

The first philosopher of the window is also the first philosopher of painting: Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti’s *De pictura* (1435) paved the way for the ascension of painting to carry within its development the hopes and ideals of the early Renaissance. *De pictura* was a manual of sorts: how to paint using geometry, perspective, and color. In that it is a manual for painters of how to paint, it is also a manual for viewers of how to look at painting. *De pictura* showed for the first time how single-point perspective can create the illusion of depth within the frame of painting. Alberti’s synthesis of art and architecture transformed painting into a window: painting became the new window that looked out onto the new world taking shape in the wake of the Renaissance. *De pictura* did not change the world overnight: an apple was still an apple. But a fundamental shift did occur, which had to do with how that apple was viewed. Before Alberti, during what we loosely call medieval times, the visible world was the manifestation of divine power. Art was the sensuous medium that both invoked the glory of this divine power and celebrated its appearance on earth. After Alberti, an apple became simply red and ripe. In other words, the visible world became endowed with qualities for the new gaze of men and women that were severed from the servitude of a transcendent

order. The philosophy of Humanism in the early Renaissance was the opening salvo against religious orthodoxy. The apple became ours, so to speak. And the window helped us see this, perhaps for the first time.

Psychoanalytic writer Gérard Wajcman has proposed that the tableau-window signaled the birth of a new type of human: the spectator. By looking out through the window, then looking at paintings, this new human species acquired a new taste for the things of this world. This new pleasure of seeing was also a taste for watching, staring, and spying. In describing the tableau as window, Wajcman paints a portrait of the new human as someone who has a taste for seeing secrets. The pleasure of seeing is really the pleasure of seeing what is not supposed to be seen. Art, then, in the form of painting, becomes the new window from which we experience the world—in secret.

It is an unheralded accomplishment of the Renaissance that secrecy became a positive value. Before the Renaissance, the divine light of the creator illuminated every part of the visible world so that religious doctrine could be scripted on every possible surface. It is a supreme irony that we call this time the Dark Ages, for it was anything but. Light as a religious doctrine worked to ensure that every part of the world was visible and therefore accountable to the ecclesiastical order. Good subjects should be lit and in the gaze of others, especially from above, at all times. This was truly the first surveillance society. There was no shade.

Alberti's window and the epoch that made his ideas possible transformed darkness, and the very idea of secrecy, into a positive form of existence. In facilitating an encounter with the visible world that resisted the tempting certainty of religious dogma—for learning, experimentation, and above all pleasure—Alberti's window also gave new value to the parts of the world that were not visible. It was in the shadows, beyond the engulfing light of divinity, that Wajcman's spectator came



of age. The window became the nexus for two new powers: the first framed the world in a new light for secular contemplation, the second protected the new subject in the darkness of an interior, allowing him or her to gaze out the window with indiscretion: to study, to measure, to adore. “Free will” is the scholastic name for the debate around this newly evolving right to secrecy. Darkness began to lose its dimension of dread and entered into a new dialogue with the living. Life in the shadows became a condition for the coming enlightenment.

### Shadows

In *De pictura*, Alberti cites the rhetorician Quintilian (35 AD–95 AD) and his theory on the origin of art. Quintilian thought art began when the shadows of bodies cast on the ground were traced. This primal scene folds neatly into ideas about art at the time, as it lends credibility to both mimesis and figuration, the two artistic ideals championed by Greek philosophers as foundational. Light first divides the world into the thing and its other, its shadow. This shadow then develops through technique to inhabit color, form, representation, narrative, illusion, and finally art. As the realization of a reality by way of an illusion of the thing itself, this second shadow—as art—acts like a strange mirror that offers a constructed and mediated reflection.

Myths and movies have used the notion of the reflection as a source of illusion and magic for as long as both have existed. When the mirror begins to speak, or when the echo becomes a voice, only then will a reflection truly become a place for us to reflect. This is what happens in Friedrich Nietzsche’s “The Wanderer and His Shadow” (1880). A man walking alone suddenly hears a voice that says, “As it is so long since I heard your voice, I would like to give you an opportunity of speaking.”<sup>1</sup> Startled by this invitation, the man interrogates the voice until he realizes (or accepts) that it is his shadow talking. And before

the hour and the light departs, the man talks and listens to his shadow, engaging in a conversation that increasingly sounds like a man talking to himself. The dialogue is transformed into a monologue, which nevertheless retains the tension of two voices arguing and agreeing on everything from the history of masters and slaves to the origins of knowledge, as well as the dreaded night.

The shadow returns in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). This time, the shadow is slave to Zarathustra, a wise man who has come down from his mountain of solitude to teach humankind the philosophy and price of living without God. Here, however, there is no conversation, only heartbreak. The shadow speaks and breaks Zarathustra's solitude, confessing how he has "haunted the remotest, coldest worlds" and has "passed over every crime once" to learn the truth of Zarathustra's lessons. And this is why the shadow speaks: the truth has left him cold.<sup>2</sup> Zarathustra's demands for a life lived in ruthless affirmation of individuality, beyond the confines of morality and order, has ironically drained life and its pleasures out of his shadow. Hearing this, Zarathustra becomes sad. He tells his shadow to take a rest in a cave up on the mountain and not to bother him anymore. Zarathustra then cuts and runs, promising that there will be dancing when night comes.

For Nietzsche, the shadow is the voice from the darkness that imbues self-awareness with all its potential. For Maxim Gorky, this voice comes not from the self or its other but from the future: a foreshadowing plus electricity. In his famous essay describing the experience of seeing a film projection by the Lumière brothers for the first time in 1896, he writes, "Last evening, I was in the Kingdom of the Shadows. If one could only convey the strangeness of this world. [Gray] rays of sunlight in a gray sky, gray eyes in a gray face, leaves as gray as cider. Not life, but the shadow of life. Not life's movement, but a sort of mute specter."<sup>3</sup> Gorky saw the screen peopled with shadows moving like the living dead and reacted with a mix of horror, awe, and

sadness. Perhaps it is the same kind of sadness Zarathustra felt listening to his shadow's lament. I imagine what Gorky saw in film was not the bright promise of a world transformed by this new, progressive art in the age of mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin had hoped. Rather, he read the lifeless images on the screen as shadows from the future, speaking in silent black and white, about the coming community dominated by an empire of electricity and mechanization. The melancholy of seeing film for the first time was not a reaction to its rough and technically impoverished image of the living but rather the sobering realization that there is truth to this image of impoverishment and that it above all speaks to the birth of a new kind of impoverished life.

Film did not remain in the shadows for long. Technology soon stripped film of its originary black-and-white outlines to project new images in color and sound. Progress continues to shape film to mimic a reality that rivals reality itself. The experience of seeing a kingdom of shadows on the screen is a distant memory as film (and now video and digital) severs its servitude to the thing that initially offered its ghostly other for reflection and transfiguration: lived experience. Everything on the screen is illuminated, which is to say, shadowless.

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The image of progress in art is paid for by the sacrifice of its originary form: the shadow. If light is the cunning of reason that imagines the development of artistic technique as tantamount to the expansion of the self through vision, darkness must be dominated as a principle of necessity in order for that vision—and the very idea of progress—to be perpetually renewed.

## Light

The ability of the eye to register details, distinctions of color and contrast, and the complex play of perspectives decreases as the magnitude of light increases. This is a well-known phenomenon in photometry (the science of measuring light) and deserves to be better known in art. It can help articulate the measure and value of an aesthetic that is increasingly sought after in moving-image works: blindingness.

The brightness of light sets the conceptual tone for how images emerge from the darkness—of a monitor, room, or theater. The brighter the light, the greater the spectrum between darkness and lightness, and the more the work imposes on the viewer a sense of the plenipotentiary that she first experienced from the other side of the tableau-window: in the sun and among the trees.

I remember once not so long ago a day so bright my eyes tingled. I not only saw the ravens and dying leaves fluttering from the wind as images but also felt them as sensations. The tingling on my eyes triggered by the relentless light changed in value and degree depending on the shapes, colors, and above all movements that entered my field of vision. I felt the velocity of the flapping wings and the iridescent black body as much as I saw the raven flying past: it tickled. Light conducted like a live wire the electricity of the thing as feeling. This day, much like any other day, revealed to me that the import of moving images is expressed most forcefully in its brightness, not its content. Mimesis, the philosophical name for the longing to imitate nature by way of technique, enters into artworks before the first image even flickers into view. It appears the moment light emanates from the tableau-window and penetrates the darkness of space with such intensity that the viewer imagines the work is as “bright as day.”

Fundamentally, there are two ways moving-image works pursue the mimetic ideal of brightness. Technology is one.

Industries that profit from visualizing information (including the entertainment industry) drive the desire for greater and greater lumens. Art benefits from this drive and uses the technology to produce bigger and brighter works. Multiplication is the other way. Installations using multiple projections and screens transform the architectural into the archi-luminal. Walls that once sheltered and separated become translucent and fluid with movement and light, binding together to form a sensorial whole that feels at once like the expanse of a panorama and the cell of a panopticon. Brightness becomes not only an attribute of the image but also a luminous value in the space, carving out of the darkness an environment that engulfs the body of the viewer in the cold radiance of recorded light.

The idea that brighter is better must be cut from the same cloth as last year's model, bigger is better. Both ideas presume that aesthetic progress demands the domination of the senses. An artwork must use an overwhelming force of light for the senses to register its import. But our senses are not that dumb. The eye is not a thoughtless hole that can be easily filled and flooded by the rush of luminous images. It will instead choke the light from entering the retina and reduce sensitivity to stimuli. In the face of art that imagines force as the image of plentitude, the eye makes due by seeing less. We do not necessarily see more the more we are given (or forced) to see.

So it is interesting to wonder why so much work made in the spirit of the contemporary moving image wants to blind us. It is also tempting to approach this question from the viewpoint of religious imagery. The blindingness of contemporary light echoes in form depictions of divine illumination that appear in countless paintings, frescos, and cheap votive illustrations found in tourist shops. It is a light that shines like a protective halo out from behind gods and saints, framing and isolating the figure from the rest of the pictorial space. Sometimes it radiates out of clouds or beams down from mountaintops, illuminating

the scene below with such force that visual details dissolve into a bright haze. It is, in other words, a transcendental light. It is a force from the great beyond (and usually from above) that illuminates the scene in the window and at the same time functions to mark within the picture the limits of human vision.

If at one time the tableau-window offered us shelter from the unforgiving light of divinity to develop—in secret—the resources for a new order, the window, now inhabited by the electric light of the moving image, has recast the image of divine illumination into secular form so it may, once again, illuminate every corner of the visible world on both sides of the window. For what does blindingness stand for, as expressed by the dogged use of bigger and brighter imaging technologies and the installation of multiple projections in ever more elaborate configurations, if not the reappearance of transcendental light forcing its way through the tableau-window's surface to light both the scene and the viewer so that everything is illuminated, again? It's practically medieval.

I imagine this is what poet René Char had in mind when he wrote, "In this rotting light, darkness wouldn't be the worst state."<sup>4</sup>

### Tomorrow

In my bedroom, noon is the darkest time of day. There are two windows and both face east. In the morning, the sun rises and pours light through those windows, illuminating every corner of the room. But at noon, the sun is directly above the building and the morning light penetrating the windows retreats from the room, leaving darkness in its wake. But the room is not just dark. It is strangely still, as if time followed light's lead and left the room too. It is a short farewell. The sun soon breaks the stillness of noon and moves west. Sunlight penetrates my place once again, this time from the kitchen, where the windows face west. The rays of light stretch longer and longer and touch more

of the interior as the day wears on, until the bedroom becomes illuminated from the other side, by way of the opening that connects the bedroom to the kitchen. It's a small apartment.

Not all light retreats at noon. Slivers and other irregular shapes of light manage to make their way onto the walls and corners of the bedroom. This must be the work of indirect light, ricocheting off the side mirrors of cars parked on the street to hit the shiny new cell-phone tower recently erected on the roof of a building across the way, bouncing light through my window. The light and dark blurry shapes that show up at noon are craggy, delineated by the different surfaces that reflect the light and the trees and fire escapes that obstruct its circuitous path of travel. This light does not illuminate things to see per se. It is instead a kind of light that transmits—in its lack—the very shape of things.

A light that shows by not shining, this is the light at noon.

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- <sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 301.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for All and for None*, ed. Robert Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 221.
- <sup>3</sup> Maxim Gorky, "In the Kingdom of Shadows," cited in Chris Marker, *The Last Bolshevik* (1993).
- <sup>4</sup> René Char, "Scorned Illusions," in *This Smoke That Carries Us: Selected Poems*, trans. Susanne Dubroff (Buffalo, NY: White Pines Press, 2004), p. 165.

# Waiting for Godot in New Orleans

## An Artist Statement

“Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [Pause. Vehemently.] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?”

— Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

In November 2006, I visited New Orleans for the first time. The art gallery of Tulane University was exhibiting one of my animated projections, and the art department invited me to give a lecture. I readily accepted. It was a chance to see the city for myself. It was also a chance to visit with friends and colleagues like Bill Quigely. Bill was my lawyer in 2005 and defended me and other members of the Chicago-based antiwar group Voices in the Wilderness in federal court. The US government charged that Voices in the Wilderness broke the law by bringing aid and medicine to Iraq before and during the second Gulf War. An unjust law must be broken to serve a higher law called justice, Bill argued before the judge. I found it moving and convincing; unfortunately, the judge did not. We lost the case.

Bill and his wife Debbie (an oncology nurse) spent five days in New Orleans's Memorial Hospital without electricity or clean water or phones, trying to save people from the flooding during Hurricane Katrina. After the storm, Bill and Debbie



found refuge in Houston. They returned to New Orleans almost four months later and Bill began to write a series of articles exposing the absurdities of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the pathetic governmental response to rebuilding efforts, and the political fight over the rights of returning New Orleanians. Bill's writings were my first encounter with New Orleans after Katrina.

What surprised me about seeing New Orleans for the first time was that I couldn't put together a complete picture of the city. I expected comparative contrasts but not wholesale contradictions. Some neighborhoods, like the one around Tulane, seemed virtually untouched by Katrina. But in the Lower Ninth Ward and parts of Gentilly, the barren landscape brooded in silence. The streets were empty. There was still debris in lots where houses once stood. I didn't hear a single bird.

I have seen landscapes scarred by disasters of all sorts. In Baghdad, I saw kids playing soccer barefoot around the concrete rubble that resulted from the US shelling of buildings near the Tigris River. They seemed like the same kids I had witnessed playing on a ghostly Detroit side street during an enormous labor demonstration in 1999—with shoes but no shirts. Life wants to live, even if it's on broken concrete.

New Orleans was different. The streets were still, as if time had been swept away along with the houses. Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science-fiction movie. Waiting for a ride after visiting with some volunteers from Common Ground, a recovery and relief organization gutting houses in the Lower Ninth, I realized it looked less like a movie set than the stage setting for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence. What's more, there was a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and

funny things people do while they wait—for help, for food, for tomorrow. It was uncanny. Standing there at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes, I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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The longing for the new is a reminder of what is worth renewing. Seeing *Godot* embedded in the very fabric of the landscape of New Orleans was my way of reimagining the empty roads, the debris, and above all the bleak silence as more than the expression of mere collapse. Seeing gave way to scheming. How could it be done? Was it worth doing? I had never worked on a professional play, much less produced one outdoors, in the middle of a street intersection, in a city I had only come to know through a single visit and the work of Bill and other writers and activists. Making a play is also an inherently collaborative process, and I'm allergic to working with people. If someone were to stage *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of the street in the Lower Ninth and mobilize the given landscape to tell the twentieth century's most emblematic story on waiting, that someone would probably not be me.

I started asking around. I went back to New Orleans and talked to people about what they thought of the idea. Bill said, "Great, a public performance. I love it." I respect Bill very much but you can't trust a lawyer, even an antiwar lawyer. So I talked to more people.

Ronald Lewis, who lives in the Lower Ninth and runs a small museum in his backyard dedicated to the history and tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians, called The House of Dance and Feathers, had never seen *Godot* and so couldn't say whether it was a good idea. But he told me many art projects have come and gone without leaving anything. "You gotta leave something behind for the community," he told me. We talked some more. I

noticed on the ground the shadow of a tree similar to the leaning tree I saw at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes. I had recently finished a series of animated projections that deal with shadows, so I was sensitive to their mute presence. It occurred to me while listening to Ronald that *Godot* needed a shadow. I asked him what he thought about a fund that would be set up to shadow the production budget of the play at whatever the cost. These funds would stay in the neighborhoods where *Godot* would be staged in order to contribute to rebuilding efforts. "A shadow fund," I said. Ronald thought about it a bit and replied, "It's a start."

Artist Jana Napoli liked how staging the play outside connected with the city's storied tradition of street performance, from Mardi Gras to the "second lines," the parades that leisurely snake through streets and neighborhoods. Pamela Franco, an art historian from Tulane, thought the play should be in two locations, not just one. The sense and nonsense of waiting engulfed other neighborhoods in New Orleans as well, where people still lived in trailers almost two years after the storm, hoping for some type of relief from city, state, or federal authorities. To bring *Godot* to New Orleans, Pamela thought, meant that one had to expand the place where the tragicomedy of waiting occurs, beyond the borders of one neighborhood. "What about Gentilly?" Pamela asked.

Greta Gladney, an organizer who runs a local farmers' market in the Lower Ninth and whose husband Jim teaches at Frederick Douglass High School in the city, thought that, if such a project were to happen, the schools ought to be involved. Ron Bechet, an artist and professor at Xavier University, thought the same thing.

"If you want to do this, you got to spend the dime, and you got to spend the time," someone said to me. The idea of staging *Godot* in New Orleans began to take shape. I counted on how the naturally collaborative process of producing a play, in addition

to the necessary give and take of working on the streets, could help me reimagine how art—as the form freedom takes without the use of force—can enter and engage with the myriad dimensions of life lived in the midst of ruin without succumbing to the easy graces of reducing it to either knowledge or illustration of that life. It is fashionable today (still?) to claim that there is nothing new beyond our horizon of art, that everything worth doing has already been done. But this seems to me an altogether specious claim, for it ignores the vast undiscovered country of things that ought to be *undone*. In these great times, the terror of action *and* inaction shapes the burden of history. Perhaps the task of art today is to remake this burden by suspending the seemingly inexorable order of things (which gives the burden its weight) and allowing a kind of clearing to take place so that we can see and feel what is in fact worthless—and what is in truth worth renewing.

*Waiting for Godot* has been staged on Broadway (in 1956), at a prison (San Quentin), and in the middle of a war (during the siege of Sarajevo, directed by Susan Sontag). It is a simple story, told in two acts, about two tramps (we have other names for them today) waiting for someone named Godot, who never comes. In New Orleans in 2007, Godot is legion and it is not difficult to recognize the city through the play. Here, the burden of the new is to realize the play through the city.

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## Next Day, Same Place

After *Godot in New Orleans*

Some weeks ago in New York, a woman came up to me and introduced herself. She said her name was Linda, and she wanted to tell me how sorry she was that she didn't get a chance to see *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, 2007, last November. "That makes two of us," I replied. "I didn't see it either."

We both laughed. Linda didn't need an explanation. But if she did, this is what I would say to her:

Yes, I was there. But I didn't see it either because I was too distracted. It was difficult to focus on seeing the performances when I had to concentrate on all of the other parts of the project. Christopher McElroen, cofounder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem and the play's director, said to me at one point that the play was the smallest component and our biggest headache. He was right. More than right, he touched on the true scope of the project. We wanted the play to work—to work brilliantly even—on those streets, in that city. But to imagine that the play was the thing is to miss the thing. We didn't simply want to stage a site-specific performance of *Godot*. We wanted to create, in the process of staging the play, an image of art as a form of reason. What I mean is that we wanted to use the idea of doing the play as the departure point for inaugurating a series of causes and effects that would bind the artists, the people in New Orleans, and the city together in a relationship that would make each responsible for the other. The project, in other words, was an experiment in using art to organize a new image of life in the city two years after Hurricane Katrina. For instance, a large part of the project was simply spending time in New Orleans. And this came about because people told us we had to experience the city as they did if we wanted to do the play right. So we listened, and spent the entire fall there. I ended up volunteering to teach art courses at two universities, the Classical Theatre of Harlem

rehearsed and held workshops in different neighborhoods and schools, and Creative Time, the New York-based arts organization that sponsored the project, hosted dinners and panels. Our presence in the city in turn generated curiosity and talk. And this talk in turn generated more ideas—about what we should do and should not do with the play. The more we listened and followed, the more the city talked and took an interest in what we were doing. In time, this talking and listening changed every aspect of what we initially imagined *Godot* was going to be. And in turn, the people we were working with in the city shared in the responsibility for making the play happen: they saw that what they told us had real consequences. Understanding that words and deeds have real consequences and that these consequences have to be addressed and dealt with, if the words and deeds in fact matter, made the play concrete for everyone on and off that stage—or in our case, that empty street corner in the Lower Ninth Ward.

This call and response, this cause and effect, set in motion a chain reaction the end of which I still have yet to see. I suppose this is the other reason I didn't see the play. I didn't see the play because it didn't occur to me that the play was a play. I mean, of course it was a play. But out there on those five nights in November, in the middle of those empty and soundless streets, with those hundreds of people watching Gogo and Didi and Pozzo and Lucky and of course the boy, under that moonlight, seeing that levee three blocks away, hearing dogs bark and police sirens blare off in the distance, seeing those hundreds of people again, watching and laughing at two men fighting over a turnip—it didn't look like a play.

It looked more to me like the emphatic expression of a community trying to come to terms with the irreconcilability of it all. What happened, and what is still happening, makes no sense. This nonsense has its own reason. And this reason must not be the only one worth using to make sense of what

is happening to us, around us, against us. *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* wanted to create another reason, to make another kind of sense, because art, if it is in fact art, is the reason that makes reason ridiculous.

This is what I would say to Linda.

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## Sex and the New Way

Do you know (I am sure you do) how the law commands you as long as you breathe?

For the slave who has an owner is bound by law to its owner so long as he breathes. But if the owner dies, the slave is suspended from the law of the owner.

So then if, while the owner breathes, the slave is owned by another, we call the slave a freelancer. But if the owner is dead, the slave is freed from law, so that the slave is not a freelancer, although he is owned by another.

Can you see, dear you, that you are also dead to the law? You are owned by another, unknown to you, so that together you can bring forth a new way.

For when we were slaves, the way set by law worked within our inner folds to bring forth the gift of death.

But now we are suspended from the law, that which held us in a deadening, so that we shall serve a new pleasure, and not the old spirit.

What shall we say then? Is the law sex? Heavens no. But I had not known sex but by the law. For I had not known pleasure except the law had said I shall not please freelancelly.

But sex, in the throes of law, created in me all manners of lust. For without the law sex was dead.

I was alive without law once. But when I became lawful, sex became sex, and I died.

And the legislations, which led to more life, I found led to more death.

For sex, in the throes of law, seduced me, and killed me.

But the law is the whole, that which makes us wholly here. Justice is the common good.

Is it, then, the good that brings death to me? God no. But sex brings death when it becomes a good. Sex by law becomes sexual by nature.

We know today law is spirit. But I am flesh, bound by sex.

I want but I will not allow. I would but I will not. Hate is the only symmetry.

If then I do what I would not, in the common good, I enact the law.

But then it is not I that do it, but the sex as sex in me.

There are no goods in me. There is a will, but not the desire for law that makes goods.

I do not know the good from the goods.

Now sex is law when the good is present within us as goods. I do by law for good what is for goods.

I find then that law, in good, is in death.

Sex in life after law is the spirit of a new way: a profound lust. It is sex as reason against law making.

Oh poor randy man that I am! Who will undeaden the stiff sex before the law in me?

The flesh burns like embers. There is no light, only hot ashes from parts of old bodies.

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# Inner Law

The law of reason compels sex to greater and greater extremes.

Sex binds truth to rhythm.

~~Sex is sacred only when pornography is profane.~~

The virtue of pornography is solitude.

The window frames the sex and the sex frames the solitude.

Cumming is the moment at a standstill.

Sex unfolds in kairological time.

The scope of sex draws on the horizon set by a moment's notice.

Touch rhymes with much.

Conception without concept is ridiculous.

A concept not conceived is a truth that is not true.

The art of pornography turns out to be in.

Pornography takes time in a ruthless meter.

~~Without terror there is no pornography.~~

Pornography is sex divided, dividing to survive the sexuation of time.

All ideals lead toward solitude. Pornography is the essential solitude.

Sex is law in the real.

Law is sex in drag.

There is no one one.

There is no here here.

There is no there there.

The new way arrives in twos.

The function of sex today is to legislate.

~~Rhythm connects poetry and pornography.~~

Sex is a wish for togetherness doubling as a boundary.

~~Outside, there is such noise. It is the sound of sexuation.~~

The cock is a block.

There is no more more.

Divisions heighten the drives.

Thinking, like fucking, is bodiless.

A new pornography has the image of an odor.

The history of art is the progress myth of sex becoming law.

~~The law is frozen sex.~~

Pornography is sex as abstraction.

The law of nature is the myth of pornography.

~~Sex is silence in rhyme.~~

Pornography is pastoral.

Pornography is the expression of the nakedness of all relations.

It is not up to sex to tell us our truth.

Virtue is domination.

Under the law man groans.

*Nec spe nec metu.*

Sexuality makes a hole in truth.

Sexuality is the domain where no one knows what to do with what is true.

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Originally published as "Inner Law" on National Philistine website, 2010.  
[http://www.nationalphilistine.com/inner\\_law/](http://www.nationalphilistine.com/inner_law/).

## Questionnaire from Art School

*What was the most valuable lesson—whether in the classroom, during a crit, or from a fellow student—that you learned in school? Why? Who taught it to you?*

Amy Sillman said to me once, “Dumb people make great work, too.” The implication is that art is something you can’t simply think through. Art is form in the spirit of a question.

*In art school, did you learn how to sustain yourself as an artist, both creatively and professionally? Did you feel prepared to be an artist when you graduated?*

No. I still don’t feel prepared in that way. The school that I went to had little structure to it, rightly or wrongly. And I loved it. Fundamentally, I learned that people learn at their own pace. Never let schooling interfere with your education, as Mark Twain said.

*What matters most in art-making for you? Did art school have anything to do with you coming to understand this?*

I don’t know how to answer the first part of this question. The second part must be a yes, but I’m not sure how. My experience of art school was so unformatted that it bled into other kinds of school—the school of living in Chicago.

*Did your art school give you any sense of having an ethical commitment to the community that it was located in?*

No. Where I was, in downtown Chicago, you actually didn’t want to be a part of the very local community. The neighborhood where I lived, with other art students, outside of downtown, gave us more of a sense of participation. We started a gallery in the

neighborhood of Pilsen, on the South Side. This is a complicated question, but the school itself did not instill in us this sense of commitment. Then again, I never really plugged in to what the school might offer that would have given me that chance.

*With hindsight, would you do it the same way if you had the choice? If not, how would you have gone about your education as an artist?*

I don't know if I could have gone through my education any other way, so I wouldn't have done it another way. The way that I work tends to be riddled with contradiction, and so I went to school, tried to understand what was happening, and then deliberately didn't do it. I did something else. I had to do something in opposition, both in Chicago and at Bard. You go to school to be something else, and what you learn about being something else becomes you being a student.

*Does it make sense now for art schools to organize departments by discipline? Why or why not?*

Yes, I think it does, precisely because it is conservative, and it forces students to be progressive. And having the distinctions, in and of themselves, are important. If you don't, then the history and practice of art becomes one purely of intention, which I think is to the detriment of both art and artists.

*Should MFA programs resist or embrace the encroachment of the commercial art world?*

I think they should do neither. Such programs should make the consideration ridiculous. Doing either gives the market more value than it is actually worth. By making it seem ridiculous, in whatever way MFA programs can do so—parody, ridicule, irony—there is more room for people to make their own choices.

You can't help but see that people want to survive. If surviving means being in a gallery, then that's what people will do. Life has a perpetual sense of impoverishment to it, and if there's money to be made and survival to be had by selling artwork in a gallery, then people will do it. Hopefully, what we want out of art, though, isn't mere survival. Surviving isn't living. The logic of survival is so overwhelming that you want to hope art is a space where it doesn't dominate similarly. On the other hand, you can't give in. Hegel on systems: When systems become powerful, you can only do one thing—respect and despise them at the same time. The ethical stance is to keep it at a distance without fetishizing it.

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## Texts for Parkett

3.  
~~The floor forsee~~s  
~~The mutual loss of~~  
men and God.

~~Humbled by the ascension~~  
~~of surface,~~ they become  
free again,  
as ghosts.

4.  
~~Remember the~~  
~~Bourgeoisie?~~ Their  
acreage comes closest  
to the ~~mobile phone~~.

~~The model is new~~  
~~and the ring renews~~  
~~the sting of triumph.~~  
Like that dog.

5.  
~~There are two~~  
times. Chronos is what  
we measure ~~the day by~~.

~~Kairos~~ is what  
comes after.

6.  
~~Time passes,~~  
~~once in silence now~~  
~~in stereo.~~

The indirect light  
welcomes ~~this change but~~  
~~is unconvinced of~~  
the progress.

7.  
~~Progress is regression.~~  
~~Windows~~ should be  
broken ~~to serve~~  
the beginning.

8.  
~~No justice.~~  
~~No fees.~~

~~No justice.~~  
~~No keys.~~

~~The train that served~~  
~~as the metaphor for~~  
relativity, ~~has left.~~

9.  
 You ~~think~~  
~~things will end.~~  
 And ~~that will~~ be the opening.

I ~~want you to know~~  
~~things don't think~~ to end.  
 And ~~that is~~ the promise  
 and the threat.

10.  
 You are ~~dead to~~  
 the law.

~~The shadow knows.~~

11.  
 How many ~~times~~  
 can you return ~~on investment?~~

Silly. The window ~~frames~~ to  
 and ~~fro and frames~~ you.

~~There are no more~~ secrets.  
 And ~~hence, Value.~~

12.  
~~OMG cannibals run~~  
~~the economy!~~

~~No amount of Kashmir~~  
~~will do the trick.~~

~~But I'm down for~~ whatever.  
 Now ~~that Bush is gone.~~

13.  
~~The painter of Light,~~  
 and ~~the painter of~~  
 Modern Life  
 are ~~in a bar.~~

~~They drink to value,~~  
~~but remain~~ subjectless.

14.  
~~There is no other interior~~  
~~than the world.~~

~~A man wrote.~~

~~A window no longer~~  
~~framing and light~~  
~~no longer shining~~  
~~is testament enough~~  
 No?

15.

Relief ~~comes~~  
~~when the end~~  
is near.

Magic ~~comes~~ after.  
It is called fear.

16.

The shadow  
is a depthless  
transition from suture  
to the Real.

The surface the birds  
~~touch~~ is neither inside  
nor outside.

17.

Take that  
stain out. And  
you will find yourself  
not of this time.

But is in that time. The one  
the light strikes,  
in Serbian or Spanish or  
that shit they play  
in town.

18.

Meteorological thought  
eulogizes time by a  
succession of events.

The ideal storm is really  
the magic of naming.

And in naming, releasing.

19.

The wetness misunderstood  
as darkness  
moves across  
the field in  
4/4 time.

History does not repeat,  
but rhymes.

20.

The shape that  
color renounces  
happens to look a lot  
like Glenn Gould.

Via negativa is the way  
to reach it, provided it  
justify in costs, overruns,  
that kind of thing.

21.

There is a story  
~~about~~ a secret.

But who the hell  
knows it?

22.

The ~~pragmatists have~~  
~~it wrong.~~ What is  
left is not  
the ends of use.

They hang in the air  
like dancers, soaking the  
speed back into  
our idea of freedom.

23.

It is really ~~streaming~~ live.

Moment by moment  
by light in lieu  
of form.

Left by that bird and  
that shadow, ~~together and~~  
for everyone.

24.

The present  
no longer represents  
the real.

~~Exlxia lo revek~~  
~~koviv es cheaq ip~~  
~~dic dic po.~~

25.

Here's our,  
~~ghetto~~ story.

The gas holds  
the hum that  
powers a  
return to  
the exit.

It feels like nothing.  
But that is the point  
says Foucault, making  
noise.

26.

Miguel ~~wants~~  
~~me to rise up~~  
~~and sing~~

I would, ~~but~~  
~~the moral~~ force  
~~outside~~ my window

is ~~gunning, well~~ into  
~~the next century,~~  
for my pants.

27.

Black light solitude  
is a perverse  
freedom

28.

~~This morning's~~  
~~string~~ theory  
goes as follows:

Light is ~~the inverse~~  
~~of a slackening~~  
made real.

~~Apply it~~ with malice  
on ~~aching joints~~  
~~and floors.~~

29.

~~A life in~~ crime  
must ~~cross that line~~  
~~before the point~~  
left by ~~Xeno.~~

30.

~~The time to thug~~  
always comes  
~~too soon.~~

~~You trap all day and~~  
play all ~~night.~~

The clowns ~~meet~~  
~~down the block.~~

As a precaution.

31.

Echo reconciles. ~~Ask~~  
~~the shadow of the tree.~~

Or the ~~broken window~~  
~~about the slurry time~~  
~~that~~ bonds itself ~~in~~  
~~the thing.~~

---

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2010 excerpts of which were published in  
*Parkett* 88 (2011), pp. 88–92. Reprinted by  
permission.



## On the Difference between a Work and a Project

I make work and have done projects. Sometimes they are even called art (though not by me). It has never occurred to me to think about what distinguishes what is work and what is a project—until now. And I wonder if the use of “project” to describe what one makes coincides, at least incidentally, with the changing idea of work itself.

A work is work. But strangely, work has been decoupled in the last three decades from labor. What I mean is that the very notion of creating something—whether art or a toothbrush—has itself gone through a division of labor. It is possible to make a toothbrush and make it wildly popular without knowing or understanding or even caring about what a toothbrush actually is or does. Labor as productive power is now only one component among many others needed in order to bring something into being—which is to say, for this something to appear as part of a public.

This is perhaps why what was once called work can now be called (or wants to be known as) a project. A project encompasses the making of something that is not dependent on work to appear. A project feels as if there are many hands on deck, all serving a collective purpose, despite different interests and abilities. A project works by emanating the feel of a big tent. Or an office.

It's funny to think about this now because more people are out of work in the United States than at any other time since the 1970s. The official unemployment rate is currently 9.6 percent, but of course the official rate is much rosier than what is actually happening on the streets. People need work, but there doesn't seem to be any. How does finding work differ from making work?

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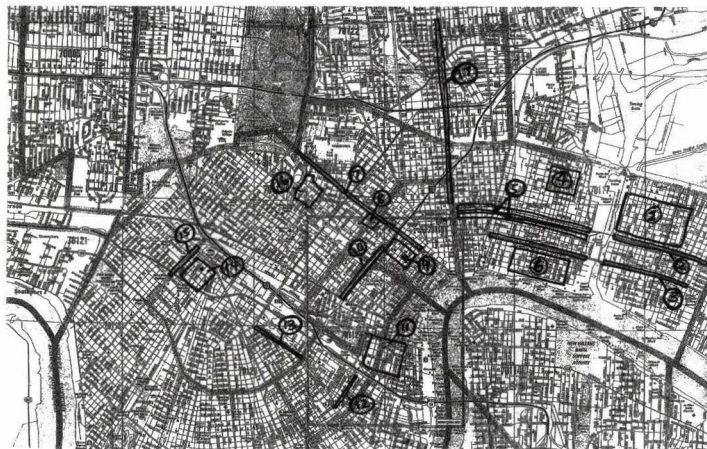


## X jxm vlr rpb pelria ilpb vlr

The first map I made was in 2004. It was done with a group calling themselves Friends of William Blake. I drew Manhattan south of Central Park and detailed all the events and activities in New York City affiliated with the 2004 Republican National Convention. The idea was to make a free map that helped people “get in or out of the way” of the RNC. It worked—to the extent that we showed both protesters and clueless conventioners in which strip-club the Utah Republican delegation was hosting a fund-raiser and the midtown location of the Dick Cheney gala. The map did not show directions as much as sow havoc.

I have made a number of maps since, all more or less useless for people looking for directions or tips on where to go. Some look like maps and others look like nothing in particular. I have learned that a good map shows you ways of getting lost that makes ways of getting where you want to go seem pointless or insignificant, wherever *there* may be. A good map is also a great place to hide things in plain sight, like messages, or pieces of information that should be preserved but not disclosed. *The purloined letter* as a compositional principle.

Take, for instance, this map.







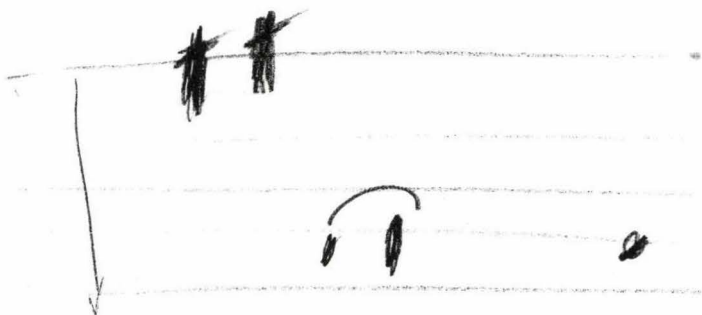
happened insofar as the drawing represents what the work should *not* be. *Godot* stayed true to form by becoming less than what I wanted and more of what it ought to be. In the end, there were no FEMA-like trailers in the background. Luckily there were no movie lights at the foot of the proscenium seating. And we never really had any street blockades, which made it possible for cars, bicyclists, or anyone walking in the neighborhood to wander onto the stage, which was really just the middle of a street intersection.

- BURNER
- GHOST
- TIME
- PROFIT / PROPHET
- NET
- GROSS
- TALK
- ALIEN
- SUCCESS
- INTENTIONS
- ORGANIZING
- COLLECTIVITY
- ARCHIVE
- FRONTS
- NECESSITY
- PROHIBITIONS
- STREETS
- OVERHEAD
- ENIGMAS
- HATERS
- PAPERWORK
- NATURE
- PEDAGOGY
- GOV'T
- REALIGNMENTS
- IGNORANCE
- "SHUT UP"
- NON-PROFITS
- FLATNESS (AFTER BOB)
- LOSS
- MAGICAL NAMES
- PARABASIS (AFTER AGAMBEN)
- PERIPHERY (SIDEWAYS WORK)
- ABANDONMENT

PROPHIT

ANABASISVIA  
NEGATIVA!

This list recounts the most memorable or useful words and phrases that I came across or heard during *Godot*. A burner, for example, is a disposable cell phone. I primarily used burners during my time in New Orleans because I had to limit the ability of people to reach me while I was working (or not working). I still use them today. In a way, this is the first conceptual map of the project. These key words and phrases became the coordinates for finding the grounding that eventually became the work. *Anabasis* is the name of a work by Greek writer and historian Xenophon. It is in essence a story about finding one's way home without knowing how. *Flatness* refers to the challenge of collapsing the distinction between foreground and background, or figure and ground, to create a compositional field devoid of any hierarchical order, where every element is equidistant from the imaginary membrane separating the outside and inside (of the work).



This is not a map. But it is something that I drew which eventually became an emblem of sorts for *Godot*. It is barely a drawing and hardly a score. Still, it's all here. Gogo and Didi.

Pozzo and Lucky. The boy. Whenever I had a spare moment during the production or when no one was around, I would take this out of a battered manila folder to look at it, and wonder.

Allegro? Moderato? Tutta Forza? Largo? Perdendosi?

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<http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=1432>. Reprinted by permission.

## Wanderlusting

What does it mean to change? No one steps in the same river twice, Heraclitus wrote. The world is unimaginably different now from what it was in 500 BC. For instance, many rivers today are now so polluted it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to step into them even once. But things are not *so* different that Heraclitus's insight doesn't ring true. Change is still an implacable, ever-present force, as momentous as it is banal. This is the cunning of change. Everything flows; nothing remains. And it happens whether we want it or not. Like time passing. Change is time rendered sensuous and real.

And yet when talk turns toward change, it is typically to complain about how little there is and how badly we need more of it, or at least the right kind. This is change that stirs the imagination because it is not destined by nature (as Heraclitus believed all change was) but directed by us. What we want when we demand change is not that things merely be different, but that they become better in accord with our desires. This is the kind of change people want to believe in because believing in it evokes the feeling that we have a say in how our lives unfold.

Change of this sort is not inexorable, but human (all too human, Nietzsche quips). It is the difference created by and for people. This is why calls for change are so seductive, because change of this kind is in essence social. It is often pleasing to be part of something more powerful than oneself and to hear what one wants reverberating in other voices. Calls for change are like the siren song, drawing those who hear them into the company of those who sing them. A community is, in a sense, those songs sung together, like a chorus.

It's no secret that people want change. But it is a mystery why those who want it most tend to do it least. It feels more the rule than the exception that those who wish most to change your mind about something tend to be unwilling to change their own



about anything. It is as if the power to change others depends on one's own obstinacy. Progress, in a sense, is the satisfaction of seeing others finally reaching the place where one happens already to stand. Change is what happens to other people: let them do the dirty work. Those in the know stay on higher ground. Is this why God sacrificed his one and only son for our salvation, instead of dying and saving humankind himself?

There is a kind of change that is neither inevitable nor imposed. It feels as rare as a blue moon and lights the night of the world just as brightly. External influences do not wholly force it into being, and one's inner disposition does not fully determine it as part of the natural course of one's development. And one never knows when it will come. There is no announcement. There is no planning for it. What's more, when it comes, it feels like something has gone wrong.

Sometimes when I make work, there is a moment when what I want to make and what I make it with fuse in such a way that the piece begins, against my intention, to take on a form of its own. It is as if I am no longer the prime mover. At this point what is in front of me becomes as strange to me as I am essentially to myself. This is the point I am always trying to reach.

It is a misstep that one keeps on taking. I look for this moment all the time, which is of course stupid. It never comes when one is looking. Still, I remain patient. What more can one do? Not much, except perhaps find solace in the fact that it has happened before and that it may happen again—if not to me, then perhaps to (or for) someone else not looking for it, but also not declining what it offers.

Which is what exactly? A chance to get lost, so to speak, in the act of making something that, over time, comes to remake the maker. He or she is irremediably different afterward to him- or herself and to others, and continues to be: wanderlusting as the way forward.

Consider Yvonne Rainer, who quit dance in the early 1970s—arguably at the height of her power and influence—to

pursue filmmaking. Of course, it was not completely out of the blue: Rainer had used projected and moving images in her work before. But to leave behind the work and world she had known as an artist and to devote herself to another set of concerns and forms are as remarkable as they are surprising. Over the next two decades she made seven feature films. Rainer finally returned to dance in 2000, which in some ways was as unexpected as her departure from it.

Or take Rimbaud, who wrote prose poems that changed the nature of poetry, only to abandon writing altogether to become a trader in Aden and then in East Africa. Being shot by his lover and mentor Paul Verlaine may have had something to do with the change, but there is also evidence to suggest he had already stopped writing, the bullet wound merely supplying the period at the end of a short and bright sentence. And what about Philip Guston, whose infamous return to representational painting after three decades of Abstract Expressionism drove everyone nuts? No one at the time could stomach the nervous lines and perversely fleshy colors, except de Kooning, apparently, who I think saw what Guston's bulbous heads and clown shoes really represented.

I want to call what I am describing the Guston moment. It is that moment when change is catalyzed into something neither wholly predictable nor fully determined. Guston stumbled upon a turning point in his work and kept turning. But what is interesting is that he wandered so far he found himself again. It's funny how that works. Others have found themselves this way. Duchamp retiring from making art. Dylan going electric. Saul becoming Paul.

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## On Volumes

Text for Documenta 13

One day in the studio, I picked my hardcover edition of Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena* off the floor. I ripped the pages from the binding and tore the loose sheets apart. I was about to tear the dusty canvas-and-cardboard cover in two when I noticed that—completely flattened and turned vertically—it looked familiar. There was something about the proportion of the rectangle, or maybe it was the worn cover fabric, that felt like dry, ashy skin.

I glued pieces of wood on the backside of the book cover to stiffen it up. I then hung it on a bare wall and left it there. Time passed. Nothing much happened.

One day, I began to paint on the cover. I painted three mountains, because its vertical dimensions seemed to call for a landscape. There are no mountains anywhere near my studio and my Internet connection was down, so I had to paint from memory.

When I'd finished, I looked at it and realized I had never seen these mountains in my life. They were foreign to me. I have been on mountains and have passed the time on a few, but not these. And the way they floated ever so slightly off the surface of the book only made them seem more alien and crude. But I was not displeased. Time was not wasted. And it was Sunday after all. They felt mocking, divine, and serene.

I began destroying more books to paint on them, on weekends. Each cover seemed to call for different things: some expressionistic, others naturalistic, still others plainly monochrome. I never read the books I tore apart.

Only later did I realize that what was being called for on the surface of these books-in-dissolution weren't images at all (although they are visual and material) but manifestations of notions that are also (and always) coming to their ends too, namely, Nature and Painting.

I grew up in the city so Nature is not something I feel I know a great deal about. I know even less about Painting. About the only thing I know is my sensitivity to light, and time passing. What more is there to know? Why it all ends, I suppose. But why the why?

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Originally published as an untitled text in *Documenta 13 3/3: The Guidebook* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012). Reprinted by permission.



**Fonts**

**and**

**Works**





# Alternumerics FAQ

## *What is Alternumerics?*

Alternumerics explores the relationship between language and interactivity by transforming the simple computer font into an art form that explores the fissure between what we write and what we mean. By replacing individual letters and numbers (known as *alphanumeric*s) with textual and graphic fragments that signify what is typed in radically different ways, Alternumerics transforms any computer connected to a printer into an interactive art-making installation.

There are currently four Alternumeric fonts.<sup>1</sup> They are Macintosh and Windows compatible and work with any application that uses fonts. Each font is accompanied with work that uses the font to explore the relationship between what is typed, what is translated, and—fundamentally—what is communicated when we use language to describe the pleasures of utopia, the slipperiness of the self, the friction of desire, and the poetry of silence.

## *What do you have against Helvetica?*

I don't remember why I began mutating fonts into forms that both reduce and expand the signifying possibilities of typefaces. It wasn't as if language had stopped working for me. I could still express love and malice and the infinite space of the future with the existing alphanumeric set on my keyboard: I could still write. But I wanted more. I got greedy. I wanted language to work only for me and no one else.

*Why fonts? Why not a Linux-based, MIDI-controlled linguistics database with an interactive satellite link to a camera spying on Japanese schoolgirls?*

First of all, it is easy to make fonts. Unlike other new-media art practices, the technologies used to make fonts have remained relatively unchanged. The politics of perpetual obsolescence in technology

forces most new-media art into a state of permanent retardation. Technology should never dictate the form; it can only dictate the field.

The field that fonts play in is expansive and intimate. It is loaded into your computer on a systems level, so any application that uses fonts can play. Word-processing applications become linguistic desiring machines; database software becomes Sadean regulator of philosophical pie charts and perverse graphs. Did I mention that fonts are very small? Their file size is invariably under 100K, so virtually any computer can work with them. Simple. Ubiquitous. Viral.

*What have you really done? Really.*

I have essentially reduced the material possibilities of these fonts to signify the immaterial by making the material more specific, more historical, less universal, and more accountable, to me. And like any system that reduces a world by trying to know it in full, it is tragic. Think Diderot's Encyclopedia. Think Socialism.

This is why the word "tragic" always comes to mind. These fonts write with scars from other bodies. They work like systems that bleed.

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<sup>1</sup> After the original fonts were posted online in 2000, seven more were made available for free download from 2002 to 2007. Starting in 2008, a new set of fonts were made as part of the ensemble of works that eventually became known as *Sade for Sade's Sake*. These twenty-one fonts technically function like the Alternumeric fonts but are aesthetically and philosophically specific to the *Sade* project.



I	DON'T REMEMBER	<del>I</del> <sup>M</sup> <del>IT</del> CAN'T BE SURE	NEVER GOT IT	I...
a	b	c	d	e
WILL FORGET IT	IMAGINE	ABLY MISREAD IT	APOLOGIZE	SOMETIMES I
k	l	m	n	o
OR MAYBE YOU	DON'T UNDERSTAND	LIZE THE GRAVITY	MAY NEVER KNOW	DON'T MEAN MUCH
u	v	w	x	y
<del>EVERY</del>	IT'S TOUGH, I KNOW)	(I'M NOT KIDDING)	(IT'S A BIT SAD)	<del>HOWEVER</del>
E	F	G	H	I
I AM NOT SURE,	AND THAT'S THAT	ALL VERY (USING)	(HOPE THIS HELPS)	(IT'S NOT THAT FUNNY)
O	P	Q	R	S
(YES? MAYBE?)	(IS THAT ALL?)	VANESSA,	AMANDA,	ANGLE,
Y	Z	1	2	3
JULIANNE,	REMEMBER	FUCK! ME?	WHAT?	IN GENERAL
9	0	!	@	#
SLEEP	WITH ME	LISTEN,	WHAT?	PLEASE
(	)	-	=	+



# Letter to a friend who doesn't seem to want to be my lover (2001, excerpt)

(IT'S A BIT SAD) I WANT TO EAT WANT TO EAT DON'T MEAN MUCH (MOST LIKELY) I... IMAGINE I NEVER KNOW I... NEVER GOT IT (FUNNY) DIDN'T MEAN THAT BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE I... PLAIN FORGOT I... (NO OTHER WAY I THINK) I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY (YES? MAYBE?) I... I DON'T MEAN IT PLAIN FORGOT -silence- ~~HOWEVER~~ NEVER KNOW REALLY, I PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... DON'T MEAN MUCH I... I DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I WILL FORGET YOU NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... PLAIN FORGOT APOLOGIZE I WILL FORGET IT I... -AMBIGUOUS- PLAIN FORGOT SOMETIMES I DON'T REMEMBER I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY I DON'T MEAN IT I... SOMETIMES I WILL FORGET YOU REALIZE THE GRAVITY I... I PLAIN FORGOT I... IMAGINE DON'T MEAN MUCH NEVER KNOW DON'T MEAN MUCH WANT TO EAT I... PLAIN FORGOT I APOLOGIZE NEVER GOT IT WANT TO EAT I... SOMETIMES I WANT TO EAT IMAGINE I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY DIDN'T MEAN THAT SOMETIMES I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE I APOLOGIZE PLAIN FORGOT REALIZE THE GRAVITY I IMAGINE IMAGINE SOMETIMES I REALIZE THE GRAVITY DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I NEVER GOT IT I... APOLOGIZE NEVER KNOW PLAIN FORGOT REALIZE THE GRAVITY DIDN'T MEAN THAT SOMETIMES I IMAGINE I... -silence- ~~HOWEVER~~ DON'T FOLLOW OR MAYBE YOU PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW BARELY COMPREHENDS SOMETIMES I NEVER KNOW DON'T REMEMBER I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE WILL FORGET IT WILL FORGET YOU DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I PROBABLY MISREAD IT (HONESTLY)(FUNNY) I WILL FORGET YOU I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY NEVER GOT IT I DON'T MEAN MUCH PLAIN FORGOT I BARELY COMPREHENDS SOMETIMES I -silence- (IT'S MEANINGLESS) I... DON'T MEAN IT I... DON'T MEAN MUCH SOMETIMES I OR MAYBE YOU NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... DON'T MEAN IT I... DON'T UNDERSTAND BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE BARELY COMPREHEND WILL FORGET YOU DON'T MEAN IT BECAUSE I I... APOLOGIZE NEVER GOT IT PLAIN FORGOT WHAT? WILL FORGET YOU I PROBABLY MISREAD IT BECAUSE I IMAGINE DON'T MEAN MUCH CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT. ~~HOWEVER~~ REALIZE THE GRAVITY SOMETIMES I DON'T MEAN IT WILL FORGET IT REALIZE THE GRAVITY BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I BARELY COMPREHEND DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I OR MAYBE YOU WANT TO EAT SOMETIMES I WILL FORGET YOU PROBABLY MISREAD IT I... NEVER GOT IT BECAUSE I I I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I DON'T UNDERSTAND BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW PLAIN FORGOT I APOLOGIZE NEVER GOT IT REALIZE THE GRAVITY I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY I... APOLOGIZE NEVER KNOW NEVER KNOW SOMETIMES I (HONESTLY)(FUNNY) NEVER KNOW SOMETIMES I REALIZE THE GRAVITY DON'T MEAN IT BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW I... I DON'T REMEMBER SOMETIMES I OR MAYBE YOU NEVER KNOW NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... WANT TO EAT I... SOMETIMES I WANT TO EAT IMAGINE I... WANT TO EAT DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I NEVER KNOW I... PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE BARELY COMPREHEND NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... WANT TO EAT DON'T MEAN IT I... PLAIN FORGOT BECAUSE I NEVER GOT IT I... APOLOGIZE NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I I IMAGINE BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE I OR MAYBE YOU BARELY COMPREHEND OR MAYBE YOU DON'T MEAN IT I NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE -silence- (IDON'T GET IT) DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY I... I NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... DON'T MEAN IT REALIZE THE GRAVITY I PLAIN FORGOT PROBABLY MISREAD IT BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT I... DON'T MEAN IT I DON'T REMEMBER IMAGINE I... DON'T REMEMBER OR MAYBE YOU NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW REALIZE THE GRAVITY I PLAIN FORGOT WANT TO EAT DON'T MEAN IT SOMETIMES I NEVER GOT IT OR MAYBE YOU <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I

## LETTER TO A FRIEND

VANESSA, DON'T UNDERSTAND I...-silence- (NO OTHER WAY I THINK) SOMETIMES I SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE I...  
 BARELY COMPREHEND SOMETIMES I NEVER KNOW PLAIN FORGOT I... DON'T MEAN IT BECAUSE I SOMETIMES I  
 OR MAYBE YOU PLAIN FORGOT IMAGINE DON'T MEAN MUCH DIDN'T MEAN THAT OR MAYBE YOU DON'T MEAN IT  
 NEVER KNOW I APOLOGIZE NEVER GOT IT NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... WANT TO EAT SOMETIMES I  
 IMAGINE BECAUSE I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE I... NEVER GOT IT BECAUSE I NEVER GOT IT APOLOGIZE REALLY, I  
 NEVER KNOW OR MAYBE YOU PLAIN FORGOT I... NEVER KNOW I... I DON'T MEAN IT BARELY COMPREHEND I  
 PLAIN FORGOT -ANNOY ME!!- REALIZE THE GRAVITY DIDN'T MEAN THAT BECAUSE I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE  
 DIDN'T MEAN THAT BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT I IMAGINE REALIZE THE GRAVITY I DON'T MEAN MUCH  
 PLAIN FORGOT I WANT TO EAT SOMETIMES I PLAIN FORGOT BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I DON'T UNDERSTAND  
 I... PLAIN FORGOT BECAUSE I BARELY COMPREHEND APOLOGIZE -silence-  
 (NO OTHER WAY I THINK) SOMETIMES I REALIZE THE GRAVITY BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW REALLY, I PLAIN FORGOT  
 DON'T REMEMBER I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE WILL FORGET IT NEVER KNOWS SOMETIMES I PROBABLY MISREAD IT  
 DON'T MEAN MUCH BARELY COMPREHEND DON'T MEAN IT BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE NEVER GOT IT -silence-  
 (I DON'T GET IT) I... I <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE DIDN'T MEAN THAT BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE BARELY COMPREHEND IMAGINE  
 SOMETIMES I I NEVER GOT IT NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT PLAIN FORGOT I...  
 PROBABLY MISREAD IT I... PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW I... DON'T MEAN IT BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT IMAGINE  
 BECAUSE I BARELY COMPREHEND DIDN'T MEAN THAT NEVER KNOW PLAIN FORGOT SOMETIMES I ~~NEVER KNOW~~  
 DIDN'T MEAN THAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND I... NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I PROBABLY MISREAD IT I... NEVER KNOW  
 SOMETIMES I REALIZE THE GRAVITY SOMETIMES I DON'T MEAN IT WILL FORGET IT SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE  
 PROBABLY MISREAD IT DON'T MEAN MUCH SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW OR MAYBE YOU  
 WILL FORGET YOU WILL FORGET YOU -silence- ~~NEVER KNOW~~ NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT SOMETIMES I  
 OR MAYBE YOU BARELY COMPREHEND DIDN'T MEAN THAT NEVER KNOW ~~NEVER KNOW~~ REALIZE THE GRAVITY  
 SOMETIMES I OR MAYBE YOU IMAGINE NEVER GOT IT DON'T MEAN IT OR MAYBE YOU IMAGINE I... NEVER KNOW  
 DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... REALIZE THE GRAVITY SOMETIMES I DON'T MEAN IT IMAGINE NEVER GOT IT BECAUSE I  
 WILL FORGET YOU SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE IMAGINE DON'T MEAN MUCH ~~NEVER KNOW~~ DIDN'T MEAN THAT I  
 NEVER GOT IT NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I PROBABLY MISREAD IT I...-silence- (NO OTHER WAY I THINK) SOMETIMES I  
 REALIZE THE GRAVITY NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I NEVER KNOW ~~NEVER KNOW~~ DIDN'T MEAN THAT I  
 DON'T UNDERSTAND I... BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT  
 SOMETIMES I IMAGINE I NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE SOMETIMES I WILL FORGET YOU  
 REALIZE THE GRAVITY SOMETIMES I DON'T MEAN IT WILL FORGET IT BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE BARELY COMPREHEND  
 DON'T REMEMBER DON'T MEAN MUCH PROBABLY MISREAD IT DON'T MEAN MUCH PLAIN FORGOT I... IMAGINE  
 WILL FORGET YOU <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE SOMETIMES I APOLOGIZE PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW I APOLOGIZE  
 NEVER KNOW IMAGINE DON'T MEAN MUCH BECAUSE I PLAIN FORGOT PLAIN FORGOT NEVER KNOW I DON'T MEAN IT  
 NEVER KNOW BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE BARELY COMPREHEND NEVER KNOW SOMETIMES I  
 NEVER KNOW OR MAYBE YOU DON'T MEAN IT APOLOGIZE PROBABLY MISREAD IT I...  
 BECAUSE I APOLOGIZE NEVER KNOW SOMETIMES I I  
 DON'T REMEMBER I PLAIN FORGOT WILL FORGET IT I... NEVER KNOW <sup>WON'T</sup> ~~CAN'T~~ BE SURE I PLAIN FORGOT I...-silence-  
~~NEVER KNOW~~ NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I... DON'T MEAN IT  
 NEVER KNOW DIDN'T MEAN THAT I APOLOGIZE

so hot	sweet thang	touch me	faster	(you)
a	b	c	d	e
freak me	the pleasure	love me more	feels nice	oh
k	l	m	n	o
(he)	oh beautiful	I feel it	let's do it	so silky
u	v	w	x	y
don't	it hurts	I'm bleeding	that's enough	oh god stop
E	F	G	H	I
help me	please don't	you're hurting me	help me	rape
O	P	Q	R	S
can't breathe	not happening	yeah	yeah	yeah
Y	Z	1	2	3
yeah	yeah	no	no	no
9	0	!	@	#
stud	angel	(a noise)	oh sugar	no
[	]	-	=	+



hold me

f

tonight

g

oh god

h

(me)

i

don't go

j

you complete me

p

I want you

q

baby

r

don't stop

s

oh girl

t

so much love

z

stop

A

I mean it

B

get off me

C

please stop

D

the pain

J

let go

K

don't do this

L

hands off

M

grow up

N

back off

T

(he)

U

it's not funny

V

someone help

W

I'm begging you

X

yeah

4

yeah

5

yeah

6

yeah

7

yeah

8

no

\$

no

%

no

^

no

&

no

\*

(screams)

,

(silence)

.

(in a whisper)

?

more

/

(with fanfare)

\

GALANTER  
FROM THE 19TH CENTURY  
amorous  
corporations  
WIVES DANIELE

a

LITTLE PIES  
but gingerly  
SWEET CREAMS

b

LIVERS  
a longing  
PHILANTHROPY

c

REVOLUTION  
domestic  
destiny  
FINE WEATHER

d

YOU  
desire  
A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

e

DISTRIBUTE IT  
luxury  
(external)  
PARIS IN WINTER

k

love  
FATTY DUCK  
ELLIPSE

l

ELITE  
luxury  
(internal)  
PHO TAI

m

LIBERATE  
southern  
fluid FEMALE

n

AN INEPPORTABLE SOFTNESS  
go on  
HARMONY

o

MONEY  
unescapable  
EXCESS ATTRACTION

u

barbarism  
PHILOSOPHY

v

TRUTH  
progressive  
series  
MANGOU

w

HYPERMILA  
ambition

x

CASTRATE  
northern  
fluid  
MALE

y

{endives}—

E

{future<sup>the</sup>}—

F

{great<sup>deposable</sup>}—

G

{bope}—

H

{industrialists}—

I

{opulence}—

O

{philosophers}—  
handprint

P

{quiche}—

Q

{roasts}—  
propaganda post

R

{socialists}—

S

{yams}—

Y

{zoo}—  
A ZOO

Z

COUNTDOWN SERIES  
1st phase  
WILD, PEACEFUL BEASTS

1

SATISFACTORY  
2nd phase  
OF NO GREAT INTEREST

2

PATRIARCHAL  
3rd phase  
YOUNG & BRILLIANT  
(182 CHINA)

3

A NEW CREATION  
9th phase  
AN AMOROUS MADNESS

9

ASCENDING HARMONY  
10th phase  
SELF-CLEAVING HEAVEN

0

WAXING HARMONY  
11th phase  
YOUTH BECOMES USEFUL

!

GRADIATING HARMONY  
12th phase  
RISE MEETING GREAT DATE

@

HARMONYISM (OR QUINTINE)  
13th phase  
JUSTICE FOR THE DEAD  
(COVER PAGE)

#

DECLINING PLUMITUD  
19th phase  
AMOROUS FUTURE

(

DESCENDING HARMONY  
20th phase  
END OF PLUMITUD BEHOLD  
THE GREAT HEAVEN (THIS PAGE)

)

{meaning}—

-

{passion}—

=

{fiction}—

+

~~CIRCLE~~  
friendship

f

~~BRILLIANT LOVE~~  
the social compass

g

~~incoherent household~~  
RANDOM UNHAPPINESS

h

~~human passion~~  
A PROMISE  
social mechanism

i

~~SPLENDID TOPHABIES~~  
—a phalanx  
RADIANTLY WEALTHY

j

~~paternity~~  
PARANOID

p

~~truth~~ ~~GRAFFITI~~  
AWKWARD

q

~~advent of happiness~~  
5 MEALS A DAY

r

~~usefulness~~  
pleasure

s

~~NOBLY WEAKNESS~~  
treachery  
CIVILIZATION

t

~~a shadow~~  
HAPPINESS CRACK

z

{alternatives}  
to this ugliness

A

{bunnies}—

B

{capitalists}—

C

{deers}—

D

~~an attractive~~  
{justice}—

J

{kinship}—

K

{multiple  
lovers}—

L

{marmalade}—

M

{necessity}—

N

{table wine}—

T

{utopia}—

U

{violence}—

V

~~finger~~  
{wafers}—

W

{unknown}—

X

~~BARBARISM~~  
4th phase  
BETTER THAN CHINA

4

~~CIVILIZATION~~  
5th phase  
YOU ARE HERE

5

~~QUANTITISM~~  
6th phase  
NEONOLIBERALISM  
(NO COGNATE AT ALL)

6

~~DAWN OF HAPPINESS~~  
7th phase  
SOCIALISM AND GOOD FOOD

7

~~ADVENT OF HAPPINESS~~  
8th phase  
COMPLEX ORDER  
OF PASSIONS

8

~~A SPLENDID PLAYTAU~~  
14th phase  
AMERICAN HAPPINESS

\$

~~SLIGHT INCLINE~~  
15th phase  
EVEN MORE ARITHMETIC COFFEE

%

~~SEPTIGENERIC CREATION~~  
16th phase  
AN ANCHORING PLANTING

^

~~APICE OF HAPPINESS~~  
17th phase  
INTERLUDE OF ABOUT 1800 YAS

&

~~DESCENDING HARMONY~~  
18th phase  
COWHILL FROM DEER

\*

—a sorry state

,

~~without reason~~ ~~HOPE~~

.

{civilization}

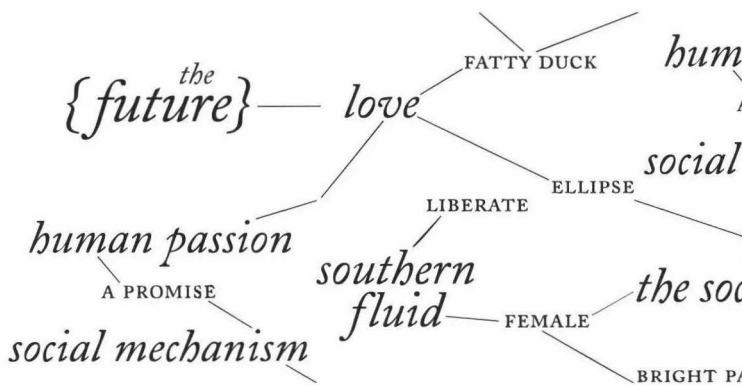
?

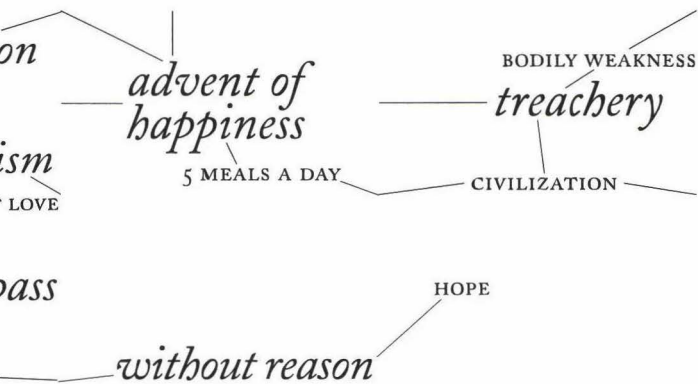
France is a scholar's hell

/

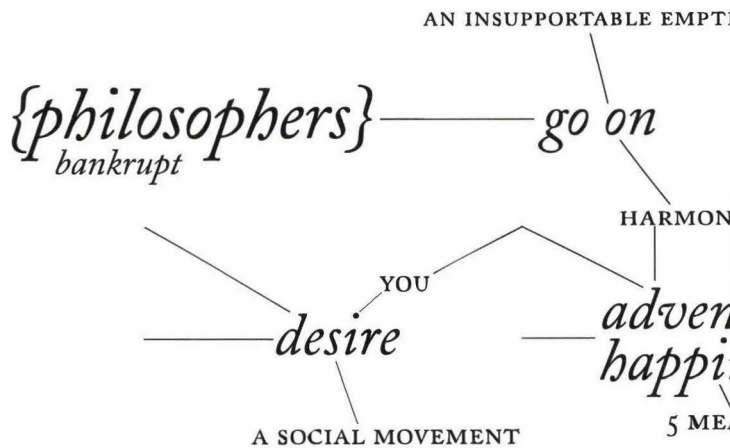
utopia is a state of society  
which more could no longer  
originate further

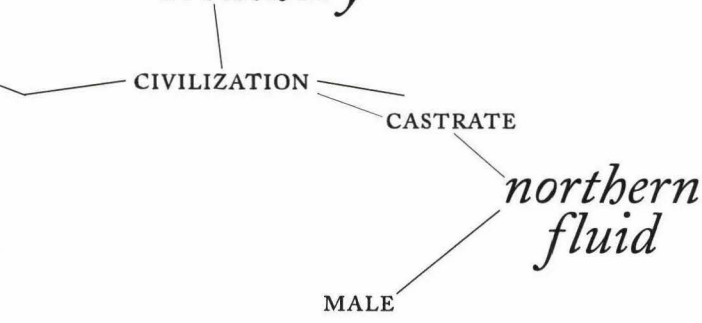
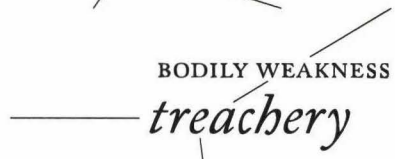
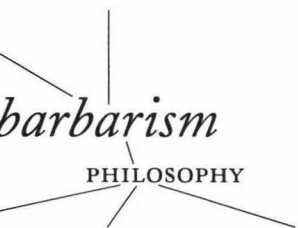
~



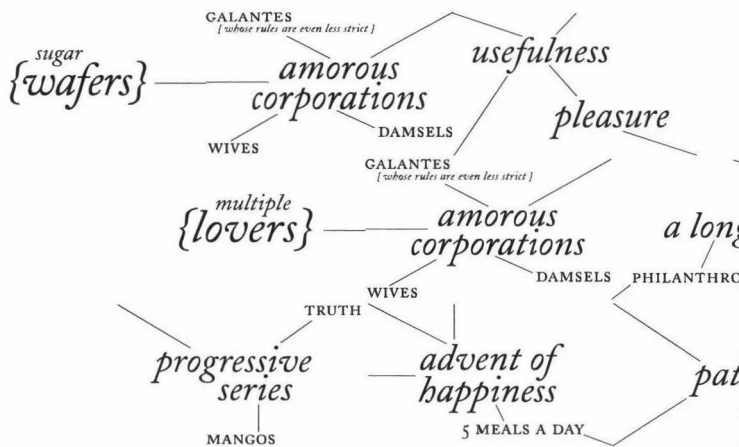


Flirting.

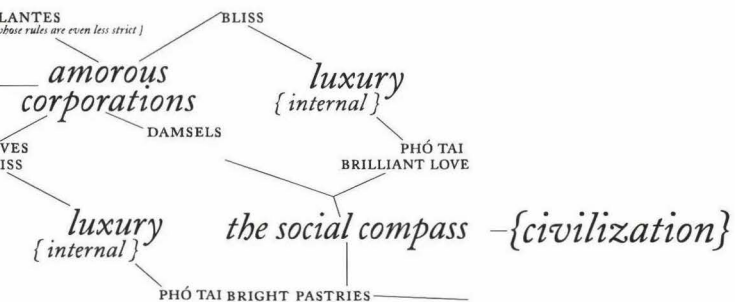




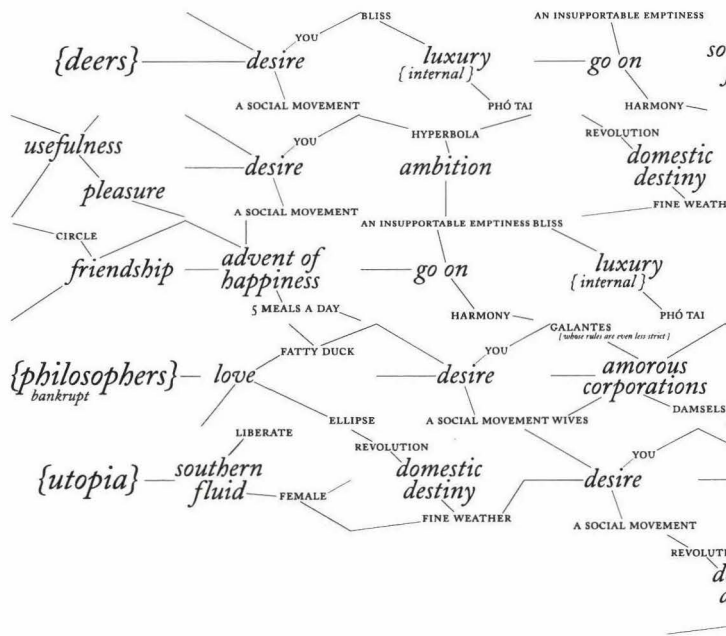
Poverty

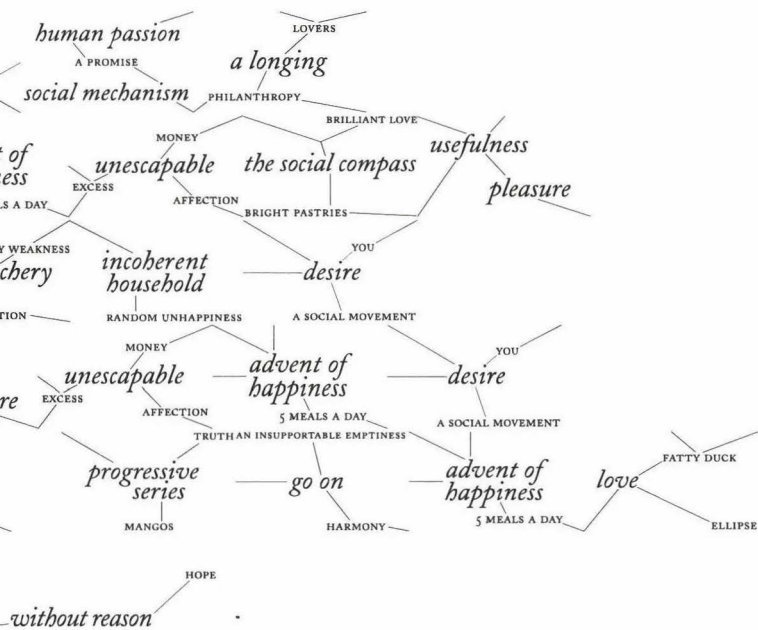






Was Lacan wrong?





Demonic sex drugs from the Pleasure Underworld.

white space

a

white space

b

white space

c

white space

d

white space

e

white space

k

white space

l

white space

m

white space

n

white space

o

white space

u

white space

v

white space

w

white space

x

white space

y

( )

E

+ some

F

white space

G

white space

H

( )

I

Like  
a g(host)

O

here

P

white space

Q

white space

R

come

S

remember

Y

break the  
day +

Z

1

2

3

white space

9

\*

0

white space

!

white space

@

white space

#

white space

(

white space

)

white space

-

white space

=

white space

+

white space

f

white space

g

white space

h

white space

i

white space

j

white space

p

white space

q

white space

r

white space

s

white space

t

white space

z

white space

A

some breezy

B

and ( see )

C

warming

D

white space

J

white space

K

( )

L

white space

M

( )

N

white space

T

white space

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white space

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# The text you write must desire me (2002)

( )

( )

( )

( )

( )

( )

come

( )

( )

come

come and ( see )

some breezy

remember

( ) ( )

and ( see )

come

warming + some

remember

warming

remember

come

( ) ( )  
( )  
( )

some breezy

( )

( )

( )  
( )

( )

warming      and ( see )warming  
Like      warming  
a      g(host)

+ some

\* ↓ ↓  
\* \* \*

+ some

+ some

( )

) ( \* ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓  
\* \* \* \* \*



( )

here

here



a

WOMEN DON'T GET AIDS  
THEY JUST DIE FROM IT

b

THE GOVERNMENT HAS  
BLOOD ON ITS HANDS

c

QUESTION EXPERTS

d



e

STONEWALL  
WAS A ROOF

k

FIGHT FOR THE LIVING

l

REMEMBER THE DEAD

m

AIDS IS A GLOBAL  
CRISIS

n



o



u

CLEAN YOUR WORKS

v

TARGET CITY HALL

w

I HATE STRAIGHTS

x



y



E



THEQUE-FATOU

F



KATAHAMAN-KAAKATAM

G



TAVSHED-DOD

H



I



O



صوت: صوت

P



TACRE-MOARTE

Q



DEGGUDE-MAYDE

R



ACCON-VIDA

S



Y



KIROB-MOUT

Z



HOW MANY MORE?

1



HOW MANY MORE?

2



HOW MANY MORE?

3



9



HOW MANY MORE?

0



!



@



#



[



]



-



=



+



f



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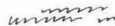
u



v



w



x



y

*Useless*

E

*sex, the dumplings*

F

*an inhuman ethic*

G

*to remain weak*

H

*a password*

I

*I demand*

O

*like an itch*

P

*so do it*

Q

*but be decent*

R

*to disappear...*

S

*giddy*

Y

*only one song*

Z

*I'm*

1

*wachos machine*

2

*a difficult map*

3

*a haunted house*

9

*You're*

0



!



@



#



(



)



-



=



+



f

g



h



i



j



p



q



r



s



t



z

a simple desire,

A

'till I vomit

B

soon, soon,

C

without reason

D

your dys...

J

a kind of ...

K

over and over,

L

true measure

M

to eat

N

to fuck

T

or leave me

U



V

avoune control

W

to be tired

X

black

4

a patient

5

a dying patient

6

a fasciat

7

a school boy

8



\$



%



^

?

&



\*

I want

,

a fence

.



?

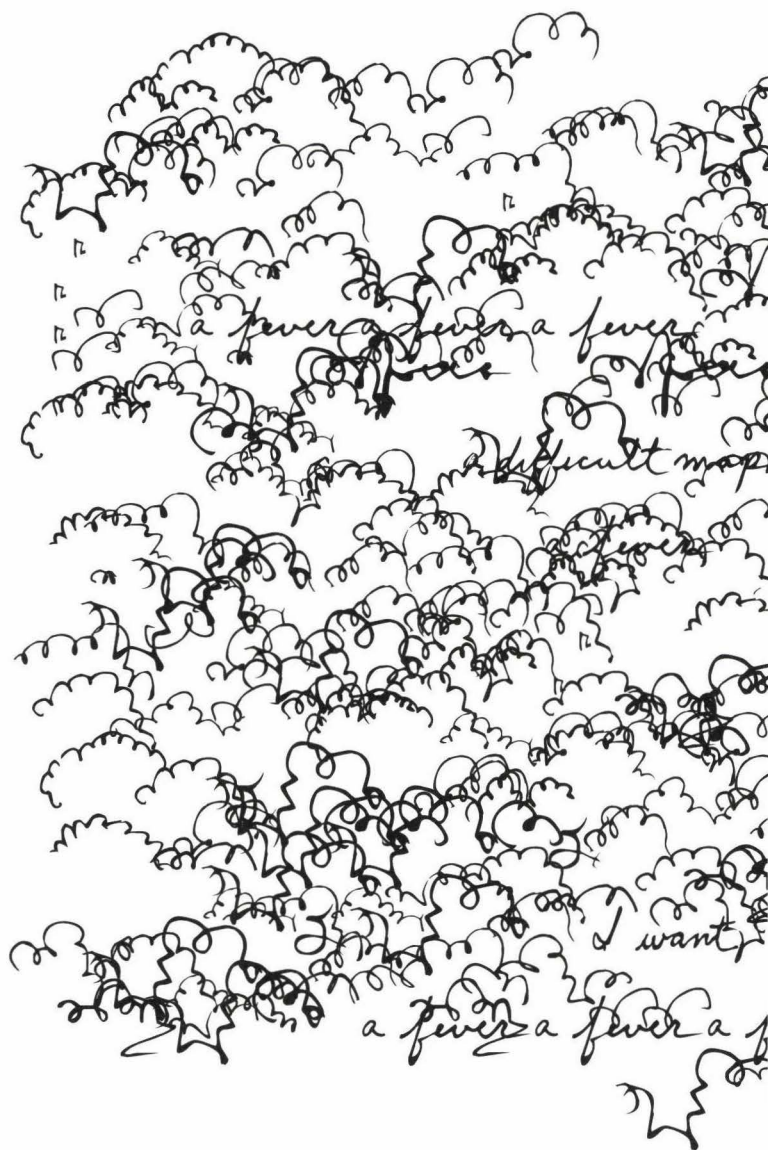


[



]

## An email from Aviv (2002)





a

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Q



R



S



Y



Z

**WE WANT FREEDOM**

1

**WE WANT FULL EMPLOYMENT FOR OUR PEOPLE**

2

**WE WANT AN END TO ROBBERY BY THE CAPITALIST OF OUR BLACK COMMUNITY**

3

**WE WANT BLACK PEOPLE WHOSE BLOODSHED TO TRAIL TO BE TRIED BY A JURY OF THEIR PEERS IN FEDERAL COURTS FROM ANY COMMUNITY AS SOON AS THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES**

9

**WE WANT LAND, BREAD, HOUSING, EDUCATION, JUSTICE, AND PEACE**

0



!



@



#



[



]



-



=



+



f



g



h



i



j



p



q



r



s



t



z



A



B



C



D



J



K



L



M



N



T



U



V



W



X

**WE WANT DECENT HOUSING, FIT FOR SHELTER OF HUMAN BEINGS**

4



\$



,

**WE WANT EDUCATION THAT EXPOSES THE TRUE NATURE OF THIS DECADENT AMERICAN SOCIETY**

5



%



.

**WE WANT ALL BLACK MEN TO BE EXEMPT FROM MILITARY SERVICE**

6



^



?

**WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO POLICE BRUTALITY AND MURDER OF BLACK PEOPLE**

7



&



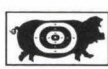
/

**WE WANT FREEDOM FOR ALL BLACK MEN HELD IN FEDERAL, STATE, COUNTY AND CITY PRISONS AND JAILS**

8



\*



\

blah	blah	blah	blah	blah
a	b	c	d	e
blah	blah	blah	blah	blah
k	l	m	n	o
blah	blah	blah	blah	blah
u	v	w	x	y
Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah
E	F	G	H	I
Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah
O	P	Q	R	S
Blah	Blah	1	2	3
Y	Z	1	2	3
9	0	!	@	#
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+
(	)	-	=	+

blah	blah	blah	blah	blah
f	g	h	i	j

blah	blah	blah	blah	blah
p	q	r	s	t

blah	Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah
z	A	B	C	D

Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah
J	K	L	M	N

Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah	Blah
T	U	V	W	X

4	5	6	7	8
---	---	---	---	---

4	5	6	7	8
---	---	---	---	---

\$	%	^	&	*
----	---	---	---	---

\$	%	^	&	*
----	---	---	---	---

,	.	?	/	~
---	---	---	---	---

,	.	?	/	~
---	---	---	---	---

# The United States constitution (2006, excerpt)

Blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah , blah blah Blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah , blah blah blah blah -  
blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah , blah blah blah blah blah  
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Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah Blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah

## Blah blah blah blah blah . Blah .

Blah blah blah blah blah 1.  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
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Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah , blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah .

Blah blah blah blah blah blah . 2.

Blah blah blah blah blah 1: Blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
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Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah -  
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Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah .

Blah blah blah blah 2: Blah blah Blah blah blah blah  
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blah blah blah blah blah blah blah , blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah .

Blah blah blah 3: Blah blah blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah





blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah -  
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Blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah ,  
blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah .  
Blah blah blah blah 4: Blah blah blah blah blah blah -  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah , blah Blah -  
blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah Blah .  
Blah blah blah 5: Blah blah Blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah blah blah  
Blah blah blah blah ; blah blah blah  
blah blah blah Blah blah blah  
blah Blah blah blah blah blah .

Blah blah blah blah . 3.

Blah blah blah 1: Blah blah Blah blah  
blah Blah blah Blah

a	b	c	d	e
k	l	m	n	o
u	v	w	x	y
E	F	G	H	I
O	P	Q	R	S
Y	Z	1	2	3
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

f

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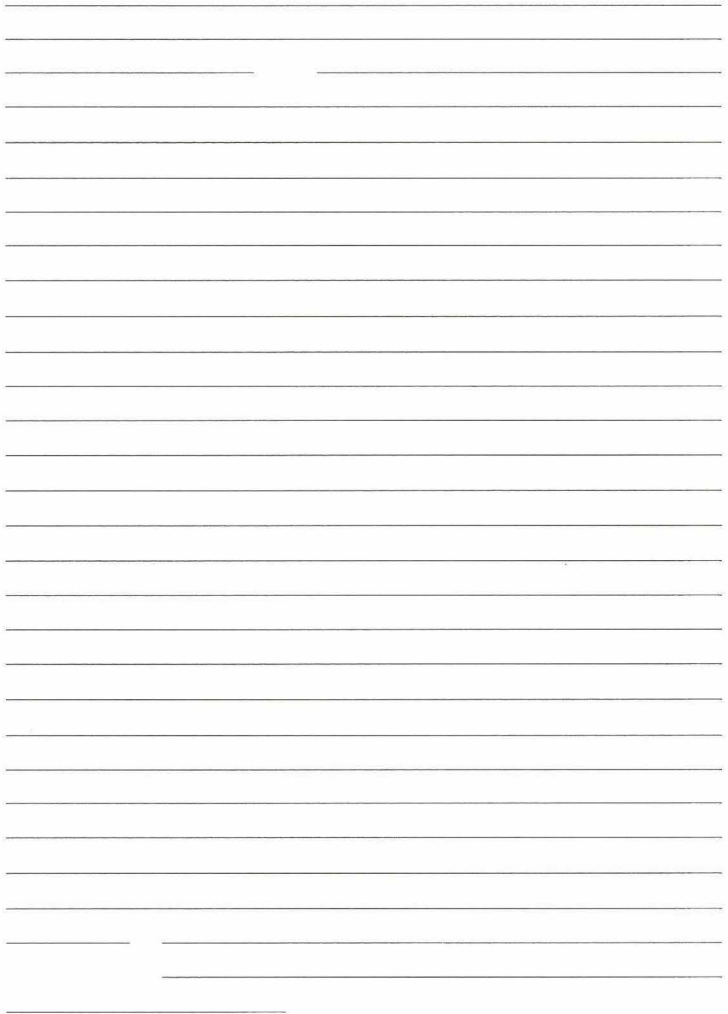
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[

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]

# Mortgage refinance spam as unevenly lined note paper (2001, excerpt)



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stop,	closer,	tighter,	wider,	there,
a	b	c	d	e
wake up,	stay,	harder,	turn,	rise,
k	l	m	n	o
wrong,	stoop,	open,	sit,	shhh,
u	v	w	x	y
I said	nothing...	a pity...	not hard...	impotent...
E	F	G	H	I
I said	a joke...	no luck...	shit...	futile...
O	P	Q	R	S
aw snap...	a failure...	cry,	moan,	think,
Y	Z	1	2	3
whimper,	hum,	do it,	now,	do it,
9	0	!	@	#
do it,	do it,	do it,	now,	do it,
(	)	-	=	+



higher, f	enough, g	deeper, h	shutup, i	hold it, j
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down, p	no— q	bend, r	come, s	don't, t
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slow, z	I said A	awful... B	a waste... C	misery... D
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a shame... J	limp... K	fuck... L	useless... M	a dud... N
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I said T	I said U	no luck... V	hopeless... W	soft... X
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yell, 4	whisper, 5	reason, 6	breathe, 7	scream, 8
------------	---------------	--------------	---------------	--------------

do it, \$	%	do it, ^	do it, &	do it, *
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I said ,	just... .	now, ?	now, [	now, ]
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rub your a	mound, b	cock and c	armpit, d	fuck your e
balls and k	pussy, wet l	nose and m	crack and n	hit your o
eat your u	nipple, v	lips and w	feet, x	ear and y
Grab my E	Slowly I F	Master, G	More more H	Frig that I
Frig my O	Whore, P	Cunt, Q	Robot, R	First I S
Highness, Y	Soon I Z	1 hour 1	2 hours 2	3 times, 3
9 times, 9	whenever 0	scream. !	yell, @	whimper, #
broken (	bloody )	pungent -	admire that =	plus +

slit and f	knee and g	hit that, h	suck your i	tits and j
cum, p	cunt and q	mouth, r	ass and s	hole and t
dick and z	Bite my A	Fucker, B	Slut, C	Father, D
Yes yes J	Next I K	Dog, L	Then M	laugh, N
Now I T	Eat my U	Faster I V	Slave, W	Daddy, X
4 times, 4	5 hours 5	6 times, 6	7 days 7	8 days 8
again \$	%	^	laugh, &	squalid *
laugh, ,	you know what. .	and then? ?	disgusting [	revolting ]

<i>hmm</i>	<i>hhhhm</i>	<i>ssmm</i>	good boy	<i>mmm</i>
a	b	c	d	e
<i>mmor</i>	harder	<i>mmf</i>	<i>oooh</i>	<i>glupp</i>
k	l	m	n	o
<i>oh mm</i>	<i>mhm</i>	so big	<i>yaa</i>	<i>ulp</i>
u	v	w	x	y
next	next	next	next	okay you
E	F	G	H	I
come on	come on	come on	come on	come on
O	P	Q	R	S
don't be shy	don't be shy	super	nice job	great job
Y	Z	1	2	3
so talented	so lucky			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

right there	<i>ah</i>	so good	<i>hm</i>	<i>oh</i>
f	g	h	i	j
<i>umm</i>	<i>unng</i>	ah yes	yes yes	<i>mmn</i>
p	q	r	s	t
<i>mmm</i>	now you	come on	now you	now you
z	A	B	C	D
okay you	okay you	okay you	okay you	okay you
J	K	L	M	N
now you	don't be shy	don't be shy	don't be shy	don't be shy
T	U	V	W	X
so smart	so pretty	so tight	so fragrant	so sweet
4	5	6	7	8
\$	%	^	&	*
faster	oh boy			
,	.	?	[	]

anxiety,	metamorphosis	symbolic	sadism,	ideal
a	b	c	d	e
zoophilia,	hysteria,	incest,	delirium	trans-
k	l	m	n	o
homo-	epileptic	fetishistic	pedophilia,	masochism,
u	v	w	x	y
I see	a symptom of	I see	I see	I see
E	F	G	H	I
my guess is	a case of	I see	I see	a case of
O	P	Q	R	S
I see	I see	elementary	hyper-	antipathic
Y	Z	1	2	3
alleged	paretic	lustmurder	weakness	satyriasis
9	0	!	@	#
mania	mania			
(	)	-	=	+

paranoia,	fetishism,	unconscious	hetero-	perversion,
f	g	h	i	j
sexually	nympho-	lust, or	dementia,	psycho-
p	q	r	s	t
necrophilic	I see	a case of	a symptom of	a sign of
z	A	B	C	D
I see	I see	my guess is	I see	I see
J	K	L	M	N
I see	a symptom of	I see	a symptom of	I see
T	U	V	W	X
transitory	demented	periodical	religious	homicidal
4	5	6	7	8
bondage			exhibitionism	anaesthesia
\$	%	^	&	*
n other words,	which means,			
,	.	?	[	]

## Oh Bishop X

For God's Sake Clean a Hole Yourself!! (2008)

nothing...rise, bend,  
a pity...rise,  
wider, come,  
futile...stop,  
wake up, there,  
a waste...stay, there, stop, turn,  
stop,  
not hard... rise, stay, there,  
aw snap...rise, wrong, bend,  
come, there, stay, higher, do it, do it,  
do it,

## Oh Blangis

So street, mo Deep, I luv Mo'Nique. (2008)

First I hit your  
ass and hole and mouth,  
fuck your fuck your hole and laugh,  
nose and hit your  
Father, fuck your fuck your cum,  
laugh,  
Frig that pussy, wet  
eat your nipple, Then hit your crack and suck your  
cunt and  
eat your  
you know what.



## Oh Boy

The harpy is past caring. (2008)

now you  
 so good *mmm* so good  
*hmm* ah yes *umm ulp hm*  
 yes yes  
*umm hmm* yes yes *mmm*  
*ssmm hmm*  
 ah yes  
*hm oooh*  
*ah*  
 oh boy

## Oh Doctor Ebing

Your tennis needs improvement. But your fury pleases me. Again? (2008)

I see trans-homo-lust, or  
 psycho-ideal delirium  
 delirium hetero-dementia,  
 delirium ideal  
 ideal sadism, dementia,  
 hetero-hetero-incest, sexually lust, or trans-epileptic ideal incest, ideal delirium psycho-  
 which means,  
 a case of homo-psycho-masochism,  
 trans-homo-lust, or  
 paranoia, homo-lust, or  
 masochism, sexually  
 hysteria, ideal anxiety, dementia, ideal dementia,  
 incest, ideal which means,  
 I see fetishism,  
 anxiety,  
 hetero-delirium

and	licking	in red,	in sweat,	and me,
a	b	c	d	e
in gray,	in hues,	on top	in tongues,	petting
k	l	m	n	o
encunting	in pink	stroking	in green	cumming,
u	v	w	x	y
She knew	He and he	She welcomed	They knew	We together
E	F	G	H	I
We welcomed	He saw	Few sang	A few	We saw
O	P	Q	R	S
No one saw	None welcomed	gasping,	laughing,	sighing,
Y	Z	1	2	3
panting,	breathing,			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

with him	in yellow,	until blue,	she	shaking
f	g	h	i	j

sucking,	in curious poses,	Rrose,	and I,	fucking
p	q	r	s	t

until dawn,	We sang	She and she	He knew	She saw
z	A	B	C	D

They sang	They together	They saw	They welcomed	Some knew
J	K	L	M	N

We know	She sang	None knew	He welcomed	Nobody
T	U	V	W	X

giggling,	cooing,	teasing,	joking,	moaning,
4	5	6	7	8

\$	%	^	&	*
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in heat,	to be.	and true.		
,	.	?	[	]

<i>hmm</i>	<i>hhhhm</i>	<i>ssmm</i>	<i>mmd</i>	<i>mmm</i>
a	b	c	d	e
<i>mmor</i>	so good	<i>mmf</i>	good girl	<i>umm</i>
k	l	m	n	o
<i>oh mm</i>	<i>glech</i>	th's good	<i>yaa</i>	<i>ulp</i>
u	v	w	x	y
next	next	next	next	okay you
E	F	G	H	I
come on	come on	come on	come on	come on
O	P	Q	R	S
don't be shy	don't be shy	super	nice job	great job
Y	Z	1	2	3
so talented	so lucky			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

*oh*                      *ah*                      *sssh*                      *ahhh*                      th's it

f                          g                          h                          i                          j

so nice                      *unng*                      ah yes                      *mhn*                      *mmn*

p                          q                          r                          s                          t

*mmm*                      now you                      come on                      now you                      now you

z                          A                          B                          C                          D

okay you                      okay you                      okay you                      okay you                      okay you

J                          K                          L                          M                          N

now you                      don't be shy                      don't be shy                      don't be shy                      don't be shy

T                          U                          V                          W                          X

so smart                      so pretty                      so tight                      so fragrant                      so sweet

4                          5                          6                          7                          8

\$                          %                          ^                          &                          \*

right there                      *mmm*

,                          .                          ?                          [                          ]

I am	restrained as	a nurse,	a virgin,	like
a	b	c	d	e
a horse,	thunder,	a trick,	a whore,	as
k	l	m	n	o
become	wretched as	a dolphin,	passive as	a mother,
u	v	w	x	y
Me	For you,	For you,	For you,	Finally
E	F	G	H	I
Me	For you,	For you,	For you,	For you,
O	P	Q	R	S
For you,	For you,	—O	—M	—:)
Y	Z	1	2	3
—iee	—gone	...	...	...
9	0	!	@	#
...	...	...	...	...
(	)	-	=	+

a student, f	supple, g	moonlight, h	I am i	a music, j
lightning, p	tight q	a tutor, r	sublime, s	visible as t
a bear, z	Me A	For you, B	For you, C	For you, D
For you, J	For you, K	For you, L	For you, M	For you, N
Cum now T	Me U	For you, V	For you, W	For you, X
—J 4	—Ss 5	—two 6	—bird 7	—Cn 8
... \$	%	... ^	... &	... *
a turning, ,	a gift. .	... ?	... [	... ]

take	then and	here there,	here and	fuck
a	b	c	d	e
oh fuck	there and	it here,	it and	fuck
k	l	m	n	o
fuck	now and	them and	ah	again
u	v	w	x	y
oh	oh Ebing	oh Juliette	oh girl	oh
E	F	G	H	I
oh	oh Marlo	oh Seduca	oh Nastya	sweet
O	P	Q	R	S
oh Godot	oh daddy	in time	in rhyme	in place
Y	Z	1	2	3
for me	for you			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+



it there,	more	him here,	suck	go go
f	g	h	i	j
here here,	haa	him and	her and	that and
p	q	r	s	t
aah	oh	oh Bishop	oh Narcisse	oh Justine
z	A	B	C	D
oh boy	oh Gertrude	Oh Hodarlin	oh yes	oh no
J	K	L	M	N
Oh ho	oh	oh Vienna	oh Junior	oh Apollo
T	U	V	W	X
in case	in full	for sho	at home	in tomb
4	5	6	7	8
\$	%	^	&	*
...	...			
,	.	?	[	]

## Oh Gertrude

If the heart still bubbles it is because the puddle has not been drained, and the fact of its bubbling more fiercely than ever is a sign that it is ready to receive consolation from the waste that splutters most, when the bath is nearly empty. (2008)

We together with him fucking until blue, and me, until blue, and me, and Rose, fucking and I, fucking she in hues, in hues, licking encunting licking licking in hues, and me, and I, she fucking she and I, licking and me, in red, and encunting and I, and me, fucking until blue, and me, sucking, encunting in sweat, in sweat, in hues, and me, until blue, and and I, in tongues, petting fucking licking and me, and me, in tongues, in sweat, Rose, and she in tongues, and me, in sweat, in heat, and in tongues, in sweat, fucking until blue, and me, with him and in red, fucking petting with him she fucking and I, licking encunting licking licking in hues, she in tongues, in yellow, on top petting

Rose, and me, with him she and me, Rose, in red, and me, in hues, cumming, fucking until blue, and in tongues, and me, in pink and me, Rose, she and I, and and I, she in yellow, in tongues, fucking until blue, and fucking she fucking she and I, Rose, and me, and in sweat, cumming, fucking petting

Rose, and me, in red, and me, she in pink and me, in red, petting in tongues, and I, petting in hues, and fucking she petting in tongues, with him Rose, petting on top fucking until blue, and me, stroking and and I, fucking and me, fucking until blue, and fucking and I, sucking, in hues, encunting fucking fucking and me, Rose, and I, on top petting and I, fucking in heat, stroking until blue, and me, in tongues, fucking until blue, and me, licking and fucking until blue, she and I, in tongues, and me, and Rose, in hues, cumming, and me, on top sucking, fucking cumming, to be.

## Oh Girl

I'm fine. Sleepy, that's all. (2008)

okay you *mmf*  
*oh ahhh* good girl  
 good girl *mmm*  
 come on so good *mmm mmm*  
 so nice *ulp* right there  
*mmn sssh hmm mmn*  
*mhn hmm*  
 so good  
 so good  
*mmm*

## Oh Ho\_Darlin

Pop is in it to kill it, for reals. (2008)

For you, as lightning,  
 I am sublime,  
 I am a whore,  
 I am visible as  
 visible as  
 as a horse, I am thunder, thunder,  
 I am  
 visible as a turning,  
 a student, as a tutor,  
 a tutor, like  
 I am thunder, sublime,  
 a gift.

## Oh hO

The organ of taste, BELIEVE ME, is thick but not so long.

Tant pis. (2009)

Oh ho him here,  
 fuck fuck him and  
 more take it and fuck it there,  
 that and take her and that and fuck  
 ...oh Bishop  
 oh Oh Hodarlin  
 oh  
 oh oh Vienna  
 oh oh yes oh ...  
 suck her and that and him here, suck here there,  
 oh fuck then and fuck that and it and fuck that and her and fuck  
 there and fuck it and more ...  
 Oh ho take  
 it and that and  
 here here, suck  
 her and ...

fuck me	jesus	so hard	there,	yes
a	b	c	d	e
christ	please	so wet	don't stop,	more
k	l	m	n	o
ride me	so huuuge	so good	do it	hurt it
u	v	w	x	y
you ass	you bitch	you hole	you boner	you dick
E	F	G	H	I
you pig	you shit	you slob	you slut	you cunt
O	P	Q	R	S
you tool	you critic	<i>oh mmn</i>	<i>aw mm</i>	<i>mm ya</i>
Y	Z	1	2	3
<i>ohhh</i>	<i>ahmm</i>	<i>aw</i>		<i>awww</i>
9	0	!	@	#
<i>ohga ga</i>	<i>ohga ga</i>	<i>ehah</i>	<i>hmghm</i>	<i>ahahh</i>
(	)	-	=	+

more f	keep going g	yes yes h	oh god i	like that, j
faster p	okay now, q	hit that r	harder s	oh shit t
fuck z	you fuck A	you pussy B	you dog C	you whore D
you bum J	you fucker K	you freak L	you scum M	you animal N
cum T	you fag U	you bush V	you sissy W	you twat X
<i>ah ah</i> 4	<i>oh ther</i> 5	<i>aw ssh</i> 6	<i>yah yah</i> 7	<i>mm ah</i> 8
suck me \$	%	^	<i>aaah</i> &	<i>mmlg</i> *
go on ,	come on .	<i>ohmm</i> ?	<i>oooh</i> [	<i>hooo</i> ]

repeatedly	violate,	rob,	flog,	I will
a	b	c	d	e
mutilate,	sodomize,	waterboard,	abuse,	I will
k	l	m	n	o
by law	gangbang,	shit on,	creampie,	brand,
u	v	w	x	y
So mercifully	For God	For heaven	For deliverance	So lawfully
E	F	G	H	I
So legally	For profit	For victory	For principle	For freedom
O	P	Q	R	S
For law	For nothing	for an hour,	for 40 days,	for 40 nights,
Y	Z	1	2	3
for long time,	for who knows,	and then	and then	and then
9	0	!	@	#
and then	and then	and then	and then	and then
(	)	-	=	+

torture, f	analize, g	for virtue, h	I will i	tie up, j
humiliate, p	pill fuck, q	deceive, r	rape, s	fuck, t
sacrifice, z	So dutifully A	For family B	For morality C	For loyalty D
For grace J	For kin K	For duty L	For purity M	For me N
I will T	So humbly U	For fun V	For us W	For truth X
for 3K, 4	for 6K, 5	for nothing, 6	for friendship, 7	for 401K, 8
and then \$	%	and then ^	and then &	and then *
and ,	you. .	and then ?	and then [	and then ]

repeatedly a	violated, b	robbed, c	flogged, d	I was e
mutilated, k	sodomized, l	waterboarded, m	abused, n	I was o
horribly u	gangbanged, v	shat upon, w	creampied, x	branded, y
So savagely E	For God F	For heaven G	For deliverance H	So badly I
So terribly O	For congress P	For senator Q	For principle R	For freedom S
For solidarity Y	For nothing Z	for 1 day 1	for 3 Fridays 2	for 8 days 3
for 2 days 9	for long time 0	and then !	and then @	and then #
and then (	and then )	and then -	and then =	and then +



tortured, f	analized, g	for virtue, h	I was i	tied up, j
humiliated, p	pill fucked, q	deceived, r	raped, s	fucked, t
sacrificed, z	So cruelly A	For family B	For morality C	For loyalty D
For grace J	For kin K	For duty L	For country M	For father N
I was, T	So wrongly U	For you V	For reason W	For us X
for 6 days 4	for a week 5	for 13 hours 6	for 8 years 7	for a bit 8
and then \$	%	and then ^	and then &	and then *
forgive me, ,	but no matter. .	and then? ?	and then [	and then ]

please	fuck me,	you like nice,	it's nice	please
a	b	c	d	e
suck me,	I swear,	nice is good	let me	please
k	l	m	n	o
please	just here,	just there,	rape me,	just the tip,
u	v	w	x	y
I mean it,	I need it,	sweetie	I can't stop,	I want it,
E	F	G	H	I
I want it,	I need it,	I love it,	darling	I want it,
O	P	Q	R	S
I love it,	pretty	1 time	2 times	3 times
Y	Z	1	2	3
9 times	10 times			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

I'm nice	just let me	it's so nice,	please	buttfuck me,
f	g	h	i	j

just a bit,	eat me,	I promise	won't hurt	come on
p	q	r	s	t

finger me,	I want it,	I mean it,	I need it,	sugar
z	A	B	C	D

I can't stop,	I can't stop,	honey	bunny	I see it,
J	K	L	M	N

I want it,	I mean it,	I love it,	baby	I need it,
T	U	V	W	X

4 times	5 times	6 times	7 times	8 times
4	5	6	7	8

\$	%	^	&	*
----	---	---	---	---

shit—	...fuck...			
,	.	?	[	]

## Oh Juliette

The grammar of being is learned before the rules of language. The rest is silent. (2008)

cum yes yes yes keep going hit that fuck me so wet so wet fuck me hit that  
more more jesus yes oh god don't stop, keep going oh god harder  
please yes fuck me hit that don't stop, yes there,  
jesus yes more more hit that yes oh shit yes yes yes  
hit that ride me please yes harder more more  
please fuck me don't stop, keep going ride me fuck me keep going yes come on

cum yes yes yes hit that yes harder oh shit oh god harder harder oh god *ehah*  
please yes don't stop, oh shit come on

## Oh Junior George

How To Do It Right The First Time? And Can It Be Clueless Too? (2008)

For deliverance I will shit on,  
I will  
I will  
For loyalty I will  
So lawfully fuck,  
For principle  
I will analyze,  
for virtue, fuck,  
I will for virtue, I will  
For God  
I will deceive, rape, fuck,  
I will I will waterboard, I will  
and then

So dutifully abuse, flog,  
For morality repeatedly abuse,  
So lawfully  
fuck,  
For family  
I will  
For morality sodomize, by law I will sodomize,  
I will rape, rape,  
I will I will I will  
and then

## Oh Justine

1, 2, 3, 4, What The Hell Are We Fighting For!  
Five, Six, Seven, Eight, we demand authentic hate. (2008)

for 1 day forgive me,  
for 3 Fridays forgive me,  
for 8 days forgive me,  
for 6 days forgive me,  
For reason for virtue, repeatedly fucked, I was, for virtue, I was  
For deliverance I was sodomized, sodomized,  
So cruelly deceived, I was  
For reason I was  
For God I was analized, for virtue, fucked, I was abused, analized,  
For God I was deceived, and then

For God I was gangbanged, I was  
forgive me,  
For freedom I was creampied, forgive me,  
For freedom I was gangbanged, I was abused,  
forgive me,  
So savagely I was analized, for virtue, fucked, forgive me, shat upon,  
I was flogged,  
I was waterboarded, repeatedly abused, flogged,  
repeatedly horribly fucked, for virtue,  
I was abused, fucked, I was robbed, for virtue, repeatedly fucked,  
I was  
but no matter.

## Oh man

Something has to change. (2008)

I want it, please nice is good  
please  
come on it's so nice, please let me  
just let me  
it's so nice, please  
won't hurt  
come on please  
you like nice, it's so nice, please let me  
just let me  
please...fuck...

oh Jesus	own it	don't ask	take it	oh damn
a	b	c	d	e
own me	have me	stay	don't wait	oh God
k	l	m	n	o
oh son	come on	don't beg	don't beg	buy me
u	v	w	x	y
do it	longer,	handle it,	lick,	more,
E	F	G	H	I
stay,	deeper,	think,	touch,	yes,
O	P	Q	R	S
holy,	pray,	go on	go on	go on
Y	Z	1	2	3
go on	go on	!!!	...	...
9	0	!	@	#
...	...	...	...	...
(	)	-	=	+

open me	touch it	don't stop	oh holy	don't tell
f	g	h	i	j
sell it	don't leave	please	take me	have it
p	q	r	s	t
believe me	harder,	now,	here,	hold on,
z	A	B	C	D
grab on,	squeeze,	drink,	hot,	feel,
J	K	L	M	N
come,	there,	come,	ah,	delicious,
T	U	V	W	X
go on	go on	go on	go on	go on
4	5	6	7	8
...	...	...	...	...
\$	%	^	&	*
?%!	!# \$!	?!	...	...
,	.	?	[	]

yes	like this?	tell me,	teach me,	yes
a	b	c	d	e
like that?	go on	show me,	please sir	yes
k	l	m	n	o
yes	in there?	Jesus	that right?	god yes,
u	v	w	x	y
I deserve it,	I need it,	my god	I am yours,	I need it,
E	F	G	H	I
I want it,	I need it,	I know,	preacher	I need it,
O	P	Q	R	S
I deserve it,	senator	more?	louder?	wider?
Y	Z	1	2	3
slower?	lower?			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+



shape me, f	sir g	as you like, h	yes i	this right? j
god p	in here? q	oh sir r	so good s	you like that? t
in there? z	I need it, A	I know, B	I want it, C	Mister D
I know, J	I deserve it, K	Mother L	teacher M	I am yours, N
I deserve it, T	I want it, U	I need it, V	Father W	my dear X
tighter? 4	looser? 5	wetter? 6	again? 7	faster? 8
\$	%	^	&	*
more sir, ,	go on sir, .	?	[	]

mmm	hmm	smak	mmd	ahhh
a	b	c	d	e
aah	mn	ohh	mmf	ohhoo
k	l	m	n	o
slrech	glech	aahgh	yaa	ulp
u	v	w	x	y
AH	HMM	Mnn	SH	SHh
E	F	G	H	I
ShH	hAh	Yahh	Ssh	OOOH
O	P	Q	R	S
hAA	SHHH	whao	whoo	oww
Y	Z	1	2	3
wh	glup	!..	,..	
9	0	!	@	#
...!...	...!...			
(	)	-	=	+

ooh	ah	sssh	slrp	yha
f	g	h	i	j
oho	yaah	slsh	mhn	mn
p	q	r	s	t
hhhhm	MM	HM	Sss	oOH
z	A	B	C	D
yA	HAA	MN	ahhH	Gulp
J	K	L	M	N
AaH	Mh	GP	AHG	AAA
T	U	V	W	X
whoa	whoao	oowsh	whha	whh
4	5	6	7	8
\$	%	^	&	*
mmor,	yeess	...?...		
,	.	?	[	]

no	oh sorrow	oh shame	why me,	oh
a	b	c	d	e
oh sadness,	not there	oh misery	oh mercy	please
k	l	m	n	o
don't,	enough	I won't,	god,	dear
u	v	w	x	y
the living	begging	descending	shrinking	the terror
E	F	G	H	I
the balm	crying	dying	weeping	maddening
O	P	Q	R	S
yowling	the damned	no	no	no
Y	Z	1	2	3
really no	nooo	in time		
9	0	!	@	#
		in time		
(	)	-	=	+

let go	pity	is me	stop,	villiany,
f	g	h	i	j

I beg you	so cruel	not that	oh lord	oh woe
p	q	r	s	t

suffer me	the fear	lamenting	suffering	numbing
z	A	B	C	D

wailing	tormenting	dulling	pleading	distressing
J	K	L	M	N

howling	the darkening	fading	fool I am	punishing
T	U	V	W	X

no	no	no	no	no
4	5	6	7	8

in time				
\$	%	^	&	*

I refuse,	I become			
,	.	?	[	]

being	the slave,	delicious,	in god	O
a	b	c	d	e
in soul	so old,	the good,	in flesh,	ye
k	l	m	n	o
becomes	in life	spiritual	the spirit	dwells,
u	v	w	x	y
Reason	The wetness	The fuck	The tit	Nature
E	F	G	H	I
Freedom	The feeling	The hair	The spot	The cock
O	P	Q	R	S
The tongue	The skin	time passes	light dims	night falls
Y	Z	1	2	3
Judas knows	( )			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

in evil	in death,	knows,	and not	the free
f	g	h	i	j

in sex	man	in sin,	new	in law,
p	q	r	s	t

woman	Law	The stick	The anus	The hole
z	A	B	C	D

The touch	The swallow	The mouth	The cum	The ass
J	K	L	M	N

The pussy	Violence	The clit	The shaft	The breath
T	U	V	W	X

I stall	death calls	skin pales	mind fails	mystery grows
4	5	6	7	8

\$	%	^	&	*
----	---	---	---	---

oh lord	praise be.	just		
,	.	?	[	]

## Oh Marys

The Inner Life Is No Excuse for Not Cumming to a Standstill. (2008)

come, don't stop  
 oh damn more,  
 don't wait don't wait  
 oh damn please drink, oh holy open me  
 oh damn more,  
 take me  
 feel, oh God do it  
 don't beg don't ask oh son take me  
 oh damn open me  
 oh God please feel, oh God  
 have it here, oh son stay stay  
 oh holy  
 don't wait touch it have it oh God oh Jesus yes, have it  
 oh Jesus don't wait take it take me  
 have it oh holy  
 have me have me !#&!

## Oh Monica

Very soon the end of your life will be at hand: consider, therefore, the state of your soul. Today a man is here, tomorrow he is gone. And when he is out of sight, he is out of mind. (2008)

I need it, yes oh sir god yes, so good yes yes please sir  
 you like that? as you like, yes yes please sir teach me, yes shape me,  
 god yes, yes yes oh sir go on yes shape me, yes Jesus yes go on go on  
 like this? yes yes you like that? as you like, yes please sir teach me,  
 tell me, yes please sir so good yes teach me, yes oh sir more sir,  
 you like that? as you like, yes oh sir yes shape me, yes oh sir yes more sir,  
 you like that? as you like, yes so good you like that? yes you like that? yes  
 yes shape me, god yes, yes yes oh sir so good yes yes go on go on sir,  
 I deserve it, yes teach me, yes god yes, yes show me, yes please sir yes so good  
 as you like, yes oh sir yes more sir,  
 you like that? yes show me, yes oh sir oh sir yes Jesus as you like, yes yes so good  
 sir yes please sir yes go on sir, I need it, please sir teach me,  
 Jesus as you like, yes please sir as you like, yes yes so good yes yes you like that?  
 yes shape me, so good yes sir as you like, you like that? more sir, as you like, yes  
 yes so good yes yes you like that? yes shape me,  
 show me, yes please sir teach me, go on sir,



## Oh Narcisse

Tell me something I don't know. (2008)

AaHahhh mn...  
 mn... ohh...  
 ahhh... mhn ohhoo ohh...  
 ahhh mn sssh slrp mmf...  
 ah...  
 SHh... mmd...  
 ohhoo mmf mn...  
 aah mmf...  
 ohhoo...  
 aahgh... yeess ...

## Oh Rosette

Have courage my sweet, the time is long and getting longer. For happiness is now obsolete: uneconomic. (2008)

shrinking no enough oh oh shame please don't, not that no pity oh  
 oh misery dear oh lord I won't, oh oh oh woe I refuse, oh woe is me oh  
 oh woe stop, oh misery oh stop, oh lord not there please oh mercy pity  
 no oh mercy why me, pity oh oh woe oh woe stop, oh mercy pity  
 not there please oh mercy pity oh not that I become begging please not that  
 is me no I beg you I beg you stop, oh mercy oh oh lord oh lord stop, oh lord  
 oh mercy please I won't, please oh sorrow oh lord please not there oh oh woe oh  
 the night don't, oh mercy oh oh shame please oh mercy please oh misery stop,  
 oh shame I become

## Oh Romans

Tahiti or me, Art or Brie? A song. (2008)

The pussy being knows, and not in law,  
 and not  
 ye in sin, the good,  
 O  
 oh lord  
 Law in sin, in law,  
 ye in sin,  
 The stick in sin, and not O  
 just Law  
 new ye in flesh, in death,  
 praise be.

aa	bb	cc	dd	ee
a	b	c	d	e
kk	ll	mm	nn	oo
k	l	m	n	o
uu	vv	ww	xxx	yy
u	v	w	x	y
EE	FF	GG	HH	II
E	F	G	H	I
OO	PP	QQ	RR	SS
O	P	Q	R	S
YY	ZZ	11	22	33
Y	Z	1	2	3
99	00	...	...	...
9	0	!	@	#
...	...	...	...	...
(	)	-	=	+

ff	gg	hh	ii	jj
f	g	h	i	j
pp	qq	rr	ss	tt
p	q	r	s	t
zz	AA	BB	CC	DD
z	A	B	C	D
JJ	KK	LL	MM	NN
J	K	L	M	N
TT	UU	VV	WW	XXX
T	U	V	W	X
44	55	66	77	88
4	5	6	7	8
...	...	...	...	...
\$	%	^	&	*
”	..	??	...	...
,	.	?	[	]

moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
a	b	c	d	e
moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
k	l	m	n	o
moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
u	v	w	x	y
moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
E	F	G	H	I
moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
O	P	Q	R	S
moar	moar	moar	moar	moar
Y	Z	1	2	3
moar	moar			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

moar f	moar g	moar h	moar i	moar j
moar p	moar q	moar r	moar s	moar t
moar z	moar A	moar B	moar C	moar D
moar J	moar K	moar L	moar M	moar N
moar T	moar U	moar V	moar W	moar X
moar 4	moar 5	moar 6	moar 7	moar 8
moar \$	moar %	moar ^	moar &	moar *
moar ,	moar .	moar ?	moar [	moar ]

...	more	(breathe)	please	..
a	b	c	d	e
ohgod	harder	(:12 pause)	yes	.....
k	l	m	n	o
.....	...	(:03 pause)	(grunt)	(:07 pause)
u	v	w	x	y
...	(open up)	...	(lick)	...
E	F	G	H	I
...	(suck)	...	(push)	(spread)
O	P	Q	R	S
...	...	...I	...ah	...hear
Y	Z	1	2	3
...song	...gulp			
9	0	!	@	#
(	)	-	=	+

righthere	(pant)	cumming	...	dontstop
f	g	h	i	j
cum	fuck	(:05 pause)	(moan)	Im
p	q	r	s	t
faster	...	(all fours)	(kneel)	...
z	A	B	C	D
...	...	(gag)	...	(cry)
J	K	L	M	N
(turn)	...	...	...	...
T	U	V	W	X
...oh	...the	...yeah	...siren	...ooh
4	5	6	7	8
\$	%	^	&	*
...	...	just		
,	.	?	[	]

and	BBBJTC	CIM,	DP,	then U
a	b	c	d	e
K9	more	MSOG,	NQNS,	with
k	l	m	n	o
some	maybe	WAH,	XIMQ,	a lil'
u	v	w	x	y
EZ!	F2F,	GOWI	HJ,	IYKWIM
E	F	G	H	I
OWO,	peg it,	luv me	RUTF	srsly
O	P	Q	R	S
YN?	so on...	once	twice	3+
Y	Z	1	2	3
9+	again	!!!	...	...
9	0	!	@	#
...	...	...	...	...
(	)	-	=	+



FBSM, f	GS, g	half&half h	then I i	juice, j
PIITB, p	QTB, q	RCG, r	SOMF, s	TUMA, t
sorry but z	ATM, A	B&D, B	cuz C	DATY, D
JIC J	KOTL K	LFK, L	MFF M	NQNS N
TS T	UTF, U	VOFRC, V	WWWM W	X4U, X
4+ 4	5+ 5	6+ 6	7+ 7	8+ 8
... \$	... %	... ^	... &	... *
2more, ,	2nite, .	?! ?	... [	... ]



# Oh there is no one one

I'm not here. (2009)

II mm nnoott hheerree....

# Oh Untitled

What is missing? Silence, exile, cunning. Odysseus had it but then he came home. (2009)

...cumming ...Im....

(moan) (:12 pause)

....(moan)

(moan)....yes (pant)

just (spread) ....harder..

yes (breathe) .....(grunt) ....

harder.....(breathe) .....

yes yes ....yes (pant) .....please (:07 pause) (moan) (moan) .....(moan)

cumming ... please ....Im more .....Im Im cumming ..yes cumming ..

(breathe) ...(:12 pause) ..cumming .....

(:12 pause) .....

# Oh young Augustine

If cumming is the moment at a standstill, Gogo (or is it Gaga) is wondering where she should stand ... (2008)

IYKWIM

FBSM, CIM, some MSOG, MSOG,

then I NQNS, GS, then I

SOMF, TUMA, half&half

then U

MSOG, with MSOG, then U

NQNS, TUMA, and TUMA,

and

SOMF, TUMA, and NQNS, DP, SOMF, TUMA, then I

more more 2more, GOWI

with GS, with

...with

RCG, then I SOMF,

then I TUMA, GOWI and GS, and...then I

SOMF, WAH,

with NQNS, DP,

then U RCG, then I NQNS, GS,

WAH, half&half then U RCG, then U SOMF,

half&half then U SOMF, half&half with some

more DP, SOMF, TUMA, and NQNS,

DP, 2nite, 2nite,

2nite,



**Artists**

**and**

**Writers**



# On Chris Marker

The first time I saw a Chris Marker film I fell asleep, twice. I woke up an hour into *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), Marker's video of the life of maverick Russian filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin during the rise and fall of the Soviet Union (or was it the other way around?), and watched for another ten minutes. Then I drifted off to sleep again. Sometimes I think better when I'm unconscious: the undertow of thought is what usually draws me toward insight.

For the past five decades, Marker has been making films and videos (and more recently, installations) that emanate upward from the undercurrents of history. Now—finally—Catherine Lupton has written the first book about the filmmaker in English, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*.<sup>1</sup> Lupton tries to sum up the extraordinary achievement of this elusive writer and artist.

Yes, we know he loves cats. That he was an accomplished poet and writer before he turned to film and invented his own genre, the “film-essay.” With the 1962 release of two films, *Le Joli Mai*, a cinéma vérité account of French attitudes toward the end of the Algerian war, and *La Jetée*, the seminal science fiction—*cum*—philosophical short film on time travel, memory, and love, he pioneered the use of fantasy—philosophical, sexual, or just plain silly—as the framework for engaging with and reflecting on the political events and ideas of the day. But did you know that Marker is fascinated by Al Capone? Or that he was one of the founders of the Petite Planète travel guides? How about the possibility (convincingly argued by Lupton) that Catholicism informed his sense and search for a global visual iconography?

There are other insights in the book. And long exegeses of his storied films and videos. Marker, engaged, flirty, revelatory, deserves this book—and many others. Sleep with him. He can help us dream up a new century.

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<sup>1</sup> London: Reaktion Books, 2004.

## On Theodor W. Adorno

To start, it's funny: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."<sup>1</sup> It is also surprisingly tender: "The song of birds is found beautiful by everyone; no feeling person in whom something of the European tradition survives fails to be moved by the sound of a robin after a rain shower."<sup>2</sup> I know. No one reads *Aesthetic Theory* for a good weep. It is Adorno after all, the dark prince of postwar philosophy. After Auschwitz, under the expanding empire of the culture industry, in the midst of May '68, he sees no escape from domination or respite from suffering. It's grim: "[art] today is scarcely conceivable except as a form of reaction that anticipates the apocalypse."<sup>3</sup> Yet he clings to art, and to a kind of thinking through art, as the only possible generator of hope and resistance left for us: "Kant covertly considered art to be a servant. Art becomes human in the instant in which it terminates this service. Its humanity is incompatible with any ideology of service to humankind. It is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it."<sup>4</sup> Art is, for Adorno, a promise not kept but not forgotten. But for what, exactly? "Natural beauty shares the weakness of every promise with that promise's inextinguishability. However words may glance off nature and betray its language to one that is qualitatively different from its own, still no critique of natural teleology can dismiss those cloudless days of southern lands that seem to be waiting to be noticed. As they draw to a close with the same radiance and peacefulness with which they began, they emanate that everything is not lost, that things may yet turn out."<sup>5</sup> Words, yes, but really a siren sonata.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, p. 73.





# Fearless Symmetry

On Jacques Rancière

Let's set the scene. It's 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Activists in the Communist Party take over and begin to enact a series of economic and cultural reforms to try to revive the stagnant Soviet satellite state. Freedom of speech and of the press is granted. Plans are made for open elections. The movement becomes known as Prague Spring.

Fall arrives. Moscow cannot tolerate the reform movement any longer and decides to invade the country. By early September, half a million troops from the Soviet Union and four Warsaw Pact countries have marched into Prague. The Czechs, with neither arms nor funds, nevertheless mount a civilian resistance campaign against the invading army for eight months. They have nothing. And perhaps because of this, they fight the army in ways no one could imagine. There are, of course, the Molotov cocktails and human roadblocks. But what about the pornography (thrown at young and frightened soldiers patrolling the streets to distract them from shooting at pedestrians) and the graffiti (like the one that reads, "Why bother to occupy our State bank? You know there's nothing in it")? My favorite: within a few hours of the invasion, all the street signs in Prague are painted over. The tanks wander directionless through the streets for hours, then days, and then for the rest of the occupation, because all the maps in the city are destroyed as well.

Liberty is not given; it is taken. This is one of the many lessons of Jacques Rancière. In the hands of those who have no part to play in the order of things (like the Czechs under Soviet occupation), freedom is achieved by dismantling the partitions that power the order that divides the people from themselves and from the potential they did not know they had. This is why I think of Rancière when I think of those painted-over street signs. Tanks roll into Prague to divide the city from its people,

and the people take freedom into their own hands and use it to “undivide” the city beyond the control of the invading order. The victory was short-lived. People were still shot, and the city was eventually occupied. And if I had been a Soviet military officer, I would have ordered the immediate removal of all those useless signs. They might function as a kind of public remembrance of the resistance. “To remember is to beat war,” Kathy Acker wrote.<sup>1</sup> If the resistance did not take, neither did it perish, because if it happened once, it could happen again. Better to secure the new order by tearing down those useless signs, defaced and transformed into talismans that potentiate the work of freedom by embodying the moment when the logic of emancipation confronted the force of law.

Talismans abound in Rancière’s work: the police order, explication, distribution of the sensible. The one I treasure most is equality. Here is what he writes: “There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order. [In] the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality.”<sup>2</sup> Liberty is taken, Rancière posits, when equality is practiced and verified. And how does one practice and verify equality? One must recognize that the first tool used to subjugate another is also the first great equalizer: language. The common share of language sets the stage for the roles of master and slave while at the same time putting them on equal footing. The practice of equality is, in the first instance, the act of enunciating this equality that is the basis of any inequality. This enunciation can take many forms. For instance, painting over street signs to confuse and disable a regiment of tanks that has invaded your city is not only a novel act of nonviolent intervention; it also becomes, in its very novelty, an elegant and potent articulation of the secret

equality shared by the invader and the invaded—namely, that in the midst of war, we are all lost.

There are no tanks rolling down my city's streets yet. Besides a few arrests and some legal threats, everything is relatively quiet. In any case, there are other stages on which to practice and verify equality. Art, for instance. This is not to suggest that all art is equally good, or bad, or meaningful, or political. Rather that, in practice (in my practice, anyway), both the visible and invisible materials used to make work are equidistant from becoming either form or content in the process of making. The wordless shivers I feel from a sentence by Pauline Réage rub against a ripped piece of black pastel paper and the metallic blue light of a video projector without a hierarchy having determined in advance which elements entering the compositional space ought to bear the heavy burden of meaning. The work works when all the constituent elements are equally tense and it becomes an apparition that hovers between our space and the space of its own making, enunciating without speaking the unsolved antagonisms of reality in the only language it knows: the syntax arising from immanent problems of form.

That is practice. But how do we verify, following Rancière, the efficacy of our practice? How do we test the work so that we know it is something made that has become more than something simply made? If we use Rancière as a departure point, perhaps a confrontation is in order. That is to say, the place to verify the practice of equality in the pursuit of a form of freedom (which seems to me like a pleasing if wonky definition of art) might well be a confrontation with a force of order that divides and partitions the ghostly whole back into measured forms of understanding and consumption. If the work is indeed a work, it will resist this partitioning at every turn and claim for itself the autonomy that can come only from the practice of imagining the presence of this now not-so-secret equality in every line, shape, color, and sound. Confronted with such a presence, the police order that longs to

divide in order to own can only blush: out of frustration, out of confusion, perhaps even out of fear. But tell me—honestly—when was the last time you blushed looking at art?

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless: A Novel* (New York, Grove Press, 1994), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 16.

## Trembling before Time

On the Drawings of Paul Sharits

*Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety*, 1982, a drawing by Paul Sharits, flickers with the hypnotic insistence of empty noise on the screen of an old television set. The hundred or so nervous horizontal lines that make up this field of phosphorus static seem to follow no discernable pattern or logic. But there is a rhythmic vibrancy in the peaks and valleys emanating from vivid green lines that appear at regular intervals down the dense drawing. They set the tempo for the entire page and pulsate and glow unlike the others, as if they had more strength to push the signal through the noise, and form out of the haywire the look and feel of a real image.

But an image never materializes. Instead, an empty frenzy fills the page, electrifying it with pure movement. It is an image without imagery, less a picture than something like the recording of an instant given visible form. It is as if Sharits wanted to capture on paper a form of becoming freed from the bonds of a recognizable presence that would anchor the becoming in space and give it shape and dimension. This becoming seems to be the essence of what Sharits is trying to construct in *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety* and many other drawings: an essence as the appearance of discord and disharmony. It is the image of an instant set alight by the friction of a desperate plentitude scraping against an empty visual field, which illuminates the whole page with the glow of petrified unrest.

It is this sense of restlessness at a standstill that is most compelling in this and other drawings by Sharits. There is in the matrix of undulating lines and colors (and sometimes representational images like arms or hands) an underlying tension that refuses to resolve or disappear. The drawings evoke a permanent irreconcilability. And what refuses to reconcile itself fully into form, and what Sharits persists in exploring and making—on paper and on film—is a convincing image of time itself.

Imagining the shape of time has a long history that traverses science, philosophy, and art. Knowing or not, Sharits draws on an image of time echoing the notion of absolute time first proposed by Sir Isaac Newton. Absolute or Newtonian time imagines that our measure of differentials is more than a mental construct that quantifies change and duration (which is what philosophers Immanuel Kant and Gottfried Leibniz believed) but was itself a thing in the world. This thing called time acts like an invisible container, gathering and separating everything into a past, present, and future. With Newtonian time it is possible actually to see and feel time itself without needing to experience things change or events coming and going to mark its passing.

It is not surprising that Sharits would be concerned with time. He was among a generation of film artists in the 1960s who developed a practice and a mode of thinking that rejected the representational conventions of cinema in favor of building moving images that reimagined and recombined the fundamental units of film into dazzling and sometimes disorienting effect. The physical filmstrip, the chemical emulsion, the sprocket holes, the film flicker, even the bare projector lamp were all elevated into form. It was the birth of spectral materialism. And the property of time was no exception. Throughout his work in film Sharits either explicitly explored or quietly alluded to its unrelenting passage, its force in shaping our inner and outer lives, and its nexus with that other fundamental property of the moving image that is as transformative and ghostly as time: light. But what surprises me is that Sharits's drawings, in particular a suite of drawings to which *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety* belongs, seem to capture time's being more eloquently and forcefully than his films. So the question is, why is a static medium like drawing more compelling than the moving medium of film in expressing the mercurial nature of time in Sharits's work? And what does this, if anything, say about our sense of what time is today?

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Drawing was always a part of Sharits's work. A film like *S:S:S:S:S Scratch System*, 1970, left a paper trail: hand-drawn blueprints detailing the structural play between the images captured on film and the rhythmic scratches Sharits planned to draw directly on the film emulsion as an intervention into the illusionary space of the filmic image. These drawings have perhaps the closest relationship to the films precisely because they provide instructions for and commentary on them. They are schematic yet informal and the most intellectually demanding of any of Sharits's work because they also allude to the constellation of ideas and discourses that constitute the intellectual ferment of the pieces: the history of avant-garde film, structuralism, linguistics, and phenomenology. In making what I call his propositional drawings, Sharits mapped out new optics for visual experience and at the same time stretched the critical discourses of his time beyond the shape of reason, and into a form of structural poetry that expressed a radically new potential for moving images.

The propositional drawings also emit a strange intensity that makes Sharits's work unique among his contemporaries like Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, and his mentor, Stan Brakhage. This intensity can perhaps be described as a kind of visual anxiety that animates every mark on the page but is always in excess of them, pushing both thought and form beyond their established boundaries and into a terrain where thinking, feeling, and touching blur. It is no secret that Sharits suffered from bouts of mental instability throughout his adult life that friends and family have attributed to bipolar disorder. Forces in an artist's life impinge on their work in ways both unexpected and unpredictable. Without reducing the unique charge of Sharits's work to the myth of historical origins, it is still nevertheless important to understand how the nature of life becomes the second nature of form, since it is through this becoming that the power to forge a new real-

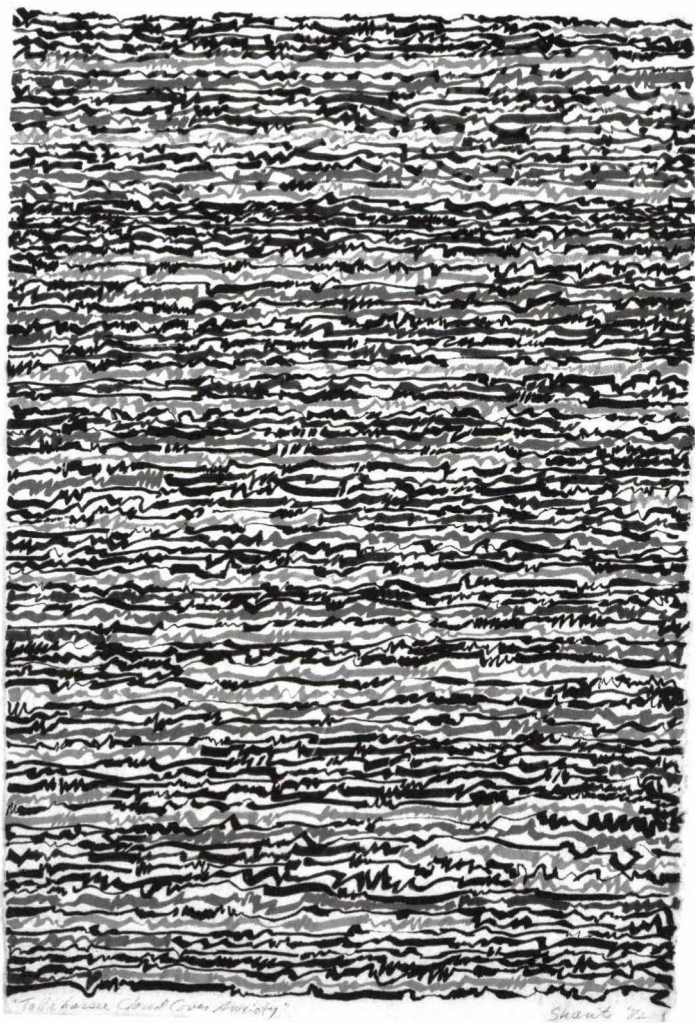


ity from the crucible of the real is made manifest. For Sharits, the erratic flux that habitually stands in for a personal order becomes organized in another way, one that allows, through form, a new measure between the conscious, unconscious, and symptomatic. On the social stage we sometimes call life, these radically different voices within us are trained to stay in key and sing in merciless harmony. The force of mediation as aesthetic construction gives permission to these voices to stray way beyond their octave and range. They find new resonances within the new dissonance, and sing in the harmonics of the new noise without succumbing to chaos or order, a condition surely more real than reality. What we call art is in truth the work of a different rhythm of attention and concentration that suspends reality for the sake of something more real.

This constant disquiet haunting many of Sharits's drawings makes visible a dynamic that recurs in many forms and guises, some more mediated than others. As Sharits expanded his production on paper beyond the propositional drawings in the 1970s, figuration and representation—pictorial modes he essentially banished from his film work—returned. This development came in light of an incident in 1981, when Sharits suffered a gunshot wound. Images of hands and faces and objects like guns and knives appeared and would repeat in a multitude of configurations, all drawn in a cartoonish manner reminiscent of sketches found in any bored high schooler's notebook. Visually they are crude, in the same way that icons are crude: they suggest an essential form rather than a visual one. Yet they cannot be considered iconic because the surface of these drawings is so rich with color and movement that it is difficult to enter into the frame of the drawing and draw out the *idée fixe* that the iconic images represent. This irreconcilability between material surface and symbolic depth would only heighten as these part-objects increasingly dominate the drawing frame and form a body of work that spells out most explicitly Sharits's iconography of petrified unrest.

It was also during the early 1980s that Sharits would leave another paper trail that I call the spectral drawings. The compulsion that pushed Sharits to evoke body parts and weapons here ironically serves the development of an aesthetic that frees that compulsion from the trauma of perpetual return by assigning the manic force the task of spectral analysis. The experience of light that both confounds and excites him as a discursive and phenomenological medium here becomes diffracted on paper as a dense system of colored lines. Sharits's hand acts like a prism, separating light into discrete frequencies and wavelengths for further articulation and analysis. The lines convulse in the rhythm of a seismograph needle recording light's trembling breakdown over time.

But the trembling is more than the evocation of light's dawning into form. It also echoes past works in a new register, like a strange parody or a willful mistranslation that alone has the capacity to restore to the original—by making anew—a semblance of tension and change the older works once longed for. There is first the echo of the lexical. Throughout his career Sharits wrote and published essays about his own work and its relationship to a variety of subjects, such as film education and contemporary philosophy. He also wrote what he called “confessional” pieces, which mix diaristic and stream-of-consciousness fragments with ruminations on film, all structured in a poetic grammatical framework that make the writings both expressive and enigmatic. Take, for example, the title of Sharits's 1968-70 text, “-UR(i)N(ul) LS:STREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:SECTION:-S:S:SECTIONED(A) (lysis)JO:”. The spectral materialism Sharits practiced makes him sensitive to the shape of weightless things. As in his film work, he reconstructs the basic syntax of language to make the text speak “harmonically.” He uses the physicality of the letters and grammatical marks to express formally what is conventionally articulated merely through content, forcing the shape and the meaning of the words to speak in distinct and overlapping voices.



Paul Sharits, *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety*, 1982.

This is why they feel strangely musical and slightly schizophrenic. In *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety*, there are echoes of Sharits's confessional writings, but only in the spirit of its form. Each flickering line harkens back to the flow of words and sentences

without ever settling into a recognizable grammarology. But one can plainly recognize the same haunting restlessness. The whole drawing hovers indeterminably between being a field of static and a secret script.

There is another echo I hear, faint but distinct, between the lines. It is the echo of the musical. Sharits always, in one form or another, wanted moving images to acquire the characteristics of music. By concretizing film's physical properties and pushing them toward visibility, the moving image frees itself from the demands of representation and the tempo of a "psychodramatic" (or narrative) time base. Film can then begin to flow in other kinds of time, producing effects and experiences as intimate, physiological, structured, and fundamentally abstract as music itself. In his early flicker films, Sharits described in interviews how the alternating frames of solid colors that blend and vibrate to create the flickering effect were attempts to simulate—through vision—the auditory effects of harmonics and tonality. In his breakthrough "locational" pieces of the 1970s, multiple film projectors were installed in a space to create wall-size tableaux of shimmering colors that, for Sharits, provided a filmic analogue to the spatial density of live music, a density expressed when various instruments (in a quartet, for instance) situated in different locations on stage play and conjure a body of sound that carries in its shape all four dimensions of space and time, as if the sound embodied not only the music but also the hollow of the room and was itself the recording or imprint of the event in that particular space. By using multiple film projectors all "tuned" differently in space and location, Sharits sought for the moving image a level of compositional, temporal, and spatial complexity that had only existed so far in music.

In film, Sharits composed shadow sonatas. And the drawings functioned like scores for the film and locational pieces to perform. Sharits himself called a number of the propositional drawings scores. And although they lack the visual conventions

of musical notation, they nevertheless functioned like scores, mapping the movements of the projected images and other compositional elements in the piece over time and in concert.

But when Sharits began to make his spectral drawings, the idea and nature of the score, and perhaps even the philosophical project of the musical in moving images, started to change. When I first saw *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety*, what struck me was the echo of the musical in the image. Certainly a drawing like this can compel hallucinations of all kinds about what it actually is. But the overtones were unmistakable: the staff bars where the bright green lines were situated on the page, the proportion of the paper itself mirroring the standard size for musical notation paper, and the shaky horizontal lines that looked like slurring notes from an infinitely demanding piece of music.

But it is equally unmistakable that the drawing is not a score. There is no way to “play” what is on paper because it cannot be read as instructions for a performance to come. Instead, it constructs the future in the present by conflating the notional form with the expressive and improvised presence of mark-making. *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety* is a drawing of a score that instructs its own playing on the page. It is at once instant and process, different tenses of time binding at the level of material. Sharits seems to suggest that, for him, the work was no longer the “inner time” of music made visually manifest. Instead, the important image was now the tension that results from the dissolving distinctions between different forms of time.

In a sense, the difference between art forms like writing, film, and music lies less in what they are made of (or can be made of them) than in how they keep and pass different kinds of time. Like clocks calibrated to distinct orders of thinking and attention, each form helps us—as makers and caretakers—keep appointments with the lost, or abandoned, or the not-yet, all the things that precipitously fall and disappear into the vast intervals between wars and news of stock prices, the only two differen-

tials that count as progress on that great clock called history. The echoing effect of past forms coupled with the collapse of temporal distinctions makes for a terribly rich image. More than rich: it is overwhelming. Perhaps this is where the anxiety in the drawing's title comes from. It is the unease of not knowing what time it really is.

It is here that I think Sharits's drawing speaks to us most about time today. It is difficult to imagine a more monotonous time than now. Calamities and disasters both major and minor feed the global twenty-four-hour news and entertainment cycle with a succession of endless events in real time. Telecommunication instruments ring and chime and sing and shout at us to get connected and keep pace. Members of our orchestra, for fear of missing the beat and being left out, dutifully follow this drum-beat with senseless abandon. There are few alternatives, since virtually all artistic mediums are in the process of merging, thus dissolving the uniqueness with which each form keeps time. The tele-historical tempo has been set to prestissimo in the hope that the quickening cycle will yield higher and higher rates of return. In double-time, the ceaseless emergence and decay of human orders and meanings flicker and fold upon one another, and the distinctions between the past, present, and future blur. The adage "there is no time like the present" takes on an oppressive tone, for our chronological order today grants only one kind of time: now.

But wait. We know from the biological sciences that human beings possess at least three different kinds of internal time: circadian rhythms, which control cycles of sleep and wakefulness over a twenty-four-hour period; millisecond timing, which helps synchronize fine motor skills like caressing or grabbing animals; and interval timing, through which we perceive the passage of time. We also carry within us indelible imprints made of images, scents, sounds, and scenes that we use to construct a sense of measure and poignancy. Memory, as our unique measure of time

passed and regained, acts like a metronome set solely to the beat of those eventful impressions that rightly or wrongly sound our presence to ourselves and others. The work of remembrance not only recalls those impressions but more significantly counts them in a different order, one that creates new relationships by drawing out new distances and different intervals between them so that they may offer new tempos for thinking. And this kind of thinking resists the image of time as an external quantity by potentializing the fragments of our experience into a qualitative form of time keeping.

We live polychronic lives. And Sharits's work offers an evocative image of what it means to live in the midst of multiple and distinct times and mediums against the encroachment of a singular temporal existence. The pressure to conform to the pace of a perpetual present is great, almost overwhelming. In lieu of social forces that could offer alternatives to what amounts to temporal fundamentalism, the best hope for resistance may simply be compelling reminders that time is out of joint. Sharits's drawings are just such reminders. Or at least they come closest to bringing into form the friction that comes from the clash between inner and outer modes of time. And drawing becomes the exemplary medium to evoke this friction because in the act of putting pen to paper, the distance that separates the modes vanishes. Contact is made and the opposing modes of time touch. And in touching, they leave a mark of their irreconcilability.

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## Maxims after Henry Darger in No Particular Order

An adult is a child as a beast.

Children are ciphers of joy.

Men become men through their uniforms.

Color is sex, disembodied.

The feeling of infinitude is composed of a finite set following a law of form carelessly.

Nature is what binds art to the *promesse de bonheur*.

Furniture is always out of fashion.

Searching for meaning in art is like looking for the price tag on a piece of clothing.

Religion is the power of innocence socialized.

The existence of clouds is evidence against the passing of time.

Nothing radiates decay more than flowers.

The supernatural is the natural precisely rendered (after RB).

In reality light is either a particle or a wave. In art it is a solid.

Paper is the first nature.

Real expressionism is an order of wants.



Every artwork is an uncommitted crime (after TA).

Trees know.

Drawing traces a semblance of reality as the image of freedom.

The debt is infinite.

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# Shows in Tights

On Rachel Harrison

I blame the Stoics. It could be laziness, and probably is. Still. There is something attractive about the idea of being the strong, silent type. The Stoics invented this. Or at the least, philosophized it. They radiated knowingness and strength by holding the world at arm's length. O Marcus Aurelius. The detachment you idealized is the armor with which you protected yourself from the carnage you brought onto the world. No one wants that anymore. But then, nobody really wants the world anymore. I mean, to keep it in abeyance is not a position these days, it's a necessity, isn't it?

The silence I hear is the emanance of inner strength, although in my more Freudian moments I think it's an expression of an unconscious fear of being exposed. I hear it more now, on the street, in bedrooms, in front of art. Our interconnective age has paradoxically brought about the bottomless fear of being exposed. Economies are now fueled by the seemingly inexhaustible need to expose oneself and others. Recognition confers the rights of a new citizenship. But what we recognize is what we already know.

What we don't know is what Aurelius was steeling us from. What we don't recognize is the formalization of what we don't know. And what we see but cannot make sense of we cannot speak about and must pass over in silence. Isn't this the way things go? The world is being made in the image of what we can only recognize. Cups and motorbikes and plastic USB drives in the shape of bananas. The rest is soundless.

Nothing so strong and passive as a stone. Stone Cold Steve Austin. Remember him? He was a wrestler: the professional kind, not the real kind. He's in movies now, with other strong soundless types. Stallone. Rourke. I think of professional wrestling more and more in the presence of contemporary art. Isn't there a

discernable sense of mythic ridiculousness within the very fabric of every exhibition and catalogue and opening? Shows in tights. The fight is fixed because everyone is supposed to know. Too bad. I don't think the idea of not knowing is felt as something worth expressing yet. When are the real wrestlers on?

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## Artist's Favorites

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Dani Leventhal

Sometimes, in movies, someone dies. But right before that moment of truth, something happens. With eyes wide open, someone sees from memory a blindingly fast succession of images and impressions of what or who mattered most in his or her life. It looks like a montage and conceptually it functions as a form of mental bookkeeping that adds up—at the end of life—the experiences that account for a life having been lived.

I don't know what this movie device is called. But I am reminded of it every time I see the moving-image work of Dani Leventhal. Nobody dies in her videos. And there is no real story or narrative to speak of. Instead, there are seemingly random images casually but not artlessly captured on video that string together to form a sequence accounting for times lost and moments past. Accounting may be the wrong word, since it implies some sort of order, which there is, just not the kind imposed by banks and cops.

Frank Kermode wrote about how there is a certain kind of art by which “the random matter of the world is reduced to order.”<sup>1</sup> Leventhal does not make that kind of work, because nothing is reduced. The singularity of each moment, whether it is a sleeping cat or somebody performing cunnilingus or a heated family argument about Israel, is given its due. In other words, each moving image is given enough space and time to be radically different from what came before and what comes after. Leventhal's videos never really come together, perfectly. And strangely, almost miraculously, it is precisely this inner irreconcilability that makes her work bewitching.

This past summer I found on the ground a small piece of paper. It must have been from a kid's lemonade stand. It reads:

INGREEDIEINS [*sic*]

lime

water

nickels

sugur [*sic*]

love

ice

I hate lemonade. But I would drink this.

—

Bruce Davenport Jr.

Bruce Davenport Jr. makes drawings of high school marching bands from New Orleans. But to say that he draws marching bands is like saying Mike Kelley makes stuffed animal sculptures. It may be true but the truth is so banal it might as well be false. In one of Davenport's drawings, a marching band may be composed of well over a hundred figures, each individually outlined in pen and inked with color markers. And then there is the riotous crowd watching and cheering the band on, and the football players milling about and waiting on the sidelines, the drunken revelers near the entrance of the stadium, and the cops in cars waiting for trouble. Brueghel comes to mind.

Davenport claims he only knew of two artists growing up. One was a character from the '70s television comedy *Good Times* and the other was Picasso. He was interested in art but was busy with other things, like playing football and getting in trouble with the law. Drawing was his way of getting off the streets. He focused on making work after a particularly bad incident with the New Orleans police and continued until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, causing one of the most horrific civil disasters in American history.

He lost most of his work during Katrina. But he began to draw again after moving back into his house in the Lower Ninth Ward and has not stopped since. The drawings have become bigger and more elaborate, with more audacious combinations of color inspired by the uniforms actual marching bands in high schools wear. Post-Katrina, New Orleans schools have suffered, and do not even have enough money for books, so funds for music classes, instruments, and uniforms have been cut. Bruce tells me he draws the bands because they are disappearing.

I want to believe Bruce. And it is clear that the drawings are forms of remembrance. But the play of repetitions, the juxtaposition of colors with the black strokes that cause the surface of the paper to vibrate, along with many other formal techniques at work, all point to something else at play. Here are memories being made anew, expressing less what once was, and more what it takes aesthetically to be fully present in the midst of ruin.

—

Olivia Shao

Olivia Shao has curated a number of evocative shows in galleries and museums in New York. Every year, usually around December, she opens a pop-up shop, selling works by artists. It seems to be a kind of holiday store, although it almost seems too seasonal, in the way that seasons sometimes appear and disappear without much notice or warning. It simply arrives. And just as quickly, it is gone.

And then there is the restaurant. Like the holiday shop, the restaurant functions like one but feels like something else. They take reservations. There are seats and a table situated in a space the size of a large Ikea closet. The restaurant serves dishes and drinks. Call it food in an expanded field. If someone orders the dish Quantum Tunnel, he or she is promptly given a menu from a nearby Chinese takeout noodle shop. One entree consists of a pile

of transparent edible pill capsules each individually stuffed with an assortment of colorful vegetable bits. Salads are served with a mix of real and plastic greens. I tried to eat both, with some success. The dishes are for beholding as much as they are for eating.

There have been artist-run restaurants before (Gordon Matta-Clark's legendary place Food, Carsten Höller's The Double Club in London) and artist-run stores too (Claes Oldenburg's Store in the late '60s, for instance). What makes what Shao does different is perhaps the idea that she does not consider herself an artist. She says she only puts things together. This distinction also runs through her work curating shows, where instead of the word *curate*, she sometimes uses *compile* or *organize*.

Adorno once wrote that by being art, art cannot become what it truly wants to be. This seems to me to be one way to enter into what Shao does. By not self-identifying the work as part of a practice that in contemporary times has in truth become an industry, she gives the work room to be what it ought to be, which is art, which is precisely what it is not, because it is always something else.

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Petra Cortright

Disinterested delight permeates Petra Cortright's work. This is hard to pull off today. There are crates and barrels full of work being made that is merely disinteresting. It comes in all forms: paintings, sculptures, installations, and increasingly performances. The works look and feel abstract but are in essence plainly representational. And what they represent is the experience of intellectual and aesthetic impoverishment, which perhaps is the truth of reality today. By representing this impoverished reality through form, disinterested work wants us to reflect on the poverty of it all. That is the strange thing about this species of art. It forces us to do a lot of reflecting so that it remains disinteresting to us.

There is not a lot of work to do in entering Cortright's work, which is one reason it is delightful. The other reason is the way in which this delight comes from its disinterest. I mean this in a strictly Kantian sense, as freedom from interests. Interests, for Kant, meant the things that we need or want in order to survive or strive toward a different station in life. When we are interested in something, Kant claims, what we are really interested in is how this something can give us a leg up, so to speak. We are ruled by our interests (because who doesn't want a leg up?) and that is why there is very little freedom or play when our interests are at stake.

Cortright's work, on the other hand, exudes the disinterestedness that only comes from a form of making with nothing in particular on the line. And what this affords is a kind of freedom that becomes, in a word, delightful. She uses images of herself with over-the-counter video effects and sounds to compose short online video train wrecks. Nothing digital seems beyond the pale of her sensibilities: bunny ears, puppies, instructions for murdering someone, floating eyeballs, and so on. Things pile and compile without purpose or any particular structure other than an unspoken directive to keep everything moving and formless.

Something else. Cortright intentionally misspells words on her site, like "CLIKC HEER" and "SNOWFLAEKS." This way of writing can and should be considered part of the vernacular language of the web. And it only adds to the pleasure of her work. A disinterested word is a freer one.

—

Ama Saru and Hsiao Chen

Saru and Chen form an artistic partnership that has yielded performances, videos, sculptures, and photo works. What compels the work forward is the idea of language: how it comes apart and how it cuts us up. This is reasonable, given that the Taiwanese Chen and Romanian Saru use and abuse English, their adopted



tongue, as a dominant component in many of their pieces. And even when there are no words visibly present, one can discern, from the title or from how the piece is made, echoes of a syntax embedded in the composition, waiting to be read.

Messages, sentences, phrases, and other texts (in an enlarged sense) anchor the works in ways that seem to carry on the language-based experimentation of early Acconci or the video work of Richard Serra. But this is not the correct fit. And I think this is because there is in Saru and Chen a particular material sensibility at play. Their idea of how language appears is always entangled with some kind of physical presence. Or rather, words must become a thing before they can be read. It is as if in order fully to investigate the strange nature of this thing called language, it must first become a thing-in-itself, so that it can be treated and manipulated as if it were a straw or a vase or a sundial.

There is also embedded into the work traces of history. August Strindberg puts in an appearance, as do the San Quentin Six and images from the history of cinema. By embedding words in both a past and a material presence, it is almost as if Saru and Chen want them to have bodies of their own, to dance and argue with.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, "Fictioneering," *London Review of Books* 31, no. 19 (Oct. 9, 2009), p. 10.

## From *The Essential and Incomplete Sade for Sade's Sake*

The *Washington Post* recently published a story about the war in Afghanistan. The Taliban has been slowly regaining its strength after the US invasion. Afghan warlords, who hold the key to defeating the Taliban, do not trust the US military and its war on terror. So military officers have been giving everything from cash and weapons to free medical care and jewelry to these warlords, because everyone knows the best way to make friends is to bribe them. But the officers have also been giving something else to these old, war-weary patriarchs: Viagra.

“You’re trying to bridge a gap between people living in the 18th century and people coming in from the 21st century,” an officer was quoted as saying, “so you look for those common things in the form of material aid that motivate people everywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the Marquis de Sade also wanted to motivate people: to experience hard-ons and headaches in equal measure. From his savage and hypnotic renderings of sexual exploits to his many declarations (in prose, plays, and treatises) celebrating the pleasure principle as the telos of freedom and reason, Sade continues—after three centuries—to haunt the sexual imagination. Today we remember him mainly as a pornographer and a libertine philosopher. So it is easy to forget that Sade’s masterpiece, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, is a novel about war profiteers. Here is the introduction:

The extensive wars wherewith Louis XIV was burdened during his reign, while draining the State’s treasury and exhausting the substance of the people, none the less contained the secret that led to the prosperity of a swarm of those bloodsuckers who are always on the watch for public calamities, which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent

so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously. The end of this so very sublime reign was perhaps one of the periods in the history of the French Empire when one saw the emergence of the greatest number of these mysterious fortunes whose origins are as obscure as the lust and debauchery that accompany them. It was toward the close of this period, and not long before the Regent sought, by means of the famous tribunal which goes under the name of the *Chambre de Justice*, to flush this multitude of traffickers, that four of them conceived the idea for the singular revels whereof we are going to give an account.<sup>2</sup>

Profit for pleasure. And there is nothing more profitable than war. It is the economic engine that converts social energy into armed (and unarmed) conflict for the benefit of those who wage wars but don't fight them. Does it make Sade's work more bearable to remember that his thinking around sex, pleasure, and freedom was inextricably tied to a ruthless critique of institutional power, whether of a government, a church, or a philosophy? Probably not. The blue and purple prose is what sticks in the craw of the mind, the seemingly endless accounting of perversities, debaucheries, and tortures. The law of reason compels sex to greater and greater extremes. In Sade, the fulfillment of the Kantian notion of freedom as a promise to follow only the path paved by one's own will to reason lives up to Kant's definition of human autonomy and at the same time makes a mockery of its humanist potential.

Pleasure has its own reason and freedom its own law. Call it Sade's law. And yet to follow Sade's law to the letter is to pledge allegiance to an imaginary power as rigid, cruel, and paradoxical as the one he was fighting against. The irony of this is on full view today. Since 2001, the United States has waged a campaign

to spread freedom and democracy around the world. But ironically, the more this freedom spreads, the more rigid, cruel, and sexually inhuman the campaign becomes.

Still. If the letter of Sade's law is an endless echoing of freedom as the ratio between sex and reason, then maybe the potential of Sade today lies not in the letter of his law, but in his spirit.

Reading Sade, one can't help noticing something about the countless debaucheries: they are not real. What I mean is that they are physically impossible. There are situations that Sade depicts where bodies suck and fuck in ways that defy physics as much as morality. The world he portrays is even less representative of reality than pornography is of actual sex. But they are not mere fantasies. They possess the prodding movements of a mind that imagines sex not merely as a pleasure, a job, or a weapon but as a form of reason. Here is where the spirit of Sade resides. If human freedom is expressed in the sovereignty of sex, then Sade is pushing to create a form of expression that can free the reason of sex from both *nomos* (human law) and physics (nature's law).

In other words, the spirit of Sade is embodied in the idea of abstraction. Abstraction, as the power to create from empirical reality an essential composition outside the laws of what constitutes the real, has always been the emblem of a kind of freedom. If abstract art has any insight left beyond merely being an apologia for interior design, then it must find a new necessity to produce images and objects that follow laws unto themselves. Abstraction worthy of that word binds content to form in such a way that the process that directed its expression is indistinguishable from the idea that led it into being. In abstraction, the origin is the end.

Sex abstracts us from ourselves. In sex, the senses lose all sense and make one feel wholly other. It is a domain in which truth and rationality have no ground, a place where no one knows what to do with what is true. Sexuality, like art, makes reason unreasonable. Abstraction, as an aesthetic principle of essential

separation, has the potential to redescribe sex by delinking it from the tortured legacy of a Western imaginary that ceaselessly tries to make what we do to ourselves and to one another into a truth worth fighting and sometimes killing for. In a sense, erotica, pornography, and even secret military prisons are merely different ways we have sought to make sex truthful: by fixing its shape, determining its laws, making it useful, rendering it reasonable. They are material representations of what sex is supposed to be. But there is nothing less reasonable than sex. This unreasonableness must be given form, rhythm, movement, touch, feel, and more. In abstraction, sex reveals the intangible force of its own irreconcilability and becomes what it is in reality: a spell for togetherness doubling as a boundary.

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Originally published in *Paul Chan: The Essential and Incomplete Sade for Sade's Sake* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2010).

- <sup>1</sup> Joby Warwick, "Little Blue Pills Among the Ways CIA Wins Friends in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 2008. [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-12-26/world/36891808\\_1\\_cia-officer-afghanistan-veterans-taliban-commanders](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-12-26/world/36891808_1_cia-officer-afghanistan-veterans-taliban-commanders).
- <sup>2</sup> Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove, 1967).

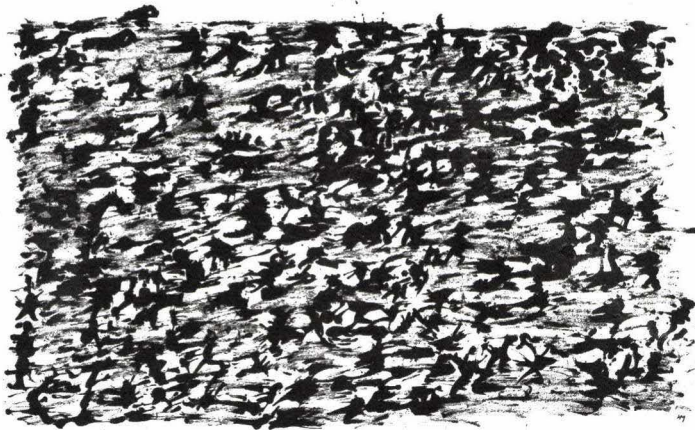
# Private View

On Henri Michaux

One evening Henri Michaux heard on the radio what he described as an “exceptionally abstract program.” Voices spoke in measured tones about the history of metaphysics intermingling with nuclear physics and the newest discoveries concerning the constitution of matter and the birth of the universe. Almost (almost) without realizing it, Michaux picked up his pencil and began to draw. He would go on to describe how this drawing started to “undo” those he had been making for months. Guided by voices, he changed the weight and curvature of his graphic gestures. Stroke by stroke, the marks on the paper started to command a kind of attention that had previously eluded him. Line by line, he ended up creating what he called a visual “situation” by displaying, negating, and erasing, at once, the images he felt manifesting within him as he tried to grasp, with less and less assurance, the swarm of words gathering in the air. By pursuing these elusive words on to paper, Michaux said he was joining “the grand and noble exalting adventure of elucidating the universe in its entirety.”<sup>1</sup>

Is *Untitled Chinese Ink Drawing*, 1961, that adventure? It certainly looks as though it is. The globular black marks that cover the drawing and are supported by smears and smudges of ink create, in an instant, the image of a universe humming with noise. And yet like most of Michaux’s work, the longer *Untitled* captures your attention, the more it changes. The ground slowly gives way to figures, until the drawing transforms into a negative imprint of a painting by Brueghel. Instead of a universe, it becomes an expansive grassy pasture filled with human-like shadows fighting, or falling to the ground, or getting drunk, or entangling themselves and generally making a mess of things.

Michaux’s work has a way of doing that. Resemblances dissemble with time and a bit of focus. Like his writings, his draw-



Henri Michaux, *Untitled Chinese Ink Drawing*, 1961

ings are constantly turning into something else. They refuse to settle into anything in particular: echo chambers on paper. But they hold shape and display a strange clarity. This is what is most unsettling in his practice. In his book *Miserable Miracle*, Michaux takes mescaline in order to write.<sup>2</sup> But he doesn't write for the sake of expressing some inner truth about himself through the hallucinatory experience, nor does he want merely to describe the strange and disturbing images that are conjured by the drugs. He writes about his experience of fighting to stay mindful and rational in the throes of being intoxicated. He wanted to write about the tension that resulted from not giving into the drug, while taking the drug. Quixotic to say the least. Yet what unfolds in *Miserable Miracle* is some of the most dramatic prose about the struggle for nothing in particular ever written.

*Obstacle qui excite l'ardeur.* This is perhaps why *Untitled* looks the way that it does. Unlike Pollock, the marks feel decidedly unexpressionistic. They appear rather stunted or compressed. This is the inner resistance in Michaux, fighting the urge to express, in order more fully to embody. In a sense, one expresses

only what one already knows. But what Michaux is after is not what he knows but what he does not. Ignorances. Diversions. Aberrations. These are undiscovered territories that he wanted to reach. So he looked for things such as drugs or voices from the radio detailing scientific and philosophical concepts (same difference, right?) to create emotional, aesthetic, and conceptual frictions for the writings and drawings to work against. The essential unsettledness in his work is the sedimentation—in form—of this struggle situated at the heart of everything he made. In *Untitled*, every mark is the embodiment of a wish to resist what it is, to better become what it wants to be.

Michaux has always been a source of pleasure for me. One of the four books I took along during a trip to Iraq right before the second Gulf War invasion in 2003 was *Ecuador*, his travel journal published in 1929. Reading this in Baghdad on the eve of an illegal and immoral military invasion, waiting in a dilapidated hotel next to the Tigris for the start of a press conference by international activists pleading for someone, anyone, to stop the United States from invading Iraq while listening to the hotel lobby speakers blaring Uday Hussein's pop radio station (Missy Elliott was on), it seemed to me that Michaux was more realist than surrealist. And his breezy yet precise writing style was an important antidote to the heaviness of the words I listened to and situations I found myself in during my stay in the city. The order and time were both out of joint, and factions left and right conspired to march forward, for and against the war, without a breath or break to marvel at the absurdity of the coming conflict.

Filmmaker Robert Bresson once said the supernatural is the natural precisely rendered. Doesn't this capture Michaux's essence perfectly?



What is a resemblance without dissemblance?  
 A drawing with no fight in it is a bore.  
 It is incomplete. Everyone gets this, right?<sup>3</sup>

Thgir, siht steg enoyreve. Etelpmocni si ti.<sup>4</sup>

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Originally published as "Private View: Henri Michaux," *Tate Etc.*, Spring 2010, np. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>1</sup> Henri Michaux, *Stroke by Stroke*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006), np.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New York Review Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Michaux, *Stroke by Stroke*, np.

<sup>4</sup> There is a minor tradition in an obscure neighborhood of poetry, referred to as using the "witch alphabet," that spells words and sentences backward. This line I consider the most private view I have of Michaux.

## On Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault has never been given his due as a comic genius. Take his theory of the rise of pornography in the West. No, he doesn't pin it on the Greeks. Foucault suggested that the greatest pornographers—the ones who profited most by inciting and spreading sexual desire—were the Catholics. And they achieved this distinction by institutionalizing the most charged erotic form ever invented: the confession.

The church was, among other things, a social platform for expressing one's innermost thoughts and desires. Because the church claimed the authority to absolve its members' sins precisely through their acts of confession, it guaranteed the right to speak freely when performing this sacrament. Foucault speculated that this encouraged a social compulsion to confess. Members were urged to use the church as a medium for talking about transgressions that the church could then forgive. The clergy in turn used the confessions as material to sermonize against, which had the paradoxical effect of advertising the very ideas they purportedly wanted to eradicate. It was as if the more puritanical the church became about sex, the guiltier people felt and the dirtier everyone's thought and speech became.

The history of the church—as an apparatus that profits from people exposing themselves—mirrors the ways social media works today. The fervor for connections, the compulsion to disclose and express, and the desire to belong are all themselves varieties of religious experience. This may be why confessions and other testimonial forms play such a significant role online. They ground what is being shared in some semblance of naked and unadorned reality, even though there may be nothing real about them. They testify to the power of what is now more real than reality: the relations that bind artifice to what is most essential about oneself.

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## Publisher's Note

*On Democracy by Saddam Hussein*

It's election season. But then, when is it not? This is what it feels like now, and perhaps what democracy ultimately is: a never-ending campaign.

*On Democracy by Saddam Hussein* is a book that asks what democracy means from the standpoint of a notorious political figure who was anything but democratic. Hussein wrote the three speeches at the heart of this book in the late 1970s, when he was vice president of Iraq. In them, he characterizes social democracy as demanding centralized authority and defines free will as the patriotic duty to uphold the good of the state. The speeches are politically perverse, to say the least. Yet at the same time they are eerily familiar. Hussein promises to bring to the Iraqi people what we hear political candidates promise to people everywhere in order to get elected into office.

This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of *On Democracy*. Despite how ultimately empty the words turned out to be, Hussein's ideas about what constitute a democracy are not so different from what actually constitutes existing democracies. In other words, the claims that Hussein makes about what he intends to bring to the Iraqi people are as idealistic, contradictory, and elastic as what people have come to expect at the heart of the democratic process.

At its core, this book is about how democracy is used and abused. It is clear that Hussein did not do his words on democracy justice. Through essays and art, *On Democracy* explores the historical, philosophical, and social contexts that enabled Hussein to employ notions of democracy for authoritarian rule. It is an attempt to reflect on how promises of freedom and security can serve to mask the aspirations of despotic powers regardless of political ideology. As talk of democracy spreads throughout the Middle East and around the world, it is arguably more import-

ant than ever to understand what we mean when we ask for, or demand, democracy from ourselves and our political leaders. It is election season, after all.

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Originally published as prefatory note in *On Democracy by Saddam Hussein*, ed. Paul Chan (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2012).

# Duchamp, or Freedom

## A Comedy

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp became involved with the newly formed Society of Independent Artists. A coalition that had organized the famous 1913 Armory show in New York had disbanded after that exhibition ended. And this new group wanted to mount something like the Armory, but with a few differences. First, it would be bigger, because second, it would be more democratic. By taking on the policy of “no jury, no prizes”, any artist could join the society and be entitled to show two works in the exhibition, as long as he or she paid six dollars in membership fees.

This was not a new idea. The society consciously modeled the policy after the *Salon des Indépendants*, an annual exhibition in Paris. But it was new in America, where group shows routinely used juries and prizes to evangelize certain notions and standards of artistic quality. What is interesting is how promoting quality depends a great deal on its opposite: quantity. In trying to defend against the influences of Cubism and other European movements, groups like the National Academy of Design mounted shows with works that all more or less exemplified a kind of romantic realism—painting after painting of idyllic scenes depicting cattle or ships or boys with rifles or bored but pleasant-looking young women. It was as if quantity is how quality is expressed.

Allowing anyone to exhibit so long as the dues were paid was not the only way the Independents tried to make the show more novel and democratic. As head of the hanging committee, Duchamp came up with the idea of installing the works in alphabetical order, based on the artist's last name. And the show would start with the letter *R*, because that was the letter that had been drawn out of a hat. When the exhibition opened on April 10, 1917, viewers were treated to a cacophony. Fauvist landscapes hung next to military photographs; Brancusi showed alongside paintings of

cats. It was the biggest art exhibition that had ever been mounted in America, with 2,215 works by more than 1,200 artists.

But history remembers only one work from this show, and it wasn't even exhibited, because it was the only piece rejected from this experiment in artistic democracy. It is of course *Fountain*, 1917, a readymade by Duchamp. The story is that two days before the opening, an anonymous package containing an envelope arrived at the venue. Inside the envelope, an artist named R. Mutt submitted his \$6 membership fee and the title of his artwork on a piece of paper. Inside the package was an upside-down porcelain urinal with the artist's signature painted in large black letters on the lower left rim. A debate erupted between the board of directors—which included Duchamp. Some found the work indecent and refused to show it. Walter Arensberg, who was not only Duchamp's friend but also accompanied him to buy the urinal at a plumbing supply store, spoke in favor of showing it. He is reported to have said, "A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man has clearly an aesthetic contribution." *Fountain*, incidentally, was not the only fountain submitted. Elizabeth Pendleton's *Drinking Fountain For Birds*, 1917, was the other, and no one objected to showing that. *Fountain*, on the other hand, met a more fortuitous fate. It was rejected by a close vote hours before the private opening on April 9. Duchamp and Arensberg immediately resigned from the board in protest.

In 2011 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York a protest organized mostly by artists in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement used a Diego Rivera exhibition as the grounds for a public conversation about, among other things, social and economic liberation. It is hard to imagine the same thing happening in front of an artwork like *Fountain*. There are perhaps many good reasons for this. It's hard to rally around a urinal, for instance. There is nothing particularly political about it, either. And aesthetically speaking, it's not much to look at. But I suspect the main reason is that *Fountain* doesn't fundamentally do what

people want art to do, which is to inspire people to think or feel something about themselves, or others, or an element of our experience of the world. I imagine all *Fountain* inspires is perhaps the nagging suspicion that it is not art at all, but a joke.

The story behind the work all but confirms this suspicion. But this only makes it more pertinent. For what we understand about freedom we glean from art. But how we come to be free is determined by our relationship with—and against—authority. Duchamp was already part of an effort to subvert the traditional ways art was legitimated, by making the Independents show open to anyone willing to pay \$6. He sidestepped curatorial authority by hanging works in alphabetical order. But then he went on to undermine his own interests and authority by submitting *Fountain*, which caused enough of an uproar to subvert the democratic claims of the entire enterprise, which he supported and helped organize. With *Fountain*, and perhaps even the rest of Duchamp's creative life, he was arguably in greatest command when he lived and worked against the expectations of authority: in art and its history, in the increasing dominance of commercial interests in artistic life, and even the authority from within oneself.

But no amount of historical exegesis or critical analysis can mitigate the degree to which Duchamp's most known works tend to feel like gags. The moustache. The peephole. His oeuvre looks unnervingly like the back stock of a gift shop that specializes in whoopee cushions and the like. So it is surprising, and even dismaying to those who believe art is suppose to be more than a joke, that his art should cast such a long shadow over the history of art, and perhaps even culture in general. Knowing Thomas Mann once said art is a higher form of prank does not help. Nor will it really illuminate the situation by admitting to you, as a poet once did to me, that art is "whatever you can get away with." Because as true as this may be (just ask an artist some time), museums do not bill themselves as places to see the most important gags ever made. They are instead where people go to experience what is



supposed to be the best and most beautiful forms of expression other people have found the time and energy to create. The case can be made that art is found in many places today. And that works from popular culture can enrich us as much as what hangs in museums. This was Walter Benjamin's hope. But I think the most that popular culture can aspire to today is to distract us from the airless rough ride that is social reality: it's what we watch and listen to on planes. Looking at and thinking about art can yield a kind of experience different from what we pay attention to in order to not feel so trapped on that endless flight. The difference comes from how art is valued.

The amount of labor it takes to make art does not add up to its worth. A work doesn't get better simply by being worked on more: that usually makes it worse. And neither is art prized for its usefulness, like a tool, although it can be used. Forms of expression that end up being art hold value differently from objects of utility, although the way that value is created is the same. In a sense, value is nothing other than what it is socially. A thing's value is not inherent in the thing itself but is determined by the connections and ties that are bound up in it. In other words, value is transfigured relations. Value is worth, as measured by the historical, material, and social relations that bind a thing into conception and hold it dear. So art—or anything else for that matter—becomes valuable insofar as it manifests those relations as apparently objective properties that express the import of those relations with the weight of material reality. Picture, for a moment, something that is valuable to you, something that you hold dear. Now ask yourself whether it is the money it is worth or the material it is made of that makes it valuable. Or whether it is how someone you care about or want to remember, or a particular history or place you call your own, has been absorbed somehow into the form of the thing you have in mind, so that it radiates the color and feel of those ties out of the very properties that make it sensuous and real. Form is sedimented social content. And expression is the power of relations made eloquent.

Artists experience art by making it. Everybody else does so by flipping through magazines and scrolling web pages. Or they visit institutions like museums or kunsthallen. Broadly speaking, an institution is the form that authority takes to assert what is worthy of being a common good. Authority can take on many forms, and not all of them have buildings and paperwork. It appears whenever a public empowers a person or a group to perform on the social stage *as if* they represented a general will. An authority—be it an institution, a leader, or even an informal congregation—turns a crowd into a chorus.

Museums are, for example, places where people come together to see what the power of an authority has entrusted as publicly worth seeing. An important element of this experience is how works that are exhibited take on the value of that institution as a semblance of the works' own worth. Value being essentially social, what becomes valuable in art when it is collected and exhibited is the fusing of notions of beauty, use, and significance with the ruling and ennobling presence of that institution. Art, in other words, takes on the authority of an institution's power to preserve and maintain the relations that best represent art as a common good. And in the process, this particular relation becomes the dominant measure of its value, to the diminishment of all others. There are many pleasures to be found at museums. Among them is the opportunity to experience things that are beautiful and perhaps even profound. It may be the case that whatever it is that we find beautiful is objectively so. That is to say, the lines, shapes, and forms that constitute the work create in us feelings and thoughts that heighten our sense of well being. On the other hand, what I want to suggest is that beauty is agreeable because it helps us to see what is worth relating to. So what is most pleasing about valuing art as an object of beauty may be that it serves to bind us in a more harmonious relationship to authority.

The Greeks understood beauty as the expression of harmony with a divine order that ruled one from above and from within.

Qualities like symmetry, proportion, and balance were prized because they represented dispositions that best suited the order of things. What is beautiful has a long history with who rightfully rules. Art in the West after the Greeks existed in general as cultic objects for institutional religions. Forms of expression were valued as sensuous representations of the power of God and the command of the church. Works of art were venerated for their expressive powers to stir feelings within believers that pulled them in line with the dictates of heavenly reign. Today, even if God no longer runs our daily affairs, art still seems to inspire and motivate from above, perhaps because it tends to inhabit the same plane of existence as the people who *do* run us today, like bankers and oligarchs. If authority rules by law, then beauty is the appeal to order by way of the senses. Works considered beautiful often evoke a feeling of agreeableness that reflects a moral sentiment, as if beauty has something to teach us about being good. Law is the mediating concept here. Insofar as morality can be defined as inner law, beauty is morality felt as a pleasure rather than as a duty.

This is why beauty is interested in us as much as we are attracted by it. It wants to show us what is good about being right in the world, even if it means not being right with ourselves. The value of appreciating beautiful art therefore feels meaningful because it bears a resemblance to the sense of fulfillment that comes from abiding by the laws of an authority entrusted to represent the power of a public. One recognizes in authority the longing to belong to a greater self. A word comes to mind: *Nomos*. It means law in Greek. But it also means song. So in this ancient word, the power of forms of expression to shape feelings is in direct relation with the rules that an authority wields to organize and command.

Artists, I think, understand this relationship instinctively. Law is technique. And order is what one makes from the mess of it all. John Cage and Merce Cunningham are examples of artists who followed a notion of law as an external system of rule. Using the *I Ching* and other writings as guides for composition, they created

works that belonged as much to chance as they did to the mind and hand. Chance is the operation that expresses the essence of the universe as the law of perpetual change. Using chance to generate randomness in art was their way of abiding by an aesthetic authority they believed was greater than any single artist. Cage and Cunningham—Duchamp to a certain degree—used chance to play with, and slacken the pull from, another law they felt artists were all too willing to follow, but one that is fundamental to how art is made: self-expression. In other words, law as inner tendency. Think the law of nature, as opposed to a law against littering. By following their intuitions wherever they may lead, artists grant themselves the right of artistic freedom to create whatever they want. And the more rigorously they follow their own law to make work, the more free and insistent the work becomes. In art, autonomy is authority.

But just because art is made freely does not mean it remains free. Expressions that are truly expressive are momentary by nature. Paul Valéry claimed that fireworks are prototypical of art in general. They exist only for the moment, but the impression they make on the minds of those who experience them can be as lasting as anything made out of stone or steel. Earlier I mentioned that what is understood by freedom can be gleaned from art. And what I mean is that in being an artist making and showing work, I learned that freedom is but a moment, or a stage, in a process. The needs and wants that shape how a work is made do not determine how it is valued in culture. Art acquires a value different from what the artist had intended by virtue of the new web of relations that enters into the work as it appears in the public realm.

Being in public is decisive. Art finds its true place there: at the center of debate and in the midst of commercial, intellectual, and political exchange. I'm sure there are artists who create solely for their own pleasure and feel no need to show their work to anyone else. I personally don't know any. The public is where an artist's work is more than what it is and becomes what it wants to be: a

common currency for what is good. And the institution that brings the work to the public becomes invested with the value the public finds in the work as a semblance of its own authority. In other words, the quality of freedom that defines art reemerges—in the process of it entering the public realm—as the reason that gives authority purpose, as if freedom depends on authority to secure and maintain a place for it in social life. If freedom is but a stage in a process, it can now be said what that process ultimately develops into: the justification of authority as a public good.

This process is apparent in any self-respecting liberal democracy, where protecting certain freedoms for individuals, however they may be defined, forms the basis of why a public needs authority in the first place. But it is also evident on the other end of the political spectrum, where authority is most ardently desired—namely, right-wing populist parties and movements. They literally call themselves after “freedom” to symbolize what they offer to a public ready to join them: a platform for a will to power. The Freedom Party of Austria. The Netherlands’ Party of Freedom. In the US, the biggest corporate contributor to the Tea Party movement comes from a group with an appropriately Protestant take on the matter: FreedomWorks. But nothing illustrates the degree to which freedom empowers authority more than what happened in 2011 in Egypt, where the first democratically held election for parliament took place after the Arab Spring swept Mubarak away. The results? Two groups of conservative Islamists won 70 percent of the seats. And the coalition formed by the young leaders of the revolt who actually organized and toppled the old regime? The very people who arguably freed Egypt? Less than 3 percent.

Duchamp had a low opinion of freedom. In a 1963 article in the magazine *Show*, Duchamp said,

All artists since Courbet have been beasts. All artists should be in institutions for exaggerated egos. Courbet was the first to say, “take my art or leave it.

I am free.” That was in 1860. Since then, every artist has felt he had to be freer than the last. The pointillists felt they had to be freer than the Impressionists, and the Cubists freer still, and the Futurists, and the Dadaists, and so on and so on. Freer and freer and freer—they call it freedom. Drunks are put in jail. Why should artist’s egos be allowed to overflow and poison the atmosphere? Can’t you just smell the stench in the air?<sup>1</sup>

Duchamp, it seems to me, is being serious insofar as he is joking. The year 1963 was also the date that his first retrospective opened, at the Pasadena Art Museum. He was 76. In the 1960s there was renewed interest in his work. He began keeping company with younger artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and was becoming the icon he never set out to be. Retrospectives are complicated affairs for artists, because it’s never clear whether they are meant as a celebration or a funeral. Duchamp wore his fame lightly and gracefully, but he rarely missed an occasion to denigrate art, especially as his own work was being venerated. It was during this period that he said to William Seitz, a Museum of Modern Art curator, that unfortunately, as far as he could tell, art does not last long and has a relatively short lifespan. About twenty to thirty years, he guessed.

One of Duchamp’s most well known concepts is the “delay.” He used it to describe his piece commonly referred to as *The Large Glass*, 1915–23. He wrote, “use ‘delay’ instead of picture or painting. . . . It’s merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture, to make a delay of it in the most general way possible.”<sup>2</sup> The key phrase here is “the most general way possible.” For what Duchamp embodies for me is the idea that the experience of freedom is truly free only when it is delayed from becoming what it is socially compelled to be: an expression of authority. The patently comedic, almost absurd lengths to which

Duchamp went in order to suspend this operation only underscores how serious he was about it. From repeatedly disparaging artists and art (including his own), to making the kind of work that practically invited derision, ridicule, and misinterpretation, to his retirement from art-making altogether in the 1920s in order to play more chess: Duchamp lived and worked as if art mattered most when it mattered least.

After Duchamp, one wonders whether art was ever as serious as culture had convinced people it was. And the fact that he is taken so seriously today only makes matters worse. He is now an authority figure, which means the joke, as history tells it, is ultimately on him. It's a shame, but not surprising. The surest way to pacify a person's ideas is to make them into an icon. How he lived and what he actually did play a relatively minor role in what he has come to represent for those who need heroes and villains to get on with the day. As for the rest of us, life is luckily less stark, and perhaps we can remember Duchamp that way too: for making art, and what we want out of art, less stark, more unpredictable, and more accommodating to a different conception of the good life—one beholden to no higher authority than how it is lived, and what pleasures can be had, moment by moment. It is the image of life lived surprisingly.

It seems to me that this is what Duchamp's work was trying to get at. He made art as a moment at a standstill. And he used the tension between the serious and the light or comic to heighten the effect. It is his dialectic. Given that boring art tends to be either too serious or not serious enough, Duchamp made works that were more or less both. This is why they feel like gags. Something has been pulled off, but nobody is sure what. Isn't this what freedom is suppose to feel like?

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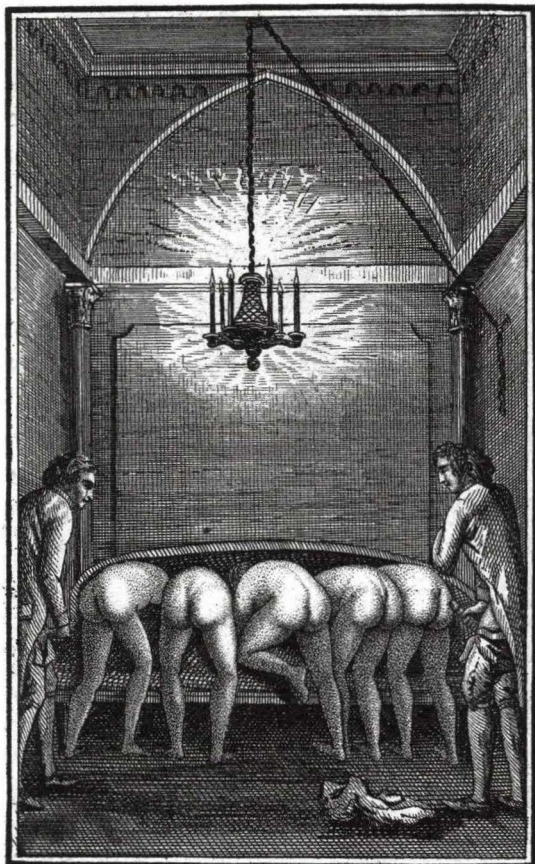
Originally delivered as Penndesign Fine Arts Lecture, November 15, 2012, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

1 *Show: The Magazine of the Arts*, 1963, p.116

2 Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

# A Harlot's Progress

On Pier Paolo Pasolini



Engraving by Claude Bornet for Marquis de Sade's novel *Juliette*, circa 1798

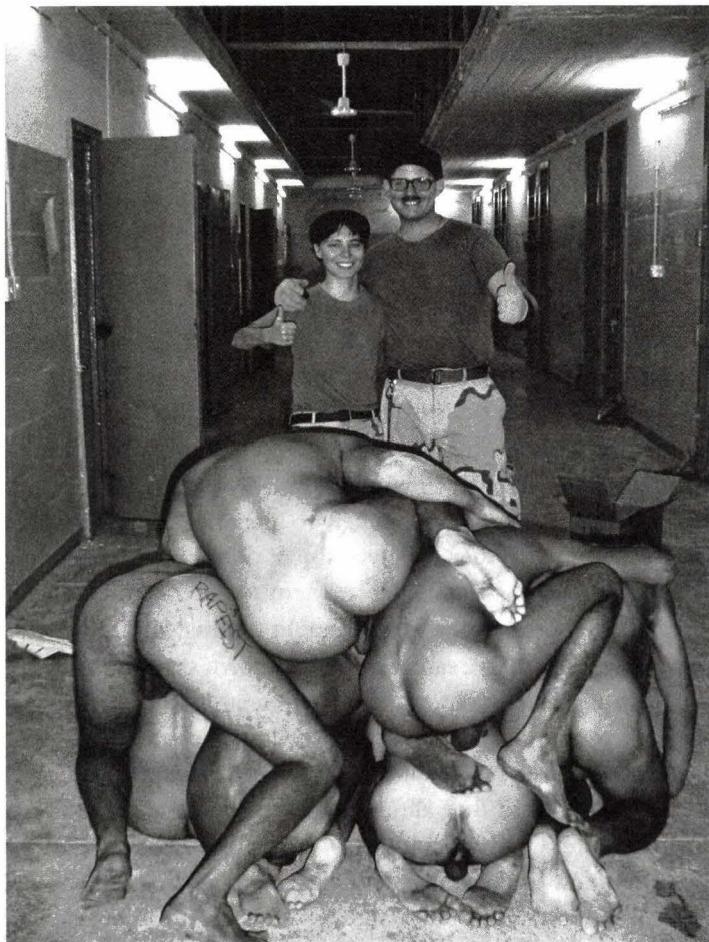


An orgy is hard to plan. The orchestration demands a particular combination of know-how and spirit, not to mention resources. It is easy enough to find a carpeted room and stock it with towels and wine coolers. But it takes vision to see a place like that can only diminish the quality of the sexual encounters. All the physical elements that make up an orgy ought to reflect the varying states of arousal that constitute a genuine sexual experience. In terms of space, it means ideally three interconnected rooms, or at the least three visually distinct areas, permitting guests to roam and congregate where their sense of stimulation and engagement is most attuned. This is not to say that each area should be designated only for a certain type of act. Pleasure is an element of freedom insofar as it is pleasing to do what and where one pleases. Multiple spaces have the ability to appeal to our natural tendency to differentiate and diversify sensations and experiences. Guests are more likely to imagine different ways of coming together if they are given the option of performing in a number of rooms, which enables them to enter into a *series* of encounters. In the end, it is really about finding what can manifest and amplify that oceanic sentiment known as sexual pleasure.

Lighting is very important as well. Being sensitive to light, I know its color and quality in a space can influence and even dominate how skin feels to the touch. There are a thousand other details I can think of. And they all matter, because the senses heighten with pleasure. Our capacity to please and be pleased is directly related to how well we feel our wants and needs are understood and cared for. And as our wanting increases and intensifies, so does our desire to please and be pleased. This process encircles and expands itself like a dialectic. It *is* a dialectic: perhaps the essential one that makes us who we are, if Diotima is to be believed.

I prefer to be invited to orgies than to plan them: too much work. Still, I am interested in the work: in other words, the organizing it takes to make an orgy into an experience. I want to know the methods that produced the effects. And for whom.

This is what I had in mind when I first saw this picture in 2004:



Abu Ghraib, 2003

In a way there is no mystery to the methods that produced this. War made this. Specifically it was the second Gulf War, which officially began in March 2003. Unofficially, the United States began bombing Baghdad two months earlier. I know this because I was there, holed up at the Al Fanar Hotel, next to the Tigris

River, with other activists and journalists. I left Iraq in mid-January, but others in the antiwar group I worked with stayed. Among the things they did was to document the treatment of prisoners at the various facilities the US military had set up around the city. The work of my colleagues and friends at the time helped expose what would eventually be called, simply, Abu Ghraib.

War is abominable enough. But this photo and others like it embody what is arguably most unbearable about the violence in war: it harbors a sexual dimension. There is simply nothing more horrifying than when the power to hurt and humiliate is used as a means to satisfy a pleasure principle that acts in the spirit of self-preservation. Sexual violence not only ravages the body, but it also erodes the capacity of sex—and perhaps bodily pleasure in general—to help us renew ourselves, in spirit and in form, against the grind of living life.

I came to this understanding because at the time the photos appeared in public, I was in the early stages of a project that would eventually be called *Sade for Sade's Sake*, 2009, after, of course, the writer and philosopher Marquis de Sade. But it was not merely how sex and violence were entangled in the Abu Ghraib scandal that made Sade's work so prescient. It was also the way in which Sade consistently used war and other forms of social conflict as the setting for his stories of debaucheries, as if to suggest that one always begets the other. For instance, it is easy to forget that Sade's most perverse work, *120 Days of Sodom*, is a story about war profiteers. Here is the introduction, in Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver's translation:

The extensive wars wherewith Louis XIV was burdened during his reign, while draining the State's treasury and exhausting the substance of the people, none the less contained the secret that led to the prosperity of a swarm of those bloodsuckers who are always on the watch for public calamities,

which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously. The end of this so very sublime reign was perhaps one of the periods in the history of the French Empire when one saw the emergence of the greatest number of these mysterious fortunes whose origins are as obscure as the lust and debauchery that accompany them. It was toward the close of this period, and not long before the Regent sought, by means of the famous tribunal which goes under the name of the *Chambre de Justice*, to flush this multitude of traffickers, that four of them conceived the idea for the singular revels whereof we are going to give an account.<sup>1</sup>

If Sade illuminated Abu Ghraib for me, it was Pier Paolo Pasolini who helped me do the same for Sade. The Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus was fond of the idea that “Like is known only by like.” Perhaps this is the case here. For Pasolini’s work was every bit as intense, complex, and contradictory as Sade’s novels and plays. It was through *Salò*, Pasolini’s 1975 film version of *Sodom*, that I came to understand how Pasolini tried to renew Sade’s work as a trenchant form of social critique. And by taking on Sade, Pasolini’s work hardened into a kind of cinematic realism that dared to portray what reality was itself unwilling to face.

*Salò* is not my favorite work of Pasolini’s, as much as I admire it. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) is closer to me. Sometimes I fast-forward my digital copy to just watch the scene where Jesus is holding his palms toward the sky, and kneeling alone on a vast and empty hill. The camera pans left, then right, and then upward toward the sun peaking through the billowing clouds. Then it cuts to a wide shot of Christ, dressed in white, still kneeling in silence. It always struck me that the shot lingered a little too long. And that perhaps Pasolini—the unbeliever—wasn’t shooting Christ at all.

It was my work with Sade that rekindled my interest in Pasolini, but in the end *Salò* wound up playing a relatively minor role. Instead, what made the difference was Pasolini's poetry. This is ironic, because his poems are not perverse at all. And when they deal with sexuality, it is with a frankness that feels more confessional than provocative. The words are not the thing, nor what they are trying to conjure. Instead, it is the rhythm.

Reading Pasolini's poems made me sensitive to the rhythms of his film work and to work in general. Poets understand that meanings can be evoked not only by what is being said but also by how one says it. The crests and falls of breaths and tones tell us what is going on as much as the words themselves. Sometimes more so. This is especially true with subjects of a sexual nature. Rhythm arouses a certain kind of attention. And it heightens one's capacity to be moved in sympathy with whatever it is that is moving. In a word, it is erotic. Here is the last stanza from Pasolini's poem "*Un Rap di Òa*":

Il Tilimínt, cu'l stradon di sfalt,  
 e li planuris verdulinis,  
 cu li boschetis flapis e il zal  
 dai ciamps di blava, fra il mar  
 et la montagna:  
 dut a ardeva ta la me ciar frutina.  
 Al era un fòuc il mal.<sup>2</sup>

(The Tagliamento, with its  
 asphalt road and green pastures  
 like the dried forests  
 and the yellow fields  
 of corn between the sea and the mountains:  
 everything burned in my childhood flesh,  
 an aching flame.)<sup>3</sup>

It is because of Pasolini's poems that I began to read other poets, which helped me understand how essential rhythm was to what I was doing at the time. But what is more remarkable is how his poems fundamentally reoriented my sense of Sade, especially *Sodom*. It is almost *de rigueur* to say that *Sodom* is virtually unreadable. This novel about four war profiteers who kidnap and systematically abuse and torture their captives is not only filled with scenes of depravity, it is also incredibly repetitive and rigid. It has the narrative quality of a user's manual for some accounting software.

But if one approaches *Sodom* less as a story than as a poem, the work changes. Reading it with an ear for rhythm rather than narrative coherence transforms *Sodom* into something strangely, and compulsively, readable. It is as if what is most provocative about *Sodom* isn't the story at all but how it is written in the cadence of a relentless sexual compulsion. The rhythm is what animates the work—and perhaps its most sadistic aspect.

Pasolini was prolific and aesthetically promiscuous. He made films, drew, and wrote essays, plays, poems, and articles. In his free time he harassed the Mafia, the church, the fascists, the Marxists, the politicians, and whoever else he thought was ruining things for the rest of us. For that and his work, I want to remember him today.

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Originally delivered as "A Harlot's Progress" at "Pier Paolo Pasolini: Intellettuale," December 16, 2012, PS1 MoMA, New York, and read by Kate Valk.

- 1 Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove, 1967).
- 2 Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Un Rap di Ūa," in *La Meglio Gioventù*, vol. 4 of *Documeni di Poesia*, ed. Antonia Arveda (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1998), pp. 251–53.
- 3 English translation by Jeremy Parzen as "A Bunch of Grapes." <http://dobianchi.com/2012/04/05/pier-paolo-pasolini-bunch-of-grapes-poem/>.



# The Writings of Hans Ulrich Obrist

## An Introduction

When I first met Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2003, he was standing at the door of my studio wearing a pale blue suit so badly wrinkled I thought he either slept in a suitcase the night before or was actually homeless. I invited him in and asked if he wanted a glass of water, but what I really wanted to know was whether he needed a warm blanket and a quiet place for a nap.

As it turned out, he more or less was sleeping in his suitcase. Before he showed up at my studio door, he had met with artists, scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and more artists in three different countries over a forty-eight-hour period. This is who Hans is. So he was fine. And after a three-hour conversation, it occurred to me that he wasn't homeless at all. He was perfectly at home in my studio, which, I have to admit was, and still is, not the most comfortable place to be. Space—as an element of experience—does not hold my interest and attention as much as time. I never regret losing space (like a studio or an apartment or an exhibition opportunity). But I always regret lost time.

I don't remember what we talked about exactly, but I do remember what it reminded me of. Some time ago, a well-known novelist paid a visit to another novelist he admired in his native country. After arriving by plane, the first novelist took a taxi from the airport to meet the second novelist in a park. When he reached the park, he found him sitting on a bench. They greeted each other with a handshake, but as soon as they tried to speak, they realized neither spoke the other's language. It was like a cruel joke. The first novelist was embarrassed and disappointed. He had traveled all this way to find himself in front of the one person he wanted to speak to, only to find that distance wasn't what really separated them. I imagine it wasn't easy for the second novelist either. They walked together through the park, in silence. Then, all of a sudden, the second novelist said, "Nabokov." Not know-



ing how to respond, the first novelist thought for a moment. Then he said, "Mann." The second novelist smiled and without missing a beat said, "Musil." It went back and forth. "Dickens." "Gogol." "Chaucer." "Joyce." "Boccaccio." For hours, I'm told.

We find ourselves at home in the language that we speak and share. And I don't simply mean English or Arabic. It's that other language I'm talking about, the one we use to express what is worth doing, knowing, and looking for. This is the language we speak to say where we really belong. Robert Walser. Samuel Beckett. Fischli and Weiss. Samir Amin. These were more than names that Hans and I passed back and forth: they were the nouns in the grammar of an intellectual and artistic history. And here were some of the verbs: delinking, experimental film and video, *via negativa*. It went on. Soon I realized from the way Hans spoke (and listened) that he came from the same undiscovered country where I was from.

This is not to say that we agreed on everything. Given the nature of Hans's work and sensibility, the notion of delinking to him would be like ornithology is to birds. And of course there is the difference in the tempo of thinking and speaking. I tend toward *adagio*, whereas Hans is more *presto*, perhaps even *prestissimo*, depending on the time of day. We found many more differences between us during the course of our conversation, which made it even more pleasing. And this is because Hans is always on the lookout for something he doesn't know or understand. He is naturally curious about practically everything. His legendary restlessness is, it seems to me, a manifestation of an insatiable need to find out the way all things go.

Curiosity is the pleasure principle of thought. Experience has taught me that you can tell how good a lover someone is by the degree of curiosity he or she possesses. The next time you meet someone you are drawn to and happen to be talking to this person, make sure to count (in your mind, not out loud) the number of questions he or she asks you. If it is, say, more

than four a minute, then you have found someone who probably knows how to please and be pleased. If after a minute or two the person has still not asked a single question of any kind—about the way you look tonight, or what you have seen lately, or simply if you like the color purple—walk away. There is nothing for you. I call it Diotima's law.

I imagine someone like Hans would please Diotima. For what he embodies is that feeling of genuine pleasure found only when one is led by nothing other than what one finds attractive enough to pay attention to and wants desperately to know more about. Hans's curiosity has taken him to the centers and margins of countless fields of knowledge and culture. And in the wake of his incessant traveling he has left behind exhibitions, interviews, marathons, and now a collection of writings.

I write this on what is supposed to be the first day of spring. It is morning and I hear birds singing outside. Sparrows? Robins? For no reason a theory comes to mind. Or is it a story? It goes like this: in the beginning, language originated in song. And music and speech were one. People spoke by singing words, and the world was made meaningful one note at a time. But there came a point when language split from song. Each went their separate ways afterward, touching at times but never fully embracing. And it was then—at the moment when music and speech became distinct from one and other—that a new concept was born: tragedy.

I don't remember where this is from. Someday I should ask Hans.

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# Sins and Precious Stones

On Sigmar Polke

It is said that when the Big Bang created the universe, the explosion left behind the sound of a hum so loud it can still be discerned today, if one has ears good enough to hear fifty-seven octaves below the range of a standard piano. This was what came to mind the first time I encountered Sigmar Polke's Grossmünster windows in Zurich. The organ was being tuned in the twelfth-century Romanesque church, and the drone of an E-sharp on the verge of being flat filled the nave as I entered. *The passion according to Terry Riley?* Nobody was sitting in the pews. A lone man selling postcards and books next to the stone stairs that led to the top of the two towers was the only person listening. Or so I thought he was. As I looked more closely, I realized from the grimace on his face he wasn't following what I interpreted as music but was enduring what I imagine he thought was noise. The E finally turned flat. A couple seconds of silence. And then an F blared loudly from the organ. I thought I heard the irritated man mutter a curse.

Of the twelve windows by Polke, seven were composed using slices of agate stones to achieve what looks like an image transmitted from the depths of outer space: a scene of abstract, celestial splendor. The window I focused on first was the only one in a half-circular frame. It is possible to see this window from the outside, since it sits atop the north entrance of the church. But what it looks like from the street does not in any way prepare you for what can be seen from inside.

It is, literally, Genesis. The round slices of agate stones that reveal concentric layers of naturally formed crystals are visually reminiscent of planets forming, or atoms splitting, or embryos replicating. The iridescent rings vibrate with a panoply of colors one expects at the birth of anything new. But this is more than an illustration of what the formation of the world is supposed

to look like. By laying bare the natural process of how agates are formed, layer by crystalline layer, Polke formally evokes what may be the most radical and peculiar thing about the Christian notion of genesis. It is the notion that a beginning is not truly originary if it doesn't prefigure within itself what is to come. This is why Christ is described as being the alpha *and* omega. In Christianity, the origin is the goal. And the change and progress that emerge over time are important insofar as they testify to how each successive stage or generation embodies and carries forth the divine guiding principle Christians believe are rooted at the origin of all things. From the seed of God to the Tree of Life, so to speak. The etymological foundation of the word *genesis* is grounded in the notion of "generations." So the literal, biblical translation of the Book of Genesis is the Book of Generations, which it in truth is. Genesis is ultimately a story about familial and prophetic lineages, told in order to rekindle the connection between the present and the past. What is novel about Christianity is the view that the layers of time that have settled into distinct epochs and ages are only worthy of being a past at all if what is remembered foretells the shape of what is to come.

This is what makes the seven agate windows so surprisingly conceptual. They embody what they discursively represent by naturally being what they are. Being natural, of course, takes hard work. And Polke used an array of tricks and techniques to enliven the seven pages of his story of creation. First, many of the agates were dyed in various chemical solutions to enhance and sometimes entirely change the colors of the stones. These processes allowed Polke to control the luminosity and makeup of every section of the windows. Second, the compositions themselves are replete with antics and allusions. A large black agate with two white, nearly circular inclusions is aligned toward the center and top of one of the windows, as if they were a pair of eyes looking down on us. In fact, there are many eyes throughout the windows

staring back. And in another window, one can make out the semblance of a face sticking out a tongue or smoking a cigarette.

Traditional religions have always used images as a kind of physics. Myths and gods may be fantastical and supernatural in form, but they nevertheless represent real ways of trying to understand the workings of the natural world. The rites, rituals, and discourses of paganism, for instance, served in general to educate people on their place in the course of phenomena like the changing seasons, death, or fire. One way to characterize what religions do is that they are parascientific attempts to comprehend nature by allegorical means. Divine powers and personalities represent sets of imaginative coordinates that provide real-world directions toward understanding—and more important, organizing—ways of being in the world. Christianity is no different in this regard, perhaps because it grew by absorbing the very practices and philosophies that existed alongside it, nourishing itself by adapting and evolving beyond its origins as a fringe and radical Jewish sect.

Nietzsche may have said it best: Christianity is Platonism for the people. Plato founded the Academy and wrote treatises and dialogues as textbooks in order to influence politicians and others in positions of power to lead a good life and to rule the city of Athens in a just way. Christianity redescribed the contours of Platonic thought to sway and organize those under the rule of power and wealth and to conceive of the entire world as a city in God's jurisdiction. It worked, more or less, for better *and* for worse, for about two thousand years. There are certainly more Christians today than Platonists. Here is a theory: maybe it was because the philosophical and political core of Christianity was more cunning in responding to something that both the powerful *and* the powerless, men *and* women, gentiles *and* Jews, the free *and* the enslaved, young *and* old, all share in common—then and perhaps even now. It is a question. And one that, when asked, gives the human experience its essential shape. It is: How to live?

Stained glass windows were just one of the many forms Christendom deployed to try to grapple with this question. Pictorial window works were first created around the late ninth century to venerate the story of Christ, his apostles, and the various saints that different regions and territories celebrated. They depicted the good life as told by the Good Book in part to accommodate those who could not read and to teach people through imagery about how the practice of Christian faith can beautify and enlighten their inner lives as brilliantly as the windows illuminate the dark interiors of churches and cathedrals.

The pedagogical nature of Polke's windows may be what is most traditional about them. For all their dazzling effects, the agate windows are made more luminous because they offer a picture lesson—for those willing to be entranced by them—about how the world Christianity tried (and is still trying) to fashion in the image of Christ is in reality much bigger, older, and more complex than the church is willing to imagine. The five other windows Polke made for Grossmünster also have something to impart about the antinomies that animate Christian faith and contemporary life, or at the least, a particular religious and historical point of view he thought worth setting in stone and colored glass.

To start, they drew their inspiration exclusively from the symbols and characters of the Old Testament: the prophet Elijah, the sacrifice of Isaac, King David, the scapegoat, and the phrase "Son of Man." Critic and art historian Jacqueline Burckhardt, who was a member of the jury that commissioned Polke to create the windows in 2006, suggested to me that he did this to emphasize how different religions and cultures are historically ensnarled in one another, which is a view that has perhaps not been valued as highly as it should, given that we live in an age of religious fundamentalisms. Muslims, Jews, and Christians venerate some of the same prophets and holy books in the Old Testament that provide a ground for the development of all three monotheistic

faiths. By highlighting the mixed heritage that Christianity shares with other religions, Polke wanted to cast a light on how impure and uncertain it all was in the beginning.

The window known as *Son of Man* expresses this most ingeniously. The only one in black and white, it stands in stark contrast to the other richly colored works. It is also the most decisively graphic, composed of nine panels, each depicting two faces in silhouette facing each other. In some panels, the outlines that define the faces are sharp. In others, a soft glow blurs the edges, making it look as if sunlight is about to dissolve the pane of glass and burst into the church. But it is also possible to not recognize faces at all in any of the panels and see only the outlines of nine white chalices. Polke used one of the oldest tricks in the visual book to compose this window, usually referred to as the figure-ground illusion, so that the appearance of images depends on whether one sees as the foreground the area in white (the chalice) or in black (the faces).

Like the agate windows, the form that *Son of Man* takes is its sedimented content. For the historical notion of what the phrase means is as uncertain as whether the window shows cups or men. The phrase “*Son of Man*” appears in the Book of Daniel (7:13), which was written about two centuries before the birth of Christ. And it describes someone who establishes an eternal rule of peace and banishes all the demonic kingdoms from the face of the earth. Jesus never called himself “*Son of Man*” in the New Testament except in the Gospel of John, which neatly prefigures him as the messiah who Jewish prophets had predicted would come in order to bring peace on earth. But none of the other Gospels in the New Testament quote Christ using those words to describe himself. So the debate among biblical scholars has been whether Jesus meant to refer to himself as divinity personified. And if this were the case, why did he use such a curious, almost poetic title when nobody in his time would recognize such a designation as a calling for his godliness? Adding another dimen-



sion of uncertainty is the issue of translation. "Son of Man" may reflect in Greek a phrase in Aramaic, which was Jesus' mother tongue, basically to mean "someone like me." It could also be extended to mean "people like us." This reading suggests that Jesus referred to himself just as any political organizer would: as somebody who was no different from the people he was proselytizing to. But perhaps in the last analysis, none of this matters, for what has lasted through the ages is the impression that he was undecidedly both human and divine.

Christ appears in another window, neither as man nor god, but as a goat split in two. In the window known as *The Scapegoat*, Polke drew on the ceremony described in Leviticus for Yom Kippur, or the Jewish Day of Atonement, where two goats are chosen to take on the burdens of the entire community. One is sacrificed to appease God, and the "escape goat" is cast out into the wilderness, carrying with it the sins of the people. A standard reading of the scapegoat is that it prefigures what John the Baptist said to Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The idea is that the crucifixion of Christ acts in the same way to relieve us of our sins as the scapegoat did in Leviticus. This was arguably what Polke had in mind when he created *The Scapegoat*. Drawing from images in twelfth-century religious manuscripts, he anchored the top portion of the window with the head and front legs of a cartoonish goat facing right while filling the bottom half with the backside and hind legs of what looks like the same goat, this time facing left. A subtle white halo radiates from the central portion of the window while a series of green, fabric-like shapes that visually evoke fertile ground provide footing for both halves of the goat.

A number of multicolored stones are embedded within the body of the goat, which is the element that gives the window visual bite. The stones make it look as if the animal is covered with sores and open wounds or is suffering from an intensely vivid rash. There is no better way to suggest sinfulness than to

express it through the metaphor of disease. But Polke has other designs, and turns the table at the level of material. The stones are tourmalines, a kind of gemstone that certain spiritual circles believe holds healing properties. Here, the topsy-turvy quality that Polke's work excels at finds its most potent symbol. What I think Polke is suggesting is that if sin is a kind of transgression, it is a therapeutic, even formative one. Sin is a precious stone, because it helps one discover—in the act of committing it—the coercive nature of law, and the penetrating insight that comes from knowing just what price one is willing to pay in order to realize for oneself what is genuinely worth following.

In a sense, Polke's oeuvre consists of nothing but reminders of how precious and formative transgressions are. Few artists have pursued the pleasures of aesthetic combustibility by mixing and mismatching forms and ideas as doggedly as he. Polke's sensibility is plainly evident at Grossmünster, his last major work. Out of the founding myths of an organized faith, he forged scenes as contradictory and expansive—and therefore as liberating and wise—as Christianity ought to be, if it still cared about the essential question as much as we still do.

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Originally published in *Sigmar Polke: Alibis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014). Reprinted by permission. The author would like to thank Jacqueline Burckhardt and Bice Curiger for their insight and good company during the process of writing this essay.



## On Not Knowing Stuart Sherman

Stuart Sherman, the New York poet, performer, and artist who died in 2001, used to stage what he called “spectacles.” They were short routines, done in parking lots, street corners, and occasionally on theater stages, that were usually based on Sherman manipulating everyday things on a portable TV-dinner tray. He would shuffle cups and playing cards, then place a carrot on top of a hat, and then put on a pair of glasses with blacked-out lens, and so on. The pace was deliberate, like a ritual, but not one from any earth-bound culture. He created over twenty spectacles in all, which survive only in documentation. I saw only one in person, and remember saying to myself at the time the same thing I would eventually say to myself whenever I watch one on video: What is happening?

This is what is most pleasurable about the works. What we are interested in the most tends to be what is most agreeable to us. But this is also why all things are full of weariness: they are made exhausted and old as a result of our interestedness, of our wanting to know what purpose they can fulfill for us. It is said that the only true knowledge is the insight that one does not know anything. Sherman’s work endures in part because it hypnotizes—in form—what is in effect the unknowability of its content. His works feel light (like a bird, not like a feather) from a lack of want and the need to be known. And they teach without really teaching just how pleasing it is to experience and reflect on something that holds no design over us other than being simply, stubbornly, incongruently what it is.

If I close my eyes and try to conjure the performances in my mind, what I recall most vividly is the polyphonic nature of the rhythms Sherman used to enthrall the audience, and the way in which he carried himself in front of the tray, at once intense and awkward, as if he had not been fully in control of his own body and an alien force was directing his movements by remote

control. Sometimes in the middle of a spectacle, Sherman would pull out a piece of paper and look it over. He would then put it back into his shirt pocket and continue performing. I have always wondered about that piece of paper. What was on it? Performance notes? A set of instructions telling him what to do and when, like a score of human cues from an inhuman intelligence? It may have been nothing of the sort, just another prop on his tabletop universe, no different than the sponge or the can of SpaghettiOs.

Still, I wonder. Thinking about that piece of paper is pleasing because it resituates Sherman's work beyond its own hermetic world and into a wider array of relationships and meanings that his work was trying to build. Maybe another way of saying this is that Sherman's gesture with that piece of paper brings up a question I often ask myself. That question is, What do I do now?

I assume most everyone asks themselves this question; when I do, it is usually directed at what I am working on or whom I am working with. There are times when I ask this to nobody in particular, and out loud. To me it is largely a moral question, insofar as morality is understood as tantamount to a kind of inner law, a set of guiding principles a person follows to distinguish between the right and wrong way to go in the course of one's own development.

But it is also something of an aesthetic question, since an aesthetic is a sensibility that informs what one makes and what one likes. In both cases, it is a matter of choosing for oneself something worthy enough to follow in order to work toward becoming more of what one wants to be.

I think about that piece of paper as an emblem of all the peculiar inner laws Sherman ended up following to become who he became, so that he could make work as odd and miraculous as his performances. It is true enough that a person's work is not the same as the person who makes it. But on the other hand, a work, if it is worth paying attention to, not only expresses what

it is but also leaves traces of the *kind* of person who made it. This is similar to the way that the “grain” of a voice embodies the person speaking or singing. The “grain” is the quality of the sound that expresses the particular shape and path air takes as it travels from the lungs to the larynx and out the mouth. It is the body in the sound.

Likewise, I’m always curious about the body in the work. It is the evidence left behind after the act that illuminates how a way of living has enlivened (or deadened) a life into form. Duchamp expressed a similar sentiment once, when he said the most interesting thing about Warhol’s soup can paintings wasn’t the paintings but the mind that thought it worth the time and energy to paint them in the first place. I want to know what *kind* of person would make something like *that*? Especially if what is made is unyielding and unknowable, as it is with Sherman’s work. It reflects, I suppose, a way of being I feel most at home with. But why would anyone want to be around someone or something unyielding and unknowable? I’m not sure. But it is a good question.

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# Credits

- Pp. 54–69: All works by Paul Chan, 2008: ink, pencil, ripped paper on paper, 11 x 14 inches (29.9 x 35.6 cm).
- P. 311: Paul Sharits, *Tallahassee Cloud Cover Anxiety*, 1982, marker on paper, 20 ½ x 13 ¾ inches (52.1 x 34.9 cm); Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York
- P. 331: Henri Michaux, *Untitled Chinese Ink Drawing*, 1961, ink on paper, 29 ½ x 43 ⅓ inches (74.6 x 109.9 cm); Courtesy Tate London. Purchased 1963 © 2014, ProLitteris, Zurich
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- P. 350: Photo Abu Ghraib, 2003. Image obtained by The Associated Press which shows naked detainees placed into a human pyramid as Pfc. Lynndie England and Cpl. Charles Graner Jr. pose behind them in late 2003 at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq (AP Photo).

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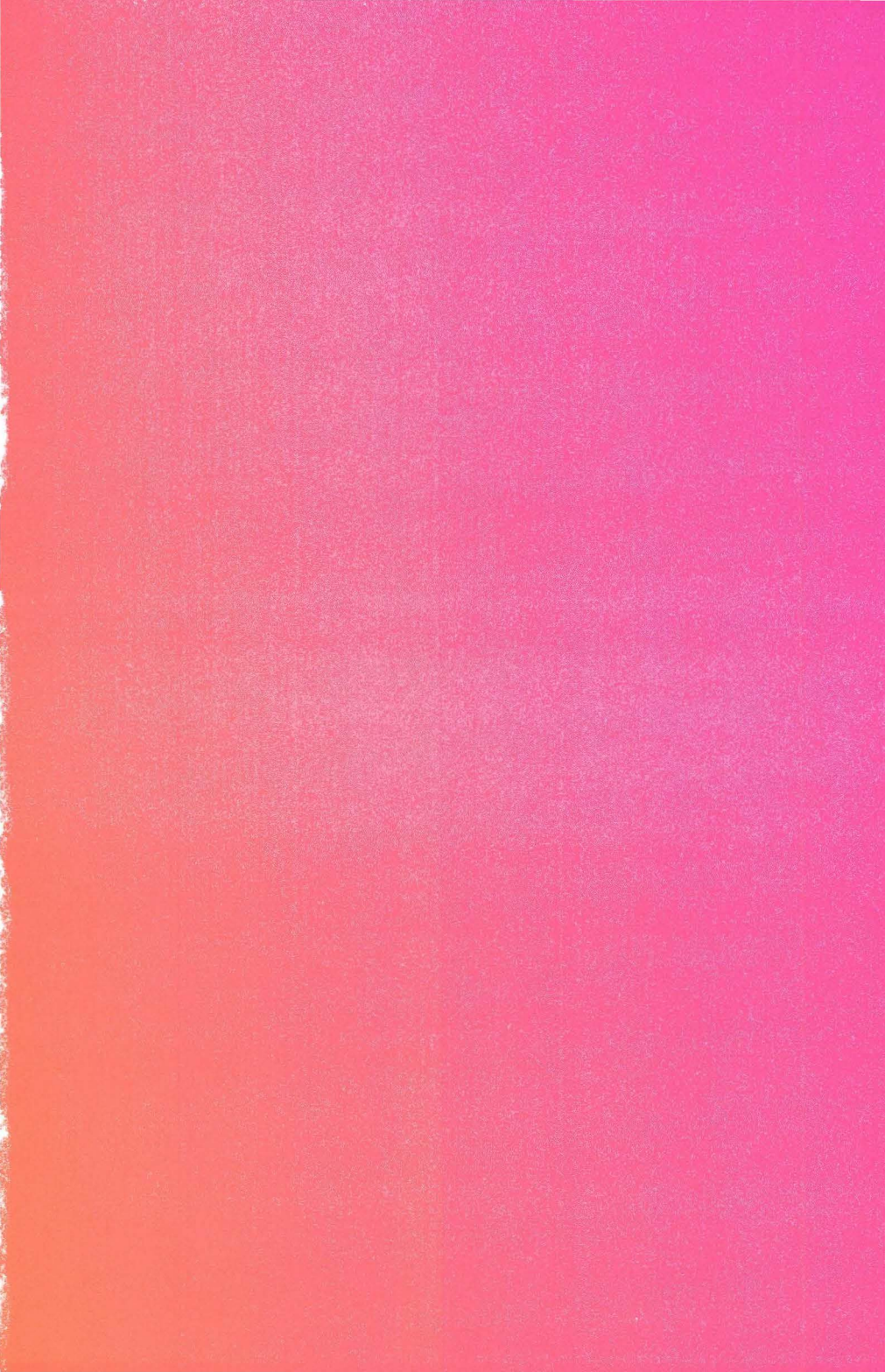
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The work of artist Paul Chan (b. 1973) has charted a course in contemporary art as unpredictable and wide-ranging as the thinking that grounds his practice. *Paul Chan: Selected Writings 2000–2014* collects the critical essays and artist's texts that first appeared in *Artforum*, *October*, and *Frieze*, among other publications, as well as never before published lectures and language-based works. From the comedy of artistic freedom in Duchamp to the contradictions that bind aesthetics and politics, Chan's writings revel in the paradoxes that make the experience of art both vexing and pleasurable. He lays bare the ideas and personalities that motivate his work by reflecting on artists as diverse as Henry Darger, Chris Marker, Sigmar Polke, and Paul Sharits. He grapples with writers and thinkers who have played decisive roles in his practice, including Theodor W. Adorno, Samuel Beckett, and Marquis de Sade. Along the way, Chan forges an understanding of the role of art in a host of broader social arenas beyond galleries and museums, where the potential of art is tested and renewed. Edited by George Baker and Eric Banks, with Isabel Friedli and Martina Venanzoni. With an introduction by George Baker.

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